

Sermons by Dr. Russell F. Metcalf, Jr.

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Holy Compromise, Holy Joy

Mark 2:1-5 (3) "And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men."

The word "compromise" is a red flag among people of principle. But in the real world of human relationships, compromise is perhaps the most overlooked source of genuine joy.

The fact is (1) bringing people to Jesus is just about always a cooperative effort. In fact, doing anything for Jesus means cooperating with His people. And (2) cooperative effort just about always involves holy compromise. But the strange and wonderful truth that follows is (3) holy compromise just about always brings about holy fellowship and joy.

No minister of integrity would ever suggest that we compromise with any form of sin. But by the same token any minister of integrity would have to say in all honesty that more pain and damage has been done than one can imagine by people who not only refuse to compromise on issues of principle, but refuse to bend or adapt or compromise in lesser matters of opinion, custom, or even personal taste.

Here in Mark's gospel is a newspaper report about some people who tore the tiles off a flat roof and lowered a paralyzed man down into the interior of the house where Jesus was. [Bringing people to Jesus is just about always a cooperative effort.] It goes without saying that here was a cooperative effort that required some compromise. Unless these four men were all the same build and same height and same strength the simple fact of carrying a heavy, inert object requires bending and stretching. But in my mind's eye I have gone into considerable more detail. If some of the personalities of the Wollaston church had been present the line-up might have looked like this [and any resemblance to Wollastonians living or dead is purely conjectural]!

FIRST THERE WAS AMOS.

Amos was a rather old, seasoned believer. He had been brought up in the scriptures from a lad. He had waited for years in faith that Messiah was coming. Early on in Jesus' ministry he had been convinced that Jesus was the fulfillment of all the OT prophecies.

Amos is MATURE! Secretly in his heart of hearts he is a little impatient and even irked by immaturity. He detests taped accompaniments! He is not the least impulsive and not too outwardly emotional. But Amos is the salt of the earth, and he loves Jesus and follows Him with all his heart.

THEN THERE IS BARTHOLOMEW.

Bartholomew is a young believer, full of energy. He is not a rebel, really— but he really has this feeling that anyone over 30 is "over the hill." Bartholomew is full of JOY!

And Bartholomew is full of LIFE! He has never had a sick day in his life, and frankly he isn't too patient with people who have aches and pains. He doesn't understand people who don't like LOUD hosannas—preferably with at least 100 watts of amplification behind them. Bart will be at all the Christian rock concerts within 50 miles radius!

THE THIRD MEMBER OF THE CAST IS CRISPUS.

Crispus is an intellectual, and a dedicated social activist. He has heard Christ's call to minister to the poor. He has put his life on the line. He has sold all that he possesses, and is personally involved in inner-city ministry. And quite frankly, Crispus questions other Christians who don't do the same as he has done.

AND THE LAST OF THE FOUR IS DEMAS

Demas is a died-in-the-wool conservative. Demas wears a Jesus-First pin. He is a real "Mary" type who simply wants to sit at Jesus' feet. He only has a job because he

has to eat, but he wants to keep unspotted from the world— so he doesn't use dice with board games, and he doesn't think the church teens ought to go roller skating.

But he really belongs to Jesus and loves Him with all of his heart.

Four people about as different in temperament as you can imagine. Four people who agree on just about one thing and only one thing— at least at the beginning of this little drama. They knew in their hearts that Jesus IS the answer to the needs of the world. No matter that they saw those needs very differently. They didn't even stop to consider that the needs of the world might be different from the way they understood them. But they agreed (without knowing it) that Jesus is what this sinful world needs!

These people had a great deal more that was NOT in common, at least on the surface. They would have disagreed violently on political candidates. They would have almost come to blows over whether or not one could fall from grace, or just 'from fellowship with God.' Any kind of abstract or theoretical question probably would have started WW I 1900 years early!

Christians are like that! They disagree in theory— they love to argue minor points of doctrine in various kinds of abstract argument And there (probably) is a place for that, but . . .but what saved them was the fact that these four men faced a very specific problem. They had a mutual friend SILAS, who was dear to them all. Perhaps he was related to one, and a friend of a friend of another— but at any rate each of these four, Amos, Bartholomew, Crispus, and Demas had said to himself many times: "If I could just get Silas over to Jesus I know that Jesus could touch him and meet his need!"

I'm not sure how they got together. Since I'm telling the story I can imagine it was one of those strange coincidences that God can arrange whenever He wants to. And in my imagination there was a mutual disappointment when the four met.

Amos thought: "A lot of good hallelujahs will do now! We need someone who KNOWS someone, and some money to hire an ambulance."

And Crispus is thinking: "That Demas guy will want to have a prayer meeting for this guy— and what he REALLY needs is a new pallet and we need to arrange hot meals for him until we can find a way to get him to the meetings."

But one of them— I don't know which one— says out loud: "If only we could get Silas to Jesus I believe HE could heal him!" And the rest agree. They realize that together they can do what they can't do alone. And they demonstrate that (1) BRINGING PEOPLE TO JESUS IS JUST ABOUT ALWAYS A COOPERATIVE EFFORT!

What a sight they are! It is not an easy or a dignified task. And as they get nearer they see that their task isn't only hard—it is apparently impossible. They simply cannot get through the crowd. There are too many people! You can't find Christ in a big crowd! You can't really worship! You can't really get near to Jesus, can you?

But by now someone comes up with another suggestion. "We've come this far! Too far to be defeated! We won't take 'No' for an answer! Let's go up on the roof! Let's take off a few tiles and drop Silas right down on the front row!"

AND THEY DID! And the Word says "Jesus saw THEIR faith!" And Jesus forgave Silas his sins. And then Jesus healed him, and sent him walking out in the sight of everyone.

How, do you suppose, did Amos and Bartholomew and Crispus and Demas "debrief" after the service was over? What was the "afterglow" like that day?

I see them as they put the tiles back and they talk. "Well, I'll have to admit that I could never have done it alone! And no two of us could have done it, either!" "Yes, I'll have to admit that we make a pretty good team!"

I see it as the beginning of genuine Christian fellowship— cross-generational, cross-cultural, even cross-intellectual, if there is such a thing. They were still persuaded that Jesus was the answer to the needs of their world. And they still saw those needs from their own perspectives. But they also began to see that there were other, honest, Christian perspectives beside their own.

That is the way Christian faith in obedient action tends to work. It brings people together who seem to have little in common, and makes them love and deeply appreciate one another.

[Illustration: It happened during the 'Jesus revival' in New York—Brother Mac (Walter MacPherson) hugging the rock musicians— big, black Isaiah McKinnon and little Charlie Rizzo— one of the 'proofs' to my own heart that this was a genuine moving of the Holy Spirit.]

THERE ARE SOME ISSUES THAT DEMAND SOLID, UNIFIED CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE.

Our compromise can never be with sin, with the breaking of any of the clear commandments of God. But as amazing as it may seem there are many serious issues, important issues, where good and sincere

Christians can and will disagree. Issues that would divide and kill fellowship if we would let them. There are "outside issues" about which Christians feel strongly:

"What about sanctions in South Africa?" "What about Reagan's policies in backing freedom fighters?" "Should we pull out of public schools and teach our own children at home?"

Just mentioning these may be foolish, but I am trying to show that in so many ways we can agree to disagree— and still agree to love each other, and to love God, and to do our best to bring people to Jesus.

And particularly these days in Wollaston there is the challenge of bringing people to Jesus—of developing and continuing ministry to families with both father and mother at home, to a college population where the students are here for a portion of four years and have a hard time feeling "plugged in." And particularly these days there are "inside issues," those matters of policy, of building, of financing, and above all, of ministry and serving Christ here in Wollaston.

Some church experts tell us that the growing kind of church is the homogenous-unit type of church. And this church is about as heterogeneous as a church can get! But in

more ways than dear Reuben may have meant in his wonderful little book, WE REALLY DO NEED EACH OTHER!

We have an opportunity right here in the Wollaston church to meet and know people who love the Lord and yet are very unlike ourselves. We will be stimulated, if not offended, by many different ways of looking at the task God has set before us. We will be seeing the curse of sin as the problem— but we will be seeing it in many more than just FOUR ways!

But if we agree that Jesus is LORD; and if we agree that Jesus is what this world needs— then like these four men who brought the paralytic to Jesus WE WILL FIND WAYS OF GETTING AT THE TASK GOD HAS FOR US!

And the best part, perhaps, is that as we learn to work together we'll discover the holy JOY that comes from finding how BIG and how BROAD and how WIDE God's holy family can be!

We are in for some dramatic surprises! We'll find that TOGETHER WE CAN BRING PEOPLE TO JESUS! And when Jesus sees OUR FAITH we'll find that holy compromise brings holy JOY!

Call His Name Jesus

(Intro:)

Next to your concept of Almighty God, the most important thought you will ever think regarding your salvation is: "What is SIN?"!

"Sin" is the modern "embarrassment word." To speak of "sin" is to admit that one is far, far behind the times. It is like speaking of the earth as the center of the solar system, or of a flat earth.

It seems long ago that "sex" was an embarrassment. We referred to "legs" as "limbs" and we pretended that the stork brought babies. But it is not an embarrassment any more. We see things discussed on so-called "talk shows" that we would have been ashamed to have anyone know we knew about in other times.

But as it says in Jeremiah, in many regards "we have forgotten how to blush!" It has become almost fashionable to talk about things that should be very private. Now we are pretty un-shockable about matters of sex.

Then "death" became the unmentionable. And we're still a bit uncomfortable thinking about this mysterious gate through which we pass one at a time and disappear from present company to a realm we cannot see. But people will talk, sometimes very authoritatively, about death. But sin?

THERE IS NO SIN! Sin is no where to be found in our modern society! Everything that is bad is sickness and maladjustment and poor environment and hereditary weakness. We have 'no-fault' insurance— and we want 'no-fault' morality— choosing without facing the consequences of choice. Jesus gets lip-service, and He is adored and admired because he went about everywhere teaching and doing good and healing. Which he did! But I declare to you this morning that Jesus did not come to earth JUST because we were weak, or sick, or maladjusted. Jesus came to earth because we are sinners, and we need a savior!

[Text:]

Matthew 1:21 "Thou shalt call His name JESUS for he shall save his people from their SINS"

I. THERE IS SUCH A THING AS SIN

A. As we have already said, "sin" is an embarrassment in modern speech. It is conspicuous by its absence in modern thought. It is 'much better' instead if we can blame illness, if there is no sin- for sickness is not our fault. But there is a vast difference between sin and sickness.

B. One large reason SIN is absent from mention is that GOD has been 'dismissed' from the consciousness of those who control the media. It doesn't mean that SIN is not real and present. It certainly does not mean that GOD 'IS DEAD,' regardless of who says so. It does mean that if we relax and relent in our personal quest after truth— and if we let others interpret God's Word to us, or take God's Word away from us by default, then we should not be surprised to wake up and find we have lost our way, morally, and have no idea where to turn for salvation— or even any idea that there is salvation!

C. If there were no sin, then Jesus was sadly mistaken in his mission. For He said in Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospels: "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance!" There is no logical ground for accepting Jesus as teacher and healer, and not as Savior from sin. For (as C.S. Lewis has so eloquently said:) either Jesus said he came to save sinners and was mistaken, which makes Him a lunatic; OR, Jesus said He came to save sinners, and knew He was lying all the time, which makes Him a charlatan; OR, Jesus said exactly the truth, and was and IS the Son of God, who came to die for our sins! I believe the last, and worship Him as God and Lord!

D. If there were no sin, then God the Father was unjustifiably cruel in permitting His only begotten Son to suffer and die on the cross for the sins of the world. We can be certain that there was no other way, or the love of a heavenly Father would have found it.

[Yes— there IS such a thing as SIN! But what IS sin?]

II. SIN IS SEPARATION FROM GOD, GOOD, LIFE

A. Popular "ideas" about "sin:" Everybody has an idea of what "sin" might be ("if there were such a thing.") At least everyone has an idea of what is EVIL. It is what other people are doing— ("Hitler was evil . . . axe-murderers are not nice people . . .")

B. "Pictures of sin:" (Often we can SEE what we can't quite put into words—) Romans, One, describes sin in graphic terms:

- Sin is UNCLEANNES (as read in Romans 1)
- Sin is VILE AFFECTIONS (twisted love, curved IN suicidally) And we don't have any problem with that. For we usually see sin as somebody else doing something really bad.
- Sin is certainly Hitler, and the evil he brought on the world. . .
- Sin is Adam and Eve saying: "God said it . . . but maybe He doesn't really mean it!"
- Sin is DAVID... staying home when kings were warring— lusting and killing to cover his failure— and repenting and being forgiven!
- Sin is Judas, selling His Lord for money and then realizing in despair that he is wrong.
- Sin is Demas, forsaking Paul and the church because he loves the present world too much.

But we have a hard time bringing "sin" closer home, to see: Sin is when WE know God's will, His Word— and say "I'll do it after a while, when I get ready..." sin is turning away from light, choosing darkness, and thinking: "I can find my way back any time I choose, but for NOW I'll go my own way!"

C. The Bible has words which we translate in English as "sin:" In the OT the common word is:

- khawtaw = offense; to miss— bear blame; loss; Willful transgression of known law of God.

Some of the NT words are:

- hamartia = to miss the mark (and so not share the prize); to err, to trespass;
- paRAbasis = violation: breaking, transgression;
- para baino= to go contrary to or violate a command;
- paraptoma = a side-slip, (lapse or deviation) i.e. unintentional error , or wilful deviation transgression; fall, fault, offense, sin, trespass (As in Matthew 5: Forgive us our PARAPTOMA); "SIN" is going against what God has revealed as right and good; the "world" hates the word, because to accept the concept of SIN assumes that there is a God, and that He has spoken, and that what He has said is important to the way we live.

D. Sin defined: But Romans, One, also begins to DEFINE SIN:

Sin is a REPROBATE MIND (degenerate/perverved) Sin is GOING AGAINST GOD, AND GOOD, AND LIFE ITSELF! Sin is CHOOSING NOT TO OBEY GOD:

Romans 1:32 "...and, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them"

Sin is SPIRITUAL SUICIDE: God told Adam and Eve: "If you disobey, you will surely die!"

We think," But they DIDN'T die!" But die they DID! Paradise was LOST! God's IMAGE was marred! Fellowship interrupted!

III. JESUS SAVES FROM SIN AND SAVES TO LIFE

A. The name "Jesus" is the same as Joshua, in the Old Testament. We think of Moses as the one who led the people out of Egyptian bondage, but there were two leaders. Moses led them OUT, and Joshua led them IN! It took the work of BOTH of those men to signify what JESUS does for us: Jesus is OUR JOSHUA ! He wants to lead us out of bondage, if that is where we are— the bondage of sin; and He wants to lead us INTO FREEDOM!

B. JESUS IS OUR FRIEND. HE WILL TEACH US. HE WILL SAVE US.

He did not come to CONDEMN a sinful world; but that it might be CONVICTED. He did not come to send us to hell, but to lift us to heaven.

What did Jesus SAY about sin? and what do the scriptures say about Him on the subject of sin?

1. Jesus Himself was without sin! John 8:46 "Which of you convinceth me of SIN?"
2. Jesus identified with US in our sinfulness:
 - a. He was baptized!
 - b. Isaiah said: "He bore our sorrows!"
 - c. 2 Corin. 5:21 (God) made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God IN HIM!"
3. Thus Jesus had the power to FORGIVE sin: (Mark 2:7) "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (also in Luke 5:21) (Mt 9:6) The Son of man hath power on earth to forgive SINS" (John 1:29) "Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the SIN of the world."

What did Jesus DO about sin? The CROSS speaks of the seriousness of sin. Jesus DIED for our sins! Romans 6:10 "..in that he died, he died unto sin once . . ." and in so doing HE PAID THE PENALTY FOR ALL OUR SINS! ROMANS 6:23 THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH"

C. Jesus conquered the sin problem by his death on the cross of Calvary. But we must appropriate his victory by identifying with HIM in His death. (Psalm 31:5 "Into thy hand I commit my spirit; Thou hast ransomed me, O Lord, God of truth.") His words can be OUR words.

This is what Paul meant when he said, in Galatians 2:20, "I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live!" In truth we can say: "Let me die with Christ to sin, in order that I may rise with Christ to newness of life.

Conclusion:

I said at the very beginning today that 'Next to your concept of God, what you think about sin may be the most important factor in your salvation.

Call His Name Jesus

The reason is: If you ever miss heaven and eternity with God and good and light and life IT WILL BE SIN THAT KEEPS YOU OUT!

(And you have sinned! ALL have sinned! (Rom 3:23)) And if you simply give in, capitulate, and agree with the fools who say there is no sin; or, if you have such a trivial regard for sin that you think it is nothing serious, the fact that you have underestimated sin will not change the fact one iota.

The Bible says: "(Numbers 32:23) Be sure your sins will find you out!" and "(Ezekiel 18:20) The soul that sinneth shall surely die." and "(Romans 6:23) The wages of sin is death!" That is God's Word on the matter.

Or, perhaps through preaching on the Law, without the benefit of grace and the gospel, you have such a heavy and oppressive view of sin— you think that your sins are so great that they can never be forgiven, even though Christ died for you, then you may be so discouraged you never reach out for the salvation that is there for you all along.

But if you look to Jesus, and listen to what He says— Jesus our Joshua, who brings us INTO the Promised Land; Jesus who died for us, and who bids us DIE WITH HIM TO SIN, then salvation is within the grasp of your God-given faith!

Romans 6:22

"Therefore being made free from sin, and become servants to God, you have your fruit unto holiness, and the end, eternal life."

Jesus is the Measure of Man

September 13 1987

Psalm 8 "What is man?"

Jesus Is The Measure Of Man

Intro: The two great questions (so far) are very much related

I. OUR CONCEPT OF GOD WILL INEVITABLY SHAPE OUR CONCEPT OF (MAN) OURSELVES

A. When I consider the heavens, the product of mere chance and the collision of atoms, the moon and the stars, which simply came into being without any force beyond mere chance, WHAT IS MAN? IF 'GOD IS NOTHING', THEN: MAN IS NOTHING!

It may seem like a careless statement but: This is the reason why our society is so deeply in trouble! The 'springs of education' have been polluted, and the 'ocean' is being defiled!

Our children, our youth may not be sophisticated philosophers. But they are not fools— and when we have persisted in teaching in our public schools for the past 50 years or so that the Bible is a myth, and that God did not create the heavens and the earth they begin to get the message: "We have come from nothing . . . and we are going TO nothing! THIS is all there is! WHAT IS MAN? MAN IS NOTHING!"

[It is a frightening thing to "look into the abyss" of nothingness! Youth worker Steve Garber speaks about people: "Going first class on the Titanic..." People work hard and play hard and keep busy and never turn off the music because they are afraid to look into the EMPTINESS FROM WHERE THEY CAME—AND EVEN WORSE, THE EMPTINESS TO WHICH THEY ARE GOING!

This past week in a shocking demonstration of total disrespect for life, in an apparently drug-related or perhaps even 'meaningless act of violence', four pre-teen

youths on bikes stabbed a Hispanic man of 30 to death. We are in terrible trouble when our children lose the last vestige of respect for God, for life, for all authority.

But we can expect more and more of this horror when the fear and love of God has been replaced by cynicism and greed and emptiness.

Suicide is a leading cause of death among youth, and many deaths blamed on other things related to this despair of life's emptiness!

Man is NOTHING where there is no God . . . coming from NOWHERE, and headed for NOWHERE.]

B. When I consider the heavens, the product of a God Who started things long ago, but is either limited in His power— things are out of control- or else He is limited in His compassion— for He doesn't really seem to care, WHAT IS MAN?

WHEN 'GOD' IS 'WHAT WE SAY 'IT' IS, THEN MAN CANNOT KNOW WHO HE IS:

And we get answers like: "Man is god . . ." "EVERYTHING is god..." "Life is sacred . . . all life equally sacred! . . . " "Animal rights." Some of these seemingly great statements and causes actually spring from primitive pantheism or evil spiritism, or faulty concepts of God that serve to degrade humankind!

II. BELIEVING THE SCRIPTURES OPENS THE WAY TO KNOWLEDGE OF MAN

A. When I consider the heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained, WHAT IS MAN?

MAN IS GOD'S CROWNING CREATION! MAN IS SOMETHING WONDERFUL!

An entirely different atmosphere ABOUT THE WAY the Psalmist even asks the question! Reverence, yes! But also the asking of one person to Another Person! This is FAITH speaking! The Psalmist is not merely seeking to find out all by himself— but is asking a God who cares! A God Who reveals Himself to faith!

B. The Genesis account says that we are made in the image of God.

What does that mean?

A theological explanation goes like this:

(1) The "image of God" has two aspects. The natural image, or personality; and the moral image, or holiness.

****PERSONS**, with the power to reason and to feel and above all else, perhaps, to choose

**** But also HOLY!** Made for fellowship with God, they had no shame— they walked and talked with God.

(2) This image has been "marred." In the Fall (Genesis 3) we have the account of how subtle sin is; attacking the integrity of God and His Word. Shame and nakedness follow. Man is exposed to his own separation from God.

C. And yet the Bible would tell us: **GOD'S IMAGE STILL REMAINS!**

"Thou has made him (MAN) a little lower than the angels.

In the place of vice-regent over Creation.

Marred— the moral image lost— yet person, with intellect and emotion and volition; with immortality! (NOT the same as Eternal Life!); with the capacity and desire to fellowship with God!

III. IN JESUS CHRIST WE SEE WHAT WE MAY BE. HE IS GOD'S COMPLETE ANSWER TO THE QUESTION: "WHAT IS MAN?"

A. In His kenosis, His emptying out, His humiliation in leaving heaven's throne and taking on our human flesh, Jesus showed us what we are to be!

He not only taught the Beatitudes: He embodied them! Poor in spirit, a man of sorrows, meek and lowly, pure in heart— and yet above all else, blessed, and conscious of pleasing the Father.

WHAT IS MAN?

****JESUS IDENTIFIES WITH US AND SHOWED US WE CAN LIVE HERE ON EARTH IN FELLOWSHIP WITH THE FATHER BY THE SPIRIT!**

Jesus is the Measure of Man

B. But that is not the only answer we have to the question: WHAT IS MAN?!! For in His exaltation, His glorification, Jesus shows us God's purpose for you and for me!

Paul sees this as finished and done: (Ephesians 2:5,6 "(God) made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus.")

John puts it in the future: (I John 3:2) Beloved NOW are we the sons of God, and it does not yet appear what we shall be, But we know that when He shall appear we shall be like HIM, for we shall see Him as He is!"

WHAT IS MAN?

**JESUS LIFTS US TO (AT LEAST IN SOME GREAT MEASURE) IDENTIFY WITH HIM ..
.AND INVITES US TO SIT WITH HIM IN POWER AND GLORY!

Conclusion:

What is MAN? Who are YOU? Who am I?

If you will let Jesus show you . . .then 10,000 years from now you reign with JESUS over this very real Creation!

WS #375 He Lifted Me

Knowing Jesus Better

Christian Living Series 1 of 9

1. **Knowing Jesus Better**
2. The Vessel Formed
3. Mystery
4. The Church as Community
5. Keeping Power Switched On
6. Real Solutions to Real Problems
7. Don't You Know There is a War On
8. The Hope The Glory The Power
9. The Dynamic for Holy Living

September 13, 1987

EPHESIANS: Knowing JESUS Better...A PRAYER FOR FULLNESS

Purpose: (3:14-21) 19b "...that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a manual on the healthiness of life in God as it is intended to be lived. Here we may read about how God's great POWER can be released in those who believe; we are introduced to mysteries of GRACE and wonders of KINDNESS and joys of LIFE. But the highest privilege is FULLNESS! The greatest imperative in the book is 5:18 Be filled with the Spirit! And in the prayer here (3:14-21) is the heart of Paul's concern for the Ephesians, and certainly God's will for you and me: FULLNESS! But what KIND of fullness?

I. THE QUESTION IS NOT 'SHALL WE BE FILLED?,' BUT 'WITH WHAT SHALL WE BE FILLED?'

- A. Each of us is a vessel that is full for there is no such thing as spiritual vacuum. People are full of the stuff of life; people are full of their own importance; they are full of worry; they are full of hot air. In our culture it is the norm to be filled with the importance of self. We are so near to our culture that we are often blind to the pervasive, insidious, all-encompassing

fullness of SELF WORSHIP as the 'accepted way' to live. There is occupation with what "I" want! There is obsession with being true to "ME!" To suggest otherwise is equal to LUNACY and TREASON combined.

IT SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE, A CONTRADICTION, THAT ONLY WHEN I AM FILLED WITH GOD MY REAL 'BEST SELF'— MY 'FULFILLED SELF' CAN BE FORMED!

But this is what Jesus was talking about when He said: (Mk 8:35) "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for My sake and the gospel's, the same shall find it."

B. There are places where our fullness shows. We need to be looking at:

Reservoirs of consciousness: The things that "fill up our day." Not that we have consciously said: "This important!" Or even that we ENJOY it . . . but this is what we DO!

Wellsprings of attitude: The way we usually ARE to other people. The 'habits of the heart' (with apology to Bellah.) We let ourselves take on a "usual" way of looking at things: "Here comes the Dreamer!" said Joseph's brothers. "Here comes A PAIN!" "Here comes LOVE!"

Fountains of the spirit: The way we really ARE BEFORE GOD! Blessed are the pure in heart! Blessed are the seekers after God! Open, obedient, growing faith and love that is reflected in love for the Word, love for the place of prayer, love for the Church.

C. Our "fullness" is not usually a conscious choice:

1. We catch the ways of society more than we deliberately choose; it isn't that we need to look for the devil under every rock...the spirit of 'creeping secularism' is much more subtle than that— WE JUST NEED TO FORGET WHO WE ARE, AND WHOSE WE ARE FOR A SHORT WHILE!
2. Being filled is not necessarily seen as moral questions, or as "serious"— but things that 'take up space' in our souls.
3. (If we can speak as though spiritual things were 'spatial') Many thought-
s/attitudes/mind-sets "take up room" that might be used for better things. [If

your box is filled with \$20 bills, you couldn't get in \$100 bills even if they were offered!]

- D. Fullness does not say anything about CAPACITY. Remember, even a small vessel can GROW, and eventually take on surprising proportions.

II. THE IDEA OF BEING FILLED WITH GOD

- A. "Filled with all the fullness of God" ALL THAT GOD HAS TO OFFER - certainly doesn't mean that we have all of God that there is— the Universe does not "contain" God, but rather is sustained by His Word- but it DOES MEAN 'FILLED WITH GOD!'
- B. This is not a phrase to be lightly dismissed: "Oh, yes— what is meant here is 'the experience of entire sanctification!'" Which may be true— but in OUR context we may be saying: "This is stuff we Nazarenes 'own.' We are on familiar territory. Two trips to an altar and 'we have God's fullness!" Sometimes I think our church has got all the theological issues solved so neatly, and 'understands' all the 'hows' and even the 'whys' that people don't see how our "neat theology" relates to them where they are.

But there is REAL TRUTH in this message of holiness, a reality to being filled with the Spirit of God that, while it defies complete description, is crucial to our success as Christians.

EITHER WE WILL SEEK TO BE FILLED WITH GOD, AND BELONG WHOLLY TO HIM, OR WE WILL FAIL! And we will:

1. fall into outward sin
2. fall into sin of pride— thinking WE are the KEY—have a "holiness" that is a mass of rules and regulations
3. fall into sin of 'false humility' (antinomianism) and say: everyone has to sin every day anyway...

THIS IS NOT MERE THEORY (this prayer of Paul for you and me) AND ONCE AGAIN:

III. THE KEY TO FULLNESS IS KNOWING JESUS CHRIST

(v20-21) GOD IS ABLE TO MAKE THIS REALITY

This is what all the rest of Ephesians is about. But for right now we look at a practical application:)

- A. Fullness means the indwelling Christ (v 17): Jesus, welcome, at home, in you/me just NOW! By having heard Him knock, and by having deliberately invited Him in to STAY
- B. And Fulness means the empowering Christ (v 18): Enabling us to GRASP GOD'S LOVE:milk//meat/ /development/ /identity//responsibility
- C. The all-surpassing Christ (v 19): a crisis/on-going process of surrender; a grasping of the LOVE that enables us to "present our bodies a living sacrifice (Rom 12:1,2)Conclusion:
 - 1. You do not have the choice: "Shall I be full— or shall I not?"
 - 2. The question is: WILL YOU BE FILLED WITH JESUS CHRIST?
 - 3. Will you invite Him in? Make HIM your STRENGTH? Acknowledge your HELPLESSNESS before Him; and let HIM BE YOUR STRENGTH!

Make Him your ALL IN ALL? Trust Him with your secret ambitions . . .your dreams . . .your hopes?

#241 His Way with Thee

The Vessel Formed

Christian Living Series 2 of 9

1. Knowing Jesus Better
2. **The Vessel Formed**
3. Mystery
4. The Church as Community
5. Keeping Power Switched On
6. Real Solutions to Real Problems
7. Don't You Know There is a War On
8. The Hope The Glory The Power
9. The Dynamic for Holy Living

September 20, 1987

Imparting of Life; Means to God's Purpose in THE VESSEL FORMED.

Introduction: God wants us filled, but first we have to be formed.

Two weeks ago we began this study of Ephesians with the text (3:19) "That you may be filled up to all the fullness of God." This is the PURPOSE of this entire epistle!

[We said that everyone is already FULL of something (even if it is just hot air), but that if we are to be filled with GOD it will be a deliberate choice on our part.]

Being filled with God is the ONLY way to go! Without the fullness there will be failure. With the fullness we will be FULLY ALIVE!

But before we can be FILLED with God, we need to be FORMED in spiritual life. Before we can learn to walk we have to be born. Before we can dedicate our LIFE to Jesus we must have a LIFE to dedicate!

I. SALVATION AS A WAY OF LIFE

Look with me, if you will, at salvation as a complete way of life. Some people think of being saved mostly in terms of a fire escape. I'm glad IT IS THAT! But I'm also glad it is much, much more.

[I certainly don't want to miss God's best for all eternity! to be 'shut out' from fellowship forever!]

But if salvation is ANYTHING at all, IT IS LIFE!

Eph.2:5 "(God has) made us alive together with Christ..." The "Theology" of the New Birth is exciting:

[Do you know what the Bible tells us takes place when we come to Jesus for 'salvation?']

1. **Regeneration:** (v 5 Even when we were dead.. He has made us alive together with Christ) The reality of a new kind and quality of life. If there is not new life there is not salvation. This life is evidenced by appetite; and by growth; and by continued development.
2. **Justification:** (Eph 2:13 Brought near by the blood of Christ) also [Romans 5:1 Therefore being JUSTIFIED...] The satisfaction of sin's guilt. The breaking of sin's power. The freedom to choose right.
3. **Adoption:** (Ephesians 2:18.19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's HOUSEHOLD.) also [Romans 8:16 The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are Tchildren of God.) HOW near are we to God? We are FAMILY! We have spoken of "adoption", but "Citizenship" ALSO applies. There must be a sense of COMMUNITY or salvation is not complete as God intended. NO LONE RANGERS! Family! Access to the refrigerator!
4. **Sanctification:** Being made HOLY! Christ.likeness begun! Begun the instant we belong to Jesus in surrender; continues to crisis of entire sanctification; continues in growth, Christlikeness to glorification, when we receive a spiritual body; continues to all eternity in God's Presence.

II. THE LOWEST LEVEL OF SALVATION Is PEACE WITH GOD!

All these wonderful things happen when we come to Jesus - [even though none of us fully realizes how wealthy we are in becoming God's children] - but usually THE FIRST OF what we understand is just ONE THING: WE ARE AT PEACE WITH GOD!

The wonder of peace; it is what we crave even when we don't realize it. {It is a luxury that cannot be bought with money. It is a pure and quiet conscience, with the knowledge of sins forgiven. It is the basis for real happiness and contentment. It is the foundation of the Christian life.}

Jesus is the Prince of Peace! That is what the angels sang when He was born! (2:14) And Jesus HIMSELF is our peace! THE ENTRY LEVEL OF SALVATION...is PEACE with GOD; being in harmony with Him, accepting HIS Word as true; seeking to live by HIS judgments, by FAITH - even though we can only SEE what we can see.

Being justified by faith we have peace with God: our life in Christ starts with peace.. peace with God

["I didn't even know I was at war with God!" "Rebellion is more like it...or anarchy!" Rebels can't dictate terms. Rebels can't make deals. Rebels can only surrender. But JESUS HIMSELF is our peace!]

[How so??]

III. THE DOOR OF ALL SALVATION IS JESUS

"I AM the Door!" At every level of spiritual LIFE, Jesus is the DOOR!

1. His death on the cross gives us access: (2:16 Jews and Gentiles alike! have access to the Father!) But that access is first of all access for salvation. . then filling!
2. Access by His Spirit - Convicting, convincing - speaking to you about sin!
3. Access in the "now!" When God speaks about salvation, His time is always in the present! The "Door" is not something which you can search for and find all on your own. In God's Providence it may well be here tomorrow when you seek it...but there is no guarantee, and presumption is a deadly enemy of eternal life!
4. Access in the context of the Church! [We are "being built together..."]

Conclusion: COME ALIVE TO THE POSSIBILITIES OF LIFE!

Do you know the high privilege of peace with God? Are you at peace with Jesus? I'm not sure what all is involved by NOT having peace with God. But there is an interesting figure here, when we combine the truth expressed about 'existence before we find Christ and are saved:'

1. We are DEAD in trespasses and sins, but also
2. We are WALKING AROUND doing like the world tells us; doing what 'the prince of the power of the air' has dictated TO the world at large!
3. So.. until we are born to new life in Jesus we are WALKING DEAD! Zombies!
4. But we are invited to COME UP to Christ's THRONE; and to SIT DOWN with Him! in PEACE!

Jesus Himself is the DOOR to Peace with God, and to LIFE and to Life "MORE ABUNDANT!" ... Come (1) confessing your sin(s)! And come (2) believing Christ's MERCY! (Romans 10:9,10. !)and that Door to LIFE is ajar for YOU this evening! You can be filled with all the fullness of God! That is God's best and perfect will for you!

#230 - Come, Just as You Are

Mystery

Christian Living Series 3 of 9

1. [Knowing Jesus Better](#)
2. [The Vessel Formed](#)
3. **Mystery**
4. [The Church as Community](#)
5. [Keeping Power Switched On](#)
6. [Real Solutions to Real Problems](#)
7. [Don't You Know There is a War On](#)
8. [The Hope The Glory The Power](#)
9. [The Dynamic for Holy Living](#)

September 27, 1987

Ephesians 3:4,10

Do you enjoy mystery? What is it about mystery that intrigues and perplexes? Conundrum, enigma, puzzle, riddle, secret . . . all these are elements of the phenomenon we call "mystery." [The BUTLER did it!]

But when "mystery" is applied to everyday life— to our paycheck, or to our marriage, or to the contents of the dinner on our plate— we are not quite so enamored with "mystery." It is 10 p.m.- and 'we want to know where our children are!

This certainly is true of our standing with God. The Bible makes it plain that we can know God, and can be sure that we are right with Him. It is important that we know we are saved, based on fact and not on myth or hand-me-down folklore. And yet having said that, here in Ephesians Paul speaks of the mystery of faith. The mystery is an open secret. It is the fact that God wants to live with men, both Jew and Gentile. God does not want us to doubt that fact.

But there will always be elements of the faith that go beyond what we can understand. Faith itself will always be mysterious. (So is electricity— but we still use it!) And we must live by FAITH as long as we are in this world of time and sense.

There are always temptations to elevate what we do know and understand, and make it more than it is, so we won't have to deal with 'mystery' any more— won't have to 'walk by faith.' And ...It is the profound sense of holy mystery, the mystery that enables us to know and not know at the same time, which keeps us honest before God and fellow man.

I. WE ARE SAVED BY FAITH AND WE MUST CONTINUE TO LIVE BY FAITH

There is a "funny thing" about salvation, it is a paradox:

1. Any child can "understand" it— we have all sinned; Jesus died on the cross to save us, and if we confess He will forgive and save us— and if we don't, we will go to hell. But also
2. there is a profound mystery involved— WHY should God care?

And there are many profound mysteries! IF He cares so much about people, what about those who never heard? What about seemingly unanswered prayer? Why is there suffering?

We are called to total obedience, to total commitment to God in Christ, before we know all the reasons why, but not before we know enough to be assured and satisfied that God is good, and that God is holy, and that God knows us and loves us.

- A. God's will in salvation involves THE CHURCH (and centers in the Cross (v 11))
- B. God's will in salvation HAS UNIVERSAL IMPLICATIONS (which we cannot fully understand). But unless we are careful, even in our desire to be more spiritual, and be better Christians— we can seek to sidestep the radical cost of walking with Jesus by faith!

This has been my day to be narrowly doctrinal! But:

The BESETTING SIN OF THE FUNDAMENTAL MIND-SET IS THAT IT WANTS TO ELIMINATE THE 'MYSTERY' AND "KNOW" ALL THE ANSWERS IN THE BIBLE

Fundamentalism leans just a bit too hard on human understanding of Bible content, and takes almost a 'cause and effect' line on prayer and holy things, even when God's perfect will is veiled.

The BESETTING SIN OF THE CHARISMATIC MIND-SET IS THAT IT WANTS TO ELIMINATE THE 'MYSTERY' AND "FEEL" ALL THE ANSWERS IN EXPERIENCE:

Charismatics seem to weigh heavily on the importance of experience, giving it what seems to be almost equal importance with Scripture.

But there is an elusive, Golden Mean of balance in living of doctrine, experience, and practice. But it is not an easy middle ground.

II. WE CAN BE FAITHFUL WHEN WE CANNOT FULLY UNDERSTAND!

The truth is: it is much easier to analyze other people's mistakes and shortcomings than it is to face the same situation with integrity.

1. We are called to a radical commitment to the authority of God's Word: The BIBLE is truth! No doubt about it! But the Bible does not save us!
2. The Bible shows us JESUS! HE saves us! and we are called to: life-changing involvement in experiential truth, while being subject to the Word. To be saved means JOY! No doubt about it! There is reality in being saved. But the JOY does not save us! The JOY results from being near Jesus. JESUS saves us!;
3. AND SO OUR PRIMARY CONCERN IS: having a LIVING connection with Jesus Christ, knowing Him, walking with Him, and abiding in Him. The Book of Job is an important book; it tells us that we can know God when we cannot understand Him. And it tells us that what we do is important to Him. And it tells us that faithfulness is precious to Him!

Conclusion:

God loves YOU!

Some day you may DO something wonderful for Him! But we need to see that right here! right NOW YOU ARE IMPORTANT TO HIM! And you can give Him something! You can give Him your love! faithfulness! OBEDIENCE!

Mystery

We preach salvation and prayer and walking with God as though they were means to an end; as, if we will do these things then (1) we will be useful, or (2) we will live happily ever after. But what we need to grasp is the fact that there is ULTIMATE REALITY IN (simply) BEING BEFORE THE LORD!

Don't mistake: It is good and necessary that we witness and win; that we be USED of God; that we DEVELOP and STUDY and GROW and do all that we can understand of God's will, for the best reasons that we can know. . . We are not excused from witnessing and working and serving and growing and doing— all the things that we can understand of God's will. But when the way is hard— and we can't see anything being accomplished, and it seems we are at a dead end, remember ...there is more to this business than we can see! There is holy MYSTERY involved. It is NOT a cop-out to say that we don't have to understand all about our faith to be part of it. But we DO have confidence in the ONE we trust!

He is GOOD! He is GOD! And if we love Jesus, and are wholeheartedly involved in seeking His face... then we don't have to achieve or accomplish to be loved of Him... TODAY we are precious in God's sight! And if we will walk before God today, whatever the circumstance, then we please Him, and we fellowship Him, and somehow we shall fulfil our purpose. We are ALIVE in Him!

#71 (EH) *Sweet Will of God*

The Church as Community

Christian Living Series 4 of 9

1. [Knowing Jesus Better](#)
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9. [The Dynamic for Holy Living](#)

October 4, 1987

"The Eleventh Commandment"

Ephesians 4:12-13; 15-16;17-32

Just this week I took relatives to Plymouth. It isn't the Rock that fascinates me there. It is the memorial at the top of the little hill there, overlooking the harbor. I never get over the powerful sense of community that brought those people to these hostile shores.

I imagine also that many pioneers had the same sense of community as they trekked across the country in wagons, looking for a land of promise in the "Western reserve"— or further. In the past many communities have been welded together by common enemies, common visions of peace or purity. They appeal to us in some vague way— but seem somehow highly impractical...

Compare/contrast: Pilgrims/pioneers// "People's Church (Jim Jones)" . . . all had a "vision" a dream of Utopia . . . a place to go— modern day Hutterites very much a viable community.

But if we will look, such a challenge to community is found in the doctrine of the CHURCH, and here is one outline for us to look at and pray about: We are all familiar with "The Ten Commandments" that God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai, the laws that are the basis and hope for morality in our world today. And it is commonly accepted that "The Eleventh Commandment" is the commandment which Jesus gave that we should love God and man. Nobody is against "love." But do we make the connection between the commandment: "Love one another!" and the concept and idea of living in fellowship with the Church of Jesus Christ?

It is easy to talk about love, and to abstract about what love is, and even relatively easy to set up communes where everyone involved is supposed to operate out of pure love. It is another thing to carry out Christ's love into the nitty-gritty of peeling potatoes and carrying the weak and bringing home the bacon. Most "communes"—even Christian efforts— miserably fail.

And it is just as hard to deliberately be a part of a congregation made up of imperfect people who are sincerely trying to carry out God's will and be a part of Christ's Body, the CHURCH!

Between the idea and the carrying out there all too often seems to come frustration and failure. What is stopping us here from establishing a community of pure love and harmony in keeping with "The Eleventh Commandment?"

Should we strive to do that? I believe we already ARE striving to do just that! But look with me at some practical aspects of God's grace manifested in the church: look with me realistically at the idea of UNITY: as a fact, a reality, but also as a goal — never being daunted because the IDEAL is not seen in the way we think it OUGHT to be seen. Is that realistic? How can we do such an idealistic thing in the pragmatic present?

I. WE NEED A COMMON DESTINATION- A GOAL BEFORE US CONSTANTLY

And the first part of the chapter gives us this ideal: (vv12,13 "...so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith, and in the knowledge of the

Son of God and become mature, attaining to the FULL MEASURE OF PERFECTION FOUND IN CHRIST." (cf 3:19 "filled with all the fullness of God.")

1. We need to join our personal goals with those of Christ for His entire Body!
2. When we pray "Thy kingdom come!" we are affirming the community of faith! And we are saying: Keep this GOAL before us!

II. WE NEED A SIMPLE PLAN TO CARRY US FORWARD TOWARD THIS GOAL

And in verse 16 is the Divine Plan spelled out: Each member, each part, is to be connected with the Living Head: "...from HIM (Christ the Head) the whole body being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies according to the proper working of each individual part causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

1. The Separatists (Pilgrims) had to entrust themselves to God by way of men they trusted: Pastor Robinson, Elder Brewster, for spiritual leadership; Miles Standish for secular government; the master of the Mayflower for transportation.
2. We need to entrust ourselves to God, and seek more than a "nominal" or "intellectual" faith in Jesus Christ. He is the living Head— and every member of His body can be led by Christ. True, Christ will probably lead through people. But there must be the vital, living connection.

III. WE CAN BE AWARE OF A MIGHTY POWER THAT ENABLES US TO CARRY OUT THE BEAUTIFUL PLAN

Beautiful plans and schemes are plentiful: plans that work are few and far between.

1. The church is to be built on integrity; and on genuine caring:

(17) Walk no longer as the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind being darkened in their understanding excluded from the LIFE OF GOD because of the ignorance that is in them because of the hardness of their heart having become callous given over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. BUT YOU DID NOT LEARN CHRIST IN THIS WAY! YOU have been taught that you lay aside the old self which is being

corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind and put on the new self which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth therefore laying aside falsehood speak truth each one of you with his neighbor for we are members of one another.

2. And the church is built on INTER-DEPENDENCE:

(v 25) "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.

This is the identical thought Paul expresses in Romans 12:5

"So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."

IV. WE HAVE A GREAT TEACHER AND GUIDE IN THIS GREAT ADVENTURE (VV 29-30)

(And the 11th commandment here has another serious commandment, a 'negative' side to the positive "Love one another!" and that is :DO NOT GRIEVE THE HOLY SPIRIT OF GOD!)

The Holy Spirit is NOT "looking for reasons to leave;" but also, He never forces Himself on those who do not want HIM!

Evidently this is a list of the things that can grieve the Spirit: bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, malice...

And definitely, here is what PLEASES God: (verse 32) KINDNESS! COMPASSION! A SENSE OF COMMUNITY!

Conclusion:

1. It may not strike you as attractive to join a community of faith. You may not see the need, like Pilgrims did, or pioneers.
2. But in reality their physical existence very closely parallels our own. WE ARE ALL ON A VOYAGE TO A NEW WORLD. We are in hostile territory, in alien culture. We MAY be

able to survive on our own, but it is highly doubtful. We need the church of Jesus Christ. My own immediate family did not come through the wars unscathed— and I shudder to think of the awesome task of rearing godly children today in our almost wholly secular society!

Children's ministry is NOT (just) Marilyn Stark's task! And while it IS the family's primary responsibility, it isn't just the "parents' task," either! It must be one of this church's priorities!

LET'S GET OUR WHOLE COMMUNITY TO HEAVEN! LET'S REACH AFTER THAT FULL MEASURE OF PERFECTION FOUND IN CHRIST!

3. WE HAVE A SUPPORT SYSTEM, AND A SUPPORT GROUP. WE NEED TO FIND EACH OTHER; WE NEED TO HELP EACH OTHER. We need to love each other— and as Reuben Welch said so eloquently and so simply: We really do NEED each other!
4. WE CALL THIS SUPPORT SYSTEM AND SUPPORT GROUP: THE CHURCH! We need to dedicate the rest of our lives to Christ's church: to
 - a. obedience and submissiveness to HIM; as well as to
 - b. finding and using our gifts to the full;
 - c. we will have opportunity both for personal growth AND for sacrifice.

But church is not an option. And church is not just for our benefit- it is the Bride of Christ, and His Body.

#47 (EH) *God of Grace and God of Glory*

Keeping Power Switched On

Christian Living Series 5 of 9

1. Knowing Jesus Better
2. The Vessel Formed
3. Mystery
4. The Church as Community
5. **Keeping Power Switched On**
6. Real Solutions to Real Problems
7. Don't You Know There is a War On
8. The Hope The Glory The Power
9. The Dynamic for Holy Living

October 11, 1987

Ephesians 3:19

Read 4:32-5:18. Emphasize 5:8 (You are LIGHT who once were darkness)..and 5:18 (KEY VERSE: *Be filled with the Spirit!*) Finding God's fullness as an on-going reality; carrying forward God's purpose for us, of being filled with GOD!)

I. LIVING AS GOD'S BELOVED CHILDREN MEANS:

A. Being FAMILY to God. The very idea of "family" as a good thing has been under attack:

1. The *sacred concept of 'family'*

The idea of belonging to one another for better or for worse; the idea that with God as Father, the community of faith IS family; *generally seeking the good of other family members*. (Sibling rivalry/friction may be a fact even within the church; but the idea of family is scriptural.)

2. The *sacred institution of the individual family*

This is dealt with later in the epistle; it is basic to the formation of character. In the reality of our society today many have to 'make do' without the ideal of parents (or parent!) who have no higher priority than children; it may be passe', but that does not make the ideal invalid., but the concept of commitment and loyalty and *togetherness* is vital.

ILLUS: Senator Paul Tsongas made a statement with his resignation a few years ago.. he had to choose between making policy for a nation.. or making an impact on his own family and children. Evidently Senator Tsongas chose to go with what would *last!* For our children will outlive and outlast this great Republic!

A *family* is NOT to be just an aggregation of individuals held together by mutual selfishness, meeting in the kitchen as they scramble off to work. They MAY have to do a lot of that *but a family is made up of people who CHERISH each other!*

3. The *fact of FAMILY in the CHURCH*

God is Sovereign; He is also "Abba." We must learn to make this more and more our own truth; to *appropriate it!*

[We are "family" with God, and God's family must be *sexually pure*.]

B. Being SEXUALLY PURE

1. God's Word speaks forthrightly about many of the issues that are argued back and forth in our society. We need to know what it says, and how we as Christians stand on such issues as *abortion*; as on *homosexuality*; and as on how we shall face the impending epidemic of *AIDS*. (In five years every one of us will be personally acquainted with a family that has a victim.)

2. God's WORD is not a clinical manual on medicine or human fertility; but it ought to be the foundation of the kind of sex education that leads us *from animal sex to human sexuality. ***
3. Sexual purity is the standard for the church for all professing Christians. NO believer can afford to rationalize, to lower the standards. The Bible has a clear standard: *all sexual intercourse outside of the marriage covenant is sin.* Homosexual intercourse [if there are children of the young age present, call intercourse "intimacy"] is sin, but so, also, is all heterosexual sexual intercourse that is not sanctioned and blessed by God in covenant blessing.
4. God expects purity
 - a. not only in the actual acts and physical relationships; but
 - b. in the intent and thought life. Sin begins with intent; with the cultivation of thoughts of evil. (There IS a distinction between "thoughts of evil" and "evil thoughts." There CAN be a resisting of temptation; of the enemy's attempt to twist HUMAN desire into EVIL desire.)

Summary of "Being sexually pure": Sexual impurity is wrong *because it breaks God's holy laws*; *but it is also wrong in that **it violates the sanctity of the family; and it treats PEOPLE as objects of selfishness*. I would love to change the more`s of our culture but that is not going to happen overnight.

Sexual impurity will NOT be unpunished. Indeed, it carries the seeds of destruction, disappointment, and even despair in itself. *But tonight we are speaking to God's family!*

The emphasis for THIS sermon is: LET THE CHURCH BE PURE! THEN THE CHURCH CAN HAVE POWER!

We all love it when we cry out against the sinfulness "out there!" "The world" is going to hell.. and we need to cry out against it.. *but the fact is, WE NEED TO MAKE CERTAIN OUR HEARTS ARE PURE, OUR MINDS ARE

GOD'S TEMPLES! AND *THEN* GOD MAY BE ABLE TO USE US TO CHANGE THE NEEDY, SINFUL WORLD!*

[Living as children of light, in God's family, also means:]

- C. NOT being GREEDY (Greed is the power.behind.the.throne in most sin; even (especially) in the sexual sins we have discussed; "power brokers" of the obscenity market).

We like to hear about the dastardly, flagrant sins of the world but we *don't* like to hear that we are in grave danger because the same fires of selfishness burn within US! If we LIVE TO GRASP! THEN THE SEEDS OF HELL ARE WITHIN US!

But we may be FREE from *impurity* and *covetousness, which is idolatry*! HOW?

II. ALL THIS THROUGH 5:18. FULLNESS. THE REALITY OF BEING FILLED!

1. (V 14: *Be awake to what is really going on!*)
2. *BE an OPPORTUNIST!* (v 15: *Walk with your eyes open!*) When He knows He can trust you, God will put you in places.. thrust you into opportunities where
 - a. you will know His prompting;
 - b. you will NEED His Presence and power;
 - c. you will find "**BREAK.THROUGH FULFILLMENT!**"
3. *But ALL THIS BECAUSE OF "5:18!"* We CAN be filled with the Spirit! We can STAY filled with the Spirit!

Exhortation:

GET sanctified! If you are a believer, (Romans 12:1,2:) *Present YOUR body to God! Give HIM your LIFE!* Be filled with the cleansing, empowering baptism of the Holy Spirit!

Get SAVED if you need to, in ORDER to get sanctified! STAY FILLED! STAY BEING FILLED!

(EH) *Give Me a Holy Life*

What is Your Name?

October 11. 1987 am

Genesis 32:26_28 Then he said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking." But he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." And he said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."

"WHAT IS SALVATION?"

This is the third time we have used the same question, "What is Salvation?" We have looked at

1. God's Sovereignty and Our Free Will: [God Loves Us and Provides Salvation for Us by Grace;] and at the...
2. Atonement, ["Christ Died for Us."] Today we look at
3. Sanctification. "[Christ changes us, and makes us like Himself].

There are not "two salvations." Both the crisis of justification and the crisis of entire sanctification are elements of one great salvation. But Wesleyans have historically emphasized the need for a crisis of entire consecration on the part of believers after they have been saved, a crisis which on God's part results in cleansing and empowering and infilling with the Holy Spirit. This cleansing and empowering we call "entire sanctification."

What IS "entire sanctification?"

I. A THEOLOGICAL LOOK AT ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION

"Sanctification" refers the whole of what God does to us and in us to make us like Jesus. GOD WANTS TO CHANGE US INTO HIS LIKENESS; FROM WHAT WE ARE, IN OURSELVES, WITHOUT HIM— TO WHAT WE CAN BE BY HIS INDWELLING PRESENCE, FROM INADEQUACY AND SELFISHNESS TO CHRIST-LIKENESS AND SERVICE.

What is Your Name?

This life-changing, character-changing grace of God begins the moment we surrender our lives to God, and continues throughout all our lives as we walk with Him by faith; indeed, I believe it continues throughout all eternity! It is a process!

But at a very important point in this walk with God, every believer is challenged to a full and complete consecration, in love, to God, forever. In return God promises 'a renewing of the mind, an infilling, cleansing fullness of His Holy Spirit.' This crisis we call "entire sanctification." It is an all-important crisis within the process of sanctification.

Our Wesleyan definitions of "sanctification" are almost always definitions of "entire sanctification:" (such as)

Dr. E. F. Walker: "Sanctification, in the proper sense, is a work of grace, instantaneously wrought in the person of a believer, subsequent to regeneration, administered by Jesus Christ, through the baptism with the Holy Ghost purifying him from all sin, and perfecting him in divine love."

John Wesley (quoted in Wiley & Culbertson): "Sanctification in the proper sense is an instantaneous deliverance from all sin, and includes an instantaneous power then given always to cleave — to God."

Dr. John W. Goodwin: "Sanctification is a divine work of grace, purifying the believer's heart from indwelling sin. It is subsequent to regeneration, is secured in the atoning blood of Christ, is effected by the baptism with the Holy Ghost, is conditioned on full consecration to God, is received by faith, and includes instantaneous power for service."

Here is a statement of our accepted theology (Wiley) that may make it a little easier to see how different needs are met by justification and sanctification, and help us to distinguish "entire sanctification" from "justification":

1. Justification in a broad sense has reference to the whole work of Christ wrought for us; Sanctification, the whole work wrought in us by the Holy Spirit.
2. Justification is a judicial act in the mind of God; Sanctification, a spiritual change wrought in the hearts of men.

3. Justification is a relative change, that is, a change in relation from condemnation to favor; Sanctification, an inward change from sin to holiness.
4. Justification secures for us remission of actual sins; Sanctification in its complete sense, cleanses the heart from original sin or inherited depravity.
5. Justification removes the guilt of sin, Sanctification destroys its power.
6. Justification makes possible adoption into the family of God; Sanctification restores the image of God.
7. Justification gives a title to heaven; Sanctification a fitness for heaven.
8. Justification logically precedes sanctification, which in its initial stage, is concomitant with it.
9. Justification is an instantaneous and completed act, and therefore does not take place in stages, or by degrees; Sanctification is marked by progressiveness in that partial or initial sanctification occurs at the time of Justification, and entire sanctification occurs subsequent to Justification . Both initial and entire sanctification, however, are instantaneous acts wrought in the hearts of men by the Holy Spirit.

II. THE NEED FOR A SECOND CRISIS

We probably need to emphasize and re-emphasize over and over that "sanctification" is both process and crisis; that the process begins when we are justified. We need to say over and over that it continues throughout life. "God isn't done with us yet...." He is never done with us!

But also we need to underscore that there comes a crisis of full surrender when the 'sovereignty question' is settled in a decisive way!

WHY do we need to underscore this second crisis? Because it is our Nazarene tradition? If THAT is the only reason— then let's have courage and dump it!

WHY underscore this second crisis? Because if we don't we will have no reason for separate identity from other evangelicals? If THAT is our reason we had better wake up! Other evangelicals are emphasizing "holiness of heart and life!"

What is Your Name?

THE REASON (then, that) WE NEED TO EMPHASIZE THE SECOND CRISIS IS THAT THIS IS THE SCRIPTURAL WAY PEOPLE ENTER INTO THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S FULLNESS! WE CANNOT AFFORD TO MISS THE SCRIPTURAL TRUTH AND LIFE-CHANGING POWER, THE REALITY OF THIS EXPERIENCE WE CALL "ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION!"

We almost always COME to God for justification for selfish reasons: to escape judgment and penalty for our sins; to receive eternal life; to GET something from God. We are saved as we are "running away from our sins."

But this matter of "entire sanctification" is a matter of STAYING WITH GOD FOR BETTER REASONS! It is a matter of GIVING something to God as best we can! It is a matter of offering Him our love for time and for eternity! It is letting God have us to make us over like Jesus! We are "sanctified wholly" as we are "running toward God with our hunger for more of HIM!"

[Transition: But it is easier to see "second blessing holiness" demonstrated than it is to hear it described and "analyzed" by experts who often confuse rather than clarify:]

III. THE LIFE-CHANGING POWER

There are several powerful scriptural testimonies to the character-changing grace of God's sanctifying power in the lives of believers. One of the very best 'pictures' of the crisis of entire sanctification is found in the story of the patriarch Jacob. [Found in Genesis 32] I happen to believe that the story 'fits' our Wesleyan theology very well, but whatever your theology, the end result was exactly what Jacob needed, and what you and I desperately need.

The end result was a change in the very nature of Jacob. To understand the story of Jacob becoming Israel, we need to understand the deep significance of NAMES here in the Old Testament.

"Jacob" means "heel grasper." He came out of his mother's womb grasping his twin brother's heel. And he kept right on "grasping" from that time on. And in his

"grasping" Jacob was a lot like some people I know— a lot like YOU and a lot like ME! And the name was fitting. Jacob was all for Jacob. He was a cheat. He tricked his brother out of his birthright and out of his blessing. You know the story, and if you don't you should read it soon.

On the way from home to Padan-Aram, escaping from his brother and his 'sins,' he had the experience in a dream of a ladder from heaven to earth— at a place he called "Beth-El," the house of God. He was changed— he was different. But he was still Jacob. Note: God met Jacob when he was RUNNING AWAY from his sins.

But perhaps 14 years later, returning home, Jacob met with God in this way:

1. Jacob was now a very wealthy man. But he was anticipating meeting his twin brother, Esau; and fearing the meeting very much.
2. The crisis came when Jacob was finally all alone, even though he had become for all purposes a rich man. I am not sure of all the significance of separation as Jacob sent over his herds and flocks and family until he was alone by the Brook Jabbok. But I do know that now this crisis separated him for a time from all his ACQUISITION.
3. But in the confrontation with God that took place there that night, the life-changing point is reached when God asks Jacob: WHAT IS YOUR NAME?

"Who ARE you, really?" And Jacob has to own up to the fact that he is a GRASPER! He is a person who lives to ACQUIRE!

Now it isn't hard to be a GRASPER! Believe me! Things have a way of grasping us! But the one BIG thing Paul tells us about Jesus is this: JESUS WAS NOT A GRASPER! (Philippians 2:5-6) And if we are to be like Jesus, somehow WE have to "let go of things" so they will lose their hold on us. HOW?

Well— perhaps it starts with answering the question: "What is your name?"

4. Jacob answers God truthfully: "My name is JACOB!" And God says: "Not any more it isn't! From NOW on your name is: ISRAEL! You are God's man!"

What is Your Name?

5. Jacob also asks God: "What is YOUR name!"

It is sort of audacious, and there is no answer immediately. God is not answerable to any creature, and is beyond what we can grasp.

But the "name of God" does come to Jacob-Israel. In Genesis 35 it comes: "I AM God Almighty— El Shaddai!— the Nourisher!"

IV. WHAT IS SANCTIFICATION?

Conclusion: Perhaps one answer is: SANCTIFICATION IS GETTING YOUR NAME CHANGED! What is YOUR name this morning?

And what direction are you running?

Are you running AWAY from the results of your sins? If you are— God is waiting to meet you, and forgive you, and save you, and bless you.

But perhaps you are running TOWARD God, with the consciousness that your sins are forgiven— and that you are rich in blessings— but also with the deep awareness that your name is "Jacob!" God can and will 'change your name' from "Jacob" to "Israel" by this second crisis of entire sanctification!

#203 - Ho! Everyone That is Thirsty!

Real Solutions to Real Problems

Christian Living Series 6 of 9

1. [Knowing Jesus Better](#)
2. [The Vessel Formed](#)
3. [Mystery](#)
4. [The Church as Community](#)
5. [Keeping Power Switched On](#)
6. **Real Solutions to Real Problems**
7. [Don't You Know There is a War On](#)
8. [The Hope The Glory The Power](#)
9. [The Dynamic for Holy Living](#)

October 18, 1987

Ephesians 5:21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

THE WINNING PRINCIPLE OF SUBMISSION

Introduction/Disclaimers:

Cultural Realities that we have no way of knowing, but we can infer a wholly different situation regarding women's status, as well as accepting absolute authority in government, and roles and classes into which people were born. No idea of "equality" of all men. Contextual setting of this passage regarding husband-wife: submission is not merely the task of women and children.

In any cooperative enterprise proper lines of responsibility & authority need to be understood and accepted. Respect for authority is one of the sadly lacking features in our American culture that may well finally bring it down. But this is a double-edged truth: real authority must be merited-/earned. One of the rare pleasures in life is learning the joy of losing one's self in a worthy cooperative effort. It is one of the great lessons of music; of playing in a group or band or symphony. It is "rare"

because most of us are interested in being "star performers." We want to be appreciated at all costs.

Allan Bloom says: "Everyone loves himself most, but everyone wants others to love him more than they love themselves." But there is a cost in entering into relationships of love and commitment. The taking of "Vows" is always sacred, whether they be wedding vows— "forsaking all others..keeping ONLY TO YOU" or whether they be salvation vows: "Jesus is LORD! forever!"

They bind us to a common submission and set of responsibilities each to the other. Any successful relationship of two free people will have to some extent be an exercise in submission to the common good. One cannot be a Christian without facing up to the Lordship of Jesus, and that means submission.

SUBMISSION TO JESUS CHRIST AS LORD

A Christian is one who is willing to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

SUBMISSION TO THE BIBLE AS THE AUTHORITY FOR LIFE

An evangelical Christian is one who is willing to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. If we are not willing to change our lives to conform to the revealed will of God, then we are not Christians. If this passage of scripture, or any other passage of scripture, makes it clear to me that I must change the way I live, and I choose not to do so, then I am not a Christian, whatever I may say.

SUBMISSION TO THE CORPORATE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

The common way of looking at the church is as a convenience, placed here by God to facilitate our individual and personal growth. Jesus said the church is His BODY. It is Christ's creation, His building. But in the body of Christ our submission is A SUBMISSION THAT CAN NEVER BE ABNEGATION OF RESPONSIBILITY.

SUBMISSION AS HEALTH WITHIN THE HOME

Unless two people deliberately determine that they will subjugate their selfish ways to make a relationship work, their marriage is doomed from the very start.

What do you expect me to say here? I can go either of two ways: the simplistic, literal way (like Bill Gothard) that denies equality. Or I can ignore the fact that Paul says the husband is to be the head of the home entirely. But what Paul is speaking about is the mighty power of MEEKNESS to release LOVE!

1. WIVES (no simplistic stuff here) Within the context of the culture to which Paul wrote this was revolutionary. Women were not to be considered at the same level as men. But the Christian faith has done great things to promote the equality of all people. There are no second-class people in God's family.

But what about "Be submissive— the husband is the head?" First— it says "Be submissive to your own husband." As opposed, perhaps, to somebody else's husband. This may be a call to loyalty.

- a. No one is "GOD" to anyone else, and is not supposed to be, ever! No one's word must be considered as final authority (except in infants that cannot yet know God's mind.)
- b. No one is "inferior by birth" to anyone else; that is, simply because one is born poor, or female, or a different color than the majority of a local church, does that in any way make him or her one whit less valuable (or MORE valuable) than the dominant majority of the church.

Illustration: Of the woman with the demanding husband who made her miserable with his lists, and then mercifully he died. She remarried and found a husband who loved her and cherished her— and one day she woke up to the fact that she was doing the "lists" her first husband had given her— but doing them joyfully. (I do not say the wife is the "servant." I say that we are all to "serve in love" in the home.)

2. HUSBANDS

Twice as much here about how the men were to cherish their wives. In light of what I saw with my own eyes in the Middle East this was truly revolutionary.

3. PARENT-CHILD RELATIONS

Here deal with potential/future parents—asking them not to repeat the imprinting that they believe may have been harmful to them; "Lord, Help me to be as near the "ideal parent" as I can be!" Does the parent live to serve the child? Does the child exist to satisfy and fulfill the parent? NO! But the home exists to glorify God! And where parents seek God's glory—instead of selfish fulfillment, God will help us to submit and respect each other...and make room for real growth. Perhaps the time for thinking about what sort of parents you ought to be is long before you have your first child. Take notes! Don't let your home overly influence you! Seek to submit to God and to one another to the glory of Christ!

4. EMPLOYEES-EMPLOYERS

(I don't know where that leaves the Quincy school teachers!)

Back to 5:21 (text) - and the ideal is JESUS!

[Conclusion: It may well be that I have only "muddied the waters" in much of this discussion—about the particulars of husband and wife relationships. If you will submit to the authority of the Word and seek God's mind I have confidence He will guide you. But let me close on a note that is much more certain and positive: (Mark Twain said: "It isn't the parts of the Bible I can't understand that give me trouble— it is the part I CAN understand and don't want to obey!")

Much of this word on "submission" is in the context of Christ and the CHURCH.

1. Marriage is one of the sacred symbols of the fidelity we are to have to GOD. No human marriage is ever perfect. God as HUSBAND TO THE CHURCH; and as our Master We don't like to think of being 'slaves' even to God! But we had better think about what a real SOVEREIGN is!

2. We are to be totally SUBSERVIENT TO GOD. He IS always right!
3. But He is also ALWAYS DESIRING OUR BEST! He DOES provide! He will be faithful!
And WE must be faithful, too!

#243 I'll Live for Him

Don't You Know There is a War On

Christian Living Series 7 of 9

1. Knowing Jesus Better
2. The Vessel Formed
3. Mystery
4. The Church as Community
5. Keeping Power Switched On
6. Real Solutions to Real Problems
7. **Don't You Know There is a War On**
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9. The Dynamic for Holy Living

The Armor of God

October 25, 1987

Ephesians 6:10-24

Introduction:

We are coming to the final words of Ephesians this evening, but not the end of this series. Lord willing, there will be two more messages before our revival with Dr. Greathouse begins.

After the subject matter of the last two Sunday evenings, I should be happy for this familiar territory that is always good for spiritual application.

But that is just the problem. We often "retreat into spirituality" here. We describe the ancient soldier's armor, and think we have understood what this passage is all about. These words are much, much more than a stroll through a museum, looking at antique armor. This is a very practical message. It speaks to life as it is lived in 1987, and not just as it was in 87 A.D., when perhaps it was written. It is concerned with human struggle, and not just "spiritual matters."

I. CASUALTIES OF SPIRITUAL WARFARE

1. I see an all-out young Christian; full of fire and enthusiasm— sets his church on fire part FIRE and part enthusiasm of youth-being-converted-to-a-cause. Then there is FLAMEOUT. Perhaps disillusionment with older Christians; perhaps getting caught up in so-called intellectual questions. For all practical purposes no good to God or the kingdom of God.
2. I recall a solid, sincere Christian at a Christian college; never a wild party-er; good testimony; becomes a well-paid specialist in a high-paying profession; becomes rich in this world's goods, and totally LOST to the kingdom of God.
3. I recall more than one or two solid, talented pastors; gifted, charismatic (in the "old" sense of the word.) Become successful— become lustful, or greedy, or both— and they FALL, and they take an untold toll when they fall. It is hard to compare casualties like this with much more graphic casualties of physical warfare. It is easy to assume that I am being parochial, and exaggerating; to assume that I am a Nazarene pastor who is jealous for the Nazarene ministry— and there well may be an element of that! But I am desperately concerned and troubled that the Christians I serve, the sphere of influence where my voice is heard realize the seriousness, the all-out nature of this spiritual warfare: AND THAT WE REALIZE THE ETERNAL CONSEQUENCES OF WINNING OR LOSING THIS WARFARE!

II. POINTS OF ATTACK IN SPIRITUAL WARFARE

The passage is usually approached with a detailed description of the ancient armor. Even now it makes me think of VBS, and sincere ladies, and little paper armor sets stuck on easels.

But Paul was describing real dangers. He was talking about GUT SHOTS, and HEART SHOTS, and FOOT SHOTS in this spiritual warfare. Each piece of armor is connected with some aspect of integrity of obedience, and the admonition is: "You need it ALL!"

LOINS GIRT WITH TRUTH

I think of people who never go beyond living a role: living as they think others expect them to live; living as though appearances were more important than reality.

[It isn't that appearances are NOT important. But what a person is on the inside is ALL-IMPORTANT!]

What really counts is a LIVING, GROWING RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST!
[(6:14) Integrity over our "loins." The "vitals" which the Jews called "splanchna."
Where our GUTS come in— "stomach" for a fight.]

And so one day the pressure is on, and the enemy strikes, and deep in the "innards" is the sinking feeling: "I NEVER REALLY HONESTLY FACED WHO I AM, AND WHO CHRIST WANTED ME TO BE!"

BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

I think, also, of people who never want to make an all-out break with sin. They try to avoid the gross and obvious sins— but they excuse the so-called "little sins;" or they compromise on principles. If anything takes the HEART out of holy living it is trying to live over sin; to rationalize fudging on all-out commitment. We are DEAD if we are not right with God and walking in all the light we have. We are gravely mistaken if we think otherwise.

And so when the battle is joined it doesn't take long for an enemy dart to strike through the heart. It doesn't make sense to join God's kingdom in wartime, and not protect your heart.

FEET SHOD WITH PREPARATION

We make a joke of people who shoot themselves in the foot. It is the shorthand way of talking about "clumsy." But a soldier who is shot in the foot is helpless in the long run. He or she can only go where others may carry; and we aren't going to make the long haul unless we are prepared.

Taking care of your feet isn't very glamorous but it is one of the big things in a foot soldier's training. And it is one of the big things in this warfare to the death!

THE SHIELD OF FAITH

No one is perfect. We don't win battles because we are so strong or so invulnerable— but because we follow Jesus and OBEY. But there will be weaknesses in our

preparation; there will be areas of emotional stress, or bitter disappointment, or failure of friends, or any other of a thousand things to all but overwhelm.

THERE IS SUCH A THING AS A "WEAKNESS SHOT"

— where the enemy, who knows your weakness, too— shoots at you where you are the most vulnerable. With the rest of the armor, faith makes us able to quench

ALL the fiery darts. Faith doesn't work right when used alone. Faith is a "completer" of body armor. When we have truth and righteousness and preparation and salvation as best we know, our human weakness is protected by this shield of faith.

THE HELMET OF SALVATION

There will be questions that we cannot answer. Jesus is NOT anti-question! But being FINITE, we will come up against facts and concepts that shake us. I'm thankful for the way Jesus handled Thomas. There is no substitute for being a personal student of Professor Jesus! Being in His Presence, knowing HIS assurance, helps us through the mind-boggling questions of life.

And, as we shall see in a moment: PRAYER IS WHAT MAKES IT ALL GO!

III. THE BATTLE JOINED

- A. A Wartime Mind-Set: We can never simply live as if it were not so! It is difficult to explain what it was like during WWII when the future of civilization as we knew it hung in the balance. I'm sure there were vast distortions, but I truly believed that the Nazis and the Japanese warlords threatened all that was sacred and safe. I was also convinced that winning the war would take God's help PLUS all we could do. "Loose lips sink ships!" "Buy War Bonds"

Paul is reminding the Ephesians that there is a Titanic struggle going on in the Universe between good and evil.

- B. The Great Sweep of the Battle-Field:

That struggle for some reason centers in the battle for the personality of men and women.

It isn't that we are intrinsically so valuable; for some reason God has made His people the showcase for three watching worlds. But as far as you and I are concerned, this warfare has eternal consequences. We have everything to gain, heaven, and eternal growth and fulfillment, and divine fellowship; and we have everything to lose, with eternal darkness and separation and memory— an eternity without God and hope that we call hell.'

That struggle is also for some reason limited to this period of mortal life here in time and space. It may seem strange to you, but I do NOT think it is necessary to be "experts on the opposition." There are those who sensationalize, and make a great deal of satanic power, and the powers of darkness. Suffice it to say that the enemy is

wise beyond human wisdom dark world New Age (awareness, basically) (mysteries again) But there

are some important things we should remember about the enemy in this war to the finish:

- he is not as wise as he would have us think
 - he is already defeated
 - and God is always working "both sides of the street" when you are doing His will; Moses was afraid because he was weak— and then he realized God was with him; what he may NOT have realized was that God was working in Pharaoh's life just as much; and when the Bible says God hardened Pharaoh's heart it doesn't mean God didn't love Pharaoh, it simply meant that NOBODY resists God with impunity—and God is either USING you right now— OR HE IS HARDENING YOUR HEART!
- C. Your place, and mine, in this spiritual warfare: It is easy to get our eyes on to the "dramatic" and look for exorcisms and spectacular miracles. But real life usually is trench warfare; the battle is won by letting Jesus keep us sweet when the pressure is on, and by loving when it is easier to be spiteful and mean. It is better to be simple in faith and

obedient, than to be very wise in the ways of the enemy without the power of God.⁴
(6:13) The idea is to fight the good fight and to be faithful!

There are TWO VITAL ITEMS that we have not yet talked about in this warfare.

THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

(6:17) The Spirit sword - The "cutting edge" is being used of the Spirit. It is not that we are so wise, and know how to wield the sword, although God has a hard time bringing OUT for use what we have never allowed Him to PUT IN. But if we live with the Word, and if we say "Use me, Lord!" the marvelous thing about it is— He will!

And the other item, the absolutely most indispensable item is

PRAYER IN THE SPIRIT!

(6:18) Prayer is what makes it all go.

Every army travels on its stomach. When an army starves it cannot fight any longer. When communications are broken off with headquarters it is easily surrounded and destroyed. Prayer is where we maintain contact; receive orders; are kept strong; it is absolutely vital.

Conclusion:

We're in this warfare "for the duration!" As long as it takes!

We can get occupied with the "dramatic aspects" of opposition— the "conspiracy" revelations; but remember, actually we are more in danger of being swallowed alive by simple, old-fashioned selfishness, greed, insensitivity, and prayerless-ness.

If PAUL needed the prayers of the people— this great giant of a Christian— then we all need the prayers of one another!

The mentality of a bomber pilot flying missions: I do as I'm told— I take my place; I don't have to survive— I have to be faithful!

The Hope The Glory The Power

Christian Living Series 8 of 9

1. [Knowing Jesus Better](#)
2. [The Vessel Formed](#)
3. [Mystery](#)
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November 1, 1987

Ephesians 1:15-23

[Introduction]

As we near the end of this series in Ephesians we look at another prayer of Paul. We began with a goal (3:19)- that we might be filled up to all the fullness of God. We are nearing the close with an over-view (1:15-23)- a look at the almost incredible resources that are ours if we want to do God's will.

These resources are unlocked from three words that represent great grace: these words are 'HOPE' and 'GLORY' and 'POWER'.

I. First, HOPE:

- A. Hope is NOT a weak word. IT IS HOPE THAT MAKES LIFE WORTH THE LIVING! ("I hope so..." means much LESS than Bible terms express) Hope is FAITH looking into the future. (In many respects HOPE is almost indistinguishable from FAITH, except that HOPE is confident in what God is YET GOING TO DO!) Hope is confidence that LIFE IN THE WILL OF GOD IS GOING SOMEWHERE!

- B. Hope can/must be translated into the way we LIVE. If we live our lives in a day-by-day rat-race, an endless cycle of schedule without God/prayer/submission/HOPE— then how we live agrees with the atheistic humanism and materialism we "intellectually despise."

It is possible to DISAGREE with the enemies of God with our HEADS, while our LIVES AGREE BY DEFAULT! If we live at the same cadence, for the same goals, by the same rules, THEN WE ARE NOT LIVING BY HOPE!

And it is LIVING BY HOPE THAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE!

- C. HOPE acknowledges that there IS a war going on! That is the whole idea! We wouldn't NEED hope if there were no battles! The battle is for real! The stakes are eternal! Our sons, daughters, neighbors— our very lives are in conflict with evil!

This does not mean we never rest— never smell the roses— but we must live with eternity in view— and with a strong HOPE that God's way is the ONLY winning way!

- D. Hope says: LIFE/TIME IS NOT AN ENDLESS SPIRAL!

Creation speaks of order, not chaos, chance. History will prove to be HIS-story! God has the last word! The God we serve INTERVENES IN HUMAN HISTORY! He came (in JESUS, specific! place!.) He is COMING AGAIN! (Just as literal! Soon!) He COMES into personal, individual lives!

GOD WANTS YOU TO BE CERTAIN THAT YOUR LIFE IS GOING SOMEWHERE!

II. Second, GLORY

- A. Our HOPE is tied to another concept: HOPE "goes with" GLORY! And Paul was deeply concerned that the Ephesians see how very wealthy they were as children of God.
- B. John 1:12 "(by receiving Jesus we become children of God)" We tend to "not hear" the GLORY of being God's children: "O well, we are adopted children. Only JESUS is God's Son!" But to be ADOPTED by God and being JOINT HEIRS WITH JESUS is sheer glory!

In R.T. Kendall's latest book (Once Saved, Always Saved) he tells of attending an adoption procedure in a court in Florida. I'd like to read a brief account verbatim:

"A few years ago my wife and I witnessed the adoption of a child in a Fort Lauderdale, Florida, courtroom. We listened to the judge as he spoke to the adopting parents in gravest tones.

"'Before I sign my name to this document,' he warned them, 'I need to know you realize what you are about to do.' In a room of sobering silence in which you could hear a pin drop, that judge looked each parent straight in the eye and said, 'If I sign my name to this document, it means that this child is yours, legally yours, as though he were your natural son. There is no guarantee how he will turn out. He may disappoint you. He may turn to drugs as a teenager. He may develop a serious illness and you will be responsible to care for him. If I sign my name to this document, that means this child is yours from this day forward. He is protected by the laws of this state. You cannot turn him back once I sign my name to this document. Do you understand this?'

Those parents did not hesitate to answer. 'We understand,' they responded. 'Then it is your will that you become the parents of this child?' the judge asked. 'It is,' they replied. The judge signed the order.

In what I thought was a rather unusual gesture, he got off his seat and walked round to the two parents and congratulated them. Every eye was filled with tears. The judge then revealed that he too had been an adopted child." (p 114 *ibid*,)

- C. We say: "Thine is the kingdom and the power and the GLORY!" And rightly so! But God SHARES that GLORY as He brings us into His family! We are precious to HIM! And that is glory!

Too often we have been living, NOT as adopted children, but as FOSTER children— afraid God is going to "send us back to the orphanage" instead of taking full advantage of being FAMILY WITH JESUS!

III. Finally, **THE POWER!**

Paul wants us to see that God's will for us is not just a beautiful, ivory-tower theory— a wonderful, glorious PLAN— but that there is adequate POWER to do ALL that God leads us to do!

- A. We focus on the CROSS, and God's LOVE. That is good. But, [with the New Testament church as our example], we ALSO need to focus on the EMPTY TOMB, and God's POWER! That certainty is what gave the disciples mighty authority and power!
- B. We can re-discover God's mighty POWER toward us:
 - 1. It is resurrection power (1:19b-20; 2:5 "even when we were dead—(Christ)— made us alive together with Christ") We not only will live again after we die physically; but we live with a new quality of life here and now!
 - 2. It is also authoritative power (1:20; 2:6 WE are seated with Christ (positionally) in the heavenly places) Our prayers carry HIS AUTHORITY as we abide in HIM and HIS WORDS abide in US! As we said when we were speaking about "HOPE," there IS a war going on! But as Christians we have the POWER necessary to be "more than conquerors through HIM that loves us!"

In his controversial (but wonderful) new book, *Desiring God*, John Piper likens prayer to a walkie-talkie set tuned to the frequency of headquarters, for the purpose of reinforcement in battle. Nothing will be spared to support us as we carry out God's will. But too often we use the walkie-talkies to ask headquarters to send a servant around with cold drinks, or something for our comfort or convenience. But properly used, we have all Christ's power of authority!

[Conclusion:]

- 3. IT IS LIVING POWER! God's power is in the fact that God has given

the Church JESUS CHRIST, HIMSELF, AS OUR LIVING HEAD! (1:22
God put all things under (Christ's) feet, AND GAVE HIM AS HEAD
OVER ALL THINGS IN THE CHURCH, WHICH IS HIS BODY! " God's
mighty POWER for Christians is centered in the FACT that we have
a living, loving, all-powerful Leader!

And (1) we can seek, find, know HIS MIND! (2) What He says, GOES! His command
is also His enabling! (3) But, too, what He says is never "an option!" IF WE WOULD
KNOW THE POWER OF HIS MIGHT, THEN WE MUST SEEK TO BE OBEDIENT TO HIS
REVEALED WILL AND COMMAND!

So there we have it: HOPE! GLORY! POWER! Beautiful words! Great "ideals!" But God
has the reality they represent available without limit for every one of us, and for this
church!

AMEN!

#409 Singing I Go

The Dynamic for Holy Living

Christian Living Series 9 of 9

1. Knowing Jesus Better
2. The Vessel Formed
3. Mystery
4. The Church as Community
5. Keeping Power Switched On
6. Real Solutions to Real Problems
7. Don't You Know There is a War On
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9. **The Dynamic for Holy Living**

November 8, 1987

Ephesians 5:18

In his practical closing, Paul comes back to the theme that has been his prayer throughout this entire letter: to be the kind of Christian God wants you to be, you must BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT!

It is not just a parting thought . . . a wonderful "luxury" option. It is absolutely vital! Why?

I. IT WILL SUSTAIN YOU IN UNCERTAIN TIMES (So That You Can KNOW!)

Christians don't have all the answers . . . there is mystery involved at every level, in every discipline. But Christians can know hope and riches of glory and power!

Ephesians 1:15-19 Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers; That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling,

and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, And what [is] the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe,

It is possible to be so "sold out" to God that the heuristic quality of faith will drive you closer, and not farther away from a personal relationship with Him. As we grow in maturity, and as we grow older and (hopefully) wiser, we realize that we know less and less of the great truths of life. We can either take an obscurantist position, and say: "The earth is flat!", or, we can go with the "obvious" or the current fad belief, and say "The old is out-dated, only the new is true!", OR, we can say: "We may not know all the answers— but we BELONG to the One who does!"

This is one great reason why we need to be filled with the Spirit. It doesn't give us the answers; it does make us aware of the certainty of HOPE, the RICHES OF GOD'S GLORY, and the POWER THAT TRANSFORMS LIVES!

But there is another great reason:

II. IT WILL MAKE CHRIST AT HOME IN YOU, AND YOU IN CHRIST

3:14-21 For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, BEING ROOTED AND GROUNDED IN LOVE, May be able to comprehend with all saints what [is] the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God. Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him [be] glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.

Psalm 90: 1 begins: "Lord, THOU hast been our dwellingplace . . ." "90" is a Psalm of Moses! Did you ever think what sort of "home" Moses had?

I love to travel and see new things. But I love to be "at home." I have a strong need for "home!" A strong sense of PLACE. But more and more the Christian realizes that "home" is NOT a place— it is a PERSON! ABIDE IN ME! Make JESUS AT HOME IN US!

Unless and until we are 'at home' with Jesus here and now we will not be likely to KNOW HIM when He returns, or to BE AT HOME WITH HIM throughout eternity. But we have the privilege of . .

Making HIM at home in OUR heart learning the privileges of development, intimacy, responsibility, growing reality ..the PERMANENCE of Christ RESIDENT!

We need "eternal security!" We find that security in LIVING WITH JESUS, AT HOME IN HIM! But there is at least one other reason:

III. IT WILL MULTIPLY YOUR EFFECTIVENESS

EPH 5:15-21 See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord [is]. And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.

Whatever we have . . . Even if we seek to use it 100% for God . . . Is only 100% of what we have. But when we bring it to Jesus and let him use it . . . then He can work His will and do as He pleases! HE can feed 5,000 . . . it is HIS business!

HOW may we be filled, and thus begin to make a difference?

1. We ARE full now . . . there are no spiritual vacuums. So God can only fill what is available to Him!
2. The "death" of entire consecration: (we have said some extravagant things here. But there is a truth we dare not dodge!) We cannot be filled with GOD unless and until we are empty of self: the cross, the dying, the renunciation of the right to self: In viewing the para-

dox, the mystery of Christian faith we are guilty of seeing the side we want to see. We say "Self is not dead!" And that is true. But still— self must die!

3. The CRISIS of entire sanctification: When we know that we have surrendered for time and eternity— completes the CRISIS of RECEIVING SALVATION . . . but it is not all there is to the sanctified life!
4. The (on-going) PROVING of the Spirit-filled life: carrying forward, learning the discipline:

CONCLUSION (heroes:)

But the world is waiting for people who will be filled . . . and go on being filled . . . and let God simply LIVE IN AND THROUGH THEM!

Less than two miles from where Rev. John Paton now lives (he was here three weeks ago)- in Blantyre, Scotland, is a little park. At one end of the park is a building that looks to me like several cement bookshelves stuck together, with semi-enclosed stairways going up the front. Between the floors of those stairways are toilets— the urban equivalent of the old outhouse - one toilet to a floor of several two-room apartments. In one of those two-room apartments lived a weaver and his wife and several children. One of these children was gifted. Perhaps more than one . . . but David disciplined his gifts, and became a medical doctor.

Wonderful!?! Yes, indeed! He had hauled himself by his bootstraps out of abject poverty into social prominence and financial security! He had reduced the total of the poor, and added to the total of the taxpayers! But THAT was not where David stopped! He gave that degree, and his learning, and his social prominence to God. And God said: Take your gifts far, far away! David is buried today in the main aisle of Westminster Abbey, in London. All but his heart, that is! THAT is under a baobab tree in Africa! And all the world has heard of the love of David Livingstone!

Later-day— Mother Teresa: great in her humanness and weakness

Esther Sanger—...and what of YOU?

#80 (Exalt Him) *Fill Thou My Life, O Lord, My God*

The God Who Reigns

Nov 22, 1987 (pm)

We have come to the end of another 'church calendar year.' Next Sunday we begin all over again, with the introspection and call to hope of Advent, as we watch for the Coming of the King.

There is wisdom in following the church year, and while not being in slavish conformity to it, letting it keep before us the broad richness of the heritage we know within the Church of Jesus Christ. There is inspiration in the way the church year is put together. Cynics can say that Christians of earlier ages simply adapted the pagan customs. I say that it is more than genius in

1. Beginning the church year in the gathering gloom of the year's midnight hour with Advent— a looking for the light; then ...
2. Celebrating the Incarnation, Christmas, the first great day of the church year, when the light begins to grow and glow and penetrate the darkness of the winter solstice.
3. We usually downplay the Epiphany, or revelation of the Light; but then in the late winter and very early springtime ...
4. We look toward Christ's Passion, and search our hearts and remember His forty-day's fasting (Lent;) and then ...
5. Recall with worship and wonder His death on the Cross, and His Resurrection, with Easter, the second great day of the church year. Then as the warmth of summer approaches we think about the Coming of the Holy Spirit and the Promise of God's Presence until we celebrate ...
6. Pentecost, the third great day of the church year. This is quickly followed by ...
7. Trinity Sunday, and we finish the year celebrating God's provision for our adequacy in Him. The church year keeps before us the whole spectrum of the great truth of salvation.

And the church year (Lutheran) ends on the note: JESUS CHRIST IS KING!

(ANGLICAN= HAGGAI 2:1-9; Malachi 3,4)

THE DOCTRINE OF THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD puts a vital perspective on "faith." To believe that God is in charge, and that all things ultimately can happen only as He wills or permits IS NOT A POPULAR DOCTRINE IN MANY CIRCLES, BECAUSE

1. IT DOES NOT LEND ITSELF TO "USING" GOD— of manipulating God into sideline issues, for it makes it clear that this Universe is run on God's terms, for God's glory, according to God's will. And, too, it is not popular because
2. IT MAKES NO PROVISION FOR "FAVORITES" IN GOD'S SIGHT; or for earning or meriting eternal life; FOR ALL IS OF GOD AND HIS GRACE.

Three Psalms (93, 97, 99) begin with the phrase: "The LORD reigns!" (And all three end with the thought of how God's people should also be holy, for this Sovereign God is a HOLY God and he demands a HOLY people.)

I. THE LORD REIGNS!

WHAT DOES THIS DECLARE?

- A. A statement of PRESENT FACT! Not "One day He SHALL reign!" but even NOW He is in charge!
- B. A statement of PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT; The LORD, HIMSELF is in charge, and not some intermediary; not some power, force, unfeeling laws.
- C. To believe otherwise is to live in some pre-Copernican age, spiritually. Thank God this Universe (1) does NOT revolve around mankind; and (2) is NOT here by chance or by chaos, even though we do not understand MOST of what we see.

[Transition: What then do we know about this God who reigns?]

II. (93:1) HE IS CLOTHED WITH MAJESTY!

He is glorious in creation!

- A. How can we speak of the transcendent majesty of Almighty God? I pity those who cannot trace His handiwork in the heavens/ in the beauty of the sea/ in the mountains

- B. The Psalmist pictures God as "serene, unperturbed (v 4) by the voice of many waters..."
God is NOT a figurehead ruler, and THE THINGS THAT THREATEN OUR VERY
SANITY ARE NOT OUT OF HIS CONTROL!
- C. (v 5) "Thy testimonies are very sure!" We may depend on this majestic King's Word!

III. (97:1) LET THE EARTH REJOICE!

God is long-suffering in mercy!

- A. The Majestic One is also very much involved in the lives of a people he calls his own! The Psalmist senses a "belonging!" (v 10 "HIS saints!") This is not to contradict the majesty and even the mystery of a great God— (vv 2-4) but God is both transcendent AND immanent.
- B. This great God "preserves the soul" of His saints (v 10)
 - 1. Our rejoicing is that GOD OVERCOMES EVIL. (true, there are no simple solutions— but God's people are on the 'winning side!')
 - 2. WE ARE CALLED TO A CLEAR SEPARATION FROM EVIL: (v 10 "ye that love the Lord, hate evil!")
 - 3. THE LORD HIMSELF IS THE "TOUCH-STONE" OF OUR
RIGHTEOUSNESS (v 12 Rejoice IN THE LORD! —and not merely in the fact that "we" are "right" or we are "God's people")

IV. (99:1) LET THE PEOPLE TREMBLE!

God is faithful in JUSTICE!

- A. We catch a glimpse here of God seated between the cherubim. HE IS MAJESTIC—
LOVING— BUT LITERALLY STAGGERING THE EARTH IN HIS HOLINESS! He is
"executing judgment in Jacob" The God who is faithful in CREATION, and faithful in
MERCY, is also HOLY! He is faithful in JUDGMENT! We cannot understand the origin of
evil in a Universe created by a good God. But a holy God can not and will not leave any
injustice or unanswered questions about evil when He comes to settle all accounts.

The God Who Reigns

- B. We are judged even NOW by our response to God's LOVE! We are invited to identify with Him in a factual, real way. We are welcomed to be His children, in His family, sharing his divine love and nature!
- C. Anything less than a total belonging to Him should make us tremble in the Presence of this God! And when He is revealed, like John, we will be awestruck! But if we are HIS, like John we will know His re-assurance!

WHAT HAS BEEN MY PURPOSE IN LIFTING OUT THIS PHRASE, "THE LORD REIGNS!" ? Just the fact that this is CHRIST THE KING Sunday? No— (actually I was drawn to this text before I recalled that this WAS the church calendar theme!) PERHAPS TO REMIND MYSELF OF THE HOLY AWE AND FEAR THAT SHOULD MAKE ME WANT TO "BE RIGHT" WITH THIS ONE who will one day make all things "right." Maybe I hoped to challenge YOU to make sure that YOU are "right" with God, too.

BUT PERHAPS I HOPE THAT YOUR RESPONSE AND MINE, TOO, WILL BE A DESIRE TO DO A BETTER JOB OF THE GREAT (ON-GOING) PRIVILEGE OF WORSHIP!

We do not have to wait until we die and go out into eternity to have part in the glory and wonder of worship! By faith just NOW we can confess that JESUS IS WORTHY! (Revelation 5:6-10.) One day every knee shall bow. We may be sure of that! But just NOW our lives as well as our tongues can praise Him!

#103 (WS) MY WONDERFUL LORD!

The Chosen

Promise for the New Year

Jan 3, 1988 John 15:1-17

What sort of year was [2007] for you? For some it was a good year. For others it was little short of devastating. How do you view the oncoming days and months of a new year? However we look at it, it is coming! The question is, how shall we meet [2008]?

At the milestone points of life, the promises of God can give us a reference point, to help us see where we've been, and where we are, and where we're going. They can help to hold us steady in the winds of success or adversity.

Perhaps you have your favorite promises. Promises like: Proverbs 3:5,6; and I like Galatians 6:7,8 ("...be not weary in well doing...") Instead of just a "promise," I would have us consider a whole "passage" as a reference point today. This whole passage is worthy of life-trust: (John 15:1-17.) A highlight is verse 7 "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will and it shall be done unto you."

The truth here, of shared life with Jesus, is a frame of reference for a lifetime, for a New Year—[especially the fact that we are chosen of God! The initiative for LIFE is with HIM!

I. I HAVE CHOSEN YOU (v 16)

- A. GOD HIMSELF HAS CALLED US! We come to know God because He makes Himself available to us. We did not simply set out and "find God." God found us!

God called Adam in the cool of the day; He calls to every person who truly will listen. Sometimes we say in our arrogance: "I found God.." And so we did; but in reality God was seeking us all, each one.

OUR 'FINDING GOD' IS ALWAYS A RESPONSE TO HIM, TO HIS LOVE.

As Jesus spoke to the disciples that night, each of them may well have thought back to when he first met Jesus. For each of the disciples was "called." Do YOU remember when you first responded to Jesus? For before WE could RESPOND...we had to be "CALLED!" Jesus said, "You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen YOU!"

GOD HAS CALLED, IS CALLING EACH ONE OF US!

- B. But to be CALLED is not exactly the same as being CHOSEN! Jesus also spoke these words: (Matthew 22:14) "MANY are called, but FEW are CHOSEN!" It is not enough that God loves you, and that Jesus comes where you are and calls for you to follow!

THAT does not make you one of the "chosen," not quite, yet! [The Rich Young Ruler came running to Jesus. Jesus LOVED him (Mark 10!) and invited the rich young ruler to "Come, follow Me!" As far as Jesus was concerned, He wanted the rich young ruler to be "chosen." But there was lacking that element of obedience! He was unable to part with his "things."

The CHOSEN are those who hear and heed and follow and keep on following! To be among God's CHOSEN, there must be a willingness to follow Jesus! A choosing to OBEY Him! (John 7:17) "If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know..." It is NOT 'salvation by works.' But we ARE chosen, when we are willing to leave all, and follow after Jesus!

II. I AM THE SOURCE OF LIFE (v 1, 5)

- A. Shared LIFE with Jesus.

Here is the figure of the Vine and the branches...one we need to return to again and again. WHY? Because the Vine and the branches share ONE LIFE! We do not receive LIFE and then proceed to go away and do with it as WE will. But forever we are to be in close connection with Jesus Christ.

- B. Perfect freedom comes from being 'ONE WITH JESUS!'
- C. THE PARADOX: Jesus is saying: "YOU ARE TIED TO ME and YOU ARE TOTALLY FREE"! This is the "heart" of the message, right here:

1. ABIDE IN ME! REMAIN IN ME! KEEP THE CONNECTION TIGHT! Seems like "conditional love." Seems very much like it is not very adventurous! The life of a grape-vine branch! Indeed! If we do not learn to ABIDE...if we do not WAIT ON THE LORD...if we do not learn the secret of this obedient "passivity," we shall never learn the FULL SCOPE OF LIFE IN CHRIST!
2. ASK WHATEVER YOU WILL IN MY NAME, I WILL DO IT! The other half of the truth of the paradox: A sense of complete liberty! Freedom to be what you were intended to be! Keep ON sharing life in Me! "Be being filled with the Spirit!" (Ephesians 5:18.) This intended to be an on-going, never-ending relationship.

III. I HAVE CHOSEN YOU...TO BEAR FRUIT (v16)

BE ASSURED! Jesus is interested in YOUR full potential! Fruit! Fruit that will last! Last—how long??

[What are the results of a lifetime of work without the eternal dimension? There is more, or less, satisfaction in all work, depending on various factors of usefulness, beauty, demand, and the like, BUT all such work will decay. Even the pyramids will cease to be!...]...but the promise is: THE CHOSEN WILL BEAR FRUIT IN THEIR LIVES THAT WILL REMAIN...LAST...ABIDE!

[Illus: What has been achieved in "things" vs. "people"—the building of Akron First Church vs. the helping of a family to get back together—which lasts longer?]

Fruit that is UNIQUE to you! What YOU were made for is fulfilled!

IV. THE FINAL WORD: LOVE EACH OTHER!

- A. I love YOU—that's why I have chosen you! Be sure of that!
- B. You love ME! Good! That's the way it must be!
- C. But more and more—SEEK TO BREAK DOWN THE WALLS OF INDIFFERENCE AND...LOVE ONE ANOTHER! [This NOT irrelevant to the rest of the message! We cannot be all WE should be individually apart from loving one another!]

1. the 'kiss of peace' and the like is one thing, but at best it is superficial. Is it possible to really have a desire to be of help to one another ?
2. perhaps it would be better to extend a hand of help— seek to do it as a regular thing
3. My prayer is that each sincere heart might find a prayer fellowship; seek "accountability."

[Conclusion:]

We have looked at the passage as a frame of reference for the New Year. It is worthy of being "a lifetime passage!" It says: HERE IS THE RELATIONSHIP ON WHICH WE BUILD OUR LIVES!

Another way to look at it is 'Lining up our lives by the "THREE GREATS" of Jesus' teachings:

1. We're familiar with THE GREAT COMMISSION . . .and that is the "fulfillment" here: bearing MUCH fruit (Matthew 28/ Mark 16:15 Go ye...) John 20:21 AS THE FATHER HATH SENT ME, SO SEND I YOU!

But the Great Commission cannot be realized unless and until the Church is heeding...
2. THE GREAT COMMANDMENT: in this passage here: (v 12,13 This is my commandment, that ye love one another!) John 13:42 A NEW COMMANDMENT GIVE I UNTO YOU, THAT YE LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE LOVED YOU.

And yet in a very real way, both THE GREAT COMMISSION, and THE GREAT COMMANDMENT are dependant on another "great!" For Jesus has give to you and to me...
3. THE GREAT PROMISE! The promise of the Holy Spirit! John 7:37: IF ANY MAN THIRST LET HIM COME TO ME AND DRINK. HE THAT BELIEVETH ON ME, AS THE SCRIPTURE SAITH, OUT OF HIS INMOST BEING SHALL FLOW RIVERS OF LIVING WATER. (BUT THIS SPAKE HE OF THE SPIRIT, WHICH THEY THAT BELIEVE ON HIM SHOULD RECEIVE!) (16:7 IF I GO AWAY, I WILL SEND HIM

UNTO YOU!) There we have them . . . the great PROMISE! . . . the great
COMMANDMENT! . . . the great COMMISSION! Our assignment for 1988!

#98 Our Great Savior

Faith Does Not Just Settle

January 17, 1988

Genesis 15:1-6

Introduction: This chapter breaks in right in the middle of things. Abraham has made an excellent start. He has had some very good times, and some not so very good times. But now, in the middle of things, Abraham's faith comes to a crisis. He must either go forward or else he must settle back, perhaps forever.

This is how life really is. This is how real faith works. We hear God's call. We set out to follow. We have real victory. We leave behind old ways. We find that the guilt and bondage of sin are gone. But we also find that we aren't "saints" overnight. There are things that come up which we could never have imagined. We find that we don't arrive in heaven by non-stop express. And the "promise" that challenged us at first hasn't seemed to take the shape that we thought it should. Other people seem to have the answers down pat. But somehow we aren't sure we even know all the questions yet.

When we were first saved we somehow believed that God wanted us to be special to HIM; to fulfill some noble and holy mission or purpose. Somehow we thought God wanted us to be "great." But we realize that there aren't many truly "great" people around. WE certainly don't feel "great."

And so we are tempted to "just settle." We're tempted to say, "Oh well, all right—this isn't exactly how I had envisioned it . . . but I'm far better off than I was before." And it is true we are. And this is how it was for Abraham on "just another desert night."

I. ABRAHAM MEETS GOD ON 'JUST ANOTHER NIGHT'

He is a very wealthy, but also a barren Abraham. God has called and blessed Abraham. Obeying God has been personally profitable to Abraham in many ways. But the one thing God promised him, that he would have a son and heir,—and become

the father of many nations, and be a blessing to the whole world—this has definitely not happened.

God's call is (1) to courage; and (2) to Himself: "Don't be afraid, Abraham!"

"Lord, I didn't know I was afraid! Things are going pretty well . . ." Abraham sounds like a person who may not have 'arrived,' but he also talks like a man who is pretty sure he isn't going any further. "My servant, Eliezer of Damascus, he is a good man . . . He can carry on when I die."

But God's word cuts through all this: DON'T JUST SETTLE, ABRAHAM!

God wanted Abraham (1) to have courage to admit that he hadn't arrived yet! [It takes courage to look hard at ourselves, and realize that we still have serious growing to do; that we still have to keep moving to catch up to what God wants for us.]

And most of all, God wanted Abraham to (2) trust HIM; to believe God had NOT forgotten Him—that God still loved him and was special to him, and would do with him as He had said.

II. ABRAHAM WAS LIKE WHAT WE ARE TEMPTED TO BE

We are fascinated by what God can do for us and with us. We are captivated by where God may lead us . . . we are excited by spiritual gifts . . . we are turned on by spiritual growth. And all this is good and right and proper. These are God's good promises to us. But God was challenging Abraham—and He will challenge each of us—to come to the radical purpose of faith—of seeking God for Himself.

We get so excited asking: "What has God DONE for you?" that sometimes we forget to ask: "Who IS God to you?"!!

God was challenging Abraham to center his faith in relationship, and not in experience, or experiences, or blessings, or anything else. There is a not-so-subtle difference in God's word as it comes this time to Abraham:

At the beginning God had said, "I will make, bless . . ." Now God begins by saying, "I AM!" He was saying, "In this matter of faith never settle for anything less than a personal walk with ME!" [Abraham had made a great beginning. He had walked out into the unknown with God.]

But God was saying: Don't let your faith settle for a good beginning! Thank God for the altar! Thank God for altar experiences. Thank God for good starts! But getting saved is not the end—it is just the beginning!

Don't let your faith settle for success! Abraham had had some great successes! His success just about filled all the available landscape. Abraham was a genuine V.I.P. But God was telling Abraham: this isn't all there is! Reputation, even a well-deserved good reputation, isn't what faith seeks! Each success that faith brings is not its own final goal. Success and failure, as other people may measure our lives looking on, may have a lot less to do with faith than most of us would care to believe.

Don't let your faith settle for God's gifts! Abraham's own suggestion to God had to do with his servant. Abraham had a special servant, Eliezer of Damascus. But God wouldn't hear of letting a servant take the place of His promise. And we all have these special servants. Obedient faith finds and develops and employs many valuable servants along the pathway of discovery.

"Gifts of the Spirit" or God-given talents and strengths of character that God blesses and uses become real sources of blessing and satisfaction. Gifts of the mind prod us to inquire; gifts of the personality enable significant achievement; gifts of aesthetics bring the joy of creativity; gifts of physical ability—all these are wonderful servants.

But ever so often we see someone who ends up with a "servant" on center stage of their life. Instead of serving, people worship their own God-given ability. But servants must never become the primary focus of faith. Faith must never settle for success, or experience, or achievement.

III. THE 'TURNING POINT' IS GOD HIMSELF

This is a strange chapter. It doesn't "fit" neatly into our idea of how things ought to be. It isn't where Abraham got "saved" or even where he got "sanctified." It isn't very dramatic. But it is a turning point. Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness. It is hard to understand the "thing" that brought Abraham to this new level of faith, this faith that would not settle for anything less than God Himself.

It certainly wasn't the FACTS. Sarah was still barren. These people were too old to have children naturally. And that was a fact!

It wasn't some new emotional persuasion or twist. God did ask Abraham to step out under the starry sky. "Your descendants will be like these stars for number!"

It had to be a kindling love for God HIMSELF! Abraham said: "God, I'll believe anything You say! I simply accept Your word on it!" There was a deep commitment of LOYALTY to God, at any cost!

[Illustration: What a beautiful thing is personal loyalty! It is beautiful in friends. It is beautiful in church-members. It is divine in God's children! (Dick Bos??)]

IV. A FAITH THAT 'DOESN'T SETTLE' LEADS TO COVENANT!

From that day on Abraham took God Himself as the object of his highest aspiration. Abraham was righteous before God because he dared to take Him at His word, and not just 'settle' for the good things along the way.

And God wants to COVENANT with us all! With each one of us!

We all start out this walk of faith thinking about what God does! We want His peace and His joy and His gifts! And rightly so, for God wants us to have them all.

But God wants us to take Him at His word and never settle short of seeing His BEST promise fulfilled in each one of us! He has a noble purpose for YOU!

[When we were first saved we somehow believed that God wanted us to be special to HIM; to fulfill some noble and holy mission or purpose. Somehow we thought God

wanted us to be "great." But we realize that there aren't many truly "great" people around. WE certainly don't feel "great."]

But God loves you as much as He loved Abraham! I'm not sure what "greatness" consists of, but . . . God wants YOU to become His FRIEND, and He wants YOU to be like HIM, like His SON, Jesus Christ! What we DO is important! What we accomplish in life really matters! But nothing compares with KNOWING GOD, and with SIMPLY WALKING WITH HIM!

So—God won't let us off with a good start—or with any amount of "success"—or even with the dedication of our gifts and our talents to Him. He comes to us—in the middle of things—in the middle of January—and says: "DON'T BE AFRAID! I still want to make YOU great!"

*My goal is God Himself, not joy or peace, Nor even blessing, but Himself, my Lord.
'Tis His to lead me there, not mine but His, At any cost, dear Lord, by any road. One
thing I know, I cannot say Him nay. One thing I do, I press toward my Lord; My God,
my glory here from day to day, And in the glory there, My great Reward. -Author
unknown*

Light on Christs Coming Again

2 Thessalonians 2:15-17

January 17, 1988 (PM)

Introduction:

When you mention the "Second Coming," or talk about the history of our planet coming to an end by the direct intervention of God's divine power, you classify yourself with the oddballs and strange people. [Only scientists and philosophers talk seriously about doomsday; the rest of us don't want to hear about it.]

The one tenet of Christian faith that is certain to be ridiculed by non-believers—a tenet that is very sorely neglected by most Christians—is the clear teaching that Jesus Christ is coming back to earth in the same manner that He went away. But Christ's return is as sure and certain as the fact that He came the first time. [The wonder of Christ's FIRST coming—God invading earth—"goes right by" most Christians, let alone the unbelievers.]

One reason 2 Thessalonians was written was to straighten believers out on this matter of Christ's return. Paul was telling them: "when it comes, you'll know it! But you had better be prepared!"

If we are to preach the whole counsel of God's Word we need to deal with what it says about Christ's coming to earth again. So many wild things have been said about Christ's Second Coming that many ministers may be like I am: hesitant to be classed as any kind of prophecy specialist."

I. WHAT IS GOD'S WORD ON "END TIMES?"

A. There are several popularly preached scenarios:

1. Some center around the timing of Christ's coming in regard to the time of "tribulation." (pre-trib/ post-trib/ mid-trib theories) [Try to tell Christians just NOW who are suffering for Jesus—in Gulag . . . in Mozambique . . . or who suffered in other times in history for their witness—that "tribulation" is something we "don't

have to worry about!"]

2. A few have used the seven churches of Revelation as "church stages"—but almost always these end up by saying, "We are in the Laodocian age..." We have been stuck there for centuries!
3. Many have elaborate scriptural charts and proofs worked out: And no doubt there are charts that are 99% accurate. But still . . . there are

B. SCRIPTURAL CERTAINTIES:

1. Jesus will return in a personal, physical way (Acts 1:11: "As you have seen Him go into heaven.")
2. His coming will be surprising (Matthew 24:44: "In such an hour as you think NOT the Son of man cometh.")
3. His coming will not be private or a secret: In Mark 14:62 the high priest asked Jesus point blank: "Are You the Son of the Blessed?" And Jesus said, plainly: "I AM; and you will the Son of God coming in clouds of great glory!"
4. So in summary, what we can say about the Second Coming with the most certainty is that it is imminent—it has both qualities of certainty and uncertainty

C. It is to be a time of vindication/retribution/judgment.

- VINDICATION: That is DOES pay to serve Jesus! That God IS both GOOD and LOVING and ALL-POWERFUL!
- RETRIBUTION: One of the things we don't understand about some of the Psalms are the "imprecation prayers" or "cursing" of God's enemies. We don't fully understand that, and certainly we should never appropriate that cursing for personal or selfish reasons.

But clearly, this will take place when Jesus returns again (2 Thes 1:8,9: "retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ"—"These will pay the penalty of ETERNAL DESTRUCTION, away from the presence of the Lord and the glory of His power.")

- JUDGMENT: Matthew 25:3— "All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another . . .

D. It has not taken place as yet:

II. HOW MAY WE BE READY FOR CHRIST'S COMING?

- A. We can never "get ready" as He comes; we have to be ready. And this cannot be at some artificially high level of emotional tension. It has to be something we can live day in and day out.
- B. Should we study prophecy and become "experts" in this field? We should study, and should increase our expectancy and desire; but I doubt if we shall ever be true "experts" in the matter.
- C. But we may be certain we will not be the subject of Christ's vengeance or retribution if we care for two matters:

- 1. WE MUST BE CERTAIN THAT WE KNOW GOD. (1:8) What does it mean 'to know God'? Certainly NO ONE knows Him in any comprehensive way. And knowing God is not a matter of 'searching Him out' by superior intelligence or privileged gifts and status. Knowing God must come in response to revelation: knowing God is always the result of a deliberate, submissive response to God's approach to our innermost self.

James says: "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you . . . "

Paul says: "I have counted all things as loss that I may know Jesus . . . "

Simply put: KNOWING GOD MEANS BEING SAVED! LETTING JESUS COME INTO YOUR HEART! RESPONDING TO HIS REQUEST TO 'COME IN!' (Revelation 3:20)

- 2. WE MUST BE CERTAIN THAT WE ARE OBEYING THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST. (also 1:8) Perhaps these are two sides of the same coin—knowing God and obeying the Gospel.

But if we know God, we will be evidencing life, and living for Him. We will be concerned about THE GREAT COMMISSION! We will try to live THE GREAT COMMANDMENT!

We will experience THE GREAT PROMISE!

Conclusion:

Revelation 22:10-21 And he (the angel) said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. "Let the one who does wrong, still do wrong; and let the one who is filthy, still be filthy; and let the one who is righteous, still practice righteousness; and let the one who is holy, still keep himself holy."

"Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done. "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying.

"I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and offspring of David, the bright morning star."

And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost. He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming quickly."

Amen. COME, LORD JESUS!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

#24 (Exalt Him) *I Cannot Tell*

Putting People Together Again

January 31, 1988

Acts 4:23-31

Text (v 31) And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.

*Humpty-Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty-Dumpty had a great fall;
All the king's horses
And all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again!*

. . . and those old nursery rhymes usually have a grain of truth. There are some things that, once broken, can never be put together again. And yet here was a man (described in Chapter 3), apparently broken, that Jesus made 'whole' in response to the disciples' faith.

I. THE DISCIPLES HAD BEGUN TO RESPOND TO THE GREAT COMMISSION

(and to "look on the great harvest fields!")

A. (vv9,10) THE DISCIPLES WERE AGENTS OF WHOLENESS:

They found that Jesus had met their needs; and now Jesus IN THEM was able to reach out with help to others in need. So they were agents of HEALING. Their testimony was: The power in the name of Jesus has made this man WHOLE. Here they meant 'physically' whole. But like Jesus, they were interested in the whole person.

B. THEY LOOKED/SAW LIKE JESUS!

Jesus "looked with compassion"...and now Peter was doing it!

THEY CARED/LOVED LIKE JESUS! They had not understood how Jesus could love everybody. They had watched Him during the years of His ministry, caring for the Jews, the Samaritans, men and women, children and cripples, rich and poor. They had never really understood that overwhelming love. But now they were demonstrating it.

C. AND PEOPLE WERE BEING "MADE WHOLE!"

II. THE RESULT WAS: GROWTH IN THE MIDST OF OPPOSITION

A. THERE WAS OPPOSITION!

It is hard to understand, but this witness was not universally well received. It DIVIDED those who observed. One might think that people who went around loving and caring and helping would be thought the greatest thing there could be. But somehow many people were threatened.

B. Here were Christians, human and flawed, BUT THEY WERE PEOPLE THAT JESUS USED. What was their secret?

1. For one thing, THEY WERE FULL OF JOY! They weren't people with a "cause" or some kind of "movement" with fanatics: they were people of "the Way"—followers of Messiah, who had conquered death.
2. For another, they didn't tolerate any Master but Jesus! THEIRS WAS A "LOVING INTOLERANCE" They loved people, and yet they did not share their allegiance. There was only one way to be made whole, through JESUS!—no other name!
3. Still another—THESE PEOPLE WERE ORIGINALS!—genuine, artless, intense—what they were: but it was evident that they had been with Jesus! Whenever we hear of any kind of 'breakthrough' we copy everything about the situation or circumstance. We need to see that God wants us to be what we are—and stay close to Him—- and then He will use us!

4. THEY WERE A PRAYING PEOPLE

Perhaps most important: they KNEW Jesus! They stayed close to Him by prayer—separate and together, and so THEIR MESSAGE WAS CERTAINTY!—they were NOT following a "guide book". (They DID know their Bibles!) They LOVED because Jesus LOVED IN THEM! They weren't testifying a "rote" sales speech.

- a. They were afraid;
- b. They were at times unsure;
- c. but they knew Jesus lived in their hearts!

Do you wonder what kind of prayer and praying they did?

III. A PRAYER THAT KEPT THE CHURCH 'ON TARGET!'

A. THEIR PRAYER (Chapter 4:23-31)

1. IT WAS A "TOGETHER" PRAYER!.

(23) " When they were released they went to their own companions and reported; and when they had heard this THEY lifted their voices with one accord":) The disciples hurried back to the fellowship; they told their concerns; then together they prayed:

2. IT WAS A PRAYER OF PRAISE!

(24—28) "Lord, YOU are Creator! Lord, YOU are in charge!) They took the time to focus on just WHO God IS! Hebrews 11:6!!

3. IT WAS A PRAYER FOR ASSURANCE!

(27-29) And now, Lord, take note of their threats!") They knew that God knew! But THEY wanted to KNOW God knew!

4. IT WAS A PRAYER FOR BOLDNESS, FOR COURAGE, FOR STRENGTH! IT WAS A PRAYER FOR THE HOLY SPIRIT!

It is significant that the disciples did not pray for the problems to be removed. They asked for courage to do whatever God wanted them to do.

5. IT WAS A PRAYER THAT WAS ANSWERED!

- a. They spoke with boldness!
- b. Great power attended their witness to JESUS!
- c. Great GRACE (love) was on them all: they GAVE, they SHARED, they MET EACH OTHER'S LACK
- d. It brought REVIVAL, but NOT perfection (Ananias & Saphira)

B. OUR PRAYER!

This is a prayer that we ALL can pray! And remember, John 15:8 comes after 15:7 !! If we can learn to pray in His will, Jesus will see that our prayers are answered!

Conclusion:

What would happen if WE would pray a prayer similar to that prayer, and keep on praying? How LONG would we have to pray? Would we be willing to let GOD show us how?

I'd like to close my message with a story. This is NOT a story that I hope we will copy—at least in the method or plan or details. But I pray that we will capture some of the "essence" of the power of praying together:

The conversion of anyone is a miracle of grace. But I'd like to tell you about a miracle that is so fresh and so wonderful it is almost unbelievable. But I need to start at the beginning, to get as much of the story as I can:

Rev. Marian (Skip) Barber, pastor of the Church of the Nazarene in Columbiana, Ohio, was facing some challenges in the life and spirit of his church. And perhaps more importantly Rev. Barber felt personally challenged in his own prayer life. Several church leaders had moved away almost simultaneously; devotions that seemed "mechanical" even though faithfully maintained failed to rout temptations to feel sorry for himself.

So in October 1985 Rev. Barber began a personal 5:30 a.m. prayer time just to seek to draw closer to God. This he continued with increasing satisfaction and joy. In

February, 1986, five months later, Rev. Barber made a low-key public challenge for his congregation to join him in this 5:30 prayer meeting.

Several members responded, and almost without interruption the daily morning prayer time has continued to the present. One of the men who responded is a friend of ours, Jim Couchenour, who himself had had an early morning prayer vigil for TWO YEARS prior to this 5:30 group (that is still meeting.)

There have been other contributing factors to the Columbiana story. But something wonderful has been taking place there. There has been growth in every measurable dimension. The number one benefit, as far as Rev. Barber is personally concerned is (in his own words:), "I have a relaxed sense of being involved in prayer with my people, of not having to prove anything to anyone!"

Before-after sketches can be manipulated, but "before" the Columbiana church was a strong church that had fallen on hard times economically, had lost leadership, had harbored temptation to bitterness. "After" there is, in Rev. Barber's words, "an attractiveness to the church..." No organized visitation, as such, is going on, but people from widely varied backgrounds are coming to find God meeting their needs. Attendance at services has increased 50%, and is still growing. Rev. Barber says, "It is like I imagine it was in the early days of our denomination."

One evening Jim Couchenour, a man who has befriended many new Christians, was concerned about one man who had had a drinking problem. He went looking for him in the town's only bar. He wasn't there, but our friend had some conversation with the bar's owner, Mrs. Watson. That was more than six months ago.

Nellie Watson, 65, owns a bar in Columbiana, Ohio. But the bar is closed forever, at least as a place for the sale of alcoholic beverages. Nellie Watson became a Christian last Sunday evening, January 24, 1988, when she confessed the Lord Jesus Christ as her Savior and her Lord. What is more, last Wednesday evening, January 27th, after prayer meeting, two or three Christians went to Nellie's daughter, Nancy's home. Nancy had prayed that very day for God to give her help in getting saved. The little group found her ready and waiting to give her heart to the Lord, too.

Putting People Together Again

But HOW it happened is fascinating: Jim made friendly contact. He paid the man's debts. He offered to provide music for a Saturday night: and brought his church "combo" to play Christian music. He talked with many people about the Lord; and started meeting at the bar after church on Sunday evening. when it was closed for business—except "kingdom business!"

A couple of weeks ago the church board met for an "extra" session—no minutes, no "business" just to hear about the "adventures" of one of their members in the bar; they "owned" the project! They were willing to follow the Lord in reaching out to the people God had called them to reach!

And there are a lot of happy people in Columbiana this week!! Nellie Watson was genuinely and soundly converted! She is a Christian! And Jim said she is a "Nazarene already!"

JESUS SAID, "THE HARVEST IS GREAT! THE LABORERS ARE FEW! BUT BEFORE YOU GO, PRAY! PRAY THE LORD OF HARVEST, THAT HE WILL SEND FORTH LABORERS INTO THE HARVEST!"

How long has it been since you prayed that God would send laborers into the harvest? Will you join me in a closing prayer that God, the Lord of the harvest will send laborers into His fields?

#54 [EH] *O Breath of Life*

The Fruits of Worship

January 31, 1988 AM

"The harvest is plentiful..." Matthew 9:35-38

Every Christian hears this challenge! As soon as we have been saved we want to help save others. Every Christian wants to respond to these words of our Lord. But the question is: How do we begin?

I. WE BEGIN WITH JESUS:

JESUS, OUR MODEL:

(35) "Jesus went about . . . Teaching, preaching, healing..." look at HIM!: [our Lord] who (1) went about meeting real people at the point of their needs; compassionate, caring, doing; and (2) did these things because of who he was, and because he spent much time alone in prayer and because he lived in constant fellowship with the Father.

Jesus SAW: (looked on the multitudes...) Jesus CARED: (He was MOVED with compassion...) Jesus WENT: He did what He was given to do.

And, in the face of this, what were His instructions to His disciples, and to us?

II. LISTEN TO JESUS:

Jesus said: "PRAY!" He didn't simply say: "GO!"—although that did come soon after. FIRST Jesus said: "PRAY!"

Prayer that is God-centered.

It is easy to be PROBLEM-centered, or SOLUTION-centered— which are just subtle ways of being SELF-centered. Even in serving the Lord WE want to exercise CONTROL!: "Pray ye the Lord of harvest . . ."

- a. Pray for the vision of Jesus.

We can see the same things in different ways. But Jesus LOOKED. And Jesus LOVED! He looked with COMPASSION!

- b. Pray for the submission of Jesus.

Just as we SEE things in different ways, we have different ideas of what the "solutions" will be. So we say to the Lord of harvest: YOU direct! We are to PRAY that HE will send laborers into the harvest fields!

- c. Pray for the "Mind of Jesus!"

Pray with a willingness to be involved, or NOT to be involved in a particular way— but pray IN AVAILABILITY! God will show YOU some open door!

III. OUT OF PRAYER WILL COME THE MIGHTY FRUIT!:

THE PRAYER JESUS WANTS US TO PRAY WILL BE ANSWERED IN US!

1. We will become ENABLERS! (Faith Promise-type giving!) WE CAN HAVE A PART IN THE OVERALL STRATEGY; we can take part in the BIG PICTURE; we are a necessary part; our GIVING reflects our corporate VISION of the lost! And these STRATEGIES do take hold! Teamwork all across a great network enable "us" to do far beyond what we would be able to do apart from this loyalty and faithfulness in giving: Seminary/ Faith Promise/ Alabaster/ Missionary Specials!

2. We will become PARTNERS! (Joining hands with others in our local fellowship we will do together what we cannot do by ourselves.)

WE CAN ALSO BE A PART OF LOCAL TACTICS; WE CAN BE TEAM MEMBERS—we can "own" and take part in the LOCAL picture! We may not—we WILL NOT—agree with everything that is officially done. But what makes CHRIST'S WORK go is the loyalty of those who pitch in and take part even when it isn't their "pet idea!" If we PRAY we will become PARTNERS!

3. We will also become REAPERS, on an individual, personal level: Beyond great PLANS and even more important than local PROGRAMS, in and of themselves, is the LOVE OF CHRIST IN THE INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIAN'S HEART THAT MAKES HIM/HER

GENUINELY CARE FOR PEOPLE!

The "heart" or "spirit" of a denomination or a local church cannot rise above the level of the heart and spirit of its individual members! We cannot do Christ's work together unless we have Christ's Spirit within. But we CAN, we MAY!!

Conclusion:

How does this work, in practical terms? It begins in very simple, even subtle ways: it makes us SEE and CARE! And THAT makes all the difference!

Illus: Park Street Church in the 1950's.

Illus: When the 1982 Billy Graham campaign was on in Boston we had a leader's rally right here in Wollaston. I recall it was near-blizzard conditions— and I felt fortunate, if it had been good weather we would not have had overflow facilities to carry the sound to the basement. Cliff Barrows and Beverly Shea were here on this platform. Before the service I had the privilege of getting a bit acquainted. They were most gracious—I recall Beverly Shea speaking with Professor Babcock at some length about a mutual friend; and there were other pleasantries. But the thing that stands out in my mind was the genuine Christ-like concern of Cliff Barrows for his unsaved neighbors. That "talent" we see on TV—leading the great massed choirs—ALSO cares about one family that lives near his home, and is praying and seeking for ways to witness and to win them to the Lord. And it was BIG on his heart!

We begin and we continue and we end just where Jesus said: "PRAY YE!"

[We must be first of all pray-ers!] And God will give us His eyes, and His heart of love, and His spirit to go into the great harvest.

The Vitality of Holy Living

Ephesians 5:18

February 21, 1988

In the PM we kick off "Lent" with COMMUNION: observe and honor the PASSION, LOVE, CARING, SACRIFICE of Jesus— not just what He SAID but what He TAUGHT!

"Lent" is thought of as a time of self-denial and fasting. It is thought of as a "sad" time, of contemplating with sadness the sorrow and pain of Jesus. ["Fat Tuesday" one last spree before the sorrows of Lent.] Perhaps a better way to observe "Lent" would be ANTICIPATION.

The "self-denial" can be a positive thing— a deliberate laying aside of the temporal in seeking the eternal. "BE NOT DRUNK WITH WINE WHEREIN IS EXCESS..." The point is not BE NOT, but rather BE FILLED!

And we CAN, we MAY, we MUST be filled!

"WHY BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT?"

I. SO THAT WE CAN KNOW... (1:17,18)

The attractiveness of CERTITUDE; of knowing where we stand with God, and where we came from, and where we are going.

Ephesians 1:15 Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, 16 Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers; 17 That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: 18 The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, 19 And what [is] the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, Know JESUS, Himself, and ...

Know what is the HOPE, GLORY, POWER OF OUR CALLING - KNOW THAT WE ARE TRULY SAVED!

II. SO THAT WE CAN BE AT HOME WITH JESUS... (3:14-21)

Unless and until we are 'at home' with Jesus here and now we will not be likely to KNOW HIM when He returns, or to BE AT HOME WITH HIM throughout eternity.

3:14 For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, 16 That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; 17 THAT CHRIST MAY DWELL IN YOUR HEARTS BY FAITH; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 May be able to comprehend with all saints what [is] the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; 19 And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God. 20 Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, 21 Unto him [be] glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.

Making HIM at home in OUR heart; learning the privileges of development, intimacy, responsibility, growing reality ..the PERMANENCE of Christ RESIDENT!

III. To Establish GUIDELINES FOR A COUNTER-CULTURE (5:15-21)

[tie to election year; mention the so-called barrier between "church & state"]

WE ARE NOT TO ABANDON THE CULTURE. Society is to stand under the JUDGMENT of Jesus; and it cannot do this because of legislation; we cannot impose God's will on unbelievers; But we may have an impact on our world today if indeed we are filled with the Spirit!

"When He, the Spirit of truth is come, He will convict the world of sin, of righteousness, of judgment!" John 16:13

EPH 5:15 See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, 16 Redeeming the time, because the days are evil. 17 Wherefore be ye not unwise, but

understanding what the will of the Lord [is]. 18 And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; 19 Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; 20 Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; 21 Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.

Living by the BOOK

- In our family/home relationships
- In the MYSTERY OF WITNESS
- In the FELLOWSHIP OF JESUS! AND HIS CHURCH!

Vital Signs

Ephesians 1:15-2:10

March 3, 1988

Eastern Nazarene College Chapel

1 John 5:13 *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.*

Did I ever tell you the old story about the rural gentleman whose wife died? It was in the days when the neighbors helped each other, so they built a pine coffin, and when they were helping him carry her out the door for the last time, one of them slipped. He dropped his end of the coffin, and the "corpse" fell out with a bump, and sat up and revived. She lived ten more years, and then she died again, and the neighbors came again to help. As they started out the door the old gentleman said: "Careful, men, careful!"

I'm sure that is just a story— I hope it doesn't have a basis in fact somewhere. About a person who was alive and yet seemed at the time to be dead.

In contrast, we were in Epcot Center a few short weeks ago, and we went into the American pavilion there and saw "Mark Twain" and "Ben Franklin" genially hosting a (very secular) panorama of our American history and heritage. They had all the appearance of living— mannerisms, color, speech— but everyone there (except perhaps the little children) knew that if you looked under what seemed to be skin there would be a mass of machinery— very complex machinery, to be sure. But no life whatsoever!

In one case what seemed to be death was really just a very poor-but-recoverable kind of life. In the other, here was something which had all the appearance of life, but was nothing but inanimate, cold machinery.

What IS life? All life has element of mystery in it. Our human physical life seems simple to understand until we begin to look at it closely. When does it begin? When does it have viability? When does it have status as a human being?

And what is spiritual life? What is it to be alive to God? What does it mean to be saved?

"Life" cannot always be determined by what we see. Some things appear more dead than death— and are alive; other things appear alive when they are not living at all.

Not Everyone Is Alive, Spiritually!

Ephesians 2:1, 3 Dead in trespasses and sins;

Colossians 2:13 "Dead in trespasses and uncircumcision of heart" "hamartia" (sin)—missing the mark . . . but spiritually DEAD means not merely missing the mark—but not even shooting at the mark! In fact— the aim and purpose of life is not even considering God! Not asking HIM about goals...that is the essence of spiritual death!

How so— in spiritual reality?

Rev 3:1 Jesus told John to write to Sardis: Thou hast a name that thou art living, and thou art dead!

"Smoking flax" is nurtured by Messiah! He does not come to destroy life, but to bring life!

But Then, What Is SPIRITUAL Life?

Easy to understand-until we begin to look closely at it! Probably we would agree as Christians that 'a Christian is one who is ALIVE in Jesus Christ.' (I say "probably" because there may be NO statement on which all, professing Christians would agree!) But if we agree that a Christian is one who has life in Christ, then we all too often part ways as we define and re-define what it means to be a "real" Christian, or a "true" Christian.

Some things very practically define "life."

One of these is SPIRITUAL BREATHING. All physical life that we know about needs oxygen. All spiritual life demands exchange of life with God in prayer: adoration, confession, submission, petition— vine-branch, air-breath, sheep-shepherd— a dependency relationship that is on-going. We cannot be Christian and day after day go our own way with not thought for God.

One of these is SPIRITUAL APPETITE. All life must be nourished. Hibernating animals don't eat— but they can't hibernate forever.

One of these is SPIRITUAL LIKENESS. Like begets like. It doesn't always look a LOT like what it is becoming— but there will be hints, suggestions, that the Source of LIFE is being reproduced. God is holy, God is lovingkindness, God is pure, God is offended with injustice, God is above pettiness and meanness. And if we are deriving our life from Him, then somehow that likeness will have to break into the pattern of our spirits from time to time.

I John 3:14 We KNOW that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers.

And perhaps there are more..many more.

How May I Know That I Am Alive In Christ?

How may I be certain that I am not deceived?

Sincerity is not a guarantee of valid faith. Many people have died sincerely thinking that what they were taking was medicine when it was poison. One thing I believe for sure: One does not find life in Jesus in any casual, part-time application. It may seem "ho-hum" or even "Mickey Mouse" because you've heard it all your life...and because preachers have begged you to come forward and 'give your heart to Jesus.' But just going forward to find emotional release and satisfy the rest of the kids at teen camp does not mean you really have given your life to Jesus!

New life in Christ is simple to come by— and it is FREE— but it is never EASY or CASUAL or CHEAP! There are at least three witnesses to spiritual life, and we would do well to know them:

- There is THE WITNESS OF GOD'S WORD.

In God's Word we have the diagnosis for spiritual death, the invitation to eternal life, and the formula for confessing, finding forgiveness, and the promise of eternal life. But life in Christ is more than just mentally accepting and believing the true Word of God! That word must be received with saving faith!

- There is THE WITNESS OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT!

I John 3:21 says: "Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God..." It is not a light thing to search one's heart in humility, and in prayer, and to say: "As far as I know my heart, to the depths, there is nothing I have withheld from God. I am sincerely obeying Him, I am trusting in Him with all my heart!" There comes an end to wrestling and squirming and rationalizing, and a clear witness that we mean business! This is where "taking by faith the promises of God" comes in. But there is a further witness:

- There is THE WITNESS OF GOD'S SPIRIT!

This is very difficult to describe, for we usually slip into descriptions of experience or of feeling and feelings are very much a part of Christian life and living. But the witness of the Spirit is NOT a feeling! It probably will produce profound feelings of joy or gratitude or relief or other things impossible to describe. But the witness itself is a persuasion. It is an inner certitude, a knowledge that you are saved!

And finally, too, THERE IS THE WITNESS OF LIFE AND LIVING!

Life Must Be Maintained, Nourished, Never Taken For Granted.

Wheat and tares grow up together— and it is never our business to root up tares. (You may be sure I am a tare. At least one person has let me know anonymously of course that I am dry and boring as a preacher.)

Only one thing is absolutely necessary: be sure that YOU are alive in Christ— and not just in appearance! Maintain and develop your vital signs!

Invitations of Jesus

March 6, 1988 and October 9, 1994

Matthew 25:34 Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world."

Jesus went through His earthly ministry calling people to Himself. Some of His invitations were intensely personal. Some were plainly understood to be for the whosoever. All his invitations were a call to share His love and His life:

He called to Zaccheus (up a sycamore tree/ Luke 19:5)— and we know He sees US, and calls US into His fellowship. He called to Peter (walking on the sea/Matthew 14:29)— and we dare to step out by faith into the 'impossible' when He calls US. He called to Lazarus (John 11:43)— and we know that He will never leave us in the grave.

But look with me at some of the universal invitations of Jesus:

I. COME, FIND REST!

(Matthew 11:28-29) A CALL TO REST OF SOUL !

To the weary, and especially to those who are bowed under the load of selfishness and sin, Jesus calls: "Come, and I will give you rest!"

These may be the most beautiful words ever spoken in any language!

II. COME AND BE SATISFIED!

(John 7:37 If any man thirst, let him come to Me! also from Isaiah 55:1 "Ho, everyone that thirsteth; come ye to the waters, come ye and buy and eat; yea, come buy wine and milk without money and without price.") A CALL TO SATISFACTION

There is a God-ache in my soul! I believe there is one in yours, too. I believe that everyone, made in the image of God, no matter how marred that image may be, everyone has this God-ache. We stuff the ache with things, with activities. But only a dynamic on-going God-love can fill this big ache in us. It is a healthy ache— a hunger that tells us there is hope, for God has made us— and knows how to fill us.

That filling involves love and worship— it also involves being fruitful— carrying forward the work of Jesus Christ.

To me...this is the POSITIVE side of salvation; Jesus not only calls us to REST, but He calls us to WORK— not just busy work— but work that makes a difference, work that gives great satisfaction!

III. A CALL TO FOLLOW

(Matthew 16:24/Mark 8:34/Luke 9:23) If any man will come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross (Luke adds "daily") and follow Me!"

1. To follow means A YOKE/ A LEARNING/ seeking to be LIKE
2. To follow means A DEATH! That is what the CROSS is all about! Galatians 2:20 "I am crucified with Christ!" Learning to GIVE instead of taking all the time!
3. A call to childlikeness (Mt 19:14/Mk10:14/Lk 18:6 Suffer the little children and forbid them not to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.)
4. But remember: this "dying" is also "planting!" The seed falls into the ground and brings forth FRUIT! We are called to share in the JOY of Jesus!

John 15— abiding in HIM we bear much fruit!

IV. A CALL TO RULE!

Matthew 25:34 Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world."

But here there will be a Great Separation.

Conclusion:

One of the most beautiful scenes in all the Bible takes place in Galilee . . . along the shores of a lake early in the morning as the mists are rising. The disciples' faith is being restored after the devastation of the Crucifixion. Jesus has come to restore Peter— and as the disciples come to land they see, not an ethereal spirit, but a very real glorified Savior who has prepared a meal over glowing coals on the shore.

He calls to them (John 21:12): "COME, AND DINE!"

Let's sing "*Jesus Calls Us*"

The Lord Jesus Christ, Decent and Exaltation

March 19, 1988

Philippians 2:5 Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God; but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a Name which is above every name; that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Introduction: It was a tremendous reversal from the Triumphal Entry on a sunny Sunday to the gloom of the Via Dolorosa and the supernatural darkness that hung over the crucifixion that following Friday. Christians often make commentary on the great change, the fickleness of the people, the indignity and shame heaped on our Lord, that week.

But Jesus began His journey of condescension to the cross long before the crowds waved palms and cried "Hosanna!" And the descent that our Lord Jesus made into the abyss of night and evil to redeem us was far more than that stark week's contrast of the cheers of the crowds to the loneliness of the dark-stained cross. That pouring out of His love and life and glory began before time, in the love of God. It did not stop at the demands of shame and death for our redemption. And even today, it reaches to wherever there is sin and death and pain.

And even today, before Easter, and before Good Friday, we need to remember that just as there is a descending and a humiliation and an outpouring, there is also an exaltation. There is a name which is above every Name, and before the Name of Jesus every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

I. THIS DESCENT BEGAN IN THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE GODHEAD

Christ was not the highest of created beings, and the flowering of all that is finest and best in mankind. He is Eternal God. He was not created to bring us salvation: He created US to bring us into His life!

The Creation of Adam and Eve, and of all humankind, of you and me, and then God's identification with us, sinful though we be, is an expression of ineffable love. Bethlehem was the expression of a love which we will never understand.

It has been preached at times as though Christ came to earth because of a desire by God to fill a need. If this were true, then Creation— Bethlehem— the Incarnation— would indicate a God who acts from a sense of need. But God eternally needs nothing!

And yet in His love God did want to share His life with you and with me. Out of the Fullness that is God there came this act of Creation and Love and Giving. God's goodness and His love are the best reasons we can grasp at the "why" of salvation. And God stooped to breath His image and likeness into clay.

[From that fullness, the completeness of the Godhead,]

II. JESUS DESCENDED TO WHERE WE ARE AND HAS IDENTIFIED WITH US

He came fully experiencing our finite humanity. He was somehow limited in understanding, for the Bible tells us that Jesus grew in stature as well as in wisdom. He knew weakness, for we read how Jesus was wearied, and hungry, and faint. He knew temptation, in all points even as we are tempted.

At this level of complete humanness Jesus fully identified with us:

1. By being fully Jewish. We don't think of Jesus as a Jew first, we think of Him as the new Adam, leading us into a humanity that is perfected. But while Jesus was on earth, He was subject to the laws and customs of His human ancestry. He was circumcised the eighth day. He was subject to His parents, even when they did not understand him in the Temple when He was twelve years old. He was faithful in His growing years to the synagogue and public worship.

2. By being baptized by John, who was baptizing people for the remission of sins. II Corinthians 5:21 says "God made (Jesus) to be sin for us, even though He knew no sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." And this identification with sinners, this bearing of the weight of sin, was manifested in His public baptism.
3. By His manifest compassion for us after His anointing with the Spirit. Jesus cared for us! For little children. For the rich young ruler. For the multitudes. For Jerusalem. For you! Just about the only people Jesus did not have patience with were the people who were so holy in themselves that they didn't need a Savior.
4. As He taught with precept and story, but always with great Authority! He was the Liberator from the mind-games and the institutional rigor mortis of the self-righteous dead. He taught people how to give of themselves and be audaciously happy! "Blessed are the poor in spirit!" he said.
5. And Jesus fully identified with us: (finally) By becoming our Paschal Lamb!

*He took my sins and my sorrows,
He made them His very own;
He bore the burden to Calvary
And suffered and died alone!*

[But where is Jesus just NOW?]

III. THE ASCENSION OF JESUS ENDED IN THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE GODHEAD

Jesus came all the way to where we are; then He returned to the glory that was His before the worlds began:

[John 17:4,5 "Jesus: "I glorified Thee (God the Father) on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou hast given Me to do.

"And now, glorify Thou Me with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was."]

But now there is one difference: HE CAME DOWN IN ORDER TO BRING US UP!

The Lord Jesus Christ, Decent and Exaltation

[Ephesians 2:6 (God) hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus ."

Jesus who has been seated with the Father [Ephesians 1:20 "(God) wrought in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places."], brings US into that fellowship with Himself!

JESUS INVITES US, NOW, TO IDENTIFY WITH HIM: But how?

1. WE MUST BE CALLED! And then it takes a leap of faith to follow! Faith calls to faith.

How might we have recognized Jesus as Messiah then? How do we recognize Him now? [Is Jesus calling YOU? "Follow Me!"]

2. WE MUST RESPOND TO GRACE BY FAITH! It is a humbling thing to be died for! "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up." (John 3:14)

WE SIMPLY LOOK TO JESUS IN FAITH! [Numbers 21: the story of the fiery serpents in the wilderness; and the serpent of brass]

- a. This "look of faith" is a look of helplessness! (As in AA!)
- b. But it is also a look of HOPE!
- c. And it IS the look of LIFE! When we respond, and identify with Jesus in His humiliation, and begin to understand that He has died for us, we begin to find that we are already bound to Him for all eternity in His glorious exaltation.

ALREADY, HERE AND NOW, BEFORE WE DIE AND GO TO HEAVEN, THE POWER AND THE GUILT OF SIN ARE BROKEN WHEN WE IDENTIFY WITH JESUS.

Paul put it this way (Galatians 2:20) "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me! And the life I now live in this body, I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me, and gave Himself for me!"

CONCLUSION:

1. THIS WILL BE a glorious Creation when Jesus Christ renews this Universe and we see new heavens and a new earth that is totally in harmony with the holiness and the glory of God. We will be a part of that new Kingdom of Love and Light.

2. BUT RIGHT HERE AND NOW the Kingdom of God breaks in on us because of Christ's descent to where we are in order to bring us up to where He is.
3. HOW ARE WE TO RESPOND to the descent and the exaltation of our Lord, when we begin to see that Jesus came down from heaven's glory because he loved us, and that He has taken His seat at the right hand of the Throne of Glory that He might bring us there with Him? There is only one way:

"Streams of mercy, never ceasing Call for songs of loudest praise!"

- a. We can praise Jesus with the love of our hearts. We can praise Jesus with the words of our lips, both to each other, and
- b. We can (sometimes) praise Jesus by letting Him descend in us and through us to where there is sin and need, and, introducing Him there, watching Him bring His exaltation and victory where there has been defeat.

(Final summary :) THIS GLORY IS A FUTURE REALITY! "It doth not yet appear what we shall be! " and "I will come again, and receive you unto Myself!"

BUT IT IS ALSO FINISHED FACT, AND PRESENT SPIRITUAL REALITY: (Colossians 3:1-4)"If you then have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory."

Lifted up was He to die "It is finished!" was His cry. Now in heav'n exalted high: Hallelujah! What a Savior!

#71 (Words only; different tune) *I Will Sing of My Redeemer*

The Majesty of Our King

Palm Sunday Sermon 1988

March 27, 1988

Luke 19:29-48

Revelation 19:11-21; 22:10-13

Introduction: The Passover was an exciting and happy time for the people of Jesus' day. The High Holy days had moments of great solemnity and sheer awe as the priests made sacrifice to God for the atonement of sin. But if there were moments of awe, there were hours and days of sheer fellowship and travel and fun.

The worshipers came to Jerusalem from wherever they were if it was at all possible. They walked. As they walked they talked. And as they came near, they sang. They sang the 'songs of ascent'. Psalm 122 is one of them. It begins: "I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord!'

Abraham walked up the hill of Zion (Genesis 22) with Isaac his son to give him to the Lord. David (2 Samuel 24) climbed that hill, and bought a threshing floor and built an altar to the Lord to stay the plague in Israel. Solomon had built his glorious Temple there, and it was, and is, a holy place to many.

Pilgrims somehow felt at one with all who had gone before them as they came to worship. It is an indescribable feeling to join the generations coming to the Holy City to meet with God.

This may have seemed like just another festive Passover season to the crowds that were gathering in the Holy City that first Palm Sunday. But this was different from all others, before or since. Jesus knew that this was THE PASSOVER of all the ages that was to take place. He was fully aware that all the prophecies of all the scriptures would focus on a cross in just five short days. And this is the context of all the joy and cheering that spontaneously broke out and marked Our Lord's Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem. And what seems strange is, that Jesus permitted it all to happen!

I. WHAT DID JESUS ACTUALLY DO THAT PALM SUNDAY?

- A. Jesus accepted the imperfect, incomplete praise of His disciples.

When the Pharisees complained He told them: "If the people are silent today, the rocks themselves will cry out!" God was passing by on His way to triumph! He is our champion! We should praise Him— imperfectly until we learn better. He is worthy of our praise!

- B. Jesus stopped the procession and wept over the city (verse 41.)

From where he stopped the scene before Him was sheer beauty. Shining white buildings, and the gleaming golden beauty of Herod's Temple. But Jesus saw it with a different vision. He was weeping, not because He was going to suffer and die— He was weeping NOT for Himself— but for the lost.

Many times I have marveled at the sheer beauty of the cities. Boston is breathtakingly beautiful as you drive over the Mystic River from the north, and see the lights— or across Quincy Bay as you see the skyline. What an exciting city! But how do you suppose Jesus sees it? Can we ever see BOTH the beauty AND the darkness and the need? Do you suppose Jesus weeps over Boston?

- C. Jesus also reaffirmed His authority by casting out those who were making merchandise of the Temple (verses 45-48.)

Maybe we would see and apply this scripture by visualizing Jesus coming into our church building here and upsetting things that are not according to His will. But the Temple was NOT like a local house of worship. The Temple was the place of Shekinah, of the Presence, where the sacrifice was made. The best analogy of the Temple that Jesus cleansed that day is the holy of holies in your heart and mind! And, in the collective holy of holies that is the Church of Jesus Christ!

We must have God's glory, His Presence— when we come together— whatever the cost!

II. ANY PALM SUNDAY MESSAGE IS AN UNFINISHED MESSAGE

- A. JESUS IS STILL ENCOURAGING OUR PRAISE, even though it is still incomplete and partial.

We THINK we have a handle on the truth— and we DO have the advantage of two thousand years' worth of perspective. By now Tony Campolo's sermon "It's Friday— but Sunday's coming!" is famous..and rightly so! But even knowing now what we know, and being invited to be a part of Christ's ministry, we are reminded that the story is unfinished! And at the same time,

- B. JESUS IS STILL WEeping OVER THE LOST! It is not wrong to say that Christians must praise and be joyful— and at the same time we must enter into our Lord's compassion, and share in His suffering. The battle is not yet over!
- C. JESUS WANTS TO CLEANSE YOUR HOLY PLACE, and He wants to cleanse mine! It is important that the temple of our hearts, the place where God's glory can dwell, be cleansed. And when pure hearts come together in worship, THERE is the Church! THEN God's kingdom is carried forward!

III. AND ONE DAY THIS PALM SUNDAY MESSAGE WILL BE COMPLETED

One day the whole world will see THE MAJESTY OF JESUS! The Palm Sunday's Triumphal March was followed in five short days by another kind of procession, still led by our King. He was led forth to die!

But it is important to remember that Jesus was NO martyr! In Luke 24 we read that even as He was going to Calvary Jesus said to the people that were crying out and weeping: "Don't weep for Me! Weep for yourselves! Weep for Jerusalem! Weep for those upon whom judgment shall fall!" For Jesus was and is the Lamb of God. The Lamb before Whom the powerful of this earth will flee to the rocks and mountains because of His wrath! The same!

(Revelation 6:16 Cry to the mountains, 'Fall on us! And hide us from the wrath of the Lamb!')

The Majesty of Our King

But there is yet to be still another processional! The story is not finished on Palm Sunday, nor Good Friday— nor even Easter— nor even Pentecost! This same Jesus, who entered Jerusalem on a gentle donkey to the shouts of children waving palm branches is coming again in a different sort of majesty!

Hear the words from the closing chapters of the Bible:

(Rev. 19:11-16;22:10-13) And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and He that sat upon him was called. Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew but he himself. And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God.

And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.

And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. And (the angel) saith unto me, Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand. He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still.

And behold I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be. I AM Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.

As we walk with Jesus this Holy Week, as we take Communion with Him Thursday evening, and as we remember Calvary— in it all Jesus is King! And even beyond Easter and Pentecost— remember-one day all this Universe will know and acknowledge the majesty of our KING!

Let us pray:

One day every knee shall bow! Today help OUR tongues to confess that Jesus Christ is LORD, to the glory of God the Father! Let our hearts share in His compassion! May our lives carry forth His mission!

Amen!

120 Ride On! Ride On in Majesty

Veiled Majesty

Palm Sunday 1988

Luke 19:29,41,45

Rev.19

VEILED MAJESTY

Intro: Passover . . . moments of solemnity and sheer awe . . . hours and days of fun and sheer fellowship. People WALKED great distances to be there . . . TALKED together. SANG the "songs of ascents"

[Ps 122 "I was glad when they said unto me let us go to the house of the Lord"]

Abraham walked up [Zion] with Isaac. . . David bought Aurauna's threshing floor there and made an altar ... Solomon built his magnificent Temple there: IT IS AN INDESCRIBABLE FEELING TO JOIN THE GENERATIONS COMING TO THE HOLY CITY TO MEET WITH GOD.

This Passover was different from all others before or since! ALL the prophecies of ALL the scriptures would focus on a CROSS just five days hence.

THIS IS THE CONTEXT OF THAT TRIUMPHAL ENTRY:

I. THE VEILED MAJESTY OF PALM SUNDAY

(What did Jesus DO ?)

A. He accepted (imperfect) praise!

(1) They anticipated victory they THOUGHT they understood (19:11)

(2) They rejoiced in the miracles they had seen (19:37)

(3) They could not grasp the great SACRIFICE; the tremendous STRUGGLE; the VICTORY JUST AHEAD!

B. (19:41) The king showed great compassion; He wept!

Because He would be rejected and suffer? NO! Because THEY rejected Him, and THEY would suffer and die! (The sheer beauty of Boston - - what do we see? What does Jesus see?)

C. (19:45) The KING must be JUST!

Here is just a hint of what the CONQUERING KING will do to this universe when our probation TIME is ended! "Temple" does not mean church building (to me;) it means Shekinah-- your heart-- our worship together!

II. THIS IS AN UNFINISHED, INCOMPLETE MESSAGE TODAY.

ANY PALM SUNDAY MESSAGE IS AN UNFINISHED MESSAGE--

A. JESUS IS STILL ENCOURAGING OUR PRAISE, even though it is still incomplete and partial.

We THINK we have a handle on the truth-- and we DO have the advantage of two thousand years' worth of perspective.

By now Tony Campolo's sermon "It's Friday-- but Sunday's coming!" is famous..and rightly so! But even knowing now what we know, and being invited to be a part of Christ's ministry, we are reminded that the story is unfinished! And at the same time,

B. JESUS IS STILL WEEPING OVER THE LOST!

It is NOT wrong to say that we must praise and be joyful, and at the same time we must have the Lord's compassion and share in His suffering.

C. JESUS WANTS TO CLEANSE YOUR HOLY PLACE, and He wants to cleanse mine! It is important that the temple of our hearts, the place where God's glory can dwell, be cleansed.

And when pure hearts come together in worship, THERE is the Church!
THEN God's kingdom is carried forward!

CONCLUSION:

III. AND ONE DAY THIS PALM SUNDAY MESSAGE WILL BE COMPLETED.

One day the whole world will see THE MAJESTY OF JESUS! The Palm Sunday's Triumphal March was followed in five short days by another kind of procession, still led by our King. He was led forth to die! But it is important to remember that Jesus was NO martyr!

In Luke 24 we read that even as He was going to Calvary Jesus said to the people that were crying out and weeping: "Don't weep for Me! Weep for yourselves! Weep for Jerusalem! Weep for those upon whom judgment shall fall!" For Jesus was/is the Lamb of God. The Lamb before Whom the powerful of this earth will flee to the rocks and mountains because of His wrath! The same!

(Revelation 6:16 Cry to the mountains, 'Fall on us! And hide us from the wrath of the Lamb!')

But there is yet to be still another processional!

The story is not finished on Palm Sunday, nor Good Friday-- nor even Easter-- nor even Pentecost! This same Jesus, who entered Jerusalem on a gentle donkey to the shouts of children waving palm branches is coming again in a different sort of majesty!

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for the time is at hand. He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still.

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Let us pray:

One day every knee shall bow! Today help OUR tongues to confess that Jesus Christ is LORD, to the glory of God the Father! Amen!

Faith that Works

Unconditional Love, Conditional Covenant

April 10, 1988 PM

Romans 6:22-23 *Therefore being made free from sin, and become servants to God, you have your fruit unto holiness, and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

INTRODUCTION:

The evangelical Christian world often seems to me in danger of setting the Lord Jesus Christ and St. Paul on opposite sides of the most important issue in all the world: our salvation.

JESUS SEEMS TO SAY WHAT WE DO HAS EVERYTHING TO DO WITH OUR SALVATION. Jesus says, in His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:21): "Not everyone who says to Me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven." And this is not to any more than mention the sobering picture Jesus draws, in Matthew 25, of the division that will take place on Judgment Day, when the criterion is: "Inasmuch as ye have/have not done it unto one of the least of these . . ."

PAUL SEEMS TO SAY WHAT WE DO HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH WHETHER OR NOT WE ARE SAVED Paul says: "He saved us, not on the basis of the deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that being justified by His grace we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:5-7)"

And also, the very favorite verse on this side of the question: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. (Ephesians 2:8,9)" Although in all fairness, Paul does go on, in the very next verse: "For we are His workmanship, created in

Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8)

I. SALVATION BY GRACE IS WHERE UNCONDITIONAL LOVE AND CONDITIONAL COVENANT MEET:

- A. Salvation is by faith; but in the matter of unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace we must be careful not to mistake PRESUMPTION for FAITH.

A popular song of many years ago proclaimed: "Though it makes Him sad to see the way we live, "He'll always say: 'I forgive!'" Presumption is believing, or professing to believe without any purpose to change, or any personal commitment to Christ as Lord.

- B. "Repentance" is a condition of saving faith; it is a turning away from, and a godly sorrow for SIN. Not merely having been caught. Perhaps there is where it starts. But a turning away from, and a turning to— away from sin to God.

We are not saved by works of righteousness; but we are not saved unless and until we receive the gift of salvation; and we receive by repentance— turning— which brings us to faith.

- C. Faith is simply turning to Jesus Christ, owning Him as Lord, receiving His forgiveness, and following Him.

Liberals and secular humanists ridicule conservative Christians on this very point: salvation by faith in Christ, WITHOUT WORKS! It is a humbling thing to be died for! John Wesley found this out 250 years ago. He wrote in his Journal in November 1739:

"I have seen . . . more than ever how intolerable the doctrine of faith is to the mind of man; and how peculiarly intolerable to religious men. One may say the most unchristian things, even down to Deism; the most (enthusiastic) things, so they proceed but upon mental raptures, lights, and unctions; the most severe things, even the whole rigor of ascetic mortification; and all this will be forgiven. But if you speak of faith in such a

manner as makes Christ a Savior to the utmost, a most universal help and refuge;— in such a manner as takes away glorying, but adds happiness to wretched man;— as discovers a greater pollution in the best of us than we could before acknowledge, but brings a greater deliverance from it than we could before expect: if any one offers to talk at this rate, HE SHALL BE HEARD WITH THE SAME ABHORRENCE AS IF HE WAS GOING TO ROB MANKIND OF THEIR SALVATION!"

All religious and upright and moral people have their treasure of SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS! Salvation by faith and faith alone strikes at the heart of this wealth. It tells us that rich and poor alike, we are all beggars in need of the gift of salvation! AND THIS IS A GIFT WE CANNOT EARN OR MERIT IN ORDER TO RECEIVE . . . AND WE CANNOT EARN OR MERIT IT IN ORDER TO KEEP!

- D. But salvation by faith, not works, does not exclude CONDITIONS in entering into the covenant of grace:

In the matter of conditional covenant, Jesus makes it plain: (Matthew 16:24 and Luke 9:23) "If any man will come after Me, let him (1) deny himself, and (2) take up his cross (daily); and (3) follow Me."

We mistake unconditional love for unconditional covenant and read this: "If any man will come after Me let him say that he believes in my substitutionary death on the cross, and do as he pleases, and I'll always be there to say "It's O.K.!!!"

- E. There is all the difference in the world in accepting the terms of a covenant and earning salvation by works. The Bible nowhere says that we can be righteous or accepted in God's eyes by our own works; it does say that salvation is a gift which must be received.
- F. If you want to earn your way to holiness and heaven, then be prepared to accept your wages in full. There is none righteous, no not one. If you want eternal Life, then be prepared to meet the conditions of covenant with Jesus: go the route of obedience and faith.

II. GOD LOVES EVERY ONE OF US... HE LOVES ALL HUMANKIND EVERYWHERE. AND HE INVITES US TO ENTER FREELY INTO COVENANT WITH HIM

- A. There is no difference in what Jesus says and what Paul emphasizes— they are two sides of the same salvation. If you want to be saved— it will have to be by grace, through faith. But if your faith is genuine, it will mean more than saying, "I see!" intellectually, like a lesson that is grasped— and it will be a living encounter with the Risen Savior.

Jesus says in Matthew 16:24 "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." In Mark 8:34 again:

"Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." And still again, in Luke 9:23, "If any man will come after me let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me."

- B. TO DENY OUR 'SELF' MEANS a fundamental rejection of "self" as Judge: from now on I don't decide what is, what is not right— I deny myself as god, and accept what Jesus says. HE is my God, my Lord.

[THAT ISN'T WORKS! BUT IT WORKS!]

- C. TO TAKE UP THE CROSS (AN INSTRUMENT OF DEATH) MEANS a death to those things that hinder, THAT STAND BETWEEN US AND CHRIST!— simply giving them to God.

...and Luke says this means a daily! dying: not just a memorable, emotional scene at an altar sometime "back then" — but right NOW— I am still a follower of the Lord Jesus!

- D. TO FOLLOW JESUS! What does that mean? A fellowship of LIFE with the Lord, as He leads us and uses us as He will!

[Closing exhortation:]

We live in something of an intellectual community here; and I often preach as though I were arguing an apologetic; but the truth of the matter is that most of our problems with Jesus are NOT intellectual! They have to do with 'WHO SHALL BE LORD!' and 'DYING TO SELF-WILL!'

#465 *Trust and Obey*

The Road Beyond Emmaus

April 10 1988 AM

Revelation 21

Hebrews 10:19-20

"...Boldness to enter into the holiest By a NEW and LIVING Way ... that is to say, (Christ's BODY!)"

INTRODUCTION:

Easter isn't OVER! The HOLIDAY may be— but the real Easter begins with the resurrection! And even Christ's disciples had to learn a New and Living Way to God! What does it mean— this Resurrection Life?

What does it mean that Jesus is alive?

Walking with Jesus on the way to the Promised Land— starts on the Emmaus Road, and ends in Heaven. We know that much.

But in the here and now— WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TRAVEL "THE NEW AND LIVING WAY"? [Are there any 'models' of walking with God by faith?

ABRAHAM IS A PERENNIAL MODEL: He accepted the challenge of God to leave and old, comfortable way, and walk with God.

THE PILGRIMS ARE ANOTHER MODEL for us: people who risked everything because they wanted God.] People do not leave and risk and dare unless they have some idea of where they are going.

WHERE IS GOD ASKING US TO GO WITH HIM? Do we dare set out on an adventure of faith? Or, what sort of an adventure is it that we already have begun? One clear picture (to me, at least) is found in Revelation 21:

I. (21:1-7) GREAT FUTURE

[We are walking with God into the HOPE of a beautiful future.]

(This chapter opens with) A vision of a beautiful river of crystal clear water of life; a city of beauty with stately mansions for us all. (To my mind this is) A little like the visions settlers must have had as they left the crowded cities of Europe and came to America; and as they left the cities of the East and went looking for the Utopia in the frontier, where there was an unlimited amount of space available.

Being a Christian today must be a little like joining a wagon caravan setting out with visions of California; watered valleys for the inhabiting; a better place where life will be happy ever after.

And this is NOT just for the here-after! The fellowship with God begins the moment we set out! He, Himself, has promised to be our Guide! And the fellowship within this caravan of life is different from all the rest of the world!

II. (21:8) GREAT WARNING

[We are walking with God away from DEFILEMENT, and from wrath and judgment on sin.]

The list of the wicked who cannot take part in this journey is here; and it is headed by fearful and unbelieving. There is place for honest doubt. But there is no place for weasel-obedience. Our faith has got to make a difference in the way we live.

God gives to all people everywhere unconditional love. But that does not mean that all people everywhere, regardless of the way they live, will be saved simply because they mouth the formula, and believe with their minds.

III. (21:22,23) GREAT LIGHT

[We are walking with God in the Pathway of Light of His revelation!]

1. When we get to heaven there will be great light— the light from God's Presence— no sun/ no temple/ a new way of living, walking, worship. Rev. 21:23 says: The LAMB is the light of heaven!
2. And so, even HERE and NOW— the New and Living WAY is the way of the Living Light. [I John 1:7,9.] Where will that Light take us?

Where will we walk with the Lamb?

IV. (21:27) GREAT SEPARATION

[Fellowship with LIGHT inevitably means separation from DARKNESS!]

I think I'd like to believe in universalism; but what this great word teaches is far from universalism. The separation is already among us; we must decide how serious we are about following after Jesus! It is time to be serious about who we are. It is time to consider well the cost of being Christian. The time is drawing to a close when we can congratulate ourselves that we are Christian because we don't steal and we don't smoke or drink, and because we attend church fairly regularly. I wonder if we have the fortitude to put our lives on the line for what we really believe?

LET ME TAKE A NEW DIRECTION THIS MORNING— AND YOU KNOW THAT I TAKE PREACHING VERY SERIOUSLY: There are many respects in which we can liken ourselves in the American community of faith to the church in early Nazi Germany. We may well have to separate in our thinking the idea of a beloved nation and an intruding government that does not represent the ideals for which the Old and New Testaments stand.

I am not calling for a conservative knee-jerk reaction. But by the same token, I am not succumbing to a political solution from the left, either. It is all right to be Christian and be conservative; it is all right to be Christian and be liberal, politically. BUT IT IS NOT ALL RIGHT TO BE CHRISTIAN AND LET OTHER PEOPLE INTERPRET WHAT IS AND WHAT IS NOT GOD'S WILL FOR US. It is NOT Christian to let the government eviscerate the Bible, and tell the CHURCH what is and what is NOT moral. Too long the church has been silent on moral issues.

IMMEDIATELY MANY WILL THINK ABOUT PLACES IN THE WORLD WHERE INJUSTICE SEEMS FLAGRANT: I cannot with good conscience speak about the issues in South Africa or Northern Ireland. I simply do not have the facts, and I do not understand all the issues. BUT FOR US CHRISTIANS HERE—TO FOCUS ON THOSE ISSUES CAN BE A SMOKE SCREEN FOR WHAT IS HAPPENING RIGHT HERE IN OUR DAY-BY-DAY EXISTENCE: AND I do have facts and issues here in the United States of America.

(1) Recently a federal appeals court, in Washington, D.C., ruled that a Catholic University (Georgetown University) was bound to financially support a group on its campus that was and is diametrically opposed to the clear teaching of that church group. The statement in CT was that the court understood that this opposed church teaching, but that factor was outweighed by the court's consideration for gay rights.

I quote now from Richard Neuhaus in his landmark book, *The Naked Public Square*: "In recent decades, "pluralism" has become something of a buzzword. It is variously employed. Often it is used to argue that no normative ethic, even of the vaguest and most tentative sort, can be "imposed" in our public life.

In practice this means that public policy decisions reflect a surrender of the normal to the abnormal, of the dominant to the deviant. Indeed it is of more than passing interest that terms such as abnormal or deviant have been largely exorcised from polite vocabulary among the elites in American life." 146

Bear with me just a bit more in this quoting: "Movements today that employ the anti-discrimination provisions won in the racial struggle see themselves as a continuation of that struggle. But the convergence between law and the democratic ethos is lacking. In fact, as often as not, the effort is to use the law in order to confront and overturn the base of moral consensus. This is notably evident in some of the more radical movements aimed at erasing all sexual distinctions, creating an androgynous society, and liberating children from their "captivity" to the "oppressive structure" that is the family."

This week I have had conversation with Father Neale Heery, pastor of Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church in North Quincy, (who is in Rome just now) pledging to him that [AS FAR AS I AM CONCERNED, AND SO MUCH AS I HAVE ANY INFLUENCE AS PASTOR] we will stand with him in whatever we can do to oppose this intrusion of federal government into exclusive church domain and prerogative.

Then, too, (2) Just very recently our Congress passed, and then overrode the President's veto on a bill that will potentially emasculate all church discrimination against social evil, no matter how scripturally grounded if in fact any government

subsidy has been received by any participating member. The position of the church is (1) NOT to enter into partisan politics, and NEVER to endorse a party or candidate. But by the same token, (2) the church is not merely free to express itself on moral issues, IT IS DUTY-BOUND TO LOYALLY AND LOVINGLY CALL ITS SERVANT GOVERNMENT INTO ACCOUNTABILITY TO THE GOD IT ACKNOWLEDGES IN ITS CONSTITUTION AND IN THE WILL OF THE VAST MAJORITY OF ITS CITIZENS!

I want to quote again from an historian, this time a Calvinist from Michigan, George Marsden, in *Fundamentalism & American Culture*. He says,

"We live in the midst of contests between great and mysterious spiritual forces, which we understand only imperfectly and whose true dimensions we only occasionally glimpse. Yet, frail as we are, we do play a role in this history, on the side either of the powers of light or of the powers of darkness. It is crucially important then, that, by God's grace, we keep our wits about us and discern the vast difference between the real forces for good and the powers of darkness disguised as angels of light."

Conclusion:

Are you sure that I have gotten way off the track this morning?

Isn't it a lot easier just to wait until the issues are a lot clearer?

Wouldn't it be a lot neater and easier if being a Christian meant that we could stay neatly compartmentalized in the "spiritual" side of our lives? Wouldn't it be simpler if we only had to tithe and attend church on Sunday morning and evening and, for a few of the pious, Wednesday nights, too??

BUT FOLLOWING JESUS DEMANDS THAT WE PUT OUR LIVES ON THE LINE. THERE IS A VERY REAL HEAVEN TO GAIN, AND A VERY REAL HELL TO SHUN. BUT IN THE GAINING AND THE SHUNNING, THERE IS ALSO A VERY REAL WORLD IN WHICH WE MUST CHOOSE SIDES.

Joel prophesied it, and Peter affirmed it on the Day of Pentecost:

The Road Beyond Emmaus

In the last days God's Spirit will be poured out on the CHURCH! And young and old, men and maidens, shall prophecy!

JEREMIAH AND HOSEA AND AMOS AND JOHN THE BAPTIST ARE DEAD. AND GUESS WHO HAS BEEN CALLED TO WALK WITH GOD, AND TO TELL THE WORLD ABOUT THE PROMISE AND THE WARNING, THE LIGHT AND THE SEPARATION? WE HAVE!

Let us pray:

O God and Father of our Risen Savior, Let us walk with Him! Help us not to run ahead— and help us not to lag behind. Show us the HOPE of Your great promises; and help is WALK IN THE LIGHT of the Lamb. In Jesus' Name we ask.

#413 Faith of Our Fathers

Set the Word Free

The Best Kept Secret in the World Is the Power of Word of the Lord Jesus Christ

Acts 19:20 And so the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.

April 17, 1988

Introduction: The description of the early church's foundation-work in Ephesus here in the 19th of Acts, in the beginning and then in the end of the chapter, sounds almost as though two different places are being described. In the first half of the chapter the simple progress of the work of Paul and the growth of the church are described, in the establishing of the strong center for Christ at Ephesus; how Paul preached in the synagogue there for three months until it was no longer possible, then how he moved to the school of Tyrannus for two years.

The narrative tells of how some were healed, and some tried to copy Paul, of how many gave up false religion and occult practices. There is even a record of how 50,000 pieces of silver's worth of magic-arts books were voluntarily destroyed—at today's prices worth more than \$1,000,000.00— which is an indication of the power and scope of the revival.

And then the story climaxes with the statement: "The word of God was growing mightily and prevailing." But then the last half of the chapter describes the same place: but now with disturbance, riot, danger...uproar. There was organized opposition, and the task seemed most difficult. Paul ended up leaving for Macedonia. Which was the true picture? The answer, of course, was both!...and so it is in our own time.

When we read the success stories of Acts, or when we hear or read of revival taking place in other parts of the world it is very easy to either focus on one extreme of the facts or the other, and forget the dynamic that makes it all go.

It is easy to see a plan or a method and think that we, too, must do exactly as "they" have done, OR, we are tempted to get our eyes on the formidable opposition, and

think we need to take immediate action and seek to destroy it in our own wisdom and power.

But the story of the "seven sons of Sceva" is frightening and to the point here. These self-styled prophets tried to do God's work with a hand-me-down formula; they wanted to copy the methods without knowing either the true source of power or what it cost to see that power released in their lives. And they were put to shame. We need to focus on the true Source of the dynamic as we read the Book of Acts, or hear true accounts of revival stories going on just now.

The text says it: THE POWER WAS THE PREVAILING, MIGHTY POWER OF THE WORD OF GOD!

It was what was prevailing! The disciples gave themselves to the Word— to God through the Word— and the kingdom was established!

[Transition:]

Oh, make no mistake . . .

I. THERE WILL ALWAYS BE STRONG OPPOSITION TO THE WORD!

The doom cryers— they have their place .. what they say is true...evil men shall wax worse and worse ... We do need militancy against the evils of our age ... "Because iniquity shall abound the love of many shall wax cold."

But THE GREATEST DANGERS THAT FACE THE CHURCH ARE NOT THE TERRIBLE AND PERNICIOUS SINS THAT RAGE WITHOUT. NO, THE CHURCH IS IN DANGER BECAUSE OF THE SOFT, COMPROMISING, EASE-LOVING, CULTURE-ACCOMMODATING ATTITUDE WITHIN!

The church

1. needs to be aware of the evils of our age. We cannot retreat into some modern version of monasticism. And we need to
2. cry out against the evils of our times. And yet in our role as prophets, our primary task is to proclaim the word of God!

So-called religious leaders have abdicated their faithfulness to the Word of God. In The Naked Public Square Richard Neuhaus, far from an ardent evangelical, quotes verbatim from the minutes of a "mainline" church assembly (the 150th of this denomination)— the assembly joined in confession of sins:

"We confess our guilt as one of the wealthiest countries in the world...(not having kept faith with the generations gone before)..."the dead who lived before us whose dreams we betrayed, the dreams of 1789 and of 1917."

And Neuhaus reminds his readers that those so called "dreams" were the French Revolution of 1789 and the Bolshevik takeover in 1917 in Soviet Russia.

To me, it is no wonder that some of the mainline churches are losing members by the hundreds and thousands. The good people want to hear what God has to say, and not Voltaire or Marx or Lenin. No wonder Jesus said, "When I come will I find faith on the earth?"!!

II. BUT WHERE GOD'S WORD IS GIVEN FULL RIGHT OF WAY, IT IS PREVAILING!

Our task is to release God's Word! Where God's Word has been faithfully proclaimed in the power of the Holy Spirit, and where God's people have waited before Him in prayer, without exception there has been quickening!

There is quickening in our own land! It is probably the best-kept secret in America—but in spite of excesses on the part of some leaders, and in spite of the many things that are wrong, there are still millions of people in our land that are turning to God!

There seems to be a conspiracy of silence on the part of the liberal media regarding the good things that happen to Christ's church.

Such things as "Congress '88 (and '87 and '86, etc.) get little or no press coverage even though thousands of people flood downtown Boston in the name of evangelical Christian faith.

Such things as the 1982 Billy Graham campaign, that was consistently shut out of Fenway Park and Shea Stadium, and that overflowed Nickerson Field in a driving rainstorm were not even mentioned.

In April some 500,000 or more evangelical Christians will march on Washington for a prayer meeting for God's mercy and revival on our nation— and you can count on it— it won't get 3 minutes worth of news on local stations, and nothing at all on CBS or NBC. And yet the strength is there; lives are being changed.

It isn't the power of the media, or the suggestion of TV, or the TV evangelists that make God's church go forward! They are a symptom, and not a cause! No— what we are seeing is the power of God! The mighty power of His Word, released in thousands of faithful pulpits and pews and churches.

And what we are seeing to some extent here in America is not keeping pace with the tremendous spiritual awakening in many areas of the "third world." Dr. Gailey, when he was here in January, told us of how Africa is turning to God in almost unbelievable numbers.

[So what are we to believe? What are we to think and to see? Is there great opposition? Is the Word going forward? What are we to do? Are we in trouble . . . or . . . are we perhaps standing on the brink of revival? Which is true? The answer is— both!]

III. WE HAVE THE SOLEMN AND AWESOME RESPONSIBILITY OF INVESTING OUR LIVES AND MAKING A DIFFERENCE!

1. If we will let the Word of God be released IN OUR PERSONAL LIVES, WE WILL SEE PERSONAL REVIVAL. We cannot continue to get our orders "second hand" and our spiritual food from snatches on the radio and TV and the latest pop-theologian. There is a price to pay, of prayer and reading God's Word, and waiting before the Lord. But the Word of God is alive! And it will give our personal lives power!
2. And AS A CHURCH, WE MUST SEE THAT THE WORD OF GOD IS RELEASED! WE NEED TO INVEST OUR MONEY AND OUR TIME AND OUR ENERGIES WAYS TO BRING OUR FRIENDS AND GOD'S WORD TOGETHER. And 'so the word of the Lord will grow mightily and prevail!'

Conclusion:

I would like to close my message this morning with a story.

It is a true story, and I assure you that no one asked or in any way slightly hinted that I should tell it to you. But I just felt I needed to:

John Nielson died alone in a little house trailer in Delaware, just across the toll bridge from Pennsville, New Jersey. He was an old man, and he lived alone. He died in his bed, where he had retired to read. On his bed were three or four reference books, and on his chest were his glasses and his Greek New Testament. You might say John Nielson died "mining gold in the Word of God."

And John Nielson died a wealthy man. How can I tell you how wealthy? The reason John Nielson died so wealthy was that (1) he had made very wise investments. And (2) he had made investments that went before him into eternity, and followed after him after he had gone into eternity.

Mr. Nielson invested in his family. He put his family ahead of worldly ambition, or even ambition within the visible kingdom of God. At the age of 29 he was elected superintendent of the Washington-Philadelphia district of the Church of the Nazarene, and being a DS at that age would seem to indicate that he "had it made" as far as the church was concerned. But he stepped down and took a home mission charge so that he would not have to be away from his family so much while they were growing up.

Mr. Nielson did not shirk his duty, wherever it led. He was a loyal husband even when he had to literally carry his wife into the churches with him on preaching assignments the last several years. She had been paralyzed with a stroke, and was unable even to speak. But Mr. Nielson was committed.

Mr. Nielson did not withhold his money. He tithed and gave regularly beyond his 10%, but also he participated in pledging and special needs when it meant postponing what others might term "necessities." You see, he was a wise man, and he was making eternal investments.

So, when John Nielson died, he died in a little house trailer, and had just a little money left over— enough to bury him and pay all his debts and not much more. He came to the end of this part of life having pretty much spent and expended all the

resources and gifts and talents with which God had trusted him. He also left two daughters and three sons, and grandchildren and now great-grandchildren— and somehow he had handed down to them the idea that they had something to give to God and to God's kingdom, and that they could make a difference in this world through faithfulness to God's Word.

One quote Alice Kauffman makes in her book about Mr. Nielson is interesting to me: In a letter John Nielson wrote, "I am an egoist, not an egotist!" I take this to mean that in a thoroughly Christian, sanctified way he was saying: "I do count! I can make a difference! God does use me!"

I want to be humble and Christ-like. But I want to be rich and wealthy like Mr. Nielson, too! I want to live a life that counts. I want to come to the end of my life and have invested wisely! I don't want too much left over!

What is the best-kept secret in the world? What is life FOR? What am I saving myself for? These are questions I ask myself! And I ask God today: "How may I invest in YOUR kingdom?"

I have some practical suggestions:

1. Re-think your values. Re-order your life if necessary! What does it profit a man or a woman if we make \$100,000 a year and lose our children for all eternity?
2. Open your life to the Spirit, and to the Word. There is no short-cut to spirituality! No one else can do your praying and your Bible reading for you!
3. Determine to live for God by loving people— and start with the people that are nearest you! Be ye kind! is one of the most important verses in all the Bible!
4. Put your resources at God's disposal.

Please join with me in prayer!

The Power Commandments

May 1, 1988

Introduction: We live in a sick and broken world today. And our world is broken on its failure to recognize and respect and observe TEN simple COMMANDMENTS which God gave to the human race through the Jewish people more than 3,000 years ago. But we can hardly expect society to respect and seek the wisdom of the Ten Commandments when the people of God do not hold them as vitally important as they really are:

I. THE COMMANDMENTS REFLECT GOD'S WILL FOR SOCIETY

Why should we, who are not saved by keeping the law, and who cannot keep it perfectly, be so concerned about the Ten Commandments? They have never been repealed, but what real relevance do they have for us here today?

1. True, they cannot save us. But in Romans 7 we read that they are
 - a. holy (verse 12), and
 - b. spiritual (verse 14), and
 - c. good (verse 16).
2. Jesus (in the Sermon on the Mount) tells us that He did not come to destroy the Law and the prophets, but to fulfil them.
3. We are not saved by the commandments, but Paul makes it plain that those who are saved make themselves subject to God's laws (Romans 8:6,7:)

"For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God, FOR IT DOES NOT SUBJECT ITSELF TO THE LAW OF GOD, FOR IT IS NOT EVEN ABLE TO DO SO; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

We are not saved by God's holy Laws, but they are the basis on which we build our lives. They are the bones, the skeleton framework, on which society can be framed in justice.

II. A QUICK REVIEW OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS...

...and why they offer mankind's hope:

When people do refer to the Ten Commandments as a basis for life and living, they usually are thinking specifically of the 'Second Table,' the second half of the laws God gave that guide us in dealing with each other:

- V. Honor family ties
- VI. Don't hold human life lightly
- VII. Don't hold lightly the power to create life
- VIII. Hold property rights as very important
- IX. Be truthful, especially about your neighbor's reputation
- X. Don't be greedy, even in the privacy of your heart, let alone actually doing these evil things.

If in fact we would begin observing these laws universally this would be Millennium, heaven's rule on earth. But this is the SECOND HALF of the Ten Commandments! Why, do you suppose, did God put those other FOUR first?

The reason is: The only way that there is any hope of the 'Second Table' WORKING is in connection with the 'First.'

But, you see, man, in all his 'wisdom,' "knows" better than God! Man has 'divorced ethics from morality.' He thinks he can be his own savior— and in his self worship and arrogance he writes off as archaic the laws which 'don't make sense.' And of course they don't make sense when we have turned all the values of life around and upside down. So God would have us to know that these first commandments are the power that can make the second, "ethical" commandments work.

Do you remember that 'First table?:'

- I. God Himself must be absolutely FIRST!
- II. No idol, no manufactured deity is ever to be worshiped, or even condoned.

- III. The very name of God, and every thought of Him, must be revered. God's name should always be honored. IV. The Sabbath Day, God's gift to mankind, is to be observed by rest and worship; not seeking our own will and pleasure.

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO OVER-ESTIMATE THE IMPORTANCE OF THESE FOUR COMMANDMENTS. We have felt free to "edit" them, and explain why they are or are not relevant. But if we are the people of God then we must not only give lip service to the commandments; they are to be written on our hearts!

(Jeremiah 31:33: "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.")

(Hebrews 10:15,16 And the Holy Spirit bears also bears witness to us; for after saying, This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord, I will put My laws upon their heart, and upon their mind I will write them, He then says, "And their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.")

III. A CLOSER LOOK AT COMMANDMENTS I. AND II.

Look with me at just the first two commandments today:

I. THOU SHALT HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME.

Relating to the First Commandment: God does not share His glory with any other being. We must worship the true and the living God, who has revealed Himself in the Bible; but even more, has revealed Himself in Jesus. We can know God, and be sure of certain things about Him. But to be sure is not the same thing as taking a relationship for granted.

HOW MAY WE BE SURE WE ARE WORSHIPING THE TRUE GOD?

1. Jesus is our God-given revelation, our 'key' to knowing God. We must know the real Jesus; we must know Him for ourselves; we must make Him Lord of our lives, and of our days.

The Jesus we come to know will never contradict in any way the revelation of scriptures (see John 5:39.)

2. God is infinitely tender. "Lovingkindness" is one of the great words of description concerning this God with whom we have to do.
3. But never forget: GOD IS HOLY And WE are NOT! Any "holiness" which we have is God's holiness, it is derived from Him;

Salvation is not so much an intellectual, cold, calculating thing— saying: "This is so!"— as it is a real thing, a continual breaking through into the reality of God.

1. Our greatest danger is not rejecting the God of the Bible. It is putting Him in a box and making Him perform. It is the easy familiarity and comfortable approach to old truth. It is being so confident of our stated formula that we no longer tremble at the approach of omnipotence. We have "tamed" God.
2. The only cure for this is living contact with God! Spelling it out in plain language: We need to make time, take time, to be with God every day of our lives. It won't always feel exciting.
3. I am not talking about far-out mystical experiences, or esoteric raptures now—they may have their place. I don't know much about that. But I am talking about contact with Almighty God.

Unless we regularly break through into the consciousness of God's Presence we will find ourselves saying words to 'pictures of God,' the memories and recollections we have of Him in our distant or recent past. And God is NOT "was" or "will be." Where we live, where we are— GOD IS! He is the I AM THAT I AM!

II. THOU SHALT NOT MAKE UNTO THEE ANY GRAVEN IMAGES; THOU SHALT NOT BOW DOWN TO THEM AND WORSHIP THEM.

What about this Second Commandment? I can recall thinking when I was just a child that this commandment was totally unnecessary. For I "knew" that idols are silly; no one that I knew worshiped idols. I "knew" I would never have any problem with this commandment. And yet there are people,

many people, in this world today that do have graven images and idols which they worship.

But that probably is not a great worry or temptation to you and me. What we need to see is that anything which is so dear that it begins to take the edge off our desire to obey the Father, and please Him, is to us an IDOL, whether it is comfort, or sports, or gadgets, or possessions, or position, or the church itself!

ANYTHING that makes us think WE "know" without humble and open dependance on the Spirit, and obedience to the Bible is hubris and is idolatry! That very same "agape" love that can center one's life and love and interests outside of one's self can and often is directed toward that which is NOT God. John warns us

"Love (agape') not the world neither the things that are in the world; if any (person) love (agape') the world, the love of the Father is not in him." (I John 2:15.)

So it is possible to take the kind of love that we are to give to God, and that God can give us for himself and others— this 'agape' love,' and give it to lesser things, to idols.

The prayer behind the words of the old altar song is so important to our soul health:

*Lord Jesus, I long to be perfectly whole
I want Thee forever to live in my soul;
Break down every idol, Cast out every foe!
NOW wash me, and I shall be Whiter than snow!*

Conclusion:

1. Most of us pass through various attitudes toward God's Holy Laws, especially those of us who grow up within the preaching of the Bible.
2. We have a period when we live in and love authoritarianism. Whether or not we realize it, WE THINK THAT BY KEEPING GOD'S LAWS WE CAN BE SAVED. We may not think

we do, and may not say we do- but we like the security of being told what is right and wrong. We like to hear that we are on the right side, and we know what is right and wrong because someone we respect tells us so. BUT WE FIND THAT THERE IS NO REAL LIFE IN TRYING TO BE SAVED BY KEEPING THE LAW.

3. But then we begin to think as adults; we reject untested truth. We don't like to be told: "Do so because I say so!" Especially we don't like people telling us things like that— our parents, our teachers, human authority figures. But this carries over even to the heavenly Father, too! And in one way or another we demand AUTONOMY! We decide we'll be our own boss! BUT WE FIND THAT THERE IS NO REAL PEACE AND JOY IN BEING 'FREE FROM KEEPING THE LAW' OF GOD.
4. But when we come to ourselves, and when we come to know the love of Jesus in salvation, we choose freely to come under the authority of God. Not now simply authoritarian dictatorship, but accepting the loving authority of our heavenly Father. WHEN WE ARE BORN FROM ABOVE WE DISCOVER THE TRUTH: " BLESSED (HAPPY!) IS THE MAN (WOMAN) THAT WALKETH NOT IN THE COUNSEL OF THE UNGODLY . . . BUT IN (GOD'S) LAW DOTH HE MEDITATE DAY AND NIGHT . Life AND peace AND joy are not detached from the love of God's Laws!
5. To the person struggling in authoritarian blindness it seems that God has simply tried His best to make up some rules to keep us from having a good time.
6. But the wonderful thing we discover when we voluntarily place ourselves under God's LAWS, we see that they are an expression of His lovingkindness to us! The beautiful thing is: God's commandments are not harsh and arbitrary! Rather, they are designed to help to meet every need and longing in our God-created being!
7. If YOU are having trouble finding the power to live like a Christian— the secret is in the FIRST TABLE!

Matthew 6:33 If we will seek first the kingdom of God, and HIS righteousness, then all these things will be added.
8. And when GOD'S PEOPLE begin to keep God's LAWS in the power of His Spirit, I believe there is hope for a moving of the Holy Spirit in revival on our nation and on our world!

II Chronicles 7:14 If MY people, which are called by MY name will humble themselves and pray, and seek MY face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.

[LET US PRAY!]

#28 [WS] *Lead On, O King Eternal*

Our Big Brother

May 7, 1988

(Originally Titled: Where There is No Omen)

Ephesians 4:25-32

Introduction:

Hayford Street Gang story - -"Down Kalamazoo Street were six big bullies! How could I face them?" ... What does that have to do with the rest of the what I have to say this morning? There is a connection. Look at what this verse from the Bible is telling us:

I. THE HARMONY OF THE CHURCH WORKING TOGETHER IN IN THE LORD

(Ephesians 4:25-32)

Here is a practical list of "DO" items and "DON'T DO" items that we would do well to think on and incorporate into our lives.

1. Speaking the truth/ putting away falsehood
2. Being angry without sinning— never holding a grudge; being persons of integrity before the Lord
3. Learning to work hard and well, and NOT stealing
4. Speaking words that build and bless, and NOT words that smell to high heaven.."rotten" words (verse 29)
5. But the practical admonition that I would look at in some depth this evening is found in verse 27: don't give the devil an opportunity. What do you suppose this means?

II. NOT GIVING THE ENEMY ANY ADVANTAGE!

Or, more simply— not getting all beat up by the enemy of our souls! And there is an enemy!

- A. The immediate context of the phrase is: If I am angry with my brother or sister, and have a wrong spirit toward him, then I am giving opportunity for the devil to get a wedge in, to make the most of a misunderstanding. I believe this is correct exegesis.
- B. But the broader context of the idea: don't give the devil any handhold, any advantage goes beyond just anger with a brother or sister.
 - 1. 1. There are OBVIOUS evils to avoid: And these evils go far beyond any list of "rules" which we could make and publish! Some people think all we need is such a list— and make it include everything.
 - 2. 2. The trouble is there are NOT-SO-OBVIOUS evils to avoid, too!: GOOD things can get in the way of our walk with God! Anything can become an idol if we let it!
- C. And there are PARTICULAR areas where we need to be very careful. ONE OF THESE AREAS IS IN THE WHOLE MATTER OF SEX AND SEXUAL ATTRACTION.
 - 1. The 'boy-girl' thing was created by God. It is not of itself an evil.
 - 2. But our world is OBSESSED with sex.
 - 3. Several lies need to be addressed:
 - a. Lie #1 "IT IS ALL RIGHT TO HAVE SEXUAL RELATIONS IF YOU HAVE LOVE." But remember, this is a lie! All sex outside the marriage relationship IS STILL CLEARLY A SIN!
 - b. Lie #2 "SEXUAL DESIRES MUST BE GRATIFIED OR THE PERSONALITY WILL BE WARPED." I won't expand on that just now except to say it is a lie; and God has grace to make every Christian conqueror!
 - c. Lie #3 "SOFT-CORE PORNO DOESN'T HURT ANYONE." Porno is a multi-BILLION dollar industry in our country; it has its lobbies.
 - d. Lie #4 "EVERYONE IS DOING IT!" Everyone is NOT caught in this trap! And those who are can be set free! You don't have to take a beating from Satan on this score.

4. Sex can become an avenue by which the enemy can OPPRESS and eventually DESTROY our lives if we do not find a way of escape. Some of you may be caught in an unclean obsession with sex or porno. You can be set free!

D. ANOTHER AREA OF CONCERN IS ROCK MUSIC.

Yes, I believe there is such a thing as Christian rock music. I have very little to do with it, both because of personal taste, and because of unpleasant associations with the other kinds of rock music. At its best, secular rock music has wasted the ambitions of hundreds and thousands of mediocre talents who dreamed of making millions and finding fame. At its worst it has fueled the evil personified by a Charles Manson.

LISTEN TO THE WORDS! REFUSE TO SING OR AGREE WITH WORDS THAT GLORIFY GOD'S ENEMIES! Secular rock music has glorified anarchy and the spirit of rebellion to break down family ties.

E. ANOTHER SUPER-HIGHWAY INTO DEEP TROUBLE WITH THE ENEMY IS THE AVENUE OF DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

I know that if you are living and breathing, especially in our public schools today, you are potentially in contact with the drug culture. The enemy has a lot invested in this home-wrecking, mind^adestroying, hell-spawned avenue to damnation. Our church's and denominations (good and healthy) standards aside, the statistics show that (even if alcohol were not morally wrong, and even if) 90% of those that drink can drink in moderation and not be harmed, the 10% which cannot drink at all without addiction consumes 50% of the booze and beer. Do you understand that? 90% drinks 50%. And the other, poor, wretched, addicted 10% drinks the other 50%! That is the kind of product that sponsors A GREAT PORTION OF OUR NATION'S PROFESSIONAL SPORTS! 'THIS BUD IS NOT FOR YOU!'

F. STILL ANOTHER AREA OF DEEP CONCERN IS ANYTHING THAT HAS TO DO WITH SO-CALLED 'EASTERN RELIGIONS.'

Whether poly-theistic, or pan-theistic— these evil systems promise guidance or enlightenment or peace or some sort of control. Stay away from them!

STAY AWAY FROM HOROSCOPES. They are an insult to God! He has promised to lead you. He doesn't share His guidance with the stars.

STAY AWAY FROM OIJA BOARDS!

STAY AWAY FROM ANY KIND OF MARTIAL ARTS PROGRAM THAT PERFORMS ANY KIND OF RITUAL!

And BE VERY CAREFUL OF SO-CALLED "IMAGING!" Imagination is one of the crown jewels in God's gift of intelligence, and it enables us to take wings. But gifts of God must always be subjects and not masters or they become dangerous. And perhaps an unsublimated imagination is as dangerous as any loose cannon there is. The evil imagination can become the avenue for bondage.

Our prayer, our determination, our cry to God must be: No master but JESUS! No LORD but Jesus! JESUS IS LORD!

III. THESE EVILS ARE POWERFUL, BUT THEY ARE NOT ALL-POWERFUL!

[WHERE EVIL CANNOT 'STICK' THE TEFLON CHRISTIAN!]

A. The best way to find victory over sin is never to get into it in the first place:

1. Stay out of the garbage piles of the spirit. Have you ever been to a land-fill? One of the smelliest places on earth! You don't play on the garbage dumps! So don't go there for mental and spiritual recreation!
2. Be an active enemy of dirt of all kinds. If you knew there was a mosquito moving into New England that carried the AIDS virus what would you do about preventing getting bitten? But the bite of some of these evils is worse than AIDS! Don't you know that soul pollution is by far the worst of all?
3. THE BEST DEFENSE IS SIMPLY BEING IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD. Not being "experts" on the occult, or "powerful" in our own right— but simply

being close to God.

In Numbers 22-24 is a fascinating story. The king of Moab was into the occult in a big way. He went a long way to hire a prophet that knew something about Israel's God, the Aramean, Balaam. HE WANTED BALAAM TO CURSE THE PEOPLE OF GOD. But instead Balaam blessed the Israelites three times, evidently as they were totally unaware of what was going on in the hills above them. And Balak was frustrated and angry. That whole scene is a message or two in and of itself. And this is what the puzzled, mixed-up Balaam had to say about God's people (Numbers 23:21,23): "The Lord his God is with him, and the shout of a king is among them . . . for there is no omen against Jacob, nor is there any divination against Israel ..."

- B. BUT WHATEVER YOUR SITUATION IS, JESUS, YOUR BIG BROTHER WILL WALK WITH YOU— OR RATHER, HE WILL LET YOU WALK WITH HIM!

Yes, the best way to avoid getting "beaten up" is to stay away from these avenues of defeat. But even if you have been beaten up— and even now are all black and blue— you can be free!

(Text:) Don't give the devil any 'handhold." James 4:7,8 SUBMIT yourselves therefore to God RESIST the devil and he will flee from you DRAW NEAR TO GOD, and He will draw near to YOU!

If the great concern of our life is to please God— to live in a way that does NOT grieve the Holy Spirit— then we will not be in bondage to the beggarly elements of this immoral age. When I looked down the street and saw those "big bullies" from the Hayford Street gang waiting for me— I got up next to the big kid from the sixth grade— and walked right by them while they parted like the Red Sea! Whatever wants to WRECK YOUR LIFE ... and is too big for you to handle— there is a Big Brother who is willing to walk with you, and make and keep you free from the wiles of the enemy! His name is

Our Big Brother

JESUS! He died to set you free! His blood can make you free! If you want to be free, you can be! TONIGHT!

#136 Power in the Blood

That In All Things God May Be Glorified

Sober living for Final Days

May 7, 1988 PM

I Peter 4:7-11

The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaint. As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

It may not seem too important what or how we think about Christ's return. After all, Christian faith is for the here and now (isn't it?), and not just an escape hatch before the world dissolves and the elements melt in fervent heat (which, as Peter tells us, is going to happen. (2 Peter 3:10-12.)

It may not seem too important— and yet the last words of Jesus, and the words the angels spoke on Olivet to those who watched Jesus disappear into the heavens, convinced the early church that the time until Jesus returned was fairly short. At least this is the way it appears to many scholars. It is safe to say that the early church lived in the anticipation of Christ's Return. His NEAR return.

How, then, should we view these words:

"This same Jesus— will so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go!"??

Is it possible to OVER-emphasize eschatology? Can we be too fascinated by contemplating "end times?"

Is there a healthy way of living in anticipation?

I. THE DANGERS OF END-TIME LIVING

1. IMMINENCE: One danger can be that will not fully engage in the concerns of this present age. We must fully accept the responsibility of maturity in community, but on God's terms, not our own or society's.

Earlier generations (during depression, or during wartime insecurity,) did a good job of persuading the rank and file that Jesus would come, and that His coming would be a good thing. But for one person at least, this emphasis was strong enough to discourage thorough preparation even for the ministry!

2. ISOLATION : The impact of the "ME-generation" is being felt in the secular society. "Cocoon-ing" is a buzz-word.

This can even creep into the church until we forget the true importance of community. And if we add to this total involvement with "ME" the peculiarity that adheres to a belief that God interrupts history— has done it once, and is going to do it again— we have a built-in rationality for withdrawing from a society that needs to hear what we believe.

3. 3. IMBALANCE :

- a. to say that is SOME is good, then MORE is better
- b. to say that if a person is right in one area, then his word is scripture in every area (and so be diverted from simplicity of the gospel)
- c. to major on secondary issues (no matter how vital and true)

4. IGNORANCE : to despise history; to think that the profusion and proliferation of technology has added dimensions to the quality of life beyond virtues of integrity before God.
5. INTEMPERANCE: much like "imbalance" except this has to do with playing games with reality (Peter says: "Be sober!") The "alcoholic personality" is not limited to drinking.

We try to escape the realities of life with a pill or "drug" for every occasion. Sometimes the drug is "humor." We joke when the heat is on. We joke when our inner self comes near to being exposed.

Often the "pill" is cynicism. We never expose our innermost feelings. Only the "in" speakers have access to our respect— even if sometimes God might wish to speak to us through a child or a student or a disadvantaged person.

But these are all negative effects of trying to use a truth of scripture rather than simply let the scripture shape our lives and thinking. We simply do NOT know when Jesus is returning. We know that it is considered naive to believe that He is coming soon- but His word to His church was "Watch ye therefore, for ye not neither the day nor the hour when the Son of man shall appear." (Matthew 25:13)

And there is a God-given GLORY available to those who live in the anticipation of Christ's Return, the return we pray for every time we say the Lord's Prayer:

II. THE GLORY OF END-TIME LIVING

1. IMMINENCE : [The very same idea that puts off responsibility when viewed one way is that which keeps us digging when we realize we shall be called to account.]

Keeping short accounts. Paid up. Prayed up. And yet at the same time, fully engaged.

[Mary Hale is 93. She is going to die one of these days. She has been in the hospital several times in recent weeks, at the point of death, unable to get her breath, and Lorraine Crayton (her niece) has fully expected her to go.

But she bounces back. And "between times" she is ALIVE! She loves. She receives love. She does something meaningful. She is ready. When she dies WE will experience loss— but SHE will simply step on up!]

2. COMMUNITY : God's answer to ISOLATION.

The text says: (9) "Be hospitable to one another without complaint." Hospitality is a hallmark of a healthy church.

That In All Things God May Be Glorified

I know we think of hospitality as inviting one another over to our houses (like my son, Mark). And that is a commendable part of hospitality.

Henri Nouwen uses the term "hospitality" in a little different way which I believe is very applicable: making space within our hearts for other people. It is the willingness to actually bring people into our hearts, and care about them and their concerns.

Most of us have places in our homes where company would be "out of bounds." Brian and I laughed about those places, saying: "Don't go in the tool shed, there's a BEAR in there!" Places that are cluttered, or filled with things we cannot share.

But our inner lives can be ALL "BEAR-dens" where no one is allowed. And we must seek to live in COMMUNITY as we anticipate the Return of our Lord.

Being a part of the Church is NOT an option; it is the NORM. We denigrate the church to our own peril.

Being increasingly involved in community is the right and privilege of every believer. We need each other. We must live to enhance each other.

Not knowing when Jesus will come makes it all the more imperative that we have His Spirit, His mind. For THE MIND OF CHRIST, His Spirit within is the answer to ignorance, imbalance, intemperance.

We may be certain that the Second Coming will be at least as great a surprise as the First Advent was. There is only ONE way in which we can be prepared— one way we will be certain not to be deceived. We must know Jesus so well here and now that we will know Him when He returns!

Conclusion:

Is Jesus coming soon?

Sometimes I get to thinking that His return, AND SOON, is the only hope we have for any hope of fair and equitable society.

But He has waited now almost 2,000 years.

Some people were persuaded that last year was the year.

Some people are pretty certain that certain historical things need to unfold yet.

I don't know what "soon" is. When I was 20 I thought Jesus would come before I was ordained. Then I got busy preaching and working and raising sons. It wasn't very long ago that I began- and more than 30 years have gone by!

I have less time now to live than I have lived! I have less time to serve than I have served! I shall see Jesus soon, one way or another!

But Jesus IS going to return! We have that promise.

You have gifts. Use them to serve. Let God supply the strength. Seek to glorify God in all you do. And if Jesus doesn't come in your lifetime, it will be still a very, very short time until you are in His Presence.

#78(EH) When He Shall Come

[IF Jesus WERE to come soon— very soon— would you be comfortable in His Presence? You can do something about that NOW. Do you want to pray about it?]

He Ascended into Heaven

May 15, 1988

John 15:26-16:14

Introduction:

THIS IS "PRAYER MEETING SUNDAY"!

(Next Sunday is Pentecost- we make a lot of Christmas/Easter- less of Pentecost)

- The disciples were waiting for the "Promise."
- Three days into a ten-day prayer meeting.
- This Prayer Meeting was initiated by THE ASCENSION:

I. WHY DID JESUS EVER GO AWAY? WHY DIDN'T HE SIMPLY STAY?

A. The earthly work, passion & death, resurrection of Jesus are sacred and precious to us:

1. WE'RE GLAD JESUS CAME! Took our flesh! Identified with you and me.
2. WE'RE GRATEFUL JESUS DIED! In some mysterious yet real way "he took our sins and our sorrows . . . bore the burden to Calvary"
3. WE'RE GLAD JESUS ROSE AGAIN! The resurrection is the DYNAMO that powers the church!

But how many times do we say: I'M GLAD JESUS ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN?

B. WE CAN BE GLAD JESUS ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN!

1. BECAUSE THE SENDING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IS TIED DIRECTLY TO THE FACT THAT JESUS IS AT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE FATHER.

John 16:7: "But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the HELPER shall not come to you; but if I do go, I WILL SEND HIM TO YOU."

The Father gives the Spirit to those who ask in response to the PROMISE and the PRESENCE of the Son!

2. BECAUSE I AM REPRESENTED AT THE THRONE, AND PRAYED FOR WITH GENUINE SYMPATHY.

Hebrews 4:15 "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin."

I know that this planet is just a speck in space, and I am an insignificant atom lost in eternity— except that Jesus is at the center of all things, wherever that may be; and Jesus knows ME, and HE prays for ME! And HE is not lost in eternity— and so neither am I!

3. BECAUSE I WILL BE WELCOME IN HEAVEN AS LONG AS JESUS IS THERE.

John 14:3 "I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am there you may be also."

And also, as He prayed to the Father, Jesus said: John 17:24 "I will, Father, that they also whom Thou hast given me be with me, WHERE I AM!"

I am sometimes ill at ease in new places, especially when the company is made up of people who seem to know a great deal more than I do. But I may be sure that Jesus will make me 'at home' in heaven.

4. BECAUSE JESUS HAS PREPARED A PLACE FOR ME IN HEAVEN!

John 14:1,2 "In my Father's house are many mansions! I go to prepare a place for YOU, and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself, that WHERE I am, THERE you may be also."

The idea of PLACE has always been a strong appeal to me. I need ROOM. I need PLACE! And because Jesus is ascended into heaven, I shall have my PLACE, prepared by Him!

5. BECAUSE JESUS IS LORD AND KING, AND JESUS IS GOOD.

Matthew 28:18 "All authority is given unto Me in heaven and on earth."

The final Word must come from Jesus. Things SEEM out of hand. But I know and trust Jesus— and HE is Lord! Isn't that enough reason to say: "I am glad that Jesus has ascended into heaven?"

II. THE DISCIPLES TOOK JESUS LITERALLY AT HIS WORD

A. They went back to Jerusalem and started an open-ended prayer meeting. (It was TEN DAYS, but they didn't know that at the time.) They didn't know what to expect. They began in EXPECTATION and OBEDIENCE.

B. THE PROMISE CAME, AN EXPERIENCE IN EXACT ACCORD WITH JESUS' WORDS:

Their ACTIONS expressed a PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF HOPE!

1. The FACT of a living Church, the Body of Christ!
2. The certain knowledge that JESUS IS IN SESSION!
3. The 'theology of hope's central feature was: JESUS IS COMING BACK AGAIN! "The church's TIME is limited!"

So— where does THAT come to bear on the way WE Christians are supposed to live in May of 1988?

III. IT IS OUR PRIVILEGE TO ACTIVATE THESE SAME PROMISES!

A. The promises respond to EXPECTANCY (which is another word for living FAITH!)

Jesus said (Luke 24) "I send the Promise of the Father on YOU!" Peter (Acts 2:39) said: "The Promise is to you- and to those afar off ... EVEN AS MANY AS THE LORD SHALL CALL!"

B. AND OUR EXPECTANCY, OUR FAITH, IS ACTIVATED BY OBEDIENCE!

WE may expect the PROMISE, the PRESENCE, the POWER, the JOY- when we are ready to obey the directions Jesus gave WHEN HE ASCENDED:

1. WE are to TARRY until WE are filled. There is no set time limit now. But it is NOT just a matter of cut-and-dried incantation, formula. It is two persons (Person & person) coming to know and trust each other!
2. In tarrying we are to CONSECRATE. We need to die to SELFISHNESS, and come alive to Christ's Body, THE CHURCH!
3. If we tarry. we shall receive! The Spirit will give assurance! And THEN we are to continue in faith.

Conclusion:

What would happen if we observed "Prayer Meeting Sunday" faithfully? made it a part of OUR calendar as faithfully as we do our Christmas shopping? What would happen if we prepared for Pentecost the way we prepare for Christmas and the Easter Parade?

Is the fullness of the Holy Spirit- the Promise of Jesus-the Gift of the Father- a first priority in YOUR life this morning?

Prayer:

Let Your Promise Come to US in a new and vital way as we seek to obey YOU from our hearts. AMEN

#272 Breathe on Me

Aldersgate The Dawning of Revival

May 22, 1988 - Today is Pentecost Sunday - the 250th Anniversary of Wesley's Aldersgate-Street "heart warming" experience.

Romans 1:16,17 "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written: *'But the righteous man shall live by faith.'" (*Habakkuk 2:4)

Introduction:

There is nothing quite so predictable and at the same time unique as the rising of the sun. It came up at exactly 5:17 a.m. here in Boston today, although no one in Boston saw it because it is cloudy and raining. No one doubts it came up— for it is daylight. And not very many people cared about the exact time, although technically at 5:16 it had not yet risen, and at 5:18 the sunrise was history.

The rising of the sun was preceded by light, growing almost imperceptibly from total darkness to full gray daylight. The exact beginning of the light just before sunrise is almost impossible to trace with the naked eye, and varies with the atmosphere, and, in fact, with the latitude. In equatorial latitudes dawn and dusk are brief and darkness and light occur with surprising suddenness. In polar regions twilight lingers.

Sunrise, for the people called Methodists, and many others, including the holiness groups, dawned when one man of God discovered for himself that we could be saved and we could know it! John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed at 8:45 p.m., Wednesday, May 24, 1738. Let me tell you about the dawning of that sunrise, as I understand it, and of the clouds or fog that obscured some of the light in the dawning of that sunrise.

The story of Wesley's search for assurance is fascinating, and quite well documented:

He was born into a poor clergyman's home, and from an early age had the conviction that God had his hand on his life.

Cutting the story short, in 1725 he was ordained a priest in the Church of England. The Aldersgate experience marked a high point in his experience after 13 years of disciplined living in the priesthood:

There are some mis-perceptions about his up-bringing: He did have a godly mother— but with no teaching of assurance, for Susannah Wesley herself only came to know assurance September 3, 1739, more than a year after Aldersgate!

Certainly in his seeking after God and God's will Wesley held nothing back. He was in earnest— and if works would bring salvation and assurance, Wesley would have been saved over and over again.

But there came to the Wesley brothers the slow persuasion that salvation is by faith alone. They slowly began to know the relinquishing of the 'wealth' of acquired righteousness. On Whitsunday, May 21, 1738, Charles Wesley believed and was assured of his salvation. The following Wednesday John Wesley followed his younger brother. [Look with me at this experience of the assurance of salvation:]

I. THE EXPERIENCE OF SALVATION

GOD HONORS THE HUNGER AND THIRST FOR HIM THAT HE PLACES WITHIN US, BUT THERE IS A PLACE, ALSO, FOR US TO ATTEND TO THAT HUNGER

1. THE INNER PERSUASION: there was an instant of sun-rise (SON-rise!) Here are Wesley's own words:

5/24/1738 "In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate-Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And

an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

2. But this new assurance was NOT a simple, cloud-free sunrise; and it was NOT unchallenged, emotionally. I have read many, many accounts of Wesley's conversion. I do not recall any that go on with what immediately follows in his Journal. Here is the very next paragraph, on that same meeting in Aldersgate:

5/24/'38 "I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitely used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there, what I now first felt in my heart. But it was not long before the enemy suggested, 'This cannot be faith; for where is thy joy?' Then I was taught, that peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation: But that, as to the transports of joy that usually attend the beginning of it, especially in those who have mourned deeply, God sometimes giveth, sometimes withholdeth them, according to the counsels of his own will."

[Then, later that same day, after he had gone to his own home, he wrote:]

"After my return home, I was much buffeted with temptations; but cried out, and they fled away. They returned again and again. I as often lifted up my eyes, and He 'sent me help from his holy place.'

Then, the next day after the 'sunrise' come these words:

Thursday 5/25/1738 ".. the enemy injected a fear, 'If thou dost believe, why is there not a more sensible change?' I answered (yet not I,) 'That I know not. But this I know, I have 'now peace with God.' And I sin not today, and Jesus my Master has forbid me to take thought for the morrow. " 'But is not any sort of fear,' continued the tempter, 'a proof that thou dost not believe?' I desired my Master to answer for me; and opened his Book upon those words of St. Paul, 'Without were fightings, within were fears.' Then, inferred I, well may fears be within me; but I must go on and tread them under my feet.

And the next day:

Friday 5/26/1738 "My soul continued in peace, but yet in heaviness because of manifold temptations.

Sunday 5/28/1738 "I waked in peace, but not in joy."

Monday 5/29/1738 "I was often tempted to doubt."

Why am I telling you this, to discredit Wesley? Far, far from it! Wesley's usefulness to God and the kingdom are beyond question. But I am bringing this to your attention so that you can see that the greatest exponent of 'know-so salvation' came to his own assurance by way of doubts and struggles and extreme honesty, as well as by dint of single-minded desire to live for God and with God!

3. Wesley thus had both sympathy and advice for others; as well as the insistence that none be satisfied short of the witness of the Spirit;

Monday November 19, 1739 "I earnestly exhorted those who had believed, to beware of two opposite extremes, -the one, the thinking while they were in light and joy, that the work was ended, when it was just begun; the other, the thinking when they were in heaviness, that it was not begun, because they found it was not ended."

II. THE PRACTICE OF GODLY LIVING

GOD USES THE LIFE THAT HE INHABITS, BUT HE IS MORE CONCERNED WITH FAITHFULNESS THAN HE IS WITH THE 'BELLS AND WHISTLES' OF OUR EMOTIONS

1. God honors those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. John Wesley was a seeker!
2. Wesley was led as he obeyed . . . not by human programming, nor by deliberate design; although this did not keep Wesley from being as methodical and as well-disciplined as he knew how to be: a round-robin circuit of all Britain, year after year.
3. God begins to use JW in preaching out in the streets and fields, and a revival begins while preaching in a prison:

Thursday 4/26/1739 "While I was preaching at Newgate (a prison in Bristol), on these words, 'He that believeth hath everlasting life.' I was insensibly led, without any previous design, to declare strongly and explicitly, that God willeth 'all men to be' thus 'saved;' and to pray that, 'if this were not the truth of God, he would not suffer the blind to go out of the way; but if it were, he would bear witness to his word.' Immediately one, and another, and another sunk to the earth: They dropped on every side as thunderstruck. (A spiritual awakening was on at Newgate that reformed the prison!)

Sunday 5/13/1739 My ordinary employment, in public, was now as follows: Preaching an average of 22 times per week!

[Transition: But where does this Wesley study have to do with our world on this Pentecost Sunday in 1988 in 'post-Christian America?']

III. GOD IS NOT FRUSTRATED...

...WITH THE EVILS OF OUR AGE, BUT CAN IT BE THAT HE IS FRUSTRATED WITH THE LEVEL OF HUNGER AND THIRST AFTER HIM ON THE PART OF HIS PEOPLE?

1. Wesley's England was at least as barbarous as our own country today! There was rigid class discrimination; there was wide-spread brutality; there were debtors' prisons and capital punishment for minor offenses.
2. When he died Wesley had not conquered all ills— but God in John Wesley had made a difference!
3. AND WE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE! Jesus: Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled! Where, really, is our hunger? We, too, can make a difference in our world. We cannot all be John Wesley. But we can be saved and know it!

This way of living the Spirit-filled life— cannot be by dint of merit; we do not simply come to the place where we 'deserve' to be filled.

But it does not come to the casual seeker, either.

Conclusion: Has the Sun of righteousness risen in your life, to take the central place in everything you are and do? If we were as concerned to let Jesus Christ dominate us as Wesley was, do you think we could come to the assurance that our lives are truly His? Do you believe we could make a difference?

Malachi 4:1,2

"For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.

But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall."

Let's keep looking with FAITH for the rising of the Sun!

#190 - A Charge to Keep I Have

I Believe in the Life Everlasting

Trinity Sunday

May 29, 1988

John 3:1-15, 16

Nicodemus was the kind of man on which you can build institutions. He was an expert in control. He was a wise man, with the confidence of his peers. He understood political power, and he was used to taking charge and making decisions. In every way that could be measured, Nicodemus had his life 'together.'

But Nicodemus had some questions deep down in his heart, questions that would not go away. He had questions that he hardly knew how to put into words. This spiritual hunger was one area where Nicodemus was not in control. And finally he came to Jesus; he came with a strange mixture of confidence and fear, of certainty and deep uncertainty. Nicodemus planned to be in control of the situation— even in his seeking. He came to Jesus saying, "Rabbi, We know . . . "

Which is not necessarily the best way to approach a teacher, even though in this case Nicodemus was evidently intending to impress Jesus with his good intentions. The way to come to a teacher is to say, "We don't know. Teach us!" Still, Nicodemus showed a measure of confidence in Jesus.

But Nicodemus also came by night, and it is highly probable that the darkness covered Nicodemus' fear of being openly associated with the controversial Nazarene. Nicodemus was sure that he had the situation pretty well in hand.

But he never got his well-planned introduction finished. Jesus cut straight to the heart of the matter. Nicodemus wanted answers. But what he needed first was LIFE.

LIFE is God's specialty. Listen to the words of this reading:

[John 3:1-15, 16]

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

"But," said Nicodemus, "how can a man be born when he is old?"

Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You may hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from, or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

"You are a teacher of Israel," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

Life is God's specialty. And life is always on God's terms.

I. JESUS SPOKE TO NICODEMUS OF MYSTERIES

"The wind blows..."

- A. Ours is a faith of mysteries; but not of incredulity. As R.C. Sproul says, "FAITH IS MORE THAN REASON; IT IS NOT LESS THAN REASON!"

There is a great difference between magic and miracle; a great difference between myth and revealed truth. Jesus spoke of mysteries, and yet, Jesus did not come to "answer" all mysteries:

- B. We have the temptation to believe our faith consists of what we know, and what we can explain to each other [— which we do, in official and non-official ways.]
- C. Jesus told Nicodemus: There are some things that you simply cannot understand! "The wind blows— you know it is blowing— you can see what it is doing- but you cannot tell how it starts or where it is going!"
- D. But, Jesus went on, If there are things that you cannot understand, STILL YOU CAN KNOW SPIRITUAL REALITY— AND YOU CAN HAVE ETERNAL LIFE AND KNOW IT!
- E. (And so) Nicodemus asked the questions we all would ask; he speaks for us all: HOW CAN A MAN BE BORN WHEN HE IS OLD? HOW CAN THESE THINGS BE?

II. JESUS SPOKE OF KNOWING HIM, OF FAITH IN JESUS' WORD

- A. A. Jesus said: Believe what I tell you! "If I tell you of earthly things and ye believe not how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things?"
 - 1. DARE TO KNOW ME, AND BELIEVE ME! You can trust what I say even though you cannot fully understand it!
 - 2. JESUS SPOKE OF GOD'S LOVE THAT GIVES: Here is the greatest text in all the Bible! Given to a man looking for "answers!"

[The Golden Text of the Bible:] "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life." It is here that JESUS SPEAKS OF GOD AS A GOOD, LOVING FATHER.
 - 3. JESUS SPOKE TO NICODEMUS OF FAITH AS THE WAY TO LIFE ETERNAL:
 - Faith and not "knowing all the answers!"
 - Faith and not earning our way by good works, like the good Pharisee that Nicodemus was.

- Faith that has to leave the control to God, and let HIM be Savior!

Later Paul refined this idea of personal faith, and put it into almost 'creedal language:' "If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and if you believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved!" Romans 10:9,10]

- B. Nicodemus found that his need to control, and getting Word from God are not compatible. Jesus spoke to him about the fact that answers come to faith and to obedience. But Nicodemus listened! He heard what Jesus was saying. His conversion may not have been like the text-book we write would say it should be. But this man became a follower of Jesus. He gave over control to God in Christ.

[Conclusion:]

III. JESUS WILL SPEAK TO US, TOO!

- A. [On this Trinity Sunday,] like Nicodemus we have questions deep within us that we can hardly put into words.
1. They may be ETERNAL, WORLD-CLASS QUESTIONS such as:
 - What is the Trinity?
 - How can God DIE for ME?
 - Why is the BIBLE God's Holy Word?
 2. THEY MAY BE VERY PERSONAL QUESTIONS, LIKE:
 - After I have prepared for this, how come God has sent me that?
 - Why does a good person suffer with cancer and a drug pusher and pimp enjoys good health and drives a Mercedes?
 3. THE UNCERTAINTIES OF LIFE FAR OUTWEIGH THOSE THINGS WE FEEL ARE SAFELY UNDER CONTROL.

And so we come to the Master with our mixed up feelings of confidence and hesitation, we know Jesus is God and He is good—

but we wouldn't think of stepping out to a public altar, for after all, we have our reputations to consider.

So like Nicodemus we begin our earnest prayers saying: "Lord, We realize this.. and we know that..." How often we use those words in prayer. It must be comforting to Jesus when He sees how much we know!

"Lord, this is exactly what You need to do for me!"

We do need to listen to what we say when we are praying!

- B. The place to begin, in our search for answers, is in this question of control: that hunger, that question deep within that will not go away, IS REALLY OUR HEART'S CRY AFTER THE REALITY OF GOD!

And if we will simply come to Jesus, on His terms, He will speak to about LIFE just as He did to Nicodemus!

Prayer: Lord, Have control of our lives . . . and don't let us settle for anything less than real LIFE in You. Amen.

Hereby We Know

June 5, 1988

I John 3:13-24

HEREBY WE KNOW..."

Introduction: If all goes as planned, on Wednesday, June 8, 1988, just before 9:00 p.m., Helen and I will board British Airways Flight #214 and sit back confidently expecting to arrive in London at 8 a.m. that next Thursday morning, after the shortest night you can imagine. It is amazing what we don't know, and will never know about Flight #214, if we are privileged to go. We won't know until we see the aircraft whether it is to be a 747 or an L-1011. We won't ever know anything about the pilot except his name, which we will forget. We won't know how the cockpit controls work, or what radar and vectors and ground controllers will be doing while we are airborne.

What we do know is (1) when the flight is leaving and from where; (2) where it is heading for; and (3) we will know that we have our tickets— and (4) finally— we'll make sure we actually get on board.

The rest is a matter of faith.

It is quite a bit like that on the most important journey that we shall ever take; or, more correctly— the journey into life and eternity that we are all making right now!

There are a lot of things we DON'T know, and can never understand. But on such an important journey there are SOME things of which we must be very SURE! The Bible tells us that we can have eternal life; and what is more, the Bible tells us that we can KNOW we are alive, spiritually!

I John is a little book that is big on this matter of knowing about eternal matters. John wants us to be sure about the important things that have to do with life and death and eternity.

Would you like to know HOW you can find CERTAINTY in these vital matters?

I. CERTAINTY COMES BY WAY OF GOD'S REVELATION,

[and not by other sources of knowledge.]

(2:3) And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.")

"KNOWING," in matters of eternal life, is always connected to the Word of God.

- A. We can NOT look to non-Christian sources for advice on facing life and death. And as a matter of fact, there will always be some form of conflict with the 'wisdom of the world.' (verse 3:13 " Don't be surprised if the world hates you!") One would think that when a person comes to Christ everyone would rejoice. In actual fact there is always some kind of conflict! It is almost a 'witness' in itself! It is NOT by the approval and acceptance of the world that we are affirmed in our faith.

[In Marks' gospel there is the story of the man who had a whole region terrorized— and Jesus came along and cast a legion of devils out of him, and it ruined a herd of pigs; and when the people came out of the town and saw this man who had been naked and raving mad and fearsome sitting quietly, clothed and in his right mind and listening to Jesus teach, they said to Jesus: please leave us! What a reaction!]

- B. This does not mean that everything that is not revealed in the Bible is untruth; it does not mean that Christians should only study and believe sacred facts and figures. Many things pertaining to life and living are true whether the 'believer' in them is Christian, Jew, Mohammedan or pagan.

- C. But ETERNAL LIFE COMES FROM ONLY ONE SOURCE. That Source is GOD.

And God has revealed His LIFE in His Son, Jesus Christ, the Living Word, through His gift of revelation to us that we call the Bible, the Written Word. As we read the Holy Spirit helps us understand and believe. And as we are persuaded, and as we agree in will, and in spirit, and in beginning the necessary steps, we have the assurance that we have passed from death to life— we are on our way to heaven!

So, CERTAINTY BEGINS WITH THE BIBLE. God said it! I accept it! I believe it! I choose to go with God! That settles it! I KNOW because of God's WORD! [But that is only ONE witness, and there are more!]

II. CERTAINTY OF SPIRITUAL LIFE IS REINFORCED BY OUR OWN KINDLING LOVE.

We become aware that something real, and personal, is happening within our own being! (3:14 We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren.) The LIFE which we receive in Jesus Christ is NOT received in a vacuum. It is not received in isolation.

It is always received in a relationship; a relationship to God as Father, and a relationship to all God's children as FAMILY.

The Roman Catholics have a saying: 'He who has God for his Father has the Church for his mother.' And the only thing about that saying is—it is pretty much TRUE! The LIFE we receive will manifest itself by hunger and thirst, spiritually. But also it will immediately manifest itself by a sense of family! We are BORN into God's family, the church! One of the strong proofs of spiritual life is this fact that the Church of Jesus Christ increasingly becomes our family! How do you describe being part of a "family?" What does it mean? ?

In a good family there will be a strong sense of BELONGING. That belonging is one of the strongest ties known to man! In every family there are shared values. There is an almost 'mystical' BELIEVING.

"This is what our family values! This is our family creed! This is what we believe!"

And in a good, strong family there are challenges to GREATNESS or SIGNIFICANCE of some kind that is important to that family. There is a family "BECOMING!" This is what our family counts as important! This is what OUR family achieves!

"Goals" and "achievements" seem to run in families. Somehow, this is where goals are fulfilled- great and noble goals- or unspoken and unworthy goals of pleasure,

laziness, or worse. And here John tells us that a critical (if not the critical) sign of spiritual life is this family bonding. We care for each other!

III. CERTAINTY, FINALLY, IS A MATTER OF DIRECT WITNESS

3:24 And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us.

4:13 Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of His Spirit. There is a gentle persuasion that comes directly from God.

- A. I hesitate to preach "experience" as a "norm" because people get "set up" for a certain blessing or kind of "feeling." And this is usually sincerely misrepresented (as Wesley's "heart warming experience" at Aldersgate is preached without the many, many journal entries afterward that tell about his doubts and questions and his fighting through to assurance by using the Word and by prayer.)
- B. But all the same, there is this direct witness of the Holy Spirit!

It completes the assurance, and there is no substitute for it! And it is a witness that is promised to us all. I am not sure that we should "seek" this witness— but I am sure that we should not be satisfied until and unless we have the assurance of the Holy Spirit Himself!

Conclusion: (Summary)

I don't know where you are planning to go this summer— and perhaps that isn't all that important. But what about that other journey?

Isn't it a wonderful thing that we can know what we need to know about where we are in eternal matters?

There are a lot of things we will never really know or understand: HOW salvation works! WHY Jesus should come and love us and die for us!

But we can know what is really necessary! God has given us witnesses that we are passed from death to life.

We have the threefold witness God makes available, of revelation, of belonging, of consciousness of His Presence. Or, put another way:

1. THE WITNESS OF THE WRITTEN WORD.

I can read and understand. I can agree with the Word, and believe that God is faithful and just, as I 'follow directions.'

2. THE WITNESS OF MY OWN SPIRIT.

I have responded in faith! I come to the place where I know there is nothing 'held back.' There is literally no more which I can do. I find rest in that place. It is 'believing ground.'

3. THE DIRECT WITNESS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. IT IS, FINALLY, A PERSON TO PERSON ASSURANCE!

(3:24 "And hereby we know that he abideth in us, by the Spirit which he hath given us.")

Every Christian is entitled to this certainty! It is remarkable what we don't know, and don't NEED to know - and how our entire life IS lived in partial understanding. But the most important things— the things which have to do with real LIFE and death and eternity— need not be left to chance. LET US PRAY: Thank You for certainty and assurance! Amen

449 I Know Whom I Have Believed

Finding the Real Me

June 19, 1988

... that ye bear much fruit ... " John 15:1-8

Introduction:

These are words to live by. We would do well to make them "life verses." God cares about each of us: He desires our very best! Christ's commands are also His promises.

I. GOD HAS A 'MAXIMUM FULFILLMENT' FOR EACH OF HIS CHILDREN

- A. We often hear "God has a plan for your life." Just the right address. Just the right position in just the right firm. Just the right spouse. It sounds almost mechanical. And the way we interpret it, it can be very "me centered!"

Can we believe that God DOES have a plan just for YOU?

- B. Certainly God DOES know you and care about you, and DOES desire the very best for you. (Text:) EVERY branch is to bear fruit OR be taken away! and every branch is to be subject to pruning so that it may bring forth MORE fruit. I believe the answer is "Yes." There is absolutely NOTHING which can frustrate God's purpose for your life, if indeed you will agree with the Father's will.

- C. But it may be significant to see the difference between a great "destiny" for yourself, and a great "calling" to follow Jesus! We cannot make ourselves the focus of greatness!

"We're number 1!!" There can only be ONE "Number 1!"

II. DISCOVERING GOD'S DESIGN FOR YOUR LIFE

- A. The problem is to dare to really go after God's best! Most of us cannot think about ambition except in terms of what we think WE want. How may we be consumed with seeking after God's best, and not be

utterly selfish about it?

- B. The key word is "CONTROL!" Who shall have control? WHAT we do is important! But what is "driving" us?

WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO IS ALL IMPORTANT! It is all-important that Jesus Christ be the focus of our living, and of our ambition. "I am the Vine!" "Without ME you can (really) do nothing!" As long as we retain the last word of control— as long as our desires are for OUR success, then we frustrate the BEST!

It is paradoxical, but the most self-fulfilling thing we can do is renounce control in favor of God's BEST! And then all heaven's resources are available to see that God's "maximum fulfillment" for your life is actualized!

- C. The pathway to God's "best" is deceptively simple:

1. **"ABIDE"** ... 15:5(b) "Without Me you can do nothing" This is to be a permanent relationship. Forever we are to be "at home" in Jesus; and He in us. We are not the source of vitality; not our great ideas and energies— HIS!
2. **"TREASURE"** 15:7 "If ye abide in Me AND MY WORDS ABIDE IN YOU ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done." Psalm 119:11 Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against Thee.

The best treasure, in the best hiding place, for the best reason!

We cannot expect personal fulfillment apart from coming under the good authority of God's Word.

3. **"ASK"** 15:7 - the 'other half' of the above verse; we can then use the Word in our praying. There is no power in prayer like praying in the Spirit using God's own promises! It becomes as natural as breath and breathing.
4. **"PRAISE"** 15:8 "Herein is the Father glorified!" We must not forget, and become enamored with our success in prayer; it is NOT "our" success— and thanksgiving keeps us pure and joyful!

5. **"BEAR! DO! ACCOMPLISH! 15:8 "That ye bear much fruit!"**

"MUCH Fruit!" It is the inescapable by-product of abiding,
treasuring, asking, and seeking to lift up the Name of God!

Conclusion:

These are words to live by! LET AMBITION BE UNSHACKLED! Pray BIG!
Think BIG! Only do it in order!

Perhaps the problem with our ambition is not that it is too big— but
that it is too small! In his devotional classic Robert Benson quotes
Letters to Scattered Pilgrims, by Elizabeth O'Conner:

"If we are each obedient to our visions the cities would have green
spaces, birds in their trees, and architecture to quicken the
awareness of the divine life throbbing in the whole of the
world. And the towns? the towns would have galleries to hold the
works of their artists; theaters for the performing arts would
spring up in their squares; scientists and poets would confer with
each other; students would gather for debate and reflection,
children would want to continue in life, and church congregations
everywhere would be struggling 'to make serious use of the wings
the creator had given.' Everyone would know what it meant to be
the servant of the Most High."

1. I believe GOD'S VISION works on the most practical levels:

Tithing... Making God a partner... in our janitor business... in our
fishing... golfing... in our money matters— nothing is too small or
too large to share with God.

2. But GOD'S VISION is deeper than that, deeper than just a temporary
benefit for a single individual. When we seek to abide, and to
treasure, and to ask so that we may praise we will find that we are
becoming giants in the faith! BUT BEST OF ALL- WE WILL BE A PART OF
THE BEAUTY OF OUR GOD!

Finding the Real Me

3. Why do we do what we do? AT WORK? in the church? So much of what we do is for our own convenience, and is limited to what is obviously profitable.

DO WE DARE GO AFTER GOD'S BEST?

#63(EH) *Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me*

The Basic Elements of Faith

What is a Christian?

June 19, 1988 PM

2 Corinthians 5:16-17

Intro: There are hundreds of religions in our world today; many of them followed after by people who are undoubtedly as sincere as we Christians.

What distinguishes Christian faith from other ways? Simply to say, "It is so because it is so" may satisfy some people. But it doesn't satisfy me. What is the living difference? How do we know that we serve the same God that answered the prayer of Elijah by fire?

Here in 2 Corinthians 5 are some aspects of the Christian faith which I believe are unique to Christianity. Each of these aspects of our faith is introduced by the word "therefore" in the New American Standard Version (in the King James Version the last "therefore" is a "now then."):

I. SAVING FAITH BEGINS WITH A CONFIDENCE THAT IS BASED ON THE RESURRECTION

(verse 6) "Therefore WE ARE ALWAYS CONFIDENT, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord."

Verses 4:14 ("knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus...") and 5:1 ("For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.") are the antecedents of this first 'therefore.'

Christ's resurrection was absolutely the thing that drove the early church. There was a literal confidence that

(1) Jesus rose bodily from the dead; and that (2) Jesus' followers would have eternal life with Him.

Every time another man or woman of faith dies there is a testimony to this confidence. We sorrow; but not as those who do not have this confidence.

II. THIS CONFIDENCE GROWS INTO CONVICTION THAT BEGETS CONVICTION

(11) "Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men

... Verse 5:10 ("We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.") is the antecedent to this 'therefore.'

Our faith is not an arrogant know-it-all attitude on every subject; such a bellicose attitude will turn genuine seekers off.

But we come to the certainty that (2) we shall stand before Christ. His laws are understandable, and they have never been repealed. We shall give an account to Him, of how we have responded to His laws.

And if we really believe that, we shall have a conviction that makes our sharing of the gospel persuasive.

True evangelicals are growing in every way because they really believe that they are accountable to God.

III. CONVICTION LEADS TO CONVERSION THAT REJECTS THE COUNTERFEIT

(17) "Therefore if any man be in Christ he is a new creation!" 5:14 ("For the love of Christ constrains us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died;") is the antecedent. The love of God controls us. Christ died for US!

The standard for conversion, the norm, is (v 17) a new creation. God indwelling human personality by a supernatural work, a miracle of grace (justification/ regeneration/ adoption).

The temptation is to judge strictly by what we see; we want "success" by the accepted standards of the day and culture. Paul tells us: we don't know anyone spiritually this way; even if we knew Jesus Christ (only) in the flesh it "wouldn't count."

We have the privilege of knowing Jesus Christ in just as personal and as intimate a way as the disciples did on the road to Emmaus!

IV. OUR FAITH BRINGS US A COMMISSION THAT BRINGS DIGNITY AND WORTH

(20)"Now then WE ARE AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST" Verse 18 ("Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation ...") is the antecedent: God has given us all these things; He has called us to be ambassadors!"

Our worth is established by His love for us; before we do anything we are precious in His sight. He loves us. We are ambassadors! Important! But, remember, we are called to be servants; to be like our Master in spirit.

Conclusion:

- A. These, then, are the vital elements, or parts of our faith: God grants us confidence, and conviction; as we respond there comes conversion and commission.
- B. Faith is COMPLEX! Faith has a way of growing and developing and changing for the better as we walk along. It never gets easier, and never gets monotonous, if we keep up the daily walk with Jesus.

[But look at faith with me in another way as we come to the close of another Lord's Day:]

- C. FAITH IS VERY SIMPLE!

It is either saying "YES" or saying "NO" to Jesus!

Where are you just now with Jesus?

Where are you in your actions? [Anything that you are doing a source of irritation? ... of condemnation? ... of excessive rationalization?

Where are you in your attitudes? Are you forgiven? Are you forgiving?

- D. Salvation is not a matter of a coherent, cohesive "plan;" (it may well be that) ... but salvation first of all is a One-on-one relationship of love and trust with Jesus Christ! It is hearing HIM say: "Leave your way, and come, follow Me!"

The Basic Elements of Faith

#332 Follow, I Will Follow Thee

How the New testament Church Grew

June 26, 1988 PM

Acts 4:33 "And with great power the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all."

Intro:

This, of course, was prepared mainly for 'my own people' to let them know what I am thinking about this summer (1988) regarding church growth.

1. We plan to launch a fairly aggressive PR campaign in cable TV, local radio, newspapers— to let people in the area know what kind of fellowship is here.
2. What kind of fellowship IS here? If you could say something regarding your church to all the people in your area, what would that one thing be?
3. I'm convinced that this is the best church I know anything about. It has faults. But I don't want to magnify them. I want to talk to people about the love and the support and the HEALING OF SPIRIT that goes on here.
4. A church is like a home: the real success or failure of a family is connected with the everyday spirit of the home— taking time to love and to express love.
5. The greatest gift a man can give his children is to love his wife! THE GREATEST 'SELLING JOB' WE CAN DO FOR OUR CHILDREN REGARDING THE CHURCH IS TO EXPRESS OUR LOVE FOR THE CHURCH!
6. Be a committee of one to pray about SEEKING and SAVING the lost! You don't even have to wait until the fall!

[But now to the message at hand:]

"Acts" is a textbook on church growth. The conventional thing is to say: "We want a church like the early church!" I'm not sure we would want to face the same ratio of impossibilities.

But one thing is for certain, the growth of the early church was co-existent with great problems and trouble. There was almost universal opposition from authority both

religious and civil. There was disagreement and strife and even failure within the ranks of the believers. And yet our text says that they had great grace and they had great power! This particular incident came after there was a great stir that began with the healing of the lame man (Acts 3) and there are some very significant statements which lead up to our text:

I. (v 12) THE DISCIPLES WERE LOVINGLY INTOLERANT

- A. "Intolerance" is not the same as "schism." How can we speak of the virtues of "intolerance?" Aren't we supposed to see all Christians as brothers; and aren't we supposed to have a genuinely ecumenical spirit when we follow Jesus?

Certainly we need more understanding— more reaching out to all Christians everywhere. The church of Jesus Christ is bigger than we may understand or appreciate. We need to get along with other Christians who may have faults. God knows that we may have a fault or two, as well!

- B. "Intolerance" is aimed only at central issues; and the first issue of all is: WHO IS JESUS CHRIST? and— WHO IS JESUS CHRIST TO YOU? We cannot simply co-exist peacefully with those who deny the deity and Lordship of Jesus Christ- and expect great grace and power!

- C. Jesus will not surrender His authority— nor will He share the loyalty of His servants.

[I watched a feature story on the revival of miracle plays in the streets of York, England; the man playing Jesus was an Indian national, and a Buddhist, who affirmed on camera again the theme that Jesus was good— he is one way to God among many. But Jesus was NOT "good, and one way among many to God." Jesus is HOLY, Jesus is God, and the ONLY way to God, or else Jesus is a liar and fraud.]

- D. We must raise the level of our alertness/awareness to doctrinal truth. We must be lovingly TOLERANT of disagreement WITHIN the family of faith. Some may insist on speaking in tongues: we can lovingly disagree; some may insist "once-in-grace-always-in-grace" and we can argue within the family; some may even pray to Mary, and we scripturally disagree. We don't have to agree on all points— but we can pray for each other, But there

can be NO compromise in the matter of authority and Lordship: THERE IS NO OTHER NAME! NO OTHER WAY!

II. (v 20) THEY WERE OBEDIENTLY INSISTENT

- A. They not only believed (intellectually), but they were determined to be obedient. Acting on what they believed to be God's truth. The experience, the reality was there. In "new" churches like our own the tendency is:

Generation ONE: fervency and reality; Generation TWO: maintenance and tolerance; Generation THREE: convenience and simply "fitting Jesus in" wherever we are not called on to sacrifice.

At whatever cost, we must press into the reality of knowing God in Christ!

- B. What was God's will for these men (Peter and John)? Long before they had met Jesus personally. They had heard Him say to them:

1. "Follow ME ... and I will make you ..."

And they had begun to follow; they had found a new way of life: living by God's LOVE. They had seen Jesus live and die and were convinced that He had conquered sin and death and hell. They were determined to FOLLOW JESUS AT ANY COST!

They had also heard Jesus say, before He ascended to heaven:

2. "Tarry ye .. until you are clothed with power ... to witness to Me"

And they had experienced the birth of the church in it glorious fellowship and worship.

- C. These disciples had been true to their own personal experience.

1. We cannot "share" what we don't have. A faith that doesn't pay its honest debts ... that doesn't get along with its neighbors ... that can't keep a civil tongue in its head ... is hardly advertisement for Jesus and His LIFE.
2. But if Jesus is meeting your needs - and if you are a growing Christian - then you need to SHARE Him — and there are people that NEED what you have found!

III. (v 23) THESE CHRISTIANS KNEW THE VALUE OF SHARING PRAYER REQUESTS

When threatened (they were human! they were frightened! so) they hurried back to the CHURCH and TOGETHER they prayed through to new reality, and new infilling and power.

IV. (v 32) THEY WERE UNITEDLY UNSELFISH

- A. Their exact METHOD is not what we should copy; but we need to re-discover their SPIRIT.
- B. How may we be UNSELFISH in any practical sense?:
 - 1. God does not demand the UNreasonable. But each of us HAS that which is valuable to contribute; and it is the greatest pleasure to GIVE!
 - 2. HOSPITALITY; KINDNESS TO EACH OTHER is a grace. In the HOME— (as we have already said!) — THE GREATEST GIFT WE CAN GIVE OUR CHILDREN IS TO LOVE EACH OTHER. We WILL disagree — but we can be Christians in working out and talking out our disagreements.

What has this to do with REVIVAL and the CHURCH? It is so obvious— we cannot see it: In the CHURCH — the greatest tool for power and witness is to love each other!

Our own children are lost to the church at an amazing rate, and one wonders if it is not because we have aired our criticisms more than our love! I am not complaining now about personal problems, but there is a general truth here: people who find fault and criticize wake up to realize they have cut their children's faith out from under them! What is GOOD about our fellowship?

This "love-one-another" power carries through in evangelism, too. People may come to God because they want different things; but they STAY with the church because they find LOVE AND UNDERSTANDING AND A PLACE TO BELONG!

If I really believe that our church (with all its faults) is the best church I know anything about, how do I express that to those I meet? As I try to bring people to Jesus, do I tell them how I see Jesus in YOUR faces? Do I tell them how when I have

faced difficult times Jesus has sustained me because of YOUR love? What do you think might happen if we were able to communicate what we really believe about Jesus Christ and His church— and OUR church in particular?

Conclusion:

(In Wollaston)

We don't have the contagious enthusiasm of a risky, brand-new situation. (And you are like that, too!) There is something exciting about a storefront. There is a thrill in having just a few and seeing that few grow.

But we do have the thrilling reality of a middle-sized church that is pushing forward in several vital areas, and that wants to mind God in being a force for revival and renewal in this unique place! (You have what this world desperately needs!) If we will love one another and mind God, then Jesus will build His church!

#311 I Love Thy CHURCH, O God!

Enrichment through Release

August 14, 1988 AM

Philippians 4:10-13,18-19; 2:3-11

We spoke last week about the peace of God. But perhaps even more attractive than peace is that quality of life we call "fulfillment." In this wonderful book, Paul tells us about how he has found this quality of living.

I. THE VIBRANT QUALITY OF LIFE IN CHRIST

1. There is more to life than mere existence. Beyond "peace" is spiritual 'vitality,' that which makes life 'sparkle.' Call it 'fulfilled living,' or 'life with purpose,' vitality is a "plus" way of living.

Granted there is no real life that does not have battles and loneliness and even temptation to boredom. And yet there is a way of living that can only be termed "spiritually vital."
2. Much of our energy is devoted to discovering of what that "plus kind of living" really consists. Advertising tells us "Go for the GUSTO!" "YOU deserve a break!" And as John Piper has said in his book, *Desiring God*, the thing that is wrong in seeking fulfillment and pleasure is not that we want it— but that WE SETTLE FOR LESSER PLEASURES AND SATISFACTIONS THAN WE ARE MADE TO ENJOY! We are never satisfied with less than GOD!
3. As our world "expands" our idea of what constitutes real "living" also expands, and we discard old goals and dreams for bigger ones: - one time a bottle of orange "pop" would satisfy me - then I dreamed of scoring a winning home run in front of my best girl - then came dreams of a cottage and picket fence ... and there is nothing wrong with any of these! - now my generation wants security and professional respect and community recognition — and, once again- there is nothing wrong with these ...
4. But Paul claims to have found something infinitely more satisfying! He claims to have found "success" and "fulfillment."

- a. He does not hesitate to use himself as an example (3:17 Be followers of me! DO as I do! and 4:9 The things you have learned and seen in me, DO!)
- b. His testimony is: "I am content wherever I am!" (4:11) and CONFIDENCE: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me!" (4:13)
- c. And he says: This is for YOU, too! (4:19:) "My God shall supply ALL YOUR NEEDS!"
- d. All this while Paul is in prison!

Is he deluded? Or is he really fulfilled, self-confident, really spiritually vital and alive?

Well, Paul accomplished more, perhaps, than any other human being except his Master. And as to memorials—there are churches all over the world dedicated to him- how about St. Paul's in London?

II. PAUL'S PRESCRIPTION FOR SPIRITUAL VITALITY: FOCUSED LIVING

1. The world's motto for vital and powerful living is simple: "Take life by the throat! Go for it!" And there is more than a pinch of wisdom in that idea, for nothing in life is ever won without effort and enthusiasm. But all too often this "seizing of life" is interpreted purely selfishly. And this is where Christians have to be prepared to radically part company with the world and its wisdom.
2. The formula Paul has for us is deceptively SIMPLE. But "simple" does not mean either "cheap" or "easy." There is NO cost involved, for it is a free gift of God's grace; and yet it costs us everything we have!

So what is Paul's prescription for real "success"? PAUL FOCUSES HIS LIFE ON A SINGLE, ATTAINABLE GOAL: (3:13 "But ONE thing I do: I press on toward the goal!")

- a. All other goals must become secondary! Paul doesn't say everything else is wrong— that we should not be striving for excellence in business, education, arts, science. But he does say that every other purpose in life must submit to the master purpose!

This is where "Enrichment" through "Release" makes sense: We can release "keeping up" as a life goal— we don't have to do like

others ... and we can release "personal rights" as Jesus did, for the privilege of giving! We can even release our reputation (as important as that is!) when it conflicts with character (what people think as opposed to what God KNOWS!)

- b. Success is knowing what we are made for, knowing our purpose, and doing it! Success can never (finally) be measured in money! Success can never (finally) be measured purely in Numbers or Statistics.
- c. THIS MASTER GOAL is knowing Jesus and walking in fellowship with Him. Too simple? Simplistic? More about this later in this series, but for now these questions:
- d. HOW DO WE MAKE THIS GOAL SUPREME?
 - DELIBERATELY! We deliberately choose a Master Goal. We cannot simply "let life happen." We seek God, His Presence, His Guidance, His purpose. This is an unfolding, wonderful thing!
 - CONSISTENTLY! We constantly re-affirm this in our prayers and in our waking moments: "Lord, I want YOUR will, regardless of how I feel, or what I think I want or need ... !"
 - LEARNING & GROWING! We learn to look to Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-3) the AUTHOR and the FINISHER of our faith! [WHICH BRINGS US TO THE HEART OF THIS MESSAGE:]
 - Text: "LET THIS MIND BE IN YOU WHICH WAS ALSO IN CHRIST JESUS!" What was/is the 'mind of Jesus?'
Perhaps this is not possible to discuss in a few minutes at the end of a sermon; properly it is a life-study. But let me TRY to summarize:

i. JESUS DID NOT GRASP, HE SOUGHT TO GIVE

What was His by right He did not cling to; this is not to say He did not love life, or that He "enjoyed" pain ("O My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me!"); but still He loved the Father more than He loved the good things He could SEE; His faith told Him that fulfillment was along the lines of SURRENDER TO GOD'S GOOD WILL.

ii. JESUS DID NOT SHRINK FROM THE SERVANT-ROLE

iii. JESUS WAS OBEDIENT TO THE FATHER'S REVEALED WILL

CONCLUSION:

In practical terms, how can we move toward this spiritual vitality?

1. KNOW THAT FULFILLMENT IS POSSIBLE!

BUT YOU MUST MAKE A DELIBERATE DECISION! YOU can be spiritually VITAL. It is not just for a few chosen ones! You don't have to become a monk, or go out of this real world— in fact our Master has commanded us to stay in this world of computers and rocket weapons and be salt and light! But YOU have to be selective! You have to RELEASE secondary goals: (1) disciplines and (2) great things and (3) power or glory for myself.

2. KNOW THAT THIS IS A HIGH CALLING! RE-INFORCE YOUR SELF-WORTH IN JESUS CHRIST!

To be deeply spiritual does NOT mean to accept second-class status; we are to have Christ's mind! We are NOT to be obscurantists! We are NOT to ignore facts! But Jesus is the Lord of TRUTH! He is not second class! And our source of self-worth is in God! And our source of vitality is in Him!

Look again at Paul's statements of confidence: "I can do all things ..." and "My God will supply all your needs ..." PAUL ENCOURAGES US, HIS LOVED ONES!**** Give your loved ones permission to win! Tell them they are precious!

A recent PBS documentary about children who failed revealed the fact that they were verbally abused by their parents! "I hate you! I wish I'd never had you! You'll never accomplish anything!"

"YOU can do anything you want!" versus "You'll never amount to anything!"

VERBALIZE SELF-WORTH to yourself and to others. But even with yourself: don't "put down God's child!" NEVER say "What a dummy!" It may be all right to say: "That wasn't very smart!" Or, "A stupid thing to do!" But don't talk to yourself.

3. EVERY OBEDIENT CHRISTIAN IS A FULFILLED CHRISTIAN

- a. The only way to contentment and to confidence and to fulfillment is the mind of Christ! A fulfilled person is a rich person, whatever other people may think.
- b. "Success" has a dimension that can only be understood by God, too. James the brother of John was killed with the sword. Paul reached the ends of the earth. Which was more successful? God knows.
- c. Jesus was the most successful person who ever lived. "It is finished!" Jesus made a way to get sinful man and holy God together— a way for us all to reach the un-reachable. Jesus was a builder of bridges.

Paul exalts in Christ's success; he sees Jesus highly exalted! Paul grasps the spirit of success: it is yielding to the Father's will!

Epilogue: The world's success is found in GRASPING. The success that enriches life is found in YIELDING. And so Paul says, "If you want to know spiritual vitality! If you want to know what made me the world-shaker I am: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus ..."

Power Through Focus

August 21 1988 AM

Philippians 3:7-11 "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection ... 3:13 "Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ."

Paul's goal was not centered in power. But you have to believe that power was attractive to Paul. And Paul was conscious of the need of power. And in Paul's central purpose, aim, goal in life, power was there!

And Paul would say to us that God can and will see to it that the greatest power in the universe is available to us. Real power! Power for doing the greatest task possible to humankind!

I. POWER TO CHANGE THE LIFE OF THE BELIEVER/SEEKER

"... if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection from the dead!" Paul wanted to share the full quality of eternal life with Jesus Christ!

- A. Paul experienced this power: When he was struck down on the Damascus Road, Paul reported that Jesus said to him: (Acts 26:18 "I am sending you to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light; that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in Me.") And we may be certain: Paul's mission was also Paul's testimony.
- B. There still is no better summary of how God's power begins to work in the life of faith than this Paul spoke to Agrippa that day. God's power does this:
 - 1. This power is the only force that can open blinded eyes to the reality of sin, to the deadliness of sin, to the realities of heaven, and hell, and eternity. Without this power such things are foolishness.

2. This power is the only force on earth that brings spiritual LIGHT. It enables us not only to see, spiritually, but it gives us spiritual direction. [Like Christian in Pilgrim's Progress, seeing, following, finding the "Light."]
 3. As we walk in this light, the power is the only force that can assure us of being RELEASED from Satan's power! It breaks the slave-holder's grip. It sets the prisoner of sin free!
 4. And this power not only lets us walk away from the power of sin— it makes us righteous in God's sight! It is the ONLY genuine way to be absolutely free from the GUILT OF SINS!
 5. And, finally: this power brings us into a 'FAMILY RELATIONSHIP' with God! We receive inheritance among the holy ones! We have the privilege of belong to God's great family!
- C. There is no other power that can take selfish, enslaved sinners, and make them loving, kind, Christ-like followers of Jesus. THAT is real power! [But that is not ALL that there is to this power Paul wanted to know. Christians do not simply live for themselves!]

II. THIS IS POWER TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THIS PRESENT WORLD

- A. Paul had always been interested in power. He had been an activist before he became a Christian. He, Paul, was going to set the world straight!
- B. And after Paul was convinced, convicted, converted— he still was interested in changing his world! But now Paul was willing to do it on God's terms.

[Our teens came back from D.C. two weeks ago saying: "Let's go M.A.D.!" Go and Make A Difference! And they CAN! But it takes real POWER to M.A.D.!!]

- C. And make no mistake— spiritual power is REAL POWER! It is greater than the obvious things like bulldozers and rocket boosters and number crunchers ... powerful as they really are!

Spiritual power lies in the spirit that lies behind the WORDS, or behind the ACTIONS, or even just behind the PRESENCE !

Not all spiritual power and force are for good: For example WORDS can cut both ways!

A selfish or evil spirit can give words power to warp a life for years!

[How careful we need to be with the WORDS we say in the four walls of our homes! What tremendous influence WORDS have on those we love!]

- D. The SPIRITUAL POWER of which Paul was speaking comes when the Holy Spirit INHABITS His Church! When the WORDS we speak, and the DEEDS we do, and even the SPIRIT we manifest are consciously lived out in the light of a single focus, or purpose: TO KNOW JESUS CHRIST!

III. POWER ALWAYS RESULTS FROM DISCIPLINE (Focus)

- A. This is true even in secular concepts. The present generation of "movers and shakers" ... the YUPPIES ... focuses directly on power itself! It sees the future as being influenced by giant corporations. It is willing to set aside all other values for financial independence and for the chance to set policy in a major corporation. Family loyalties/ corporate loyalties/ children/ marriage/ — all must give way to ambition: GIVE ME POWER!
- B. But the Christian approach to power is radically different! Instead of focusing directly on POWER— it focuses on loving and knowing God! We may not always be conscious of the raw power released in and through our lives, because power comes as a by-product of seeking and knowing and loving and OBEYING Jesus Christ!

[Too often, however, Christian's "focus" is much less intense, much more "casual" than the selfish, driving ambition of people seeking worldly power! But Paul says: THIS ONE THING I DO!]

Conclusion:

And what a difference it makes where the focus lies!

What a contrast in spiritual powers!

[A young man from a refined family, brilliant— named ALBERT (Speer)— had opportunity to be the architect for his nation ... to design great buildings. The glory

and sheer power of it grasped him— he became Minister of Armaments, brilliantly controlled millions of slaves, prolonged WW II two years, perhaps — and in the solitude of Spandau prison acknowledged that POWER WITHOUT REGARD TO MORAL AND SPIRITUAL VALUES IS TOTALLY CORRUPTING! We remember Albert Speer, if at all, with revulsion and waste!]

(Several other young men have had similar opportunities. No doubt some have died unnoticed except for God. But Joseph and Daniel both kept God ahead of selfish ambition— and both are remembered with great joy.)

But in that same generation with Albert there was another young man— also from a good family. His name was DIETRICH (Bonhoffer.) He, too, had opportunity to play ball with the Nazi regime and corrupt his church. he chose, rather to (ultimately) die for Jesus Christ! And we recall Dietrich Bonhoffer with admiration. To this day he influences young men and women!

Paul said: I must know Christ! And I will have His POWER! And YOU may have this power, too— when you can say with Paul: THIS ONE THING I DO!

Prayer

EH 75 Jesus, My Strength My Hope

Joy in Knowing Jesus

August 28 1988 AM

Introduction:

Philippians is a book full of JOY. It speaks of peace and of quality of life, and of power and adequacy. But it doesn't stop short of JOY.

What IS joy?

Joy is hard to describe. It isn't necessarily "fun," and yet it is deeply satisfying; it isn't against good fun. It can happen on good days, but it also can go on deep down inside on not so good days, as well! It is something that bubbles up from within that says: It is good to be alive! It is something LIKE having a "good time" going on on the inside of our very being.

[Do you know what a really good time is? It is something you can enjoy in anticipation, and then as you experience it, and then every time you remember it, as well!]

WHAT IS JOY?

JOY IS THE GROWING ASSURANCE THAT YOU ARE ALIVE, AND BEING AND DOING WHAT YOU WERE CREATED TO BE AND DO. This JOY is the privilege of every son and daughter of God, through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What does Paul tell us about JOY?

I. CHRIST'S JOY IS FOR REAL PEOPLE IN REAL SITUATIONS

(Remember, Paul was writing this to a minority group in a pagan city. And he was writing it while he himself was a prisoner of the Romans.)

It is not incidental that Paul seems to be refereeing a disagreement right in The middle of this passage about "quality life!" Euodia and Syntyche are having a problem seeing eye-to-eye!

1. I used to think this was an interruption of the flow of this passage about peace and joy. You can't talk about peace and joy when there is a squabble going on! Or can you?
 - a. These are real Christians!
 - b. They are having a real quarrel! At least serious enough to immortalize them with Paul's admonitions!
 - c. They are not being kicked out of the church ... but they are being urged to agree, not only so there will be peace, but so that they can have personal peace and real joy!
2. EVERY Christian can experience the peace of God. We can KNOW the joy of the Lord if we will!
 - a. JOY, as well as PEACE and POWER are the by-products of the single goal of knowing Jesus Christ!
 - b. We have to begin NOW, right in the middle of LIFE as it is... and not wait until things are more "ideal."

II. CHRIST'S JOY STANDS THE WORLD ON ITS HEAD!

(It is different from what you might expect!)

1. IT IS TO BE A GENTLE JOY!

"Let your GENTLENESS be evident to all." Meekness, humility, teachableness are at the very top of the list in Christ's kingdom. The world admires raw power. It doesn't understand meekness, which is power under control. But don't be deceived: the greatest power IS under control! Jesus said, "The MEEK shall inherit the earth!"

2. IT IS ALSO TO BE A PRESENT JOY!

The English word "present" has at least TWO meanings that apply in this passage; meanings that can help us to understand and grasp God's JOY.

- a. present means here and now. We are to expect God's JOY here and now ... not just when the storm blows over, and when it is easier to manage.

- b. present means give, or gift. And we are to GIVE the situation, the circumstances, the DAY to God.

3. IT IS ALSO A LOVING JOY!

Get this through your head. God is GOD! And God is GOOD! He does understand. His "silence" is not absence; and he cares for you more than you know. Personally! Tenderly! Lovingkindness is God's very nature!

The NATURAL way of thinking about loving God is: "If I KNEW Him better, I could love Him more!" or, To KNOW Him is to LOVE Him!" But as we walk with God we find: THE MORE WE LOVE HIM, THE BETTER WE KNOW HIM! Or, TO LOVE HIM IS TO KNOW HIM! And this is where real JOY begins!

So never stop loving Him! Job said: "I don't understand! But I do trust Him!" LOVE GOD BACK! There is JOY in that kind of attitude!

4. PERHAPS THE KEY IS this, that OUR JOY IN CHRIST MUST BE AN INTENTIONAL JOY!

We must choose to go the way of rejoicing!

Within the framework of love and obedience to God, we can look at the prison cell, and the hard facts of discipline, and the unanswerable questions, OR, we can do as Paul tells us here: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable— if anything is excellent or praiseworthy— think about such things."

And he dares to go on and say: "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me— put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you!"

Conclusion:

How many really joyful people do you know? You can be among God's JOYFUL PEOPLE... but not necessarily by a trip to an altar. And not in an instant or in a day or a week, perhaps. Old habits aren't changed that easily.

But how about if we try these four simple things for the month of September:

Joy in Knowing Jesus

1. Cultivate the spirit of gentleness. (I'll be speaking about that, Lord willing, next Sunday morning.) MEEKNESS is not WEAKNESS!
2. Determine to have present joy. (In spite of the circumstance, I'll give it to Jesus, NOW!)
3. Reflect God's love. Send it back to Him! Let Him know that He is your Father and you're glad of it! Seek to be a loving child!
4. Claim Philippians 4:8,9: Be a positive pray-er!

Remember the Christian's definition of JOY?: JOY IS THE GROWING ASSURANCE THAT YOU ARE ALIVE, AND BEING AND DOING WHAT YOU WERE CREATED TO BE AND DO. Every one of us can have this JOY that Jesus gives!

You can be what Jesus Christ wants you to be! You can fulfill the highest and noblest purpose God has for your life!

Even if at the moment you are experiencing difficulties! Even if you are having disagreement! (Remember Euodia and Syntyche??) We can choose to go God's way ... and then we can choose to be filled with Christ's JOY!

Prayer: Help us not to stop short of Your promise of JOY! Amen.

EH 22 O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus

The Spirit of the Kingdom

Kingdom of God Series, Part 1 of 6

1. **The Spirit of the Kingdom**
2. [Heroes of the Kingdom](#)
3. [Laws of a Righteous Kingdom](#)
4. [Kingdom Exploits](#)
5. [Kingdom Priorities](#)
6. [Worship the King of the Righteous Kingdom](#)

September 4, 1988 AM

Intro: Here are some statements about JOY ... (Here are definitions from 'The Amplified New Testament:

- "Blessed"=happy, to be envied, and spiritually prosperous [that is, with life-joy and satisfaction in God's favor and salvation, regardless of their outward conditions;)
- ("Blessed"="and enviably happy [with a happiness produced by experience of God's favor and especially conditioned by the revelation of His matchless grace;")
- ("Blessed"=happy, blithesome, joyous and spiritually prosperous, etc.)
- ("Blessed and fortunate and happy and spiritually prosperous [that is, in that state in which the born- again child of God enjoys His favor and salvation]") ...that on the surface seem to contrast with the "facts."

We come to understand (1) that we are dealing with paradox; and (2) Jesus would have us to trust Him as to what is and is not lasting reality. The pathway to Life Eternal may be PLAIN, so that no one need be lost— but it is also SPIRITUALLY DISCERNED.

It is a Way of trust! FAITH means that we must follow our Shepherd, and trust His wisdom. Everyone seems to be a self-appointed "expert" in this matter of spiritual truth.

R.C. Sproul tells of a theologian and an astronomer in dialogue; the astronomer says to the theologian: "We don't need all this study, these big words— faith and salvation are simply "Do unto others ..."

And the theologian came back: "I think I see what you mean about technical terms and study: I don't understand 'expanding universe' and 'novae' and 'black holes' and the like. Such words are unnecessary; astronomy is simply, "Twinkle, twinkle, Little star ..."

Salvation is truth both SIMPLE and PROFOUND! And (3) JESUS DECLARES THAT OUR "HAPPY" ... OUR "NORMAL" ATTITUDE IS TO BE ONE OF TOTAL DEPENDENCY ON GOD.

I. THE PERCEPTION OF FALLEN MANKIND IS: I AM THE CENTER

- A. We are BORN into the CENTER of our own little universe. Little children, as wonderful as they are, have a very small world that slowly expands— but always has "EGO" at the center!
- B. To be BORN AGAIN is to enter into the REAL WORLD, where God is at the CENTER. We come to believe spiritual reality by the ministry of the Holy Spirit— but we still see things, humanly, from our own eyes, from within our own personalities.

And so, unless we deliberately accept God's WORD, and stay close to Him, we are tempted to slip back into self-centered ways of living; (1) making selfish goals of prosperity OUR goals; (2) making self-centered judgments of who is or is not important on the basis of OUR benefits.
- C. This is what had happened to the Church at Laodocia: they had failed to remember the Beatitudes, and so they had failed to find real "blessedness." (Revelation 3:17-19 Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white

garments that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous, therefore, and repent.)

II. THE REALITY IS: WE ARE COMPLETE ONLY IN VICE-REGENCY TO GOD

- A. Man does enjoy unique privilege. (Psalm 8!) "When I consider the heavens ... the work of Thy fingers; the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained, WHAT IS MAN? Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels!" Man carries THE VERY IMAGE OF GOD!
- B. The temptation is: You shall be as gods! And yet somehow being God's highest free moral creation does not seem to satisfy man ... he is tempted to be his own god!
- C. Real JOY ("Blessed ...") COMES FROM LIVING IN GRACE JOY IS BEING WHAT WE ARE INTENDED BY GOD TO BE, AND DOING WHAT WE ARE CREATED TO BE DOING!

III. FAITH IS DELIBERATELY ACCEPTING/OBEYING TRUTH FROM ONE WHO KNOWS

- A. Salvation is NOT simply what we do or do not know... or even what we do or do not do. Those things are important. But all too often they keep the spotlight on "SELF."
- B. Salvation is deciding 'WHO shall be God!' and 'Whom shall I believe?!' Who is going to be "at the center of my Universe?"
- C. This may/will require going against "how we feel" at times. How many times pilots or mariners are required to believe what the instruments say instead of how they feel! I have been completely turned around in a white-out fog and ended up at the wrong side of the harbor. Pilots have realized they were literally upside down. Why? Because facts sometimes contradict senses. This is a weak illustration of spiritual reality and faith, perhaps. But it is a valid truth all the same.

CONCLUSION:

Are YOU "blessed?" How happy are you? Perhaps we all need to look at our spirits! We need to ask: Am I 'poor in spirit?'

The Spirit of the Kingdom

"Poor in spirit..." does not refer, primarily, to how you happen to "feel" today. But it does have everything to do with your dependency on God's grace:

1. "Forget" about salvation as a matter of correct doctrine, or believing the "right/-correct/Nazarene way!"
2. And (please don't deliberately misunderstand me!) "Forget" about salvation as a matter of doing this and not doing that;
3. The real question is: AM I A TOTALLY GOD-DEPENDANT PERSON? Is my life totally wrapped up in His life, His will, His grace— until I am everything I am because of HIM, and nothing I am or have is worth anything apart from Him?

If you want JOY, real JOY, wonderful JOY ... then be dependant!

Prayer: Lord, We do believe You! We refuse to believe this world with its "wisdom!" We are NOT the center of the Universe! YOU are! AMEN!

#367 Jesus Is All the World to Me

Heroes of the Kingdom

Kingdom of God Series, Part 2 of 6

1. [The Spirit of the Kingdom](#)
2. **Heroes of the Kingdom**
3. [Laws of a Righteous Kingdom](#)
4. [Kingdom Exploits](#)
5. [Kingdom Priorities](#)
6. [Worship the King of the Righteous Kingdom](#)

September 11, 1988

INTRODUCTION

This may well be the most difficult period in all human history to live a genuinely Christian commitment. Now as never before the world needs to see the Church of Jesus Christ in purity and in power!

When Paul Rees was here in this church ten years ago he said, among other things, "We need the vigor of a Christian community with all the earmarks of a counter-culture."

Would you think with me a few minutes about that statement of need?

I. THE NEED FOR A VIGOROUS COMMUNITY OF FAITH, WITH ALL THE EARMARKS OF A COUNTER-CULTURE

Why is this so important? And why is it so difficult to achieve?

- A. Why a community of faith, anyway? Why not simply each one do his or her own thing?

The plan of Jesus is to change the world through His Church. The entire New Testament is written to the Church- for the Church- the Church is Christ's creation, his love! The Church is Christ's ONLY plan to evangelize and reach the world with His redeeming love.

[Ours is an age of individualism. The church exists to serve US! We choose a church by how well it helps OUR needs. But Jesus sees the Church as His BODY— as an extension of Himself— to do HIS work of redemption.]

- B. WHY IS THIS DIFFICULT NOW? We aren't being persecuted for righteousness sake— not really!

A community of vital faith would seem to be more difficult to achieve under open, obvious persecution. But do you think that is really how it would be? [Frederick Faber wrote: "Our fathers, chained in prisons dark, were still in heart and conscience free. How sweet would be their children's fate if they, like them, could die for Thee!" What could he possibly mean?] Under obvious tyranny issues SEEM more simple. Harder, yet simpler.

It is more difficult now to be 'all-out' for Jesus because the issues, the values, are often "fuzzy" ... harder to see clearly!

- C. WE LIKE TO FOCUS ON A FEW ISSUES THAT WE SELECT — and that WE see as "clear-cut" and we focus on THEM: (1) Abortion (2) Hunger (3) Disarmament (4) Or, for some "King James Version" or "Our Brand"

But then WE are still the focus— OUR activity— OUR control! We like to hear the sins WE hate preached against— but we don't like to have our comfortable way of life disturbed!

- D. JESUS CALLS US TO ALL-OUT LIVING, not simply on a few difficult or easy issues, which WE select, BUT IN THE SPIRIT OF THE BEATITUDES, AND IN THE FELLOWSHIP OF HIS CHURCH and cutting ACROSS culture— not simply "for" it or "against" it. AND THAT IS DIFFICULT!

II. AND SO HEROES ARE NEEDED!

[IF WE ARE TO SEE CHRIST'S CHURCH BECOME THE VIGOROUS COMMUNITY OF FAITH, WITH ALL THE EARMARKS OF A COUNTER-CULTURE!!]

Transition: "BUT HOLD ON— If it is such a difficult business to really be a Christian, how come the church is full this morning?" AREN'T WE ALL CHRISTIAN HERE?

A. IT TAKES COURAGE TO LIVE THE BEATITUDES!

Jesus knew that if people began to live the way He was preaching that they would run into trouble. That is why He said: "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

And then went on to add: "Blessed are YOU when men SHALL revile YOU!" Not just in centuries gone by! Every person who sets out to follow Jesus is going to be swimming ACROSS the current!

B. HEROES OF THE FAITH ARE PEOPLE JUST LIKE YOU AND ME THAT SIMPLY SAY: "I AM GOING TO OBEY JESUS, NO MATTER WHAT!" Heroes are:

1. Pete and Jim
2. Tom (Nees) and Tom (Wilson)
3. [THIS WEEK!] Brenda simply and as a matter of course turning down a high-paying job because it is an abortion clinic.
4. Esther
5. Cecil, patient and Christ-like before a class of immature teenagers; influencing them to believe that Christ can really change a life.
6. YOU! Living for Christ in school— at work— faithful— Jesus says: You are BLESSED!"

III. HOW CAN I RESPOND TO THE NEED FOR HEROES?

A. To begin with: DEFINE "FAITH" AS O B E D I E N C E! Get away from the idea that faith and salvation are a matter of KNOWING CORRECT FACTS ... OR EVEN DOING 'GOOD THINGS!'

B. CHRIST'S HEROES KNOW WHAT JESUS SAID; THEY SEEK TO LIVE BY HIS SPIRIT

In order to be a hero in the kingdom of heaven one must deliberately reject the wisdom of this world. And the wisdom of this world, of this age is particularly pervasive. We are persuaded that we are the wisest, smartest

generation of all human history; NO ONE, including JESUS CHRIST, can tell US how to live!

But following Jesus— being "heroes for HIM" requires the humility to take orders from the meek and lowly Nazarene— and requires the humility to be a part of His glorious-and-imperfect CHURCH!

C. AND BEING A HERO FOR JESUS CHRIST MEANS ACCEPTING HIS VALUES! [

Can you believe Jesus said: "It is BLESSED to be reviled for Christ's sake!" ??]

What are the commonly accepted values of this world, this age?

(From Fortune magazine: I quote- " ... they tell themselves that this is an increasingly crowded, competitive world. ...they feel a deep urgency about getting what they feel are their shares of power and its rewards. They tell themselves that in their urgency they cannot afford relationships that "drag" on their progress. Marriage is possible if it does not hamper career. Children, for most of them, must wait until both members have claimed lucrative posts. For many of them the decision to remain childless feels final." (MORE QUOTES AT END...)

In contrast, Jesus says: PUT ME, PUT MY CHURCH, MY KINGDOM FIRST!
(6:33!)

CONCLUSION:

[Transitional sentence:] "I said at the beginning: This may just be the most difficult time in all of human history to be a Christian." Can you see how this might be true?

A. IT WASN'T AS SIMPLE AS WE MIGHT THINK WHEN THE ISSUES WERE BOLD and clear-cut under despotic, totalitarian rule:

Swiss doctor-writer Paul Tournier wrote, in his book "To Resist or Surrender?"

"Shortly after (WWII) I was asking him (Bishop Wurm) about that tragic era ... he told me how hard it had been, at the beginning of Hitler's reign, to know what attitude the church should take.

"... Should the church step in line, in spite of the movement's obvious flaws, in the hope of influencing the new regime and of directing it toward a true national renewal? Or must the church fight the regime, thus losing all contact with the masses? ..." And then come some very significant words: "There comes into every conflict a terrible, vicious circle: He who does not stand up in time is carried forward into ceaseless compromise right on into final capitulation."

What Dr. Tournier is telling us is that unless we take a stand against evil as soon as we recognize it we soon find EXCUSES to do as we please, even if it means cooperating with the NAZIs!

B. B. BUT WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT TODAY? But what about OUR times? What are the prevailing value systems of our times? Who tells us what is really important? Show biz videos? The craving of greed for more prosperity? The blind worship of sports? The fat god of comfort? Self-development at any cost?

Certainly NOT: "Poor in spirit!" Certainly NOT: "Mourning for our sins!"

Certainly NOT: "Meek, gentle!"

Who has the courage to cast his or her lot with the lowly Nazarene? "We need the vigor of a Christian community with all the ear-marks of a counter-culture."

Are there Christians who will follow Jesus in a radical manner— not in a cult-like, blind, unbalanced way— but in total obedience??

I AM ASKING YOU TO BE A HERO! Will you tell Jesus in your heart of hearts today that if He will give you grace, you will follow Him— in His SPIRIT— and live for Him no matter what the cost?

There is an apocryphal story of how Alexander the Great called a truce and gave the chief of a warrior tribe an opportunity to surrender, to become slaves and vassals without a battle.

"Why should we surrender?" the proud chieftain asked. "We have hundreds more brave warriors than you!"

Alexander simply pointed at one of the soldiers in the ranks nearby. "Thrust your sword into your heart for Alexander!" he ordered.

Without hesitation the soldier drew his sword, opened his breastplate, and plunged the sword into his heart, and fell down at his commander's feet. The warrior chief surrendered.

This seems like a remote story— from a far-off culture. The Lord Jesus would never call on us to die merely for display, I'm sure. But what happens when the boss asks you to LIE? Do you put your job on the line? What happens when everyone in the class CHEATS? Do you die to false honors and follow Jesus?

What kind of a Christian Community— what sort of powerful church— could Jesus Christ build— right here in Wollaston— if He had that kind of total loyalty? What could Jesus Christ do with a people who determine to be His followers, even in this pluralistic, humanistic, anything-goes, comfort-seeking society? WOULDN'T IT BE EXCITING TO FIND OUT?

397 *Where He Leads Me*

Addendum 1

Pete Fleming: Master's degree; walked with God from the age 13; in high school earned letters in basketball and golf, and as valedictorian (Seattle, Ore.) he said in his speech: "Where shall we look? Where shall we go? I believe that we have a right to go back to the Bible for our anchorage. University of Washington, president of University Christian Fellowship; in 1951 he received his master's degree, the master's thesis in philosophy: Melville's *The Confidence Man*. He announced to his friends that God was calling him to Ecuador: "I think a 'call' to the mission field is no different from any other means of guidance; a call is nothing more or less than obedience to the will of God, as God presses it home to the soul by whatever means He chooses." In 1951 as he prepared to sail from the States: "Remember the last few verses of I Corinthians 3: 'For all things are yours ... and ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's.' Throughout all our personality we are God's, and since God has made our whole selves, there is great joy in realizing who is our Creator. This realization is to

permeate every area and level of life. In appreciation of beauty, mountains, music, poetry, knowledge, people, science- even the tang of an apple— God is there, to reflect the joy of His presence in the believer who will recognize His purpose in all things."

Addendum 2

Jim Elliot: graduate of Wheaton, school-champion wrestler, consistent honor student, president of the Student Foreign Missions Fellowship, amateur poet, class representative on the student council. Diary jottings: (As a senior in college:) "'He makes his ministers a flame of fire.' Am I ignitable? God deliver me from the dread asbestos of 'other things.' Saturate me with the oil of the Spirit that I may be a flame. But flame is transient, often short-lived. Canst thou bear this, my soul, short life? In me there dwells the Spirit of the Great Short-Lived, whose zeal for God's house consumed Him. 'Make me Thy fuel, Flame of God.'"

Jim and Pete went in 1951 to work among the QUICHUAS— where they labored almost 5 years. Jim and Pete went on to join Ed McCully and Roger Youdarian and Nate Saint in one of the most dramatic and widely publicized Christian ventures in history: they were martyred in January, 1956, reaching the dreaded Auca Indians in interior Ecuador.

Addendum 3

James Fowler, in his important book, *Stages of Faith*, tells us that the present generation of ambitious young people believe that NO ONE can tell them HOW TO SUCCEED! They KNOW! These ambitious young people "... tell themselves that most of the men and women presently at the top are probably less imaginative and less competent than they are (or will be.) They do not believe, therefore, that they have too much to learn on the way up. The major obstacles to their rising that they see are the inertia and self-protecting power of the incumbents. ...they must be in striking distance of a chief executive's post by the time they are thirty-five."

Addendum 4

In 1980 Fortune magazine interviewed 80 25-year-old "yuppies" about their hopes and plans (as quoted in Fowler's Stages of Faith:) "The values that seemed central had to do with the achievement of success. Success meant for them the eventual achievement of financial independence and, on the way to that, achieving top-rank leadership in one or more of the major institutions of our corporate society. .. Far more than government, they believe, today's and tomorrow's corporate giants are the entities that will determine our global future. " ... they tell themselves that this is an increasingly crowded, competitive world. ...they feel a deep urgency about getting what they feel are their shares of power and its rewards. They tell themselves that in their urgency they cannot afford relationships that "drag" on their progress. Marriage is possible if it does not hamper career. Children, for most of them, must wait until both members have claimed lucrative posts. For many of them the decision to remain childless feels final. " ... At the risk of sounding judgmental (their testimony) might be capsulized as "the human vocation is to take care of number one; those number one's who have the most talent, drive and luck will— and should— inherit the earth." [And then Fowler goes on to tell how talented and mostly decent young talents were sucked into the Nazi dream and realized that selfish ambition is finally self-destructive.]

Laws of a Righteous Kingdom

Kingdom of God Series, Part 3 of 6

1. [The Spirit of the Kingdom](#)
2. [Heroes of the Kingdom](#)
3. **Laws of a Righteous Kingdom**
4. [Kingdom Exploits](#)
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6. [Worship the King of the Righteous Kingdom](#)

September 18, 1988

Matthew 5:17-20;43-48

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished.

Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

For I say unto you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.

(43) You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles the same?

Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Introduction:

The Sermon on the Mount is a keynote speech for the kingdom of God. It sets forth the principles on which Jesus Christ has founded His church.

1. The spirit of Christ's kingdom is set forth in the Beatitudes: poor in spirit, godly sorrow for sins, purity of heart, gentle— in short the spirit of Christlikeness.
2. The heroes of Christ's kingdom are those willing to be persecuted for righteousness' sake. Following in Christ's example, with His spirit, will bring conflict with the values of this world.
3. But Christ's kingdom is more than a spirit, and more than heroic followers. Christ's kingdom is a kingdom of clear and definite LAW. There is no authentic kingdom without some kind of law. Without law there is anarchy.

(transition) And in the opening paragraphs of this great Sermon Jesus shows how His kingdom relates to Law. He shows how His kingdom (I.) is the old testament law fulfilled; and how in His kingdom (II.) the spirit of the law surpasses even the keeping of the letter of the law; and how, in His kingdom (III.) the heart of the LAW is revealed as perfect love.

I. THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW FULFILLED

(Verse 17 Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.")

- A. Jesus did not come to bring anarchy, which is what freedom from the Ten Commandments would mean. Jesus came to set us free to be able to KEEP this Law-code, which is good and holy. (see Romans 7:12)

The Ten Commandments have never been erased. Do you know them? Do you keep them?

- I. No other gods before Jehovah God
- II. No idols/ no worshiping of man-made things
- III. Reverence for the Name of God (and His Person)
- IV. A day of special significance before God

- V. Honor father and mother
- VI. Respect LIFE/ do no murder
- VII. Respect intimacy/ no sexual infidelity
- VIII. Respect property/ do not steal
- IX. Respect truth/ do not bear false witness
- X. Respect integrity/ do not break the commandments in the privacy of your heart!

B. Jesus did reveal His authority over the Old Testament Law by boldly stating: "This is what you have come to understand ... But I declare to you ..." And then Jesus proceeded to show that the law could be "kept" in a legalistic way that did not satisfy the demands of His kingdom. Jesus wanted the love of the LAW implanted within His people's hearts!

And later, Jesus summarized the O.T. Law, the Ten Commandments, by saying:[in Matthew 22 and Luke 10] "Thou shalt love the Lord with all your being..and your neighbor as yourself." THIS IS THE FULFILLMENT OF ALL THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS.

C. But Jesus lifted this "law of love" to an even higher plane when He gave His life for us, and He calls us to that same self-giving love with His "New Commandment" [John 13:34 A new commandment I give you, that ye love one another as I have loved you, that ye also love one another!"] The "Golden Rule" is an Old Testament rule; Jesus said: "Love as I have loved you!"

[Transition: Not only was the Law fulfilled— the letter of the law was to be surpassed in this kingdom Christ was founding:]

II. THE LETTER OF THE LAW SURPASSED BY THE SPIRIT

(Verse 20 For I say unto you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.)

A. WE DARE NOT TAKE THE LAW LIGHTLY! Jesus said: "Whoever annuls (ignores, breaks) one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven."

What Jesus was saying is: WE LIGHTLY INTERPRET THE LAWS OF THE KINGDOM TO OUR OWN GRAVE PERIL! An attitude of glib interpretation is a dangerous position. "Oh, this is what that commandment means! Surely the Sabbath is strictly an Old Testament concept! "Why should I worry about the covetousness of my heart? "I really don't bow down and worship my color T.V.— I just spend 20 hours a week respectfully bowing down before it!"

- B. JESUS COMMENDED THE SERIOUS STUDY AND OBSERVANCE OF THE LAWS OF THE KINGDOM. Jesus also said: "Whoever keeps these commandments and teaches them will be BIG in the kingdom of heaven. I see this as an attitude of serious attention to the written Word of God. A willingness to live by the revealed will of God.
- C. THESE LAWS ARE MORE THAN JUST RULES AND REGULATIONS.[It may be well and good to look for loop-holes and every legitimate deduction when filling out your income tax. That is what the government expects. But this is NOT the spirit with which we approach the holy LAWS of the kingdom of God. We are to DELIGHT in them! We are to LOVE TO KEEP THEM! They represent God's love and concern for us!] Jesus said: Keeping the law has to be more and better than just the scrupulous outward observance! You have to surpass the scribes and the Pharisees!

What sort of law-keepers were they?

They were very good at keeping the letter! But THEY WERE (1) SELF-CENTERED; they kept the law in order to save their hides, not because they loved the Lawgiver. And THEY WERE (2) SELF- RIGHTEOUS. Blind to the fact that they were breaking the first commandment and the last, they revelled in the fact that they knew the ins and outs of Jewish law and could get around the letter of the law with impunity. Being (3) SELF-SATISFIED, THEY COULD NEVER KNOW THE SATISFACTION OF REALLY PLEASING GOD. There was very little warm love in their religious faith. [... and so ...]

III. THE HEART OF THE LAW REVEALED AS PERFECT LOVE

(Verses 44 and 48 But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you ... THEREFORE YOU ARE TO BE PERFECT, AS YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER

IS PERFECT.)

- A. Jesus spent a good part of the Sermon on the Mount showing where the "letter" of the law, in and of itself, would not suffice in His holy kingdom. "You have heard ... but I say!"
- B. He made it clear that the heart of the good and holy law was to make us like God. Jesus wanted us to see that God LOVES us. He wants to make us like Himself so He can have fellowship with us "(v 45)in order that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good..."
- C. So He closes the first part of His Sermon with the startling statement, actually a command: BE PERFECT! WHAT CAN THIS MEAN?

Certainly not 'perfect' in the sense of never being wrong, never making mistakes, never needing forgiveness. But 'perfect' here means complete, or mature, or having come to the adult stage of development. Conclusion:

Jesus came to fulfill the Old Testament. He is Lord and Master of the revealed Word of God.

If we will plunge into the written word of God... beginning now, where we are, spiritually; and if we will take the Law and the Prophets seriously, realizing they are intended to show us how to seek and to find in them the spirit of Jesus Himself, the Bible will be like a good schoolmaster, bringing us to the knowledge of the deeper truths of the spirit of Christ's kingdom, and into the personal knowledge of the King Himself!

#311 I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord

Loving God

September 18, 1988 PM

1 John 4:7-21

Introduction:

With all the labels we place on each other, it is increasingly difficult to identify what a "true" Christian is supposed to be. There are liberal Christians and conservative; fundamentalists and born-again Christians. There are all shades of all kinds of labels.

How do we describe what we mean by an experience with God that brings freedom from guilt and sin, and that fits us to walk with Jesus, in His fellowship, with His people, and get to heaven?

Perhaps some of our terms might be more descriptions than labels. If we told about our walk with God, instead of just subscribing to a particular school of thought, or theological party, we might be more effective.

- Consider the question (1) 'Do you KNOW the Lord?' Being a Christian is, in some measure, coming to know Jesus Christ as a real Person!
- Or, Consider a pertinent follow-up question (2) 'Do you LOVE the Lord?' Being a Christian means to LOVE God as He is revealed in His Son.
- Or, How would you reply if someone asked you (3) 'Are you SERIOUS in your walk with God?' Not sour, not long-faced— but is your walk with God the most important thing in your life?"

I would focus on just ONE of these descriptive inquiries into the personal areas of our Christian faith: To be a Christian is to LOVE God! WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO "LOVE GOD?" [One answer might be the book Chuck Colson has written. It is a practical answer! It is the life of holiness!]

I. WE CANNOT LOVE WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW...

- Can we love God when we don't know ANYTHING about Him at all?
- What CAN we know about God?
- How can we love such a BIG BEING?

... BUT GOD INCREASINGLY REVEALS HIMSELF: [This passage tells us some clear truth about God:] A STATEMENT ABOUT GOD

A. GOD IS TRANSCENDENT

"No one has seen God at any time ... (v 12)" God must be Self-revealed.

B. GOD IS SELF-REVEALING!

"God is love...(v 16)" — pure love; NOT human-centered and patronizing and indulgent, spoiling all it touches; but caring and protecting; finding the very best for all

C. GOD DEMANDS THAT HIS CHILDREN LIVE IN LOVE

1. We come to know God by loving Him! To LOVE Him is to KNOW Him. ... to step out on His promises that seem too good to be true ... and step by step come to see that He is GOOD!
2. We cannot be God's favorites! God demands that we love ALL His children! If we don't love, we aren't His children.

II. WE CANNOT ALWAYS CONTROL THE WAY WE FEEL ABOUT PEOPLE...

- Can we love God and NOT love God's people? (No— we've seen that!)
- What do we know about the relationship between loving God and loving each other?
- How can we love the un-loving? (One dour Scot scolded the secretary of the church for mentioning that this week was his wife's and his 50th wedding anniversary!) ...BUT GOD'S LOVE IS DEEPER THAN EMOTION: [and this passage gives us:] A STATEMENT ABOUT GOD'S PEOPLE

A. A. THE NORM FOR GOD'S PEOPLE (11) the norm for God's people is to love one another.

- B. B. GOD'S PEOPLE FIND SUPERNATURAL HELP! (18) fear is excluded by love.
- C. C. GOD'S PEOPLE DO NOT HATE/BEAR GRUDGES (20) hatred is incompatible with Christian love.

III. GOD NEVER COMMANDS WHAT HE DOES NOT ALSO ENABLE!...

- Does this need to love everyone 'doom' us all? Is love the same as "being IN love with?"
- Where does all this "LOVE" originate? [With GOD of course!]
- How can we be "serious" Christians, coming to "know the Lord" and truly "loving Him?" ... IF WE LEARN TO LOVE GOD, WE WILL REFLECT HIS LOVE TO OTHERS!

[Yes this is a command, but:] A COMMAND, BUT WITH PROMISE

- A. LOVE! for with God it is possible! This doesn't mean you have to agree with or like all the cultural/ sociological aspects.
- B. WE DON'T 'STRIVE TO LOVE' BUT WE OPEN UP TO LOVE ... LET GOD LOVE THROUGH US MAKE GOD "AT HOME" IN MY HEART— SEE HOW HE LOVES ME—AND HE WILL MAKE HIS LOVE REAL ...
- C. Mother Teresa was asked how she can love the very un-lovely people with which she works. (She spends hours in private prayer!) She said: "I have said a (dynamic) YES to Jesus!" And love becomes her very LIFE!

This is grace! Grace to forgive... and grace to receive forgiveness!

Conclusion:

How do you label yourself, as a Christian? Why should anyone take your faith seriously?

- Can you say: "I know the Lord!"?
- Can you honestly say: "I love the Lord!"?
- Are you serious about the matter of your walk with God?
- Are you showing that love by loving those around you?

One of the most beautiful scenes in the Bible is in John 21, where Jesus took Peter aside, and restored him to full fellowship. It is almost too private to look in on; and yet the Holy Spirit has had John write it for our edification.

Jesus takes Peter aside and asks him: DO YOU LOVE ME? Not, 'Do you believe Me?' or "Will you obey Me?" or "Are you sorry you let Me down?"

Just "DO YOU LOVE ME? DO YOU LOVE ME MORE THAN ANYTHING OR ANYONE ELSE?"

Can you say with Peter: "Lord, You know all things! I DO LOVE YOU!" ??

#243 I'll Live for Him ("My life my love, I give to Thee..")

Kingdom Exploits

Kingdom of God Series, Part 4 of 6

1. [The Spirit of the Kingdom](#)
2. [Heroes of the Kingdom](#)
3. [Laws of a Righteous Kingdom](#)
4. **Kingdom Exploits**
5. [Kingdom Priorities](#)
6. [Worship the King of the Righteous Kingdom](#)

September 25, 1988 - Matthew 6:1-15

Introduction:

We have called the Sermon on the Mount the constitution of the Church of Jesus Christ, the 'foundation statement' for the kingdom of God.

1. The Beatitudes state the revolutionary, loving spirit of the kingdom.
2. The heroes of the kingdom are the men and women who dare to live in that spirit, across cultural pressures. ["blessed are ye when men shall revile you for My sake!"].
3. And the kingdom of heaven is a kingdom of holy law. ["I have come to fulfil, not destroy, the law"]

Spirit, heroes, a constitutional law; all these are vital parts of the beachhead of the kingdom of heaven which Jesus has established on planet Earth.

But there is more. For Jesus makes it plain that those who are part of His kingdom have deeds to do, tasks to perform, exploits to accomplish.

In the opening paragraphs of this sixth chapter Jesus makes some clear assumptions:

I. THE EXPECTATIONS OF OUR MASTER

A. A. Every follower of Jesus has expectations to meet:

1. Jesus expects that His kingdom will be a giving kingdom; so he expresses that assumption to His disciples (verse 3): "When you GIVE..." The kingdom of God is an out-flowing of love. [A GIVING KINGDOM [outward]]
2. Jesus came to establish a living kingdom; He came to bring the LIFE of God Himself, and bring it in abundance to and all that is symbolized in the vertical relationship, the give and take of spiritual breath, is comprehended in the expectation (verse 6): "When you PRAY..." The kingdom of God rises no higher than its Source in prayer. [A KINGDOM OF ABUNDANT LIFE [vertical heaven- connection]]
3. And Jesus desires that His kingdom shall be a resourceful kingdom. There are 'means of grace' available for us. God desires to meet every inward longing of the human heart, and He has designed 'means of grace' that correspond to our deepest needs. [A KINGDOM OF FULFILLMENT [seeking of personal power— inward!]]
4. But Jesus intends that the means of grace remain just that: means, and not ends in and of themselves. This is at least a part of what Jesus was saying as he made the assumption (verse 17): "When you FAST..." For the kingdom of God has means of inward renewal and growth and strength.

B. [summary] So there you have it: There are some things we simply are going to do because we are part of Christ's kingdom:

1. we GIVE— the outward thrust of life
2. we PRAY— the vertical dimension, the breath of LIFE
3. we FAST— (seeking personal power, growth) the inward focus of spiritual growth ...
4. and perhaps we could add a fourth assumption to this chapter that includes the other three. In verse 20 Jesus says: "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven!" And He adds: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also!"

- C. All three of these basic movements of the soul are involved in the tasks of the Church of Jesus Christ, to which we all are called as Christians.

The (1) giving out, and the (2) dependency on God in fervent prayer, and the (3) receiving of energy and inspiration all are involved in the 1. WORSHIP, and in the 2. EDUCATION, and in the 3. EVANGELISM; in the 4. FELLOWSHIP and in the 5. SERVICE MINISTRY of the church at every level of its existence.

We GIVE, and we PRAY, and we LEARN TO DEPEND ON THE SPIRIT MORE AND MORE in whatever facet of the church's work we are gifted and called upon to labor.

II. THE PERFECT COMPREHENSION OF GOD THE FATHER

"Your heavenly Father, who seeth in secret ..." repeated three times (4,6,18); and (verse 8): "Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him." and (verse 32): "... your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things."

- A. God KNOWS
- B. God CARES
- C. God RESPONDS (more on this truth in IV.)

III. CHRIST'S PATIENT EDUCATION

- A. Learning how to implement His expectations. Jesus knew that even spiritual things must be taught and learned. So this was a lesson which (no doubt) He repeated over and over again— and taught by His example:

"When you GIVE— do it like this. When you FAST— make it effective!" And His BIG lesson, at least here, is about PRAYER: "When you PRAY- here is how!:"

- B. The "Pattern for Prayer"

Worship - Surrender - Trust - Specifics - Praise !

- C. Perseverance in this great School!

IV. THE SATISFACTION

A. Labor in the kingdom of God does not go unseen nor unrewarded! It pays to serve Jesus!

Labor for Jesus is NOT 'slave-labor!' God responds to the sincere cry of the heart!

Hebrews 11:6 "God is a Rewarder of them that diligently seek Him."

B. But HOW does it pay?

1. It pays in FELLOWSHIP WITH JESUS. (Go! ... and Lo, I AM with YOU always!)

2. It pays in ACCOMPLISHMENT and ADEQUACY (Galatians 6:7:"Be not weary in well-doing, for in due season ye shall reap if ye faint not!")

[But these are NOT the heart of the emphasis here. Jesus says: "The Father will reward you OPENLY!!"]

3. It pays to serve Jesus in a way that will be rewarded OPENLY! It will be MANIFEST!

Conclusion

Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer we are asking Jesus to return in His glory and set up His kingdom when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

But there is this sobering thought about the coming again of Jesus. It is then that we shall come face to face with His expectations for us! It is then that we shall give an account of our stewardship. Our GIVING and why we gave! Our praying and even our 'spiritual reaching'— our holy things— our 'fasting' and our seeking to find the holy way.

#48 (EH) Go Forth and Tell! O Church of God, Awake!

The Dynamic of Fullness

September 25, 1988 PM

Ephesians 5:18 *Be (being) filled with the Spirit ...*

[The summary of Ephesian practical admonition:] It is not just a parting thought . . . a wonderful "luxury" option. It is absolutely vital! Why? (And I'm NOT taking these in order of their appearing in Ephesians, but perhaps in their order of importance to me ..?)

I. THE PROMISE OF GOD'S FULLNESS

WHAT IT IS SUPPOSED TO DO FOR US

- A. GOD'S FULLNESS WILL MAKE/KEEP CHRIST AT HOME IN YOU, AND YOU IN CHRIST !

Ephesians 3:14-21 *For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, 16 That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; 17 That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, BEING ROOTED AND GROUNDED IN LOVE, 18 May be able to comprehend with all saints what [is] the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; 19 And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God. 20 Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, 21 Unto him [be] glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.*

At HOME! What a wonderful word "home!" Psalm 90: 1 begins: "Lord, THOU hast been our dwelling place in all generations." Now Psalm 90 is a psalm of Moses! Did you ever think what sort of "home" Moses had?

I love to travel and see new things. But I love to be "at home." I have a strong need for "home!" A strong sense of PLACE. But more and more the Christian realizes that "home" is NOT a place— it is a PERSON! ABIDE IN ME! Make JESUS AT HOME IN US!

Unless and until we are 'at home' with Jesus here and now we will not be likely to KNOW HIM when He returns, or to BE AT HOME WITH HIM throughout eternity. But we have the privilege of . .

Making HIM at home in OUR heart learning the privileges of development, intimacy, responsibility, growing reality ..the PERMANENCE of Christ RESIDENT!

We need "eternal security!" We find that security in LIVING WITH JESUS, AT HOME IN HIM! That is what this passage is about.

But there is another great reason:

B. GOD'S FULLNESS WILL SUSTAIN YOU IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

(So that you can KNOW!)

Ephesians 1:15 Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, 16 Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers; 17 That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: 18 The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, 19 And what [is] the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, "

CHRISTIANS DON'T HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS . . . there is mystery involved at every level, in every discipline. But Christians can know hope and riches of glory and power! And it is possible to be so "sold out" to God that the heuristic quality of faith will drive you closer, and not farther away from a personal relationship with Him. As we grow in maturity, and as we grow

older and (hopefully) wiser, we realize that we know less and less of the great truths of life.

We can either take an obscurantist position, and say: "The earth is flat!", or, we can go with the "obvious" or the current fad belief, and say "The old is out-dated, only the new is true!", OR, WE CAN SAY: "WE MAY NOT KNOW ALL THE ANSWERS— BUT WE BELONG TO THE ONE WHO DOES!"

This is one great reason why we need to be filled with the Spirit. It doesn't give us automatic "answers"; it does make us aware of the certainty of HOPE, the RICHES OF GOD'S GLORY, and the POWER THAT TRANSFORMS LIVES!

But there is at least one other reason:

C. GOD'S FULLNESS WILL MULTIPLY YOUR EFFECTIVENESS IN SERVING JESUS CHRIST

Ephesians 5:15 See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, 16 Redeeming the time, because the days are evil. 17 Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord [is]. 18 And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; 19 Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; 20 Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; 21 Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.

Whatever we have . . . Even if we seek to use it 100% for God . . . Is only 100% of what we have. But when we bring it to Jesus and let him use it . . . then He can work His will and do as He pleases! HE can feed 5,000 . . . it is HIS business!

II. THE PATHWAY TO FULLNESS

HOW MAY WE BE FILLED THE HOLY SPIRIT, AND THUS BE THE KIND OF POWER IN THIS WORLD THAT GOD WANTS US TO BE?

The Dynamic of Fullness

- A. We ARE full now . . . there are no spiritual vacuums. So God can only fill what is available to Him!
- B. But whatever we may be full of, besides or apart from God, we cannot be filled with GOD unless and until we are empty of self: and there is a cross, a dying, a renunciation of the right to self that can properly be called a "death to self." What can we say about the "death" of entire consecration?

(Holiness people may have said some extravagant things here. But still there is a truth we dare not dodge!) In viewing the paradox, the mystery of Christian faith we are guilty of seeing the side we want to see. We say "Self is not dead!" And that is true. But still— self must die! We must renounce the sovereignty of self forever!

- C. [Which brings us to :] The CRISIS of entire sanctification: When we know that we have surrendered for time and eternity— and God accepts our sacrifice and comes in with His fullness, this completes the CRISIS of RECEIVING SALVATION . . . but it is not all there is to the sanctified life! HOLINESS IS AN EXPERIENCE!
- D. [For there is a LIFE TO BE LIVED!] And the on-going life in the Spirit must be lived in the same kind of faith/dependency that brought the crisis of cleansing!

The LIFE OF LIVING IN THE ADEQUACY OF THE SPIRIT! The process of the Spirit-filled life: carrying forward, learning the discipline: this is where the victory lies!

Conclusion: (The need for heroes:)

The world is waiting for people who will be filled . . . and go on being filled . . . and let God simply LIVE IN AND THROUGH THEM!

[One of the great Christians of modern day times was Methodist missionary to India, Dr. E. Stanley Jones.

As a lad in his teens (17) he was converted under the rugged ministry of Evangelist Robert J. Bateman (who went down on the Titanic.)

Stanley went on to seek and claim the experience of entire sanctification. He began to read Hanna Smith's book *The Christ's Secret of a Happy Life*, and on page 42 the Holy Spirit said: "Now!" Stanley obeyed, and was assured of the fullness.

He testifies that it saved him from the extremes of emotionalism and of rationalism. Stanley was "all out" for God— with no holds barred.

He professed to being called to preach— but forgot his outline in his first sermon and left the pulpit, dumbfounded. But before he got to his seat, he felt he should give his testimony; and a young man came forward and was converted [— and later entered the ministry.]

But Stanley wanted to be "being filled" with the Spirit! He told of how as a student at Asbury, in a dorm-room prayer meeting, the Holy Spirit moved in in a way that Stanley had never known before— and never knew quite the same way again.

He was "spirit (Spirit) intoxicated!" for three or four days. After a day or so the emotion almost totally wore off; but there was a sense of God's Presence that swept the entire community.

Every student in that Christian college professed to a right relationship with the Lord, along with scores of people from the community.

And for Stanley, that filling became the touchstone for a life of living in the fullness— depending on the fullness— again and again breaking into the fullness of the Presence of the Lord.

He declares he did not live on "mountaintops" or speak in tongues— did not know extremes of emotions. He simply lived in the fullness of the Presence.

He was elected a Bishop of his church— the highest honor that could be offered— and graciously declined so that he could continue a missionary in the poorest country of the world that he knew.

He touched thousands of lives.

He spoke here in 1949— and I still remember his text!

The Dynamic of Fullness

He was controversial. He was wrong many times. He said himself that there were times when he went on his own judgment and failed.

Stanley Jones learned to live in the dynamic of being filled with the Spirit. He knew his crisis of being sanctified. He had his mountaintop experience(s) of full assurance. And then he simply lived in the expectancy and the dependency and the obedience of the Spirit-filled, Spirit-dominated, Spirit-saturated life! When you looked at E. Stanley Jones you saw an ordinary man. When Stanley Jones spoke and acted, somehow Jesus was exalted!

THE WAY GOD INTENDS THAT WE LIVE IS IN THE EXPERIENCE OF THE FULLNESS.

THE WAY WE KNOW, AND CONTINUE TO EXPERIENCE GOD'S FULLNESS IS THE LIFE OF CRISIS, AND CRISES . . . PLUS WE NEVER GROW BEYOND THE LIFE OF DAY BY DAY OBEDIENCE.

Do you know the fullness of the Holy Spirit just now? Have you made a complete surrender of your will to God? Are you continuing to walk in dependency on Him?

#270 Fill Me Now

Kingdom Priorities

Kingdom of God Series, Part 5 of 6

1. [The Spirit of the Kingdom](#)
2. [Heroes of the Kingdom](#)
3. [Laws of a Righteous Kingdom](#)
4. [Kingdom Exploits](#)
5. **Kingdom Priorities**
6. [Worship the King of the Righteous Kingdom](#)

October 2, 1988 (also April 5, 1992)

Matthew 6:33 "Seek ye first the kingdom of God ... "

(Service of Holy Communion)

Intro:

One of the difficult things for Protestants is grasping the great importance of the sacraments of the church. Of all the means of grace, the sacraments of baptism and communion are possibly understood the least. [Our fierce American/Protestant independence makes us want to reject anything that looks like "formalism" or sanctimonious hocus-pocus. But in a blanket rejection of the "mysterious side" of our faith we throw away literally hundreds of years to which we are heirs as much as any Christians anywhere!]

Our text this morning as we prepare to share together in the sacrament of Holy Communion is of the most powerful promises in Jesus' teachings. It is the text from the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:33 "Seek ye first the kingdom of God..." There is a strong correlation with this text and coming with God's people to share the sacraments Jesus has commanded for the church.

Look at the text:

I. SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM OF GOD

- A. A challenge to take God's word against all other voices, including the word of our pagan world.

The text comes to grips with the basic conflict that we see as: Christian faith and "flesh."

[It answers the question, 'When push comes to shove, and you must decide "Shall I compromise on my moral principles just a little bit and eat, even if I know what I am doing is immoral? or, Shall I obey what I know Jesus wants me to do even when it will cost me cold hard cash?" WHO WILL I PUT FIRST? ME ... OR HIM?]

1. One view: flesh is "evil" and must be mortified. Nothing that is enjoyable can be holy. Black clothes; etc.
2. Another view: flesh 'does not connect' with faith; so what we do does not matter so long as we have "standing" with God (antinomianism)
3. The clear scriptural word is: Somehow the flesh must become the vehicle of expression of the spirit.

We hear quoted: "...they that are 'in the flesh' cannot please God" But also we read, "I beseech you ... present your bodies a living sacrifice" and that is "flesh!"

...and Paul writes of Christians: (Rom 8:) "Ye are not in the flesh but in the Spirit if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you!"

- B. MAKING THE FLESH SERVE THE SPIRIT: this is the whole of practical Christianity. It isn't that we don't need material things.

1. God knows what we need! We do need clothes, food, etc. So it becomes a matter of trust! Not presumption. Not foolish laziness: "I'll pray all the time and God will supply the rent money and I won't have to work!" but rather: "in the choices of life I will deliberately seek to do what God will have me do, regardless of what the cost may be!"

2. If we will seek God's grace, He will provide for us BOTH to live IN Him and FOR Him, AND to make our way in this physical world.

[Transition to "Sacrament" and connection with text:]

But that is where 'means of grace' come in, and particularly the sacraments:

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SACRAMENTS AS MEANS OF GRACE

As I speak about the importance of sacraments as 'means of grace' let me raise some very simple questions:

- A. What is grace? Grace is unmerited favor of God; grace is that which bestows God's great LOVE on us; grace is God's attitude of forgiveness toward the sinner; grace is a quickening and strengthening of life within the soul.
- B. And means of grace are just that: the ways and means, the vehicles or channels by which God bestows His LOVE on our hearts. And what are the 'means of grace?' My list may not be complete, but I submit seven:
 1. Word of God; and with this I include the faithful the preaching of the Word, as well as reading in order to obey God's will.
 2. Prayer is probably the primary means of grace; and prayer combines with power with the use of the Word.
 3. The Fellowship of God's people is a significant and powerful means of grace. God never intends for us to make our way to heaven independent of other individuals, or of other families, or even other groups of believers. God intends that we bear one another's burdens.
 4. Corporate worship, in the large groups or celebrations, in the smaller groups united around a lesson or a ministry (congregations,) as well as in the accountability groups of prayer and sharing (cells,) is a means of grace.
 5. Personal worship may be the same as #2, prayer; but it involves the carrying forward of life in the spirit of 'the living sacrifice.'
 6. Wiley lists the Sabbath as a means of grace! It was introduced at the time of man's creation, and belongs to mankind generally and perpetually. Personally, I am convinced that there is great spiritual power waiting to be released in the

lives of the people who can tap the resources of the Lord's Day by observing it joyfully, not in bondage, but in rest and worship and refreshing.

7. But the last 'means of grace' I would mention are the sacraments of the church that were instituted by Jesus.

C. What are 'sacraments?'

We use the term 'sacrament' to signify an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given to us, ordained by Christ Himself as a means of receiving that grace, and as a pledge or assurance of Christ's promise. From the earliest times, the sacraments have been understood by the church to be religious rites that carry the most solemn obligation of loyalty to Jesus Christ and His Church.

1. The RC church teaches seven (7) sacraments: baptism, the Lord's supper (or "mass"), confirmation, ordination, extreme unction (or 'last rites'), penance (or 'confession'), and marriage.
2. All Protestant churches recognize but two: baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Sacraments are pledges of loyalty to Jesus Christ; they are testimonies that mark Christians as separate, different from those who do not believe.

- D. It is vitally important that we reach out for God's grace in every way we can. [Perhaps we do not take seriously the parables of Jesus when He warned us that it is mortally dangerous to have talents and not use them!] We are responsible not only for what we are, but for what we might be by God's free gifts of grace!

Along this line John Wesley once said: (in 1736) "I think the rock on which I had the nearest made shipwreck of the faith was the writings of the Mystics; under which term I comprehend all, and only those, who slight any of the means of grace." GFH, p541

In other words, Wesley said that even people who seem to be so very, very spiritual nearly led him astray when they picked out which means of grace they would adopt, and which they would avoid. Wesley was saying 'I want to be faithful to God through Christ's church!'

- E. And if you wonder what John Wesley thought the 'true church' consisted of, here is a quote from H. Ray Dunning: "There were two major means that Mr. Wesley seemed to identify as constitutive of the church: the pure Word of God preached, and the sacraments duly administered. This puts him squarely in the Reformation tradition." GFH p542

III. COMMUNION IS A SYMBOL OF THE FLESH SERVING THE SPIRIT

- A. The salvation Jesus has provided is NOT (simply) a "spiritual salvation!" It is a TOTAL salvation. It will not be complete until we have a glorified BODY.

Jesus died on a very real cross. Jesus literally put His BODY on the altar for our salvation. And thus He became our very LIFE!

- B. Jesus expects us to glorify Him IN OUR BODIES! That is, not just "spiritually" but in the expression of His love in day- by-day living!

He wants us to give very real water and food and clothing to real people in His name! He wants us to flesh out His Presence by the way we live!

- C. That is why He wants us to use real bread and wine at His table, in His sacrament! Coming to the table of the Lord in faith is coming to that meeting place of spirit and body: it is acknowledging that Jesus really did DIE for us; it is saying that we will live in Him and by Him.

(Text) May this communion be a means of grace to us all: May we reaffirm the reality of the Christ-faith And may we pledge OUR FLESH TO SERVE HIS SPIRIT!

Worship the King of the Righteous Kingdom

Kingdom of God Series, Part 6 of 6

1. The Spirit of the Kingdom
2. Heroes of the Kingdom
3. Laws of a Righteous Kingdom
4. Kingdom Exploits
5. Kingdom Priorities
6. **Worship the King of the Righteous Kingdom**

October 9, 1988

Intro:

We come to the close of this brief series in which we have defined the Sermon on the Mount as the constitution of the kingdom of God, the Church of Jesus Christ.

We have looked at the Beatitudes as the spirit of the kingdom; we have seen that the heroes of the kingdom are those who live in that spirit, regardless of the cost. We have regarded the holy law of the kingdom, that it is written on the hearts of the king's loving servants; and we have examined the priorities and promises of the kingdom: and we believe that if we seek the kingdom of God first, God Himself knows what we need and will provide it.

Last week we looked at the entrance requirements for the kingdom; and we know that Jesus Himself says, "The gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life."

But there is one important truth that the Sermon on the Mount conveys that cannot fully be measured by its words. For these words were spoken by the King of the kingdom Himself!

The impact of these words reflect the powerful Personality of the One who humbly sat down on a hillside and taught His disciples. Here was the lowly Nazarene, the carpenter's son, the servant. But somehow the light of divinity shone through that

day in the authority, and the regal bearing of the Son of God as He spoke of His kingdom come to earth.

And so the people were amazed not only at what Jesus had said, but what they could sense of His power and authority— they were deeply moved by the KING of the kingdom!

I. JESUS IS THE KING OF THE KINGDOM!

THESE WORDS (THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT) ARE VALID ONLY IN THE VALIDITY OF THE ONE WHO SPOKE THEM.

- A. He proved it by His AUTHORITY: "Ye have heard it said, but I say unto you...!"

Christ's kingdom, the POWER to make it work, and the GLORY which sets it apart from all other pretenders to universal authority, springs from the authority and command of Christ's own Person. "All power is given unto Me in heaven and on earth!"

- B. He proves it by His CHARACTER: The Beatitudes are a profile of the character of the King of the righteous kingdom.

Every kingdom must have a sovereign. And in an absolute monarchy, the character of the realm takes on the character of the ruler.

Jesus Christ embodies the spirit and truth of the Sermon on the Mount. If we want to see what heaven will be like; if we have the faith to see 'the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord' here on earth, and wonder what that will be like: here is the key, the clue: IT WILL BE LIKE JESUS!

II. JESUS WAS KING AS HE WALKED THE EARTH IN THE DAYS OF HIS HUMILIATION

Even then His glory shone through, and could not be denied:

I (we) cannot fully imagine what the humanity-deity of Jesus involved in His own consciousness, or how He appeared to His disciples. But from the very beginning of the incarnation, this glory shone through on significant occasions.

- at Bethlehem, in a stable, the glory of the Lord shone round about; kings bowed low, and offered up gifts.
- here on the Mount the multitudes were dumbfounded
- as Jesus walked on the water
- in the miraculous draught of fishes [Peter: "Depart from me!"]
- the mysterious transfiguration on Mt Tabor

III. JESUS IS KING JUST NOW

...IN THE AGE OF THE CHURCH MILITANT

- A. This glory, coming from the REGAL AUTHORITY OF JESUS CHRIST, fell on the Church at Pentecost:
 - tongues of fire (the symbol— each saw on the other's heads!)
- B. JESUS was the central theme of GLORY that inaugural day of the Church; He was the theme of Peter's sermon when 3,000 believed and identified with the Church
- C. This same GLORY is available to the Church, if we are in contact with the living King, for we are in the Pentecost Age. The Spirit is available to those who want Him more than anything else.

God is not capricious. Jesus said: "All authority is given to Me: Tarry YE in the city of Jerusalem until ye be endued with POWER from on high!"

IV. JESUS IS THE ETERNAL KING!

WE HAVE JUST A GLIMPSE INTO THE REGAL GLORY THAT SHALL YET BE REVEALED:

The Bible gives us a glimpse into the glory of Jesus Christ yet to be revealed.

1. We may speak lightly or casually about the Second Coming, but if we were suddenly to be ushered into the Presence of the Risen Savior we would experience something very close to excruciating pain along with the joy; for we would see an almost unbearable

Worship the King of the Righteous Kingdom

glory! - and certainly it would be unspeakable! it would be something beyond our casual or 'take-it-for-granted' egalitarian attitudes.

2. In Revelation 1:8-17 we get just a hint at what we are in for when we see Jesus.

Here is John, the beloved, the one who knew Jesus best, humanly speaking. "The disciple Jesus loved!" When he glimpses the risen, glorified King he wrote: "I fell at His feet as a dead man!"

CONCLUSION:

What may we do about this Savior who spoke with authority?

1. We may worship Him!

How seriously do we take our public worship? Do we think first NOT as to what it does for US, but how together we honor the KING?

We cannot truly have the kingdom, and leave out the KING from the absolute center of our lives.

This is my quarrel with "Marches for Peace" and "Walks for Hunger"— and all the other GOOD things that are scheduled in conflict with the traditional times of worship, almost as if by design the WORSHIP is superseded by "something more important for the moment," —as if our week-by-week worship is not the most important corporate act that we, the church, can offer to the King!

2. We may swear to Him our allegiance forever! Psalm 2 says: "Kiss the Son!"

Jesus came by the lakeside where Peter and Andrew were washing their nets and said: "Follow Me!" It cost them their reputations, their routine, their comfort— and their very lives. But they saw in Jesus the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, and they followed Him, and they see Him in His glory!

Has Jesus come by the place where YOU labor? Will YOU follow Him, and own Him as YOUR King forever? He will be absolute Ruler of all this Universe! You can depend on it! Can He be Ruler of YOUR life this day?

[EH] #52 *Ye Servants of God*

New Way to Walk

October 9, 1988 PM

Ephesians 4:17-5:2

INTRODUCTION

Look again with me at one of the Golden Chapters. There is no short cut to spiritual power, but also there is no limit to how high and deep and strong we can grow in God's love! (As Paul exulted in Ephesians 3:20- He is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think!)

I. We Can LISTEN TO THE HOLY SPIRIT (verse 17-19)

("... to comprehend with all saints [the dimensions of] God's love!")

There is a contrast on every point in the two "walks:"

A. The Gentiles are insensitive to God's leading because:

1. A WRONG POINT OF VIEW (v 17)

"the futility" [vanity] of their mind is a self-centered, UN-faith point of view. They are incapable of really trusting Romans 8:28!

2. A LIMITATION OF UNDERSTANDING (v 18)

"their understanding is darkened" (II Timothy 3:7 "Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.") In spiritual ignorance about what LIFE is all about because "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom!"

3. A DAMAGED CAPACITY TO GIVE/RECEIVE LOVE (v 18)

"hardness (or blindness) of heart" ... An inability to really LOVE because the world usually mistakes "love" for a good feeling (instead of giving, and living for the one who is loved); until there must be an ever-increasing thrill (v19) "become callous, given over to every kind of impurity with greediness")

B. But (in contrast Paul says) YOU have not so learned Christ!

1. Instead of vanity (or a selfish POINT OF VIEW) we are (2:6) "SEATED WITH CHRIST IN THE HEAVENLIES!"

Now of course this doesn't mean we are literally carried up to heaven, from whence we look down on all the troubles of the world.

2. Instead of spiritual ignorance we have received (1:17-19) THE TEACHER HIMSELF! The Holy Spirit will guide us into truth!
3. Instead of LUST and SELFISHNESS we receive (3:19) THE LOVE OF CHRIST! The capacity for real love!

II. We Can LIVE DAILY IN THE HOLY SPIRIT (verse 22-29)

(...and let "faith" filter down into everyday life!)

The contrast carries forward:

A. The walk of the "Gentiles" is represented by the "old self" (v 22) "which is being corrupted with the lusts of deceit"

B. But Christians have a renewing available (v 23:)

1. (25) Honest in our dealings with fellow-Christians: MORE than merely not lying; this means praying for one another; it means leaving sham and pretending. It means the risk of friendship.
2. (26) Can this mean HEALING HURT FEELINGS?? We must let the Holy Spirit cleanse us daily from the hurts and cuts and bruises of the spirit before they fester into sores and cancer!
3. (28) OPEN OUR EYES TO THE DOCTRINE OF VOCATION
By "vocation" I mean bringing the Holy Spirit into my everyday living! IS MY LIFE-WORK SANCTIFIED?

- a. (v 28) This included doing an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. "Let him labor!"
- b. But this is deeper than just honesty in work; it means that we do whatever we do AS CHRISTIANS! We are to bring glory to God by

the way we go about our work!

I've spoken before about the hazard of a TGIF ("Thank God It's Friday") mentality ... when we live only for the time we have to use 'selfishly.' Certainly we enjoy rest and vacation time and renewal. But we need to say TGIM, too! And we need to be alive during working hours—listening for the Spirit's leading. It is less than LIFE when we put any segment of our time merely "on hold."

- c. A Christian who has this doctrine of vocation will be a benediction to her/his family! Regardless of what kind of work he does, there will be respect. [The dignity of a man who knows what he is doing and takes great pride in his work. Multiplied when that person is a Spirit-filled Christian!]

Henri Amiel said: "The religion of a child depends on what mother and father are, and not on what they say. The inner and unconscious ideal which guides their life is precisely what touches the child; their words, their remonstrance, their punishments, their bursts of feeling even, are for him merely thunder and comedy; what they worship, this is it which his instinct divines and reflects." We need to live daily in the Spirit.

III. We Can LOVE BY THE INDWELLING SPIRIT (verse 30 - 5:2)

- A. Love is NOT (primarily) something we FEEL. First of all, it is what we center our lives around— what we really LIVE for!
- B. (v 31) The SPRINGS of love must be KEPT clear. We dare not let any of these things ("bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander ... all malice— ill will) find a home in our thinking; we dare not let them stay awhile until they begin to fester.

The feelings of frustration must never be denied. But neither can we tolerate them! How do we deal with them? We confess them! We bring them to the

blood! Simply we need to bring them to Jesus, to the Holy Spirit, to the blood!

CONCLUSION:

Love like this is the most powerful thing in all the Universe!

At the beginning I said: "There is no short cut to spiritual power, but also there is no limit to how high and deep and strong we can grow in God's love!"

If we will deliberately walk in love— which is the same as walking in the Spirit— God is able to (Ephesians 3:20) DO EXCEEDING ABUNDANTLY BEYOND ALL THAT WE ASK OR THINK!

When we walk like this, we walk in fellowship with Jesus by His Spirit. (We PLEASE, not GRIEVE the Holy Spirit!)

When we walk like this, we walk in fellowship with one another (We embody Christ's spirit, the spirit of kindness.)

When we walk like this, we overcome in the evil day (6:13)

When we walk like this, NOTHING CAN KEEP US FROM GOD'S VERY BEST!

#68 (EH) *I will serve Thee because I love Thee*

The Church and Its Pastor

The Church and Its Pastor

MORNING STAR BAPTIST CHURCH

Annual Pastor's Anniversary Banquet

October 15, 1988

Hebrews 11:6

Ephesians 4:32-5:2

Pastor and Mrs. John Borders, members of your families, Reverend Clergy, Honored Guests, and Brothers and Sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ:

Greetings! It is a privilege and an honor to be invited to speak to you on this seventh anniversary celebration of your relationship as pastor and people.

I am not an 'after dinner speaker,' and your committee and pastor know that already. Now I understand that after dinner speakers are supposed to be entertaining and even funny. Usually the time when I am funny is when I am seriously trying NOT to be!

For I am a college pastor, and everyone knows that college pastors are dignified! So please believe that I am dignified! And yet I must confess that I have gotten my biggest laughs sometimes when I say one thing to several hundred college students, and they hear something quite different! That is embarrassing. I don't know what I said that was funny.

I feel then like the young missionary that one of our 'adopted sons' told us about—he is a Mexican citizen—the missionary was learning the Spanish language, and had come to preach his first sermon 'on his own,' so to speak.

He decided the Lord wanted him to preach about the ninety and nine sheep and the one gone astray. But the word for "sheep" and the word for "bee" are similar

sounding in Spanish: "abea" and "ovea"; and you know our young friend got them mixed up.

So the poor Mexicans had to sit there and try not to laugh out loud in the young preacher's face while he told them about the Good Farmer who had ONE HUNDRED BEES; and when he went to count them he saw that there were only ninety and nine BEES in the fold, and one BEE was missing. And so on. And so forth!

I've never had a problem quite like that, to my knowledge. But I did have a problem with BEES once; or I should say, with ONE bee. I'd do well to forget about it ... but ...

So you see I'm dignified but it takes a little effort!

But I haven't really come to talk about ME this evening. And I haven't really come to give an after-dinner speech.

I want to talk to you about what is to me one of the most wonderful relationships in all the world— a relationship that is dear to my own heart: this relationship of a church with its pastor.

I. THE CHURCH AND ITS TASK

- A. A church is not quite like any other organization in the world. A true church, that is. We have a mission before God that calls us to holiness, and calls us to serve the present age our calling to fulfill. This encompasses FIVE TASKS.

I don't have any "notes" about these tasks, and I don't need any. YOU might divide the tasks differently— I have dear friends that word them differently. But I believe that the church must WORSHIP, and EVANGELIZE; the church must EDUCATE, and it must SERVE THE COMMUNITY; and last but not least, it is a holy function of the church to enjoy Christian FELLOWSHIP!

- B. But these five tasks can be laid aside or sidetracked. They can be sacrificed on the altar of "GOOD THINGS" which keep them from fulfilling the CENTRAL PURPOSE AND WILL OF GOD. We can neglect one or more as we over-emphasize others. But usually the temptation is to try to do God's work in the power and wisdom of the world alone. It is won-

derful to let the wisdom we have SERVE God. It is too bad when we think we know more than God, or think that God needs "correction" from science!

- C. The church often becomes enamored with other paradigms, other "models" if you will—of human endeavor or achievement.

From the world of the MIND: PSYCHOLOGY AND PERSONAL WORTH AND PERSONALITY 'ADJUSTMENT.'

From the world of ENTERTAINMENT: ARTISTIC CREATION AND ENTERTAINMENT AS AN END IN ITSELF— we can fall into the trap of trying to compete with TV in our services!

From the world of big business: CORPORATE MODELS OF BIG BUSINESS/ BUILDINGS/

[I certainly am not saying any of these is evil of itself; I AM saying they are not stopping places for the church.]

The church is understandably influenced and even to some extent shaped by culture and by other human factors. Every church is in some sense unique. [I know problems in my situation which would seem foreign to you in yours; and I am certain that you have burdens and challenges that I would know nothing about.]

Yet the true church is a living, breathing part of the Body of Jesus Christ. We have much more in common than we have that separates us. And you need, and I need—the whole Body of Christ needs to stay in vital touch with the Lord of the CHURCH! We are called to be IN THE WORLD, BUT NOT OF THE WORLD!

II. CHURCH AND PASTOR WORKING TOGETHER AS ONE

- A. The Lord has His Ways of keeping His church pure. And one of the key elements in this process of keeping us from lesser goals is a gifted pastor who seeks to be like Jesus Christ, supported by a church full of Christians who love him.

No pastor in his right mind would ever claim to be the reincarnation of Jesus, and I would not embarrass either Pastor Borders, or myself or any other

clergy here by holding us up as having achieved the full standard of what I am sharing with you. But still, the MODEL is Jesus Himself!

- B. In this "Jesus model" for pastoring are the three great titles of our Lord. Jesus was PROPHET, PRIEST, AND KING.

Bear with me, now— I am not suggesting that we set up the clergy as KINGS with little kingdoms in any way shape or form.

But the prophet is to call for justice, to proclaim the coming of the Lord, to make us uncomfortable until we are willing to line up with the will of God.

And the priest is to mediate between God and Man— and somehow to show us God's LOVE.

The KING is a little different; but a king calls the people to community— and a pastor-servant serves under the King to bring us into a community, a unity, a loving body of believers! AS OUR CHURCHES GROW WE NEED THIS KIND OF COMMUNITY-BUILDING! AND WE ALL SUFFER 'GROWING PAINS' AS WE BREAK THROUGH THE BARRIERS ONE BY ONE AND SEE OUR NEED FOR CHRIST-LIKE ORGANIZATION GROW!

- C. This is where the pastor-congregational relationship comes full into play. [I believe that often a church can make or break the man of God! My own testimony!] The pastor can lead the church into new areas of victory by gifts and graces, AS THE CHURCH MAKES THEIR PASTOR STRONG BY DEMANDING IN PRAYER THAT HE BE PROPHET, AND PRIEST, AND SHEPHERD. [I didn't say "king" there, but we must become a community of faith and love!]

CONCLUSION: A PRACTICAL VISION

HOW MAY WE PRAY FOR EACH OTHER? [How can I do much more than suggest in a brief sermon like this?] I assure you that the answer is prayer!!

1. Pray for a constant renewal of FAITH! We must pray as constant SEEKERS; and pray the prayer of FAITH. (Hebrews 11:6)

PRAY THAT YOUR PASTOR WILL PREACH WITH PROPHETIC AUTHORITY ...
and then pray for grace to believe with your feet! ((Psychology is fine-in its place, and it is great to be able to understand ourselves. But before we are "well balanced" and have "great self-images" we need to make sure we are right with God!))

2. We must pray for the SPIRIT OF LOVE; perhaps this is the most important part! (Ephesians 4:32-5:2)

PRAY THAT YOUR PASTOR WILL LEAD YOU IN WORSHIP UNTIL YOU SEE JESUS as you come together! {I'm sure that he does— and that you do! But nothing is more important than worship!} ((Entertainment is great!! I enjoy it as much as YOU do! But our churches are not just places to put on pageants, or hear great "sermons" or great "singers." We have to see Jesus!))

3. And finally, together we must pray for a constant renewal of HOPE! You have a wonderful name! MORNING STAR!

And I see an unlimited glory in your future as you dig into God's great resources!! PRAY THAT GOD WILL HELP YOU SHARE A VISION OF "MUCH FRUIT!!"

My verse for you, for "HOPE" is John 15:8, for it tells me that God Himself wants you to FILL THE FUTURE WITH HIS GLORY!

((The great corporate models of the business world are well and good as servants; no doubt many of you men and women are well-schooled in business techniques and management by objectives, or whatever. [I am NOT!] And I hope and pray that as you continue to grow your organization and your cash flow and all those aspects will keep pace. But God has a vision for Morning Star Baptist Church that exceeds all business models; God has a success for your church that together as pastor and people you can make an eternal difference in Boston, Massachusetts, and in the world-wide Church of Jesus Christ!))

A Gift of Caring

October 23, 1988 PM

Philippians 1:1-11

I. THE CHURCH IS FAMILY

"GRACE TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND THE LORD JESUS CHRIST"
(vv 1-2)

Paul's letter to the Christians at Philippi is full of love and a sense of "family." But the idea of community in faith, of 'family,' is more than coincidental. It is central not only to Paul's letters, but to the entire New Testament.

There are some systems of religion where the worship center or place of public gathering is about as cordial and family-like as the "friendly supermarket." [Maybe there are even Christian churches that SEEM like that!] People are civil, but what they do is no one else's business. This is not the way vital Christians worship.

Paul says that God is our FATHER. [The same emphasis Jesus taught in the Pattern Prayer.] When we come to Jesus for Life, we are adopted into the family, and are related one to another in Him. The people we worship with regularly become dear to us. But more, there is a blood relationship with every other born-again believer!

II. THE FAMILY PRAYS FOR ITSELF

"I THANK MY GOD IN ALL MY REMEMBRANCE OF YOU" (vv 3-5)

We Christians may be 'family,' but even in families love is never 'automatic!' We need to learn this lesson: God intends that we pray for each other! Paul wrote to remind the Philippians: "I am praying for you!" And he asked the Ephesians: "Please pray for me!" (Ephesians 6:19)

And when this 'sense of belonging' and 'family' before God is focused in prayer for others, it enhances the God-given love for our fellow-believers that is already there.

If you want a sense of "belonging," begin to pray for the body! And pray like Paul said he prayed: (I thank God for you every time I think of you!/ not criticism; I recall with joy the way we have shared in the Gospel; I have genuine affection— warm feelings in my insides!)

Prayer enhances love. I question whether or not it is possible to consistently pray for someone and hate him or her at the same time.

III. THE FAMILY PRAYS POINTED PRAYERS

"AND THIS I PRAY ... " (9-11)

HOW do we pray for each other? What IS intercession? Is it enough to mention the name and say, "Bless him!" "Bless her!" What do we mean by "bless?" Perhaps when we pray for a lot of people our mind simply passes over the names, we think of the people with kindness— but there are times that the Spirit draws and leads us to pray for certain specific people, with specific needs.

Paul's specific prayer for the Philippian Christians was for:

1. Increasing LOVE.

We dare not take love for granted at any level. We need to tell our husbands and wives— often. We need to stop and tell our little children, too. And when they aren't quite so cute and so manageable, we need to tell them, too! Especially so!

[I had a dear, Christian father. And yet this past week as Helen and I were talking I recalled an incident when my father was extra harsh with me when I was about sixteen. It really hurt! He never knew— and will never know now. He didn't mean anything bad. But I remember 42 years later!]

But this is true in the family of God, as well. We need to thank God for each other! Sure we have faults. And we know each other's weaknesses.

(Paul prayed also that his church family might have...)

2. ...Discernment to choose the best; and not just settle for what seemed to be good at the time.

The reason for this was that Paul always had in his mind that he would give an account for his life to God. And so in light of judgment, Paul prayed that his friends would have discernment to choose the best!

(Finally, at least 'finally' in this prayer, Paul prayed for his church family's...)

3. ...Fruitfulness! He wanted them to know the pure delight and joy of pleasing God, and bringing forth MUCH fruit!

"Fruit" is mentioned in at least two aspects in the New Testament in reference to believers: One aspect is the fruit of the Spirit, and has to do with the quality of the inner life and spirit, as well as the love with which we fill out our relations with God and fellow humans.

Paul wanted his family to be quality people: with the fruit of the Spirit manifest in their lives.

But the other aspect of "fruit" has to do with the multiplication of the Christ-life through bringing others to know the Lord.

IV. A CALL TO 'FAMILY PRAYER'

(Ephesians 6: 18,19 ... BE ON THE ALERT WITH ALL PERSEVERANCE AND PETITION FOR ALL THE SAINTS, ... AND PRAY ON MY BEHALF ...)

[Actually I move back a chapter to get the actual challenge from Paul in this final word, a call to prayer. (Paul has been writing about the 'whole armor of God,' and he closes by saying " ... pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints," ... which is clear enough, but then Paul adds, in the same sentence, "and pray on my behalf!" The great apostle needed, and asked for, and even begged for prayer!)]

Maybe we do already pray for each other a great deal! But with a special revival emphasis coming up in just three weeks from next Tuesday, I wonder if for those three weeks you might accept a word of concern from your pastor?

A challenge to care for one another in prayer;

1. A specific time frame: the next three weeks, particularly.
2. In a specific way:
 - a. Perhaps for a person you love very much; and that you believe loves the Lord, but could use some strong prayer support. For a short period of time, take this person as a project. Good health; good work; good praying.

Perhaps your husband, your wife, your room-mate, your brother or sister. Someone you love but don't usually think of as needing extra time in prayer.
 - b. Then also perhaps, for a definite spiritual need. Maybe an old burden ... a fresh look; a time of special intercession.
 - c. For yourself: for an opportunity to talk about Jesus. Not necessarily related directly to the first two prayer concerns. But just an opportunity— and the sensitivity to know when it comes!
3. Some "extra" prayer times. Mark Blachley will be calling the student body of the college to at least some means of extra prayer.

And I have asked that the church make the next three Wednesdays a time for special prayer of open-ness before the Lord with revival in mind.

The church will be open the next three weeks from 12 noon to 1 o'clock Wednesday. No scheduled service; just prayer around the front: altar and front seats.

It may just be the kindest gift that one person can give another— this gift of intercessory prayer! And I believe that God will honor our prayers. I believe He will bless Dr. McCumber and use him in a powerful way to meet our hearts. I believe He will equip us to carry forward Christ's work as we have never done before.

EH #63 Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me

The Formation of Faith

November 6, 1988

Titus 3:3-11

Introduction:

The most wonderful and rewarding assignment I can imagine is preaching to the Church. The main calling of the pastor-teacher is to "feed My sheep," as Jesus said to Peter. This is a task that I love. I want to be a growing Christian myself, and I want us to grow together in every aspect of God's grace.

But there may be a danger in a teaching ministry of assuming; assuming that everyone understands the basic, elementary, even introductory truth. It is good from time to time to say some of the things we all assume.

We need to understand that it is possible to grow **IN** grace, but it is **NOT** possible to grow **INTO** grace. (Illuminate?) In other words, we need to say from time to time:

I. "PEOPLE STILL NEED TO BE SAVED!"

(Text, verse 5) "(God) saved us through the washing of rebirth..." And also verses like John 3:3: "(Jesus: 'Unless one is **BORN AGAIN** he cannot **SEE** the kingdom of God' and 'Unless one is born of **WATER** and of the **SPIRIT** he cannot **ENTER** into the kingdom of God.' and 'You must be **BORN AGAIN!**'")

- A. This is **CONTRARY TO** the "wisdom" of our sophisticated society! You need to understand that you will be considered a fool by many so-called cultured people to talk about being born again, or being saved. It goes against the 'I'M OK/YOU'RE OK' truism of humanism.

For by the simple sense of the word "saved," if some are saved, then others are not saved.

At the very time when third-world countries are discovering God's saving grace through Jesus Christ, modern "Christian" denominations are

questioning the need for sending the gospel to other cultures. [Why interfere with their native customs and religions? Their idols or superstitions are equally true with Christian faith ...] "We" question the need for being saved because we have lost the clear understanding of what it means NOT to be saved... to be LOST!

[Zimbabwe report of Richard Menees, in Banket, Zimbabwe; a surging hunger after vital Christian faith.]

B. (BUT) ...it IS the clear language of the Bible.

In the text Paul reminds Titus of what "we were" before we were saved: it is a realistic look at the fact that people NEED TO BE SAVED! He could have made a much longer list, but Paul says three things about the unsaved:

1. To be unsaved is FOOLISHNESS. This kind of foolishness has little to do with intelligence, or grasp of facts and figures. Rather it has to do with understanding values.

This foolishness acts as if there is no God; it is disobedient to the One who loves us, and seeks our best. This foolishness is deceived, and spends energy and time and life and love in pursuit of satisfaction that never quite comes.

2. To be unsaved is LONELINESS. Paul speaks of spending life in malice and in envy. Apart from God's family and God's love, there is comparing our lot with others, and somehow we are always getting the short end of the bargain; we end up filled with hate: "hating one another."

3. To be unsaved is HELPLESSNESS. Paul briefly mentions here "being ENSLAVED TO VARIOUS LUSTS AND PLEASURES." The illusion of freedom apart from God's grace is just that: ILLUSION. The sinner may think he or she can quit and walk away from sin, and its guilt and its enslaving power.

But he or she cannot simply "quit sinning" and be a child of God.

PEOPLE NEED TO BE SAVED BECAUSE THEY ARE CAPTIVES OF SIN

[It may be elementary, but we need to say it: "People still need to be saved!" But we also need to say:]

II. "PEOPLE CANNOT SAVE THEMSELVES!"

- A. This is a bitter pill for us to swallow. PRIDE is such a peculiar thing! It seems as though the one who has the least to be proud about is the one who needs pride the most! And when it comes to admit that we are captives to sin and need a SAVIOR, we ALL seem to have trouble.

We want to say with the Rich Young Ruler: "Good Master Jesus, what can we DO in order to have eternal life?"

- B. We are helpless until God's grace draws near!
1. (Titus 2:11) "The GRACE OF GOD brings salvation!" How basic that is! God's Riches At Christ's Expense!
 2. Clearly nothing we have done/can do (verse 5) can bring us deliverance.
 3. This grace draws near (BECOMES VISIBLE) in the kindness and love of God (verse 4.)

[What basic and elementary things can we say about what being saved IS? Look again at the text:]

III. BEING SAVED MEANS WASHING AND RENEWING AND JUSTIFICATION AND ADOPTION

In short, it means being "set free."

- A. The EXODUS STORY is THE paradigm for salvation.

Here was a great body of people held captive in a land that despised them and made slaves of them.

They were in a captivity that wasn't really their own fault; they had been born into it. [Later on God's people were sent into captivity and bondage as judgment for deliberate sins. But here God's people were not yet formed

into a nation; they lay in miserable captivity, waiting to be set free and established as a chosen people, loved by their God.]

In their captivity they had heard about a great God who had made promises to their forefathers. But for all purposes they were dead in captivity until a miracle happened, and they were WASHED in the waters of the Red Sea of deliverance. And then they were RENEWED (or called into being as a people) at the Mountain of the Giving of God's LAWS.

A SACRIFICE OF ATONEMENT was inaugurated that looked forward to a coming PERFECT SACRIFICE. They were justified by sacrifice. And best of all, THEY BECAME GOD'S CHOSEN PEOPLE!

Here is washing and renewing and justification and adoption!

B. The CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST is the New Testament "Israel"

(I Peter 2:9-10) Speaking to the church: "But YOU are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now YOU HAVE RECEIVED MERCY!"

The church is made up of those who have been WASHED and RENEWED and JUSTIFIED and MADE HEIRS.

[Perhaps the last simple statement I ought to make from time to time is:]

IV. "PEOPLE STILL CAN BE SAVED!"

- A. It is true that we are saved into the community of faith. We become a part of the Body of Christ. But we are saved one by one as we respond to the "kindness of God our Savior" and when "His love for (us) appears!"

Illus: (!)

- B. We are born under prevenient grace, but "with our backs to God." Until we respond to God's love by an act of choosing, by a deliberate act of repentance and faith, we are NOT saved!

But when we DO respond we are WASHED, and we are JUSTIFIED, [{Romans 5:1}] and we are RENEWED (REGENERATED)[{II Corinthians 5:17}] and we are ADOPTED (MADE HEIRS ACCORDING TO THE HOPE OF ETERNAL LIFE.) [{Romans 8:15}] We are SAVED!!! We are brought into face-to-face fellowship with God.

(**Conclusion:**) I am going to continue to emphasize growing in grace. As God leads, I believe that will continue to be the center of my ministry. But please, let's never get too far away from the foundations of our faith! Don't try to GROW INTO grace! You can be saved, and you can KNOW it! Let us pray:

Lord God, You know if there is anyone here who has never made a clear-cut decision to belong to You, and let You wash them, and let you forgive all their sins, and bring them into your family!

If someone like that is here- help their faith just NOW! AMEN!

EH #85 *He Touched Me*

The Gift of Sabbath

November 13, 1988

Exodus 20:8-11 - Isaiah 58: 13-14

Introduction:

Just a few days ago, along with Helen, and Jim and Ruth Cameron, I experienced something very beautiful; something which as a Gentile I never expected to have the privilege to do. We were guests in a devout Jewish home on a Friday evening, and were invited into their family circle as they welcomed the Sabbath . . .

To preach on Sabbath observance is to potentially antagonize everyone; for many will think Sabbath observance went out with the Old Testament laws, while others will be certain that anything that is said is not enough.

But it is my abiding conviction that a proper observance of the Sabbath may well be a key to genuine spiritual awakening and revival, as well as being a deciding factor in salvaging family relationships, in establishing the experience of personal salvation. How you keep or desecrate the Lord's Day will have a profound effect on every other area of your life.

I. THE SABBATH IS A UNIVERSAL AND PERPETUAL PRINCIPLE

[It was incorporated into the very Creation of the world ...]

- A. It is first mentioned in Genesis 2:2.3 (where:) "God blessed the seventh day and set it apart ..."
- B. It was included in the Ten Commandments; it is a part of the Moral Code. As such it has two sides: [A "FROM" and a "TO"]
 - 1. It is to be a cessation from labor
 - 2. It is a time for honoring, recognizing God as the Source of Life (LIFE!)

II. THE PRINCIPLE OF SABBATH REST HAS DEGENERATED [ALL TOO OFTEN] INTO CONTROVERSY

[It seems that humankind has always had trouble with this Commandment; the arguments descend from "principle" to "rules" to "squabbling over petty details."]

- A. Which DAY, really, ought we to observe? ['God's SEVENTH was man's FIRST (first full day)', etc., but is this the real issue?]
- B. HOW SHALL WE OBSERVE THE LORD'S DAY?
 - 1. In times past the Jews multiplied rules; they became very legalistic ('sabbath-days journey,' etc.) [Yet they have preserved something of the rest, beauty, family stability]
 - 2. Many Christians have become harsh, legalistic, arbitrary in this matter: we, too have multiplied rules and have served OUR OWN INTERESTS in the process
 - 3. But a reaction to LEGALISM has caused many people to dismiss all idea of the keeping of a Sabbath. And with losing the Sabbath, we HAVE LOST A KEY TO SPIRITUAL HEALTH!

III. NEEDED: A REBIRTH OF OBEDIENCE TO (ALL) TEN COMMANDMENTS

AND, ESPECIALLY, A LOOK AT THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT AS A KEY TO REVIVAL

- A. Principles of Sabbath observance which apply in 1988:
 - 1. A cessation FROM normal labor: permitting time for spiritual things. If we habitually disregard this 6/1 ratio we sin against God, against our bodies, and against our relationships.
 - 2. Taking time FOR "spiritual things:" The Sabbath should make time for:
 - a. quality corporate worship
 - b. study of God's Word, and meditation thereon
 - c. God-blessed fellowship with loved ones (family, Family)
- B. Application of these principles in the light of scripture:
 - 1. This is NOT simply "Old Testament truth." The Sabbath principle is universal and perpetual. Matthew 12:8: "Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath."

2. We must seek to do God's pleasure on God's day (as the earnest of doing God's pleasure on all other six, too.)
3. "Call the Sabbath a delight!" A time when we can get better acquainted with God!

Conclusion:

- A. The Sabbath Day or Lord's Day must be a day that is blessed and set apart. There is no question, this is God's will for humankind.
- B. As we deliberately set out to honor God and keep His spiritual (and physical) laws, we shall find great soul health. We shall be "delighted in the Lord." [I am sure this is as much in God's delight in our intent as it is in the intrinsic benefits of rest and meditation.]
- C. I have a particular vision for this coming week that we call "revival;" [We don't value that word 'revival' as some of our brothers and sisters do. To them it is an awesome moving of God in a community in a way which most of us have never seen. Be that as it may;] my vision comes from Psalm 51:

May God grant us:

1. The creation of a clean heart
2. The renewal of a steadfast spirit
3. The Presence of God in our everyday living
4. The tangible JOY that must characterize genuine Christian living
5. May God sustain the purpose of our spirits to serve Him, for then:
6. We will teach transgressors; and sinners will be converted!

As a church we talk about gearing up to reach our world, our community, global and local. We are trying to get programs and materials and wise actions in place that will serve to reach those who don't yet know Jesus as Savior.

BUT REVIVAL BEGINS WITH GOD'S PEOPLE, WITH GOD'S WORK OF CREATION AND RENEWAL DEEP IN THEIR HEARTS. WHEN OUR LIVES HONOR GOD, HE WILL TRUST US WITH PRECIOUS HARVEST!

D. May I suggest a personal pledge of each of us to God:

I PLEDGE TO KEEP THE LORD'S DAY AS HOLY UNTO HIM. I WILL SEEK GOD'S WILL ON HOW I SHALL HONOR HIM ON HIS DAY. AS THE HOLY SPIRIT GUIDES ME, I WILL KEEP A CHRISTIAN SABBATH BY AVOIDING UNNECESSARY LABOR, AND BY DEVOTING TIME TO REST AND TO FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD, AND WITH HIS PEOPLE. XXX

Addendum: Having nothing directly to do with the morning message:

There may be some people here that are directly concerned with how to be sure that they are saved. I talked with two people this week who loved the Lord but only recently have come to the assurance that they have been forgiven all their sins, and born again of the Spirit, and brought into a personal relationship with God.

If that is where you are this morning I want to see you come into that assurance of salvation. You can be saved right now! And you can find assurance that God has saved you.

Will you pray with me 'The Sinner's Prayer'? [Will everyone help in this by praying along— in remembrance of the time when you came to the Lord, and as a re-affirmation of your trust in God's grace?]:

*'O God, Have mercy on me a sinner,
And save me for Jesus' sake.
O Jesus, I invite you to come into my life,
And I will make you LORD as well as Savior.
Thank You for dying on the cross for me;
Thank You for loving me;
Thank You for saving me. Amen.'*

If you believe God has saved you for Jesus' sake this morning, I want to pray with you and talk with you and give you some encouragement.

EH #78 *When He Shall Come*

Go in Debt this Christmas

The Word is Anticipation

ADVENT I - November 27, 1988

Romans 13:8-14 *"Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another ... salvation is nearer to us than when we believed"*

Introduction:

Up in the small bedroom of the parsonage, on the dresser is a pile of beautifully wrapped, odd-shaped packages. When the grandchildren come they always somehow make their way to that room. And the ones that can read look for names. The ones who can't read think that all the packages are probably for them.

Helen has been preparing for family Christmas. Nothing wrong with that. There has been some foresight involved. And not a little expense. I'm thankful for Helen!

[Transition: But what does that have to do with this text at hand? How is this an "Advent Text?" It is an Advent Text, and a beautiful one! The key word is "anticipation!" (and not "debt.") There are several 'Advent Facts' we need to face in this passage:]

I. IT IS NIGHT NOW, BUT DAY IS CERTAINLY COMING (11, 12)

- A. One of the recurring figures describing 'spiritual reality' is this concept of day/night, light/darkness. Do we need to be reminded that until Jesus comes, we are people of LIGHT, but we are living in a world of darkness: [v 12 "The night is almost gone" (but it is still night!)]
- B. In case you haven't noticed, the world in which we live is sick. The war for men's hearts has never been more keen. DARKNESS!

Where? Everywhere! On every front! No truth stands unchallenged! Drugs are just one example of the pandemic proportions of some of our major social problems.

In Florida (principally in the Miami area) in 1987 calendar year, 2,000 babies were born already addicted to cocaine. That is horrible. But I heard a government drug officer say that if the current figures for 1988 hold through the end of the year, that figure will be 10,000 babies born in south Florida already addicted to cocaine. (From seminar held at Georgetown University on the drug problem, November 1988.)

C. The text states: There will be a dawning!

II. CHRISTIANS ARE TO BE PEOPLE OF LIGHT, ANTICIPATING THE DAWN (11, 12)

- A. A. It IS an act of faith to believe this; it is something like Simeon and Anna.
- B. B. Anticipating the dawn means living by faith. It is believing that we can make a difference. God's people do not need to live in darkness! They can have God's light now! But what does this mean to you/me?
 - 'Can I save my marriage?
 - 'Can we save our families?
 - 'Can we reach into the darkness?

Faith says: We can! WITH LOVE WE CAN!

[But if we think of love as a 'warm fuzzy'- it may do some good- but that isn't what the world needs. And it isn't what our families need, either. How may we truly be 'people of light?']

III. HOW TO BE AGENTS OF THE DAWNING: "IN DEBT, IN TIME, IN CHRIST!"

(8 "owe nothing except love"; 11 "it is already the hour"; 12,14 "put on the armor of light; put on the Lord Jesus Christ.")

- A. IN DEBT "Owe no one anything ... except to love!"
 - 1. Acknowledging a debt of love. Paul began this letter to the Romans with a theme of obligation: (1:14) am debtor to the Greeks and the barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish; thus, as much as in me is, I am eager to preach the

gospel to you also who are in Rome!"

Our church (Nazarene) was begun with a vision of debt: ("I am debtor to every man, to give the gospel in the same measure as I have received it." -Bresee)

We are in debt for God's great grace, a debt we can never really repay. But we need to start paying; paying on the installment plan; and doing it in the "now."

2. To help us catch this idea of 'debt', here is a quote from Bertha Munro, originally published in the Herald of Holiness, with the title "I.O.U.":
 - "I owe you respect for your personality. You too are that climax of God's creation, made in His likeness. I owe you a right to your opinion. You may differ with me without fear that I shall raise a barrier between us if we do not see eye to eye. We can disagree and still be friends.
 - "I owe you belief in your integrity. Since I do, I shall put the best possible construction on your actions. I shall trust your words and deeds, even those I am unable to understand.
 - "I owe you honest treatment; I shall not steal people's good opinion of you. I shall voice the sort of comment on you and your actions that I should wish made on me.
 - "I owe you a "taking off place." Though I value your friendship, I shall not enslave your spirit nor bind you so closely to me that you will lose the wealth of other friendships, or even fail to develop your own best potentialities.
 - "I owe you thoughtful consideration. I will not steal your time when you are evidently busy, just because I have free time to "kill."

- "I owe you honest wages if I chance to be employer, honest work if I chance to be employed, honest measure and just weight in any case.
- "I owe you special help in time of special need: my hand, my ear, my voice. I owe you patience with what seems to me your stupidity or slowness. I owe you the identification of Golden Rule imagination. I owe you "love unfeigned."
- "I owe it to you not to push you down in order to lift myself. Rather, I owe it to you to see you forge ahead of me without any reaction of envy or jealousy- even to give you a push.
- "I owe you a good example, a Christian testimony. I owe you the gospel of Christ to the limit I possess it. I owe it to you to prove its power to the full, that God may challenge and encourage you by the sight of what He has done for someone else.
- "All this I owe you, and much more. I owe it to you not to fall behind with my payments. I shall always owe the abounding love that will meet those unforeseen and unexpected demands of the emergency and will save me from "Thou shalt" and "I must."

"Owe no man any thing, but to love."

B. IN TIME (11) "It is already the hour for you to awaken!"

1. It is the nature of Christians to think in terms of a great sacrifice; an heroic gift of self— off somewhere in the safety of tomorrow.

But as wonderful as that will be, we need to begin now, with the small, kind giving of ourselves in little packages of Christ-likeness. We cannot despise the importance of a smile when we don't feel like smiling. Of a deliberate word of encouragement. Of a helping hand when it isn't to be expected.

2. The key is DON'T WAIT BEGIN TODAY! It is human to put off important things to a deadline. But to delay here can be fatal. Just about every Christian has a horror story, if they only knew it! [of someone who they felt they should tell about Christ's love— who died before they obeyed their inner urging] But the biggest horror stories are those of unspoken love among family members and friends.

C. IN CHRIST " ... put on the armor of light; put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts."

1. "In Christ" means that Jesus Himself is interested in the things that matter. He will be involved in helping us pay our debt of love!
2. "In Christ" means a surrender to His will; a conscious seeking after Christ-likeness.

[How can we be realistic about this? Just what does "In debt, in time, in Christ" come out to practically?:]

3. WE MUST GO IN DEBT FOR OUR MOST PRECIOUS RELATIONSHIPS.

- a. If we want to save a marriage we must be willing to go in debt for it! (Not in money— but in SELF-GIVING!)
- b. If we want to "bring up a child in the way he/she should go" it doesn't come easily or cheaply!:
- c. The best gift any father can give his children; any mother can give her children— is a consistent, supportive, sincere love of their mother-/father. Our relationships will survive ONLY as we acknowledge this debt, and begin paying on it!

4. WE MUST PAY A DEBT OF LOVE TO OUR COMMUNITY.

- a. This is much, much more than "program" and "check-lists." (These can/will be useful at some point.) But do we even like people? Can we come to see them as Jesus sees them? Do we want them to be part of our lives?
- b. It seems something of a contradiction when we earnestly seek out better and more efficient ways to welcome new people into our

church and fellowship, when at the same time there are people already in our fellowship, already converted, that in their own minds are invisible; they feel shut out, isolated, not really a part.

I am not laying blame or finding fault— simply stating the way some people perceive our church (from within!)

- c. Part of the "debt of love" is to ask God for a heart to like people; for a willingness to reach out to others who may not have the same interests we have.

- D. WHAT GOOD CAN IT DO? Perhaps results aren't our direct responsibility. A debt is a debt.

But all the same it will make a difference! THE ONLY HOPE FOR OUR SICK SOCIETY IS A DRAMATIC CHANGE OF CHARACTER! And this change must start somewhere! Let it begin with anticipation of the dawning! Let it begin within YOUR HEART!! "Owe no man anything except love ..."

Conclusion:

People will be spending money, time, great effort to be "ready" for family Christmas. Within limits, that is good.

But in case you have forgotten, IT ISN'T SANTA THAT CHRISTMAS IS ALL ABOUT! And I'm afraid that not too many people will be concerned about getting ready for the dawning of the great Day!

THE ONE WE ARE WATCHING FOR IS THE KING OF KINGS! The morning we await is an eternal day! And (v 12) "The night is almost gone, and the day is at hand.") Our dream-world is passing away.

Are YOU going into debt to be ready ? [Text: Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves ... has fulfilled the law.]

Prayer: O Lord, Help us to awaken and put on the armor of light! Live through us and help us to truly be children of the dawning light. Amen.

EH #75 Jesus, My Strength, My Hope, or, EH #78 When He Shall Come

Advent Means Hope

December 4, 1988 ADVENT II

Romans 15:4-13 *"For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. . . ."*

Introduction:

ADVENT IS ALL ABOUT "HOPE." Hope is faith's eye peering into the unknown future. Faith is confidence that what God has promised He will carry through. Hope is living in the reality of that faith. Hope is what makes life worth the living. The absence of hope is the essence of hell.

I. OUR GOD IS A GOD OF HOPE

(Verse 13 "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.")

ADVENT SPEAKS TO US HERE, NOW, TODAY. It was not just those who lived in the darkness before Jesus came who needed to "look forward into salvation." We, too, very much live or die by "hope."

We say that we "are saved," and in a measure we know a present walk with God through Jesus Christ. We know that we have "been saved" through the sacrifice that Jesus made for us on Calvary, and our faith is rooted in the past. But we are not yet saved as one day we shall be.

Paul writes (in Romans 8:20-25): "The anxious longing of creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. ... For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth until now. And not only this, but we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For IN HOPE we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one hope for what he

sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it."

And John also write about hope. He says (in I John 3:2): "Beloved now are we the children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is."

We very much live, or we die, by our HOPE. But how may we be filled with hope? The answer is here:

II. THE WORD OF GOD IS THE SOURCE OF OUR HOPE

There is no abiding source of hope apart from God's own self-revelation.

- A. That self-revelation is complete in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. He is the Word of God. (John 1:1-5; Hebrews 1:1,2) The INCARNATION - God with us, God revealing Himself to us, God identifying with us- this is the heart of Christmas truth.
- B. The Written Word of God as we have it today is an incarnational miracle that reflects God's love in the Living Word, Jesus Christ; and results in the miracle of The Indwelling Word, where God Himself resides in and with His Church, and in the individual believers' hearts, Jesus carrying on His life and ministry through His Body on Earth.
- C. The VALIDITY of the Bible is NOT the question. There is a time and place to bring together arguments for the validity of the Bible. But this is not the time or place, so far as I am concerned. We spend a great deal of time and energy going over old arguments to prove the validity of the Bible, when what we need to do is to begin to obey what we clearly can know and understand of the Bible.

[Billy Graham tells of "the" turning point in his long and beautiful and fruitful ministry in the Word. In effect he said: 'I am not going over these things I cannot understand over and over. I believe this is God's Word, by faith. I will make it the authority of my life and ministry.' "The Bible says..." has become Billy Graham's hallmark. And God has honored his ministry perhaps more than any other living man.]

D. The AUTHORITY of the Bible for YOU/ME IS the question! It is the one authority that can make us abound in hope, and joy and peace in believing!

1. To make the Bible our authority involves perseverance. It is NOT 'an instant' thing. (The NIV calls it endurance.) It must be our way of life. Not a passing, six-week emphasis. Not a self-improvement scheme to bring us to 'success.' But somehow we must come to the Word with the passion of the Jew who binds his phylacteries on his forehead and wrist every day, who kisses the word when he enters a room, who meditates day and night in the Word.

[I cannot quote the rabbi verbatim, but an ancient Jewish maxim has it that blasphemy is when two Jews come together and DO NOT talk about Torah! "In His law he meditates day and night! Whatsoever he doeth shall prosper!" (Psalm 1) Perseverence!]

Is that the kind of perseverance you know?

2. To make the Bible our authority involves "(a united effort to) glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." (v 6)

III. THE WORD OF GOD OPENS TO THE SEEKER AFTER GOD

[The skeptic says "What IS truth?" and does not find it. The hungry heart says "Where is GOD?"]

- A. We have the awesome privilege of an open Bible. We cannot honor and obey what we do not know. And ignorance of the Word of God is not excuseable for us. There is a time and a place to wrestle with the great question: 'What will God do with the millions who have never heard the Gospel?' But that is NOT a valid question for you and for me! There may well be some excuse for people to whom the Bible is a total unknown.

But there is no excuse for our ignorance of the Written Word. Our ignorance is tremendously expensive, for it costs the kingdom of God many lost man-hours and man-years of labor. And our ignorance is potentially damning to us, if God holds us responsible for what we might have known.

B. B. We must study the Bible to know and be known of God.

1. Steve McCormick repeatedly asked the question in a chapel talk this week:
"When Jesus comes again, will I know Him?" And the question is also there:
"Will Jesus profess to know me?" The saddest words some men and women
will ever hear will be from Jesus: "Depart from me, you workers of evil, I never
knew you!"
2. Knowing 'the facts' is not enough. Intellectual curiosity is not enough. Even
knowing the truth is inconsequential unless there is a willingness to submit to
the authority of that truth. When the Magi came to the palace in Jerusalem, and
asked Herod's wise men about where the Messiah would be born, they came
up with the absolutely correct answer: the scriptures say- Bethlehem! But that
did not convert them, or give them personal hope.

C. Scriptures are the breath of life, or the sentence of death, depending on how we diligently
receive them.

Scriptures do not bring eternal life unless and until they testify of God and
until we are willing to come to Jesus that we may have life. (John 5:39-40:
"You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal
life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to
Me, THAT YOU MAY HAVE LIFE.")

Scriptures do bring us clear testimony to God's good will when we bring
submission, simple obedience, loving trust to what we hear God saying to
us: (John 7:17) "If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the
teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from Myself."

D. The living Word of God still has power to transform lives. [Walter Lahner died this past
year. I shall never forget the power of the Word, first to transform this man; Then to nur-
ture him, and powerfully develop him into a man of God, and a testimony to a whole coun-
tryside.]

CONCLUSION:

The Messiah did not arrive as a surprise to the faithful who had lived by every Word of God; who had trusted in scriptures. And even the Magi, with their limited revelation had a measure of HOPE. They had hearts to worship the true God, and their HOPE was vindicated.

And our HOPE can be steadfast and certain, too. But our HOPE must be founded on the sure Word of God!

Will you make the Bible YOUR handbook for life?

I am not asking now that you promise to "try" the Bible for a few weeks or months. I am not asking you to take a special graduate course. I am suggesting that unless you make God's written Word the standard for your life and living you will be like the chaff which the wind drives away! Only the one who meditates in God's law day and night can send down roots into HOPE!

The Bible is a best seller. It has never been more popular than it is now. But I am afraid that the Bible is also more and more a book that people are satisfied to know second hand.

But for those who open to the Word— the scriptures are written "that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Word we may have HOPE!" Life IS worth the living . . . to those who live by the Word of God.

But I would rather take my chances as one of the head-hunters of Papua New Guinea who has never heard of the Gospel, than to stand before God having had the wonderful privilege of an open Bible all my life, an open Bible which I had treated with disdain and contempt, considering it easy to master, considering it under my judgment, rather than the proper way: standing under its quick and powerful division of my innermost self.

PRAYER: Fill us with HOPE, O God of hope! Fill us with Yourself! Make Your Word to dwell in us richly! Amen.

No. 36 WS: *Open my Eyes, that I May See!*

A Promise of Immanuel

December 7, 1988 [also December 20, 1987]

Philippians 4:1-9 - Isaiah 41:9-10

Introduction:

We have been speaking this Advent about HOPE! And this passage in Philippians is 'an Immanuel passage!' It begins with the anticipation (3:20) "our citizenship is in heaven, from which we eagerly await for a Savior," and it ends with the statement, "THE GOD OF PEACE WILL BE WITH YOU!" Maybe that is why it is often read the Sunday just before Christmas.

[[This passage is also a favorite reading for general devotions. Christians young and old think "they" have discovered it new, all by themselves! It is one of the first "favorite passages" I discovered. My first, hesitating sermon as a teenager after I was given a Local Preacher's License was on the text: "Be careful for nothing!"]]

And at the beginning of this rich chapter is a short paragraph most of us simply hurry through and ignore. After all, what is a personal note, with names that are strange to our ears, doing here in such a wonderful cluster of promises?

Isn't it strange that right in the middle of a "divine passage" comes a plea for personal unity and harmony? Here is a very personal note along with names— a specific message to actual people! But can it be that the entire passage makes a cohesive whole, and that even this first paragraph "fits" perfectly? I believe it does! For [[part of the HOPE OF CHRISTMAS is . . .

I. A PLEA FOR AGREEMENT IN THE LORD

If we are waiting for Messiah, and our confidence is that He will come— then it is evident that we need to be at peace with God's people. And Paul mentions three specific members of the congregation at Philippi- (probably four, for 'yoke-fellow' was the common name 'Syzygus')- he says, "Eudia and Syntyche, please agree with

one another in the Lord! And Syzygus, you and Clement and the rest—help them! Bring them together in love!"

Why, do you suppose, this very down-to-earth, specific problem is mentioned in Holy Writ right alongside such a sublime hymn to love and joy and peace? Some reasons are :

1. Real life is that way! Good people can begin to get 'out of sorts.' The good people in Philippi NEEDED the admonition. We deal in absolute truth, and try to live by high principles, according to ideals and holy patterns. And yet real life is never quite exactly 'by the textbook.' And our sermons that seek to touch the stars have to deal with life right down here on earth where we live it!
2. Love is always a CHOICE. Even for born-again, sanctified Christians! We cannot simply depend on how we "feel," and so Paul could say: "Stop! CHOOSE to love one another! CHOOSE to agree in the Lord!" Christian love always depends on some kind of PREMISE of INTEGRITY. Christian love depends on people of good will, who themselves stop and think how others who disagree MAY just be God's good people, too. And so, real LOVE is somehow a willingness to "ascribe" that same level of pure motivation to those who differ from us in the Lord.
3. Note: THE CALL IS FOR AGREEMENT IN THE LORD! Not for perfect understanding or perfect unity in approach or all driving the same kind of cars . . . Or even voting the same ticket! But it IS a call for KINDNESS! Richard Foster, in the December issue of Christianity Today, says: "Any gospel that so focuses upon a future heaven that it leaves people firmly rooted in harshness, bitterness and despair is a half-gospel."

Do you agree with me that this first paragraph in Philippians 4 belongs there?

[[But ANOTHER facet of CHRISTMAS HOPE is . . .]]

II. A CALL FOR JOY IN THE LORD

- A. But having 'gotten the attention' of the congregation at Philippi, Paul gets back to his wonderful theme of Christmas JOY! And he really winds up with a "masterpiece" of a passage! It is one of the very richest passages of promise in the Bible. He begins with a call

for JOY; he climaxes with the assurance, THE GOD OF PEACE WILL BE WITH YOU!

But he starts by saying: REJOICE! It is a deadly thing to say: "Be funny!" It is almost as bad to say, "Enjoy!" Happiness, enjoying— comedy— are things that sort of "happen." But here Paul says: "Rejoice! And do it ON PURPOSE! It is the way that you are supposed to live— and it is NOT out of your reach! Live on the BOUNTY of God's great grace! Live in the sunlight of His LOVE!

The things that Paul has been writing about— are not just cold, intellectual matters. Knowing Jesus — having the mind that Jesus had — coming to fellowship in the Church— these are the basis for real JOY! Paul says 'Don't stop short of the reality! THAT is real JOY!' DON'T SETTLE FOR 'JUICELESS SALVATION!'

It isn't enough to live an outwardly holy life. We can't stop with just "being 'good'!" ("I've given up everything for Jesus! Poor me!") We have to keep on to the place where the joy of Jesus breaks into our everyday life and living!

Paul was writing this letter of love and joy from a Roman prison! And he was saying things like: "MY GOD WILL SUPPLY ALL YOUR NEEDS!" and "I CAN DO ALL THINGS THROUGH CHRIST WHO STRENGTHENS ME!" From a prison cell!

- B. Paul sees "JOY" as a deliberate CHOICE. WE ARE TO CHOOSE TO LIVE ALL OF LIFE IN CHRIST'S JOY!

[[Similar to Earl Lee's discovery of 'the cycle of victorious living' in Psalm 37]]

Christians are not to be anxious, careful, paralyzed by worry, but INSTEAD, (v6) "IN EVERYTHING BY PRAYER AND SUPPLICATION WITH THANKSGIVING LET YOUR REQUESTS BE MADE KNOWN UNTO GOD, AND THE PEACE OF GOD WILL KEEP YOUR HEARTS AND MINDS IN CHRIST JESUS."

[[But there is more. Paul is issuing a challenge to nobility and Christlikeness! STILL ANOTHER SIDE OF 'HOPE' IS GROWING! NOT JUST 'SITTING STILL' AND PASSIVELY WAITING!]]

III. A CHALLENGE TO GROW IN THE LORD

(Challenge to Nobility!)

We have to get used to living in a Palace! We are too easily settled into pursuing goals— goals that are too small for the souls of God's children! God wants us to have a soul that is too big to be at home with the TOYS of MERE materialism or mere EARTHLY power.

The Christian faith is not merely interested in partial victories and in making us "good." It wants us to be Christ- like! We are called to be sons and daughters of the KING! And so we need to be enrolled in the 'finishing school' of God's nobility so that we will be at least a bit 'at home' when we enter into His Presence. We are to BE HOLY so that we may have fellowship with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit right here and now as we walk along.

WE ARE TO LIVE BEYOND OUR OWN, LIMITED VISION!

God does not fellowship (in any depth) with people who are pinched and small and little in their love. God wants us to be "large of soul." He wants to walk with people who let Him develop our thinking.

IV. A PROMISE THAT AS WE WAIT GOD WILL 'BE THERE' FOR US!

- A. Here is where the Christmas part comes into this prison epistle! IMMANUEL! "The God of peace will be with you!" Not just when you die—but AS you AGREE IN THE LORD, and AS you REJOICE IN HIS SALVATION, and AS you STRETCH AND GROW IN HIS GRACE, HIS NOBILITY, if you please— you will find that HE IS WITH YOU!

[Which brings us also to our passage from Isaiah: (Here is the 'Advent theme: Advent is anticipation of God's promised Messiah, and Advent is preparing our hearts to make Him room. It isn't really Christmas yet! And it never IS Christmas if we don't make proper preparation!)]

B. Isaiah underscores TWO wonderful Christmas-time truths for us: (1) the immediacy of Immanuel; and (2) the hope that will not disappoint.

1. The truth of Immanuel: Jesus really DID come! In the flesh! And He really IS coming again! He is literally going to come and change this world completely. But right NOW— even as we wait for Him— JESUS IS HERE!

Isaiah's message to his generation was: Messiah will come! Count on it! But "Fear thou not, for I AM with you!"

2. The hope that will not disappoint! At Christmas time we NEED a hope like that!

One reason— perhaps THE reason that Christmas is sad and trying to so many is — UNREASONABLE EXPECTATIONS! Remembering traditions that never were as bright as we recall them— and hoping that somehow . . .

But Isaiah says: Even while you're WAITING, you'll be strengthened! (40:29-31 "He gives strength to the weary. And to him who lacks might he increases power. Though youths grow weary and tired, and vigorous young men stumble badly, Yet those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary.")

And . . . EVEN WHILE YOU'RE WAITING FOR HIM, HE IS WITH YOU!!

#173 As With Gladness Men of Old

Stewards of the Mysteries

December 11, 1988 - ADVENT II

I Corinthians 4:1-5 Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.

Introduction:

Christmas is a magic time. A time when so many hopes and expectations and little family traditions come together. But sometimes the very most profound mysteries lie hidden just beneath the surface of the things we think are quite insignificant.

When you think of long-ago Christmases, do you think of your little brother coming down the church aisle with your old bathrobe and a tinfoil crown? — the lights are turned down and the choir is singing: "We three kings of Ori-and-tar.." And at my church Chuckie Whitney's big sister that bossed all us little kids around always got to be Mary and wear a BLUE shawl— she looked so holy and we all knew she was a real biddy! ... And I was terrified that I'd forget my lines ... and yet through it all the idea came through of the wonder of A STAR, and of A LONG, LONG JOURNEY, and of AN ASSURANCE THAT THIS REALLY WAS THE CHRIST- CHILD IN THIS MOST UNLIKELY PLACE.

It is good and healthy and proper to have these mixed memories. But we do remember that the central wonder of Christmas is not the beauty of lights reflecting on new-fallen snow, or a brand new train puffing around the tree- as genuinely splendid as those memories are. We haven't gotten mixed up! We know that the real heart of Christmas lies much, much deeper than that.

For the wonder of Christmas is the gift of Life. It is Christmas that makes Calvary and the Resurrection and the Ascension and Pentecost and the Parousia all possible.

Our text speaks of really deep truths. Advent deals with mystery— and when we have to do with God, or more properly, when God begins to have to do with us, where is always mystery.

I. THE JOY AND WONDER OF THE MYSTERIES OF GOD

Somehow we love mystery. We are fascinated by what we cannot fully comprehend. That is, we love mystery until we begin to talk about the Bible and to wrestle with the "how to's" of salvation. Then we say foolish things like, "How can I be expected to believe what I cannot understand?" But we need to see that there are some things that we can KNOW that we will NEVER understand!

A. By His very nature, God is beyond our comprehension. Finite creatures can never encompass God's infinity. So Infinity must stoop to speak to us where we are. What is exactly what God has done! And as God reveals Himself, we behold many mysteries:

B. The mystery of Creation. This is a GENERAL REVELATION. It does not of itself reveal God's love or salvation. But the in Psalm 19 we read: "The heavens declare the glory of God..."

Creation is full of wonder; and we may say with conviction: "This my Father's world!" And yet in the battle between so-called "creationists" and "evolutionists" we might do well to acknowledge THE MYSTERY WHICH IS OUR GOD'S HANDIWORK. But that is not what I am concerned about this morning.

C. The mystery of REVELATION. [God speaking to you and me.] God has always had a way of communication to human beings. And it is through this MYSTERY, of God speaking to man- first by prophets, and by visions, and, as the writer of Hebrews says, in sundry manners and diverse ways, finally gave us the complete Word in His Son, the living Word, and in the written word, which reveals the Son.

REVELATION, The Bible, speaks of the (1) MYSTERY OF THE INCARNATION. In Ephesians 3:4 Paul speaks of THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST. Kenosis- Philippians 2:5-11. John 3:16. These passages roll off our tongues so easily;

they declare wonders which we can not grasp either now or throughout eternity!

The mystery of Christ, of God coming down to be one with us, identifying with us (John 3:16) is no narrow love, confined to the Jews, or to the Christians. It is a universal, world-wide love of God. Look carefully: this is part of the mystery; as Paul says (Ephesians 3:4) "...through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."

REVELATION, the Bible, reveals THE MYSTERY OF SALVATION. God's perfect, impeccable, unblemished holiness meets with His sympathy, and forgiveness and mercy and kindness and love precisely at the Cross of Calvary.

But all these mysteries combine in the mystery that can never be explained: GOD LOVES ME!

II. OUR RELATION TO THE MYSTERIES OF GOD

"Let a man regard us as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God."

A. The wonder of Christmas, the mysteries of God and salvation DO exist for our benefit and enjoyment. BUT THEY ARE NOT FOR OUR BENEFIT ALONE. In fact, the text tells us that we exist to see that these mysteries become available to all people. We are to be: "Servants of God, and stewards of the mysteries."

B. It is easy to "get used to the idea" that GOD LOVES ME! And pretty soon we get to thinking that He OUGHT to love me, I'm sooo nice! We have heard it all so many times before. We have gotten used to it. And we have come in our heart of hearts to think that God SHOULD love us! After all, aren't WE the "good guys?" WE are SO wonderful!

It is easy to take what amounts to a patronizing attitude toward Christmas— WE GIVE A PERFUNCTORY 'BAH HUMBUG' ABOUT HOW 'THE WORLD' DOESN'T KNOW ABOUT THE TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS. WE DO, OF COURSE! [We all but invented it!]

This presumption— this self-centered attitude was one of the principal mistakes which the Jews of Jesus' time had made. Called to be God's servants and stewards of His love, they instead began to think of themselves as simply the prime recipients. They thought they deserved God's best for themselves. All others were "the adversaries!"

- C. It is hard to sort this out, especially when we have been brought up, as it were, 'on the inside of great truth.' God's people ARE highly favored. We are a privileged people. God intends that we should enjoy Him, and that we should revel in our worship, in His Presence.

But we are also to remember that we do not have the monopoly on God's love. We are to remember that God loves everyone as much as He loves us; that Jesus died for ALL people.

- D. And we are debtors to the extent that we enjoy God. We are called on as best we can to SHARE this wonder of the mysteries of God. This is our relation to the mysteries of God and salvation. We are to experience the life that comes from KNOWING God; and then we are to be stewards of that LIFE: and 'let our light so shine before men and women that they may see our changed lives, and glorify our Father which is in heaven.'

[The final thought here today comes even closer home: Not only do we have a steward relationship to the MYSTERIES of grace—]

III. WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR OUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE MYSTERIES OF GOD

"It this case, moreover, it is REQUIRED of stewards that one be found trustworthy."

- A. One great mystery of the faith has to do with Christ's coming again. ADVENT means that in wonder we proclaim that he came, and he comes. But a central truth of ADVENT IS THIS: Jesus, the LORD, is coming again.

And this verse tells us what the Lord Jesus Christ will do when He comes again. He will call us to account for our stewardship. For the word in our text is "REQUIRED!" "It is required of stewards that one be found faithful." Not,

"It is suggested..." or "It is hoped that stewards will be ..." no, the word is REQUIRED!

Stewardship of "talents," yes; but more profoundly, stewards of these mysteries of LIFE.

- B. The wonder of Christmas for which we are accountable is NOT the sparkling memories of a lights on the new fallen snow— precious as those memories may be. But we must share (EPHESIANS 6:19) the mystery of the gospel. We need to experience how it penetrates, and transforms and brings light and life. We are stewards of (I TIMOTHY 3:9) the mystery of the faith. Paul wrote to Timothy— and to you and me— that we are to handle, experience, transmit the "deep truths" of the faith with a clear conscience.
- C. All these mysteries are not simply so that we can have some kind of esoteric knowledge, and conduct our secret society meetings, and somehow feel smug about how brilliant we are. But all these mysteries of the faith, of the revealed knowledge of the transcendent God combine in the one mystery that can never be explained: GOD LOVES ME! GOD LOVES YOU!

Conclusion:

I know this isn't the usual way of handling Christmas truth. Our Advents deal with the safe and comfortable concepts of a Babe lying in a manger, where He is sweet and harmless and invokes warm and tender feelings.

But the mystery of Bethlehem unfolds and grows.

Our text makes it plain that we are to be stewards of these mysteries; we are not to be judges or policemen, saying who is, and who is not admissible to grace.

1. Faithfulness in stewardship of the mysteries begins with an attitude! ASK GOD FOR A NEW SENSE OF AWE!
2. Remember, WE ARE STEWARDS! We do not either fully understand nor "own" these mysteries. But, O, how we BELIEVE THEM!" These truths brings God's very LIFE down where we are! And God intends that we share them the very best we can!

Stewards of the Mysteries

3. So, let us begin! Tell someone you love this week the most wonderful mystery there is!
Tell him, tell her that God loves them!

It ought to be encouraging to remember that we are not called to explain the mysteries. Rather, we PROCLAIM them in humility. And remember, especially during advent- the central mystery is IMMANUEL.

Prayer:

Thank You for Your LOVE! Help us to share it as best we know how. Amen.

EH #22 Verses 1,2,5 *O, the Deep, Deep, Love of Jesus*

Joy and Peace Before Dawning

December 18, 1988

Philippians 4:4-8

Introduction:

Christmas is a magic time. But for grown-up children who read newspapers, and watch television, we sometimes are tempted to wonder: IS THERE ANY SUBSTANCE TO THIS TALK OF CHRISTMAS JOY? and Christmas PEACE?

When we think of all the pain and sorrow in our world it almost seems selfish to "rejoice always," and live with a "peace that passes comprehension."

HOW DO WE DARE TALK SERIOUSLY ABOUT "CHRISTMAS WONDER"? What does the Prince of Peace, and the Kingdom of JOY, have to say about such headlines and news items that we face daily?

Headlines like:

- Earthquake in Armenia, 56,000 killed; 500,000 homeless! ...to say nothing of a headline that isn't written:
- 350,000 die in America this year from LUNG CANCER! Could be prevented, but cigarette companies need your money! Or, in every paper in the land, we read:
- Epidemic of violence! Parents batter children ... children batter aged parents ... "5 bodies found along I-95"

TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

1. YES, THERE IS SUBSTANCE TO CHRISTMAS JOY! It is genuine and it is real and it is a legacy left us by Jesus Himself!
2. WE DARE TO SPEAK OF JOY AND PEACE IN THE FACE OF SORROW AND PAIN, BECAUSE JOY AND PEACE ARE PRECISELY WHAT THIS WORLD DESPERATELY NEEDS. It is not a question of whether or not we ought to have joy in

our desperate times. We must have joy, and we must learn to share it! We must have peace ourselves, and we must learn to tell people that there is a voice of assurance in the darkness of our world's night!

I. GOD INTENDS THAT WE SHALL HAVE A GENUINE PEACE

"Let not your hearts be troubled ... "

A. Genuine peace? Are there other kinds?

Peace of ignorance - simplify all the issues! Spiritualize the problems! Don't face up to the complexity of real life.

Peace of apathy - don't look at others less fortunate! Don't worry about great needs! Give a donation! Ease the conscience!

Peace of fear - don't rock the boat; always being terrorized! Helpless! The only kind of "peace" that many know.

Peace of surrender - "Why even try?"

Peace of taking the popular way. "Go where it is popular ... take up the causes pushed by the media. Be a humanist! Accept humanist values. [Greatest good is to 'feel good about ME!']

All these ways to "peace" will reduce the tensions of life and living. But somehow they seem empty, small, insufficient before the kind of peace God has promised us, such concepts as: "the peace of God that shall guard your heart and mind" and "the God of peace shall be with you!"

B. There IS a peace for the real here-and-now that passes understanding. For here and now, genuine peace IN the struggle— peace IN the disagreement— peace IN the disappointment ... not the kind of heavenly peace that we shall one day know, perhaps ... but a sense of being 'at home in God's will' and a sense of really being LOVED!

C. We should have this PEACE AS A WORTHY GOAL: Peace between members of the family [Euodia & Syntyche]

1. when I am troubled, strive to make peace;
2. when I perceive trouble, strive to truly help bring peace.

[We will always have differences; potential strife. But by God's help we can be a loving community, a healing place.]

D. This PEACE has practical application for the Christian:

1. Peace to RULE the heart (Colossians 3:15) "And let the peace of God rule in your hearts ..."; and
2. (Here) Peace to GUARD the heart (Philippians 4:7) "The peace of God ... will stand guard over your hearts!"

II. THE PROMISES OF PEACE

A. One of the GIFTS that Jesus gave us is PEACE: "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you— let not your heart be troubled ..." But we "open" this GIFT by way of claiming God's straightforward promises. LOOK AT SOME OF THE PROMISES OF PEACE:

1. Psalm 119:165 GREAT PEACE HAVE THEY WHICH LOVE THY LAW; AND NOTHING SHALL OFFEND THEM (Cause them to stumble and fall.) Peace COMES to us through the revealed Word/will of God: begin with the Bible!
2. Romans 5:1 THEREFORE BEING JUSTIFIED BY FAITH WE HAVE PEACE WITH GOD ... Peace BEGINS for us when we settle the SIN QUESTION! We cannot dodge the need for justification.
3. Romans 8:6 NOW TO BE CARNALLY MINDED IS DEATH; BUT TO BE SPIRITUALLY MINDED IS LIFE AND PEACE. Peace GROWS AND DEVELOPS WITHIN US as we "walk in the Spirit": as we obey the leading of God in the new-found life we share with God Himself!
4. Isaiah 26:3 THOU WILT KEEP HIM IN PERFECT PEACE, WHOSE MIND IS STAYED ON THEE, BECAUSE HE TRUSTETH IN THEE. Finally, we catch on to the 'open secret:' that Peace COMES FROM BEING NEAR TO THE GOD OF PEACE!

- B. B. But this is not automatic; nor is it a part-time assignment. It is the deliberate choice of commitment; it must be followed by a life-time of walking with God, committing our way to Him. Still, it is our promise here!

III. PEACE IS A PERSON

PEACE IS MORE THAN LEARNING LESSONS, PEACE IS A PERSON, PEACE IS JESUS CHRIST OF BETHLEHEM AND CALVARY AND NEW JERUSALEM!

A. THAT IS WHAT MAKES THIS A "CHRISTMAS/ADVENT MESSAGE!" All that we have, all of good and life and light— COME WITH HIM!

"To KNOW God!" This is the heart of Christian faith!

That last promise ("Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed ON THEE") is a KEY! God has many lessons and many blessings for His children. But all these blessings— the hope and the wonder and the mystery and the peace and the joy of Christmas— and perhaps particularly peace— are centered IN THE PERSON OF THE CHRIST OF CHRISTMAS. When we know Him, potentially we know them all. [This is the heart of ALL Christian truth!] So—

HOW DO WE MOTIVATE PEOPLE TO EVANGELISM?

We major in guilt, in "Shoulds" and "oughts", OR, WE HELP THEM FALL IN LOVE WITH JESUS CHRIST!

HOW DO WE ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO SUPPORT MISSIONS AND OUTREACH?

We multiply programs, and form new committees, OR, WE HELP THEM FALL IN LOVE WITH JESUS CHRIST!

HOW DO WE GROW A CHURCH?

We teach our people to apply all kinds of business techniques and promotion, OR, WE HELP THEM FALL IN LOVE WITH JESUS CHRIST!

B. And what is true in the life of the CHURCH is also true in the life of the individual: HOW DO I FIND PEACE WITHIN? I can follow this guru or that; I can exhaust the

literature of pop psychology, OR, I CAN COME TO KNOW AND LOVE THE PRINCE OF PEACE!

WHEN WE ARE NEAR THE GOD OF PEACE, THEN WE WILL KNOW THE PEACE OF GOD!

Conclusion:

But what about all these tasks we need to address? What about being "stewards of the mysteries" of Christmas? Isn't that a tremendous responsibility? ...A generation ago in a great time of turmoil a man of peace wrote these words:

"Much of our acceptance of multitudes of obligations is due to our inability to say No. We calculated that the task had to be done, and we saw no one ready to undertake it. We calculated the need, and then calculated our time, and decided maybe we could squeeze it in somewhere. But the decision was a heady decision, not made within the sanctuary of the soul. When we say Yes or No to calls for service on the basis of heady decisions, we have to give reasons, to ourselves and to others. But when we say Yes or No to calls, on the basis of inner guidance and whispered promptings of encouragement from the Center of our life, or on the basis of a lack of any inward "rising" of the Life to encourage us in the call, we have no reason to give, except one— the will of God as we discern it. Then we have begun to live in guidance. And I find He never guides us into an intolerable scramble of panting feverishness. The Cosmic Patience becomes, in part, our patience, for after all God is at work in the world. It is not we alone who are at work in the world, frantically finishing a work to be offered to God.

"Life from the Center is a life of unhurried peace and power. It is simple. It is serene. It is amazing. It is triumphant. It is radiant. It takes no time, but it occupies all our time. And it makes our life programs new and overcoming. We need not get frantic. He is at the helm. And when our little day is done we lie down quietly in peace, for all is well."

-from A Testament of Devotion, by Thomas Kelly

To know God's peace does not mean we can live in this world, with its disconcerting headlines, and feel nothing, and do nothing.

Joy and Peace Before Dawning

Certainly we shall know sorrow and pain: God Himself grieves over injustice. But we do not sorrow as those who have no hope! We cannot be defeated if indeed the Prince of Peace is with us!

And where the Prince of Peace leads us by His Spirit, we have the JOY of bringing the offer of genuine PEACE WITH GOD, and a growing sense of THE PEACE OF GOD as we introduce people to THE GOD OF PEACE, whose name is IMMANUEL, a God who dwells with His people.

CHRISTMAS PEACE IS REAL PEACE!

CHRISTMAS JOY IS REAL JOY!

REAL PEACE AND REAL JOY IN THIS VERY REAL WORLD!

Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin? The blood of Jesus whispers peace within.

Peace, perfect peace, by thronging duties pressed? To do the will of Jesus, this is rest.

Peace, perfect peace, with sorrows surging round? On Jesus' bosom nought but peace is found.

Peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away? In Jesus' keeping we are safe, and they.

Peace, perfect peace, our future all unknown? Jesus we know, and He is on the throne.

Peace, perfect peace, death shadowing us and ours? Jesus has vanquished death and all its powers.

It is enough: earth's struggles soon shall cease, And Jesus call us to heaven's perfect peace.

-Edward Henry Bickersteth, 1825-1906:

#41 EH - *How Great Our Joy!*

The Facts of Christmas

December 24, 1988

"Let now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which has come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. Luke 2:15

The Spirit of Christmas— the Meaning of Christmas— are dependent on The FACT of Christmas.

Introduction:

It is hard to imagine what the glory of angels in a night sky might be. But you can be certain it beat anything the shepherds had seen or were ever likely to see again. God has a way of filling up the sky with just a hint of His glory! [I recall one 4th of July at West Point, when after the (wonderful!) band concert some really impressive fireworks began. "Humans" were 'filling the sky with glory.'

[But as it happened, a small-to-middle-sized thunderstorm happened along just then, and there was a moderate display of lightning. Again and again the entire Hudson River far below the parade ground was lit as bright as noon day. And one particular bolt of lightning I shall never forget— I was terrorized and fascinated all at the same time: a line of liquid electricity made a circle all around that valley from one side of the mile- wide river to the other for a split-second that seemed to last and last! And somehow the sky rockets and sparklers seemed puny and downright anti-climactic after that display of heavenly power and glory!]

I cannot imagine what "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest!'" might have looked and sounded like! But we may be sure that it was GLORIOUS! But then the glory was gone! And so, after the GLORY, came a trip to Bethlehem and a stable. Encounter with real people, real smells, real parental concerns, but also a real KING!

THIS IS NO BEAUTIFUL MYTH. I do not have a problem with those who speak of the "mythical" in scriptural history; there is a parable-like quality to the way God has

The Facts of Christmas

dealt with people through the ages. [The Exodus, and the entire Old Testament record of God's dealings with the people of faith are both true history, AND an example of how God is faithful to His Word.]

But Bethlehem is a real place; a real Baby was born there on a particular night. The Son of God is Eternal, and never had a beginning. But Jesus Christ, God's incarnate Son, became a man in a new thing; in a way that had never been before. JESUS CHRIST'S BIRTH IS A FACT.

THIS IS NOT A TIMELESS TRUTH! Eternity has intersected time. But we cannot really grasp or understand timeless truth. We cannot know the Transcendent in any intimate kind of way— at least in our present, finite limitations. AND THIS IS PARTICULAR FACT.

CHRISTIAN FAITH DEALS WITH PARTICULAR FACTS. [Christmas comes at the winter solstice, and the return of light and warmth and the promise of spring are all beautiful thoughts that can be applied to the Christmas story. But Christmas is not a warm, fuzzy feeling.] The Eternal God has sent us a Man to deal with our sins, and with our lives as we live them. [I John 4:3 "Every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not from God."]

THE PARTICULARS OF OUR OWN HISTORY HAVE POWER TO MOVE US DEEPLY. [I am moved by Byers Green, Bishop Auckland, Barton, North Yorkshire ... Askrigg and Bainbridge, Yorkshire Dales ... because Metcalfes come from there.] And somehow we almost instinctively feel that Jesus Christ and His personal history are part of our own personal heritage. THAT IS WHY BETHLEHEM AND CALVARY AND OLIVET SPEAK SO POINTEDLY TO US!

THE PARTICULARS OF OUR FAITH CALL FOR A PARTICULAR RESPONSE IN OUR PERSONAL HISTORY. Just as Jesus came to A PARTICULAR place at a PARTICULAR time in human history, He comes to each of us IN FACT, in TIME, in SPACE, in our own personal history.

"Though Christ a thousand times in Bethlehem be born Yet not within MY heart- My heart is still forlorn."

"O Come to MY heart, Lord Jesus! There is room in MY heart for Thee!"

Conclusion:

Christian faith is tied to eternal, never-ending Truth. Our God is Almighty, and Everlasting. He is the great I AM . But Christian faith is factual faith! The meaning and the spirit and the wonder of Christmas all hang on the slender thread of a Mother's labor, and a Baby's low cry—

Christmas is NOT 'timeless truth'— it is PARTICULAR TRUTH FOR REAL, LIVE PEOPLE. And Christmas truth is not complete— it is NEVER complete— until it is received in a particular and personal way.

1. Just NOW if you have never welcomed Jesus into your heart- - just NOW, in a particular, specific prayer, you may invite Him in to be LORD and SAVIOR! [Revelation 3:20 - December 24, 1988, at 6:30 p.m., in the Wollaston Church of the Nazarene], you can receive Jesus Christ into YOUR personal history, to rule and guide and bless your life from now on for TIME as well as for eternity!
2. And just NOW we can ALL obey and share Christ in a particular way. Jesus has given us a way in which we can, in good faith, share in His fellowship and grace in a wonderful way. The Lord's Supper is open to all who own Jesus as Lord and Savior. I invite you to make it your means of grace this evening.

[Come as you are - come as you are led of God's Spirit. Come by yourself, with a friend, with your family together. Come as part of God's Family! Receive the elements; pray a brief prayer of thanksgiving for the FACTS OF CHRISTMAS and for the FACT that Jesus is with YOU, with US!; and then eat, drink, and rise, return to your seat for the candle lighting that shall follow immediately.]

Prayer of dedication; invitation.

God With Us

The Naming of Jesus

Christmas Day, December 25, 1988

Matthew 1:23 *Behold the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which translated means, "God with us."*

The names of God as given in Scripture are representative of His greatness and of His workings toward us. We love the names of God:

- Jehovah-jireh- "the Lord will provide;"
- Jehovah-nissi- "the Lord my banner;"
- Jehovah-shalom- "the Lord my peace;"
- Jehovah- shammah-"the Lord is there;"
- Jehovah-tsidkenu- "the Lord our righteousness."

Reverently we say the name "El Shaddai "nourisher, comforter;" We bow before the name "Elohim," which means "power."

But we have come to love one name of God, because it unlocks to us all the others. And that is the name which Joseph gave to his beautiful wife's firstborn Son, the name of Jesus.

Jesus, John declared, was God's Word. The same Word that had spoken into existence everything that ever was.

Jesus declared Himself to be Bread to eat, and Light in which to walk. Jesus told us that He is the Door to all good things, and that He is the Good Shepherd to lead us, and to seek us when we go astray. He said that He is the Vine in which all life resides, and that we are branches that need to abide in Him for that life. He said that He is the Way, the Truth and the Life; and He said that even though we are appointed for death and the judgment, that He is the Resurrection and the Life, and that he that believes in Him, though he were dead, yet shall he live and never die.

One name or title that goes along with Jesus is the Christmas name Emmanuel, which means "God with us!"

[What IS this God like, whom Jesus comes to reveal?]

I. God Is SPIRIT

(John 4:24) To the one woman at the well of Sychar Jesus spoke this profound truth. In it He affirms the personality of God, and the common ground on which God and humankind meet. We, too, are spirit, made in God's likeness.

II. God As Spirit Is LIFE

(John 5:26) The Father hath life in Himself; so also hath He given to the Son to have life in Himself.

(John 14:6) I am the way, the truth, and the LIFE.

As Wiley says, "the fullness of truth, order, proportion, harmony and beauty" reside in this Life.

Life is that which relates to its surrounding reality. We are "dead" to whatever we cannot respond to. So people are spiritually "dead" unless and until they can respond to God, through His grace. Jesus came to make that response possible.

III. God As Spirit Is LIGHT

(I John 1:5) God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.

(John 8:12) I am the light of the world: he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life.

Moral depravity is the absence of light, and finally results because people prefer not to come into the light. Satan blinds people's eyes:

(II Corinthians 4:4) "the god of this world blinds the eyes of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of God should shine unto them."

But if we will, we may respond to the Light which is God:

(I John 1:7,9) If we walk in the light . . . the blood of Jesus Christ God's Son cleanseth us from all sin.

IV. God As Spirit Is LOVE

(I John 4:8) God is love.

(John 3:16) God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Now THAT is our Christmas Gift for all time!

This, then, is something of what Jesus came to reveal: Jesus revealed God as Spirit, and as Spirit, Life and Light and Love.

Then Jesus revealed Himself as God- and then by His gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus has made us to understand "Emmanuel!"

For it is the BEST part of the name Emmanuel, this dawning of the reality that in Jesus, the Babe of Bethlehem, God has actually come near, has come to where we are. Emmanuel means 'God with us!' I don't know any better Christmas message. It is what Christmas is all about!

WHO is with us? *GOD* is with us!

WHERE is God in Christ? God is *WITH* us!

With WHOM is God in Christ? God is with *US*!

Search Me O God

December 28, 1988

Prayer Meeting Devotional: Galatians 6:7-10

Focus: Psalm 139: "Search Me O God ..."

We do not have a 'Watch Night' as such— this is our last official meeting together in 1988. What sort of year has this been for you?

LOOK BACK IN GRATITUDE: Thank God for His blessings:

LOOK BACK IN 'WISDOM:' What do you see in your life that you might wish to change in the coming year?

LOOK WITHIN WITH GOD'S HELP, to find light and strength to walk closer to the Lord in whatever time we may have left to us: A FEW "YEAR END" QUOTES FROM BERTHA MUNRO's classic, Truth for Today: (Several days under the theme "Life At its Best")

1. What have you set out to do with your life? You have only one to spend. What is your slogan? "Getting by"? "As good as the rest"? "Can't do that and be sanctified"? Or are you reaching out for "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ"? (Ephesians 4:13)
Let us all lift up our eyes, and stretch our souls, and look truth full in the face— truth and Jesus.
2. The best Christian life is spontaneous. Life in the Spirit. Have I made a good start? Have I received the Holy Spirit's cleansing baptism? A holy heart is not the end, but the beginning.
3. The best Christian life is practical. (Headings only here:) Develop spiritual poise. Develop a healthy self-reliance. Develop the giving attitude. 4. Walk in the Spirit. Hands, feet and voice all do heart errands— always. The Spirit's life will move the body— else paralysis.
4. Treatment of others. Perfect love for our neighbor exists in the sanctified heart potentially. It is developed by agitation under stress. It is made positive, active by life's demands and strains. I react to my neighbor's honors, to his faults, to his burdens; and as I react in love, my love is strengthened. I become more like Christ whose every contact brought forth

from Him nothing but pure love.

My neighbor gets ahead of me in my special field— an opportunity for my love to be glad in his gladness, for my lips to say kind things to him and to others about him— sincerely. I could depreciate his achievement. But love will grow as I exercise it here.

My neighbor falls- an opportunity for love to help him up. How? By prayer for him- in secret, probably. Not by spreading the story, even to my close friends. Not by cherishing a superior feeling. For the failure of a brother Christian is an occasion for love to catch a fresh glimpse of the Cross and to remember that my sins nailed Christ there. Love will grow as it says, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

5. The best Christian life is purposeful. Sow to the Spirit. Three questions and three imperatives, if we really wish to make progress.

- A. What are the priorities of your life? Be Spiritual.

It is easy to say, "God first." The test comes when two claims actually conflict, and we must choose between doing the thing that will give us material satisfaction and the thing that will give us soul development— between pleasing ourselves and pleasing Jesus. Have we decided our priorities, and do we maintain them?

- B. Are you investing or spending? Be positive. The law of growth is sowing, not scattering. We all spend our energies on something. This little poem is searching:

*I read in a Book
Of a Man called Christ
Who went about doing good.
To me it is very disconcerting
That I am so easily satisfied
With just going about.*-Unknown

- C. Do you have fainting spells? Be steady. "Be follower of them who through faith and patience inherit the promise." With all your best and God's best there will be stretches of

apparent failure. Then remember the weapon, All Prayer; keep the contact with heaven clear and a heavenly current flowing. "If you pray, you will not faint. If you faint, you have not prayed."

In one of Schubert's symphonies the directions for the conductor read on one page, "As loud as possible." And a little farther on, "Still louder!" More than our best in the coming year by the grace of God!

*Stand up. Stand up for Jesus,
The strife will not be long;
This day the noise of battle,
The next the victor's song.*

EH #42 Glory be to God on High

#51 Because I Have Been Given Much

#75 Jesus, My Strength, My Hope

WS #173 As With Gladness Men of Old

#177 Good Christian Men, Rejoice

#283 Dear Lord and Father of Mankind

#460 No One Understands Like Jesus

#334 I Feel Like Traveling On

Baptismal Service

January 1, 1989 (pm) Baptismal service

Adapted from October, 1988

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

Intro:

Perhaps one day we will have a baptismal service and NOT have the entire evening center on that sacrament. But for now it is well that we make it the center of our message:

One of the difficult things for Protestants is fixing in their minds the relative importance of the sacraments of the church. Of all the means of grace, they are possibly understood the least.

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SACRAMENTS AS MEANS OF GRACE

I begin this brief message on baptism by asking some disarmingly simple questions:

A. WHAT IS GRACE? Grace is unmerited favor of God; grace is that which bestows God's great LOVE on us; grace is God's attitude of forgiveness toward the sinner; grace is a quickening and strengthening of life within the soul.

B. AND WHAT ARE "MEANS OF GRACE?" MEANS OF GRACE ARE just that: the ways and means, the vehicles or channels by which God bestows His LOVE on our hearts. And what are the 'means of grace?' My list may not be complete, but I submit seven:

1. WORD OF GOD; and with this I include the faithful the preaching of the Word, as well as reading in order to obey God's will.

2. PRAYER IS PROBABLY THE PRIMARY MEANS OF GRACE; and prayer combines with power with the use of the Word.

3. THE FELLOWSHIP OF GOD'S PEOPLE is a significant and powerful means of grace. God never intends for us to make our way to heaven independent of other individuals, or of other families, or even other groups of believers. God intends that we bear one another's burdens.

4. CORPORATE WORSHIP, in the large groups or celebrations, in the smaller groups united around a lesson or a ministry (congregations,) as well as in the accountability groups of prayer and sharing (cells,) is a means of grace.

5. PERSONAL WORSHIP may be the same as #2, prayer; but it involves the carrying forward of life in the spirit of 'the living sacrifice.'

6. Wiley lists THE SABBATH AS A MEANS OF GRACE! It was introduced at the time of man's creation, and belongs to mankind generally and perpetually. Personally, I am convinced that there is great spiritual power waiting to be released in the lives of the people who can tap the resources of the Lord's Day by observing it joyfully, not in bondage, but in rest and worship and refreshing.

7. But the last 'means of grace' I would mention are THE SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH THAT WERE INSTITUTED BY JESUS.

C. WHAT ARE 'SACRAMENTS?'

We use the term 'sacrament' to signify an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given to us, ordained by Christ Himself as a means of receiving that grace, and as a pledge or assurance of Christ's promise. From the earliest times, the sacraments have been understood by the church

to be religious rites that carry the most solemn obligation of loyalty to Jesus Christ and His Church.

1. The RC church teaches seven (7) sacraments: baptism, the Lord's supper (or "mass",) confirmation, ordination, extreme unction (or 'last rites,) penance (or 'confession,') and marriage.

2. All Protestant churches recognize but two: baptism and the Lord's Supper.

SACRAMENTS ARE PLEDGES OF LOYALTY TO JESUS CHRIST; THEY ARE TESTIMONIES THAT MARK CHRISTIANS AS SEPARATE, DIFFERENT FROM THOSE WHO DO NOT BELIEVE.

D. It is vitally important that we reach out for God's grace in every way we can. [Perhaps we do not take seriously the parables of Jesus when He warned us that it is mortally dangerous to have talents and not use them!] We are responsible not only for what we are, but for what we might be by God's free gifts of grace!

Along this line John Wesley once said: (in 1736) "I think the rock on which I had the nearest made shipwreck of the faith was the writings of the Mystics; under which term I comprehend all, and only those, who slight any of the means of grace." GFH, p541

In other words, Wesley said that even people who seem to be so very, very spiritual nearly led him astray when they picked out which means of grace they would adopt, and which they would avoid. Wesley was saying 'I want to be faithful to God through Christ's church!'

E. And if you wonder what John Wesley thought the 'true church' consisted of, here is a quote from H. Ray Dunning: "There were two major means that Mr. Wesley seemed to identify as

constitutive of the church: the pure Word of God preached, and the sacraments duly administered. This puts him squarely in the Reformation tradition." GFH p542]

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF BAPTISM AS A MEANS OF GRACE

A. Baptism is clearly one of the sacraments of the church.

It was instituted by the Lord Jesus, first by His example, and then by His unmistakable command (in the words of the text:)

Baptism means three things for the believer:

1. BAPTISM MEANS IDENTIFYING WITH JESUS in His baptism.

John the Baptist baptized many people in the Jordan. This was not clearly outlined in Old Testament law, but it could have some meaning of preparation for the coming of a new order, in that just before the giving of the Law on Sinai, God told Moses to sanctify the people, and He specifically said: "Have them wash their garments!"

But the baptism of Jesus was unique. Jesus was identifying with sinners, even though He knew no sin. In coming with the sinners, JESUS TOOK THE ROLE OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT; and in the descent of the Holy Spirit HE CLEARLY EXEMPLIFIED THE ROLE OF THE ANOINTED ONE, THE MESSIAH.

No one else was sinless that day, or any other day. But Jesus identified with everyone who has failed; he came to bear our sins and sorrows to the Tree.

No one else could ever hear the Father say: "This is my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!" and have the Holy Spirit descend without measure.

But if Jesus identified with us, with sinful humanity that day of His baptism; then we, as His spiritual sons and daughters identify with Him.

We are not called on to die as the sinless sacrifice; but BAPTISM IS THE WAY OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT; and we identify with Jesus in death to sin (He died for sin.)

We cannot know the fullness of the Holy Spirit as Jesus knew Him, but WE ARE CALLED TO ACCEPT THE ANOINTING OF GOD, indwelling us, and live in the new life and power of that life the Holy Spirit brings.

2. BAPTISM MEANS INCORPORATION INTO THE CHURCH. The washing of baptism by John indicated a preparation for a new age of the Spirit of God. But Jesus transformed John's baptism, and made it the sacramental portion of His Great Commission: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

3. BAPTISM MEANS THE INITIAL RECEPTION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. The Holy Spirit is the gift of the Son, and of the Father. He comes to make Jesus real to us. He is the Spirit of Jesus. He does not testify of Himself, but is the fulfillment of the promise: "Lo, I AM with you always, even to the end of the age."

The connection of baptism with the reception of the Holy Spirit seems clear in the New Testament. Sometimes the people received the Spirit as, or after they were baptized; sometimes it was a witness or a seal after they had already been saved.

Acts 2:38 (Peter says:) "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, AND YE SHALL RECEIVE THE GIFT OF THE HOLY GHOST." Here, clearly, the people to be baptized did not yet have the Holy Spirit.

But later, at Caesarea, Cornelius and his household received the Holy Spirit as Peter was preaching to them. And the question

Baptismal Service

there was: "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, WHICH HAVE RECEIVED THE HOLY GHOST AS WELL AS WE?"

In obedience to the command of Christ, we can expect that the sacrament of baptism will be a confirmation of the promise of God the Father and God the Son to bestow the Holy Spirit, personally, and powerfully, into each believer's heart!

The Sacrament

Dearly Beloved: Baptism is the sign and seal of the new covenant of grace, the significance of which is attested by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans as follows: (Romans 6:3-5)
"Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of His death, we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection."

The earliest statement of Christian faith, into which you come now to be baptized, is the Apostles' Creed. Shall we all affirm our faith as we read it together:

Congregation Read (with the baptizands) the Apostles' Creed:
#513 in WS

Question #1 - Will you be baptized into this faith? (If so answer, "I WILL."

Response: I WILL.

Question #2 - Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, and do you realize that he saves you now?

Response: I DO.

Question #3 - Will you obey God's holy will and keep His commandments, walking in them all the days of your life?

Response: I WILL.

[OPTIONAL brief statement of testimony.]

[Y o u r n a m e], I baptize YOU in the name of the Father,
and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Principles for Success

January 1, 1989

Proverbs 3: 1 - 11

Introduction:

Three dynamic principles combine in one powerful statement of confidence in this passage from Proverbs. Here we have a formula for progress and for victory. If we will carefully GIVE ATTENTION, and then in faith SEEK TO OBEY our part— the commandment side of each equation, then God will most certainly carry out His part on the PROMISE SIDE. We may depend on HIM!

What are these principles? Perhaps we may see them best as we relate to what we will NEED in this New Year, and indeed, what we will need all the days of our lives:

I. WE NEED DEFINITE DIRECTION FROM GOD

Only a fool thinks that he can chart his course with certainty in any and every situation of life, let alone in spiritual matters for time and eternity.

But when we know what to do, then half the battle is won! [Even sanctified Christians know this struggle! They are willing to do God's will, but as they face decision time, HOW are we to know what God wants?]

How often people struggle on blindly in dead-end situations, impossible situations that will never change, when just a little change of direction here, or a shift of emphasis there would mean a totally different outlook.

So many people are frustrated by what seems like a futile round of toil and meaningless activity, of boredom and emptiness, when a new sense of motivation, a fresh perception of GUIDANCE would make all the difference in the world.

But that insight never seems to come! That new direction is never taken!

["Spotters" or assistant coaches sit high above the football field. They are connected with the men on field level; they see the opposition from a higher, overall view. And

many a game has been won or lost because A HIGHER VIEW saw something that could never have been seen at ground level. An adjustment has been made.

[WOULDN'T IT BE WONDERFUL IF SOMEHOW WE COULD GET THAT 'HIGHER VIEW?'
-KNOW WHICH WAY TO GO?]

Hear God's promise: "I WILL DIRECT YOUR PATHS!"

But as with every promise in the Bible, there is a condition to be met. [This is not to say that God's promises "work" by "our works." But we do have a part to play in every promise that we claim.] AND HERE OUR PART IS TWO-FOLD:

1. TRUST (LOVE) WITH ALL YOUR HEART. This means that you are to throw away your "reserve clauses" and "escape schemes." You do not, you will not "hedge" against failure. Actually our love involves both AFFECTION and TRUST.

AFFECTION means literally telling God that we do love Him, and that we are seeking ways to love and serve Him better. Our prayers should not merely be done from duty, or so that we can 'get more things done,' but more and more they should be seeking COMMUNION: learning to know God and to develop a Father-child relationship with Him.

TRUST means coming to believe in God's INTEGRITY. Integrity means living in truth what we say with our words.

Illus: [Your earthly father says "Rake the leaves and then we'll go to the ball game together." Lack of trust says, "(1) I won't rake the leaves because I don't feel like it." or "(2) I'll rake the leaves because Dad will be angry with me if I don't!" — but then I'll run off because I don't really think dad will have time to go to the ball game or that he will want to when he comes home.]

[So, the first part of the COMMANDMENT SIDE is TRUST/LOVE, and the second part is:]

2. OBEDIENCE...(IN ALL THY WAYS!.) And this is where we really begin to feel the rub! For God's promises are never set up for "trial runs" or "part-time usage." The simple reason why many people do not prosper in their souls is because they acknowledge God

in 99% or less of their ways. It is that last 1% that is critical. God simply can not and will not bless a hold- out.

God does not expect ABSOLUTE perfection from any of us. But He does want our love and loyalty. And He wants ALL OF US that there is!

[So, in summary of this first of three phases of this New Year's promise:]

We need direction.. and as we give to God our total love and trust... we can claim His promise. THEN GOD IS BOUND BY THE INTEGRITY OF HIS WORD TO DIRECT OUR PATHS!

[Transition: This whole message is contained in this first section. It doesn't get any better than having God direct our paths. But this passage goes on to highlight and illuminate and expand on this theme of victory. Here is another need:]

II. WE NEED VIGOR AND ENTHUSIASM WITH WHICH TO PURSUE LIFE'S GOALS

And believe me, this is much more easily talked about than demonstrated! What a wonderful, wonderful blessing is physical health! And health of mind is even more blessed and wonderful! And perhaps health of the inner person, the spirit and soul health is best of all.

It is my conviction that this passage touches to some extent all three kinds of health— body, mind, and soul/spirit. I know that even the body benefits from this second part of this great promise from God's Word:

HEAR GOD'S PROMISE: "THIS WILL BRING HEALTH TO YOUR BODY, AND NOURISHMENT TO YOUR BONES."

But once again, we have a brief- but-very-definite condition to fulfill in order to qualify for the promise. And once again, our part of the equation is in two parts:

1. DON'T BE A KNOW-IT-ALL. Don't be wise in your own eyes. How many of us have missed opportunities to grow because we have been talking when we should have been listening. And if this is true when we talk with people here on earth, how much more when Almighty God is concerned?

We need to be OPEN and on the ALERT to just how God wants to communicate with us. [ON TIP-TOE TO CATCH THE LEADING OF THE SPIRIT!] And yet the very people that need this the most will be the very last to think that this applies to them!

"Just the message for SAM!" they will say! But perhaps YOU are the one who needs a radical change of spirit? ? ?

How many hard places we suffer through... how many blame God for the difficult place to which He has brought us... when it could just be that some of the hard knocks are evidence of our unwillingness to learn, to be taught!

2. TURN AWAY ENTIRELY FROM ALL KNOWN EVIL! Declare WAR on sin! Have absolutely NO fraternization with the enemy! FLEE from temptation! AVOID the very appearance of evil— not because of what people will say or think— but because you want God's health. [A PRACTICAL APPLICATION: You are sitting comfortably before the TV when something comes on ... gets your interest ... which soon offends your spirit just the slightest. TURN IT OFF TO THE GLORY OF GOD! TURN IT OFF WITH A PRAYER:

"Father, I want You to fill my mind, and not this garbage! Amen."]

Ask God for a holy ANGER! Ask the Holy Spirit to show you your own shortcomings ... how prone we humans are to actually enjoy the exposure of great sins in others while at the same time we excuse the sins we consider "small" that we harbor in our own thought life!

Sins like: harsh judgment of others ... an unloving, critical spirit ... any kind of double-dealing— of lying by implication ... we must shun— turn away— reject anything like this, anything that is not of God's Spirit.

And why should we turn away from evil? (1) Because of other people's personal convictions? NO (2) because of legalistic standards? NO (3) Because of fear of what people might say? NO

We turn away from evil because IF WE TURN AWAY WE SHALL ENJOY GOOD HEALTH! So many people are not robust, healthy Christians because they

have never been convinced of the need to HATE SIN as well as to LOVE THE LORD!

[Transition: GUIDANCE! HEALTH! Wonderful promises! But finally this passage of God's promises becomes very down-to-earth and practical indeed!

Our economic prosperity is built on the film of a soap- bubble. The future of New England and America and your future and mine are certainly very uncertain.

But in the midst of all this uncertainty, do I have the courage to tell you that GOD IS PROMISING PROSPERITY IN 1989??

Do I begin to sound like the "Name it and claim it" prophets?

Well- what is it that we really NEED?]

III. IN EVERY AREA OF OUR LIVES WE NEED ABUNDANCE, AND NOT JUST A STARVING, DYING EXISTENCE

I'm aware that for a little while this morning I am going to sound a little like a TV preacher. And I don't want to get the cart before the horse. This is never an enticement to become a Christian. Christ still says: "Take up your CROSS daily, and follow Me!"

BUT I ALSO HONESTLY BELIEVE THAT AS WE FOLLOW JESUS, GOD IS GOING TO SUPPLY EVERY GENUINE NEED— AND THAT, BROTHER, SISTER— THAT IS TRUE ABUNDANCE!

Once again, our side of the equation is two-fold:

1. FIRST: HONOR THE LORD WITH OUR SUBSTANCE! (This means our money, and our material benefits which we have received from our righteous labors.)

ALL our substance should honor the Lord! And this does not mean that God is not interested in the beautiful things, the flower gardens and the vacations and recreation that may be available. Jesus Himself endorsed vacations (even if He didn't get to practice them as much as He would have liked.)

But honoring the Lord with ALL of our substance does mean that God does not want us dividing our lives into one part which is God's, and sacred, and another part which is "ours" and secular, and has nothing to do with God.

[When ALL of life is submitted, THERE COMES A RADICAL CHANGE! It may not seem like a miracle; but when we honor God with ALL, then HE works wonders!:]

Illus: [A heckler asked a street preacher in Britain if he really believed that 'hogwash' about Jesus changing water into wine— and the street preacher said, "I don't know all about that; but in my house Jesus has changed beer into furniture!"]

2. SECOND: WE HONOR GOD WITH THE FIRST-FRUITS OF OUR INCOME. (Please, this part of my message is just for born-again Christians. i wouldn't think of asking non-believers to believe this part!*)

I am talking now about the principle of STOREHOUSE TITHING. If there were ever a time when i wanted to be faithful to the principle of storehouse tithing it would be in a time of adversity. For tithing makes me, on a very practical level, a partner with God.

I used to preach tithing in the hopes that it would help out the church in its finances. Which, by the way, it did.

BUT NOW I PREACH STOREHOUSE TITHING BECAUSE I GENUINELY WANT CHRISTIANS TO FIND ABUNDANCE! (One of the very first principles in business is not to steal from your partner!

(And any time I can get set up in partnership with the wealthiest person in all the world, who promises to meet all my needs if I trust him with all my assets. I am a fool if I don't take him at his word! And I am a fool if I don't play square with him— and walk in abundance!)

If you would be free in your faith as you face the uncertainties of the future, then stay PRAYED UP, and stay PAID UP! If you would claim God's partnership in your projects, in your areas of need, then tithe from a proper motivation.

Christian! I challenge you to be a storehouse tither!

Conclusion:

[Finally, then,] What has this passage said to us about DYNAMIC PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESS IN THIS COMING YEAR ??

IT SAYS: GOD'S PROMISES EXACTLY MEET OUR NEED!

We need DIRECTION; and we may have God's GUIDANCE by LOVING and OBEYING Him.

We need VITALITY AND HEALTH; and we may claim God's promise as we are HUMBLE BEFORE HIM, and as we ESCHEW EVIL.

We need ABUNDANCE; and God has promised to honor us AS WE HONOR HIM WITH OUR POSSESSIONS AND PRACTICE STOREHOUSE TITHING.

We are NOT helpless pawns of Fate as we face this New Year, and all the years of life which God may permits us to know. God help us to avail ourselves of these tremendous promises in our text.

#64 Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah

The Sacrament of Baptism

January 1, 1989 (pm) Baptismal service; Adapted from October, 1988

Intro:

Perhaps one day we will have a baptismal service and NOT have the entire evening center on that sacrament. But for now it is well that we make it the center of our message:

One of the difficult things for Protestants is fixing in their minds the relative importance of the sacraments of the church. Of all the means of grace, they are possibly understood the least.

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SACRAMENTS AS MEANS OF GRACE

I begin this brief message on baptism by asking some disarmingly simple questions:

- A. WHAT IS GRACE? Grace is unmerited favor of God; grace is that which bestows God's great LOVE on us; grace is God's attitude of forgiveness toward the sinner; grace is a quickening and strengthening of life within the soul.
- B. AND WHAT ARE "MEANS OF GRACE?" MEANS OF GRACE ARE just that: the ways and means, the vehicles or channels by which God bestows His LOVE on our hearts. And what are the 'means of grace?' My list may not be complete, but I submit seven:
 - 1. WORD OF GOD; and with this I include the faithful the preaching of the Word, as well as reading in order to obey God's will.
 - 2. PRAYER IS PROBABLY THE PRIMARY MEANS OF GRACE; and prayer combines with power with the use of the Word.
 - 3. THE FELLOWSHIP OF GOD'S PEOPLE is a significant and powerful means of grace. God never intends for us to make our way to heaven independent of other individuals, or of other families, or even other groups of believers. God intends that we bear one another's burdens.

4. CORPORATE WORSHIP, in the large groups or celebrations, in the smaller groups united around a lesson or a ministry (congregations,) as well as in the accountability groups of prayer and sharing (cells,) is a means of grace.
5. PERSONAL WORSHIP may be the same as #2, prayer; but it involves the carrying forward of life in the spirit of 'the living sacrifice.'
6. Wiley lists THE SABBATH AS A MEANS OF GRACE! It was introduced at the time of man's creation, and belongs to mankind generally and perpetually. Personally, I am convinced that there is great spiritual power waiting to be released in the lives of the people who can tap the resources of the Lord's Day by observing it joyfully, not in bondage, but in rest and worship and refreshing.
7. But the last 'means of grace' I would mention are THE SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH THAT WERE INSTITUTED BY JESUS.

C. C. WHAT ARE 'SACRAMENTS?'

We use the term 'sacrament' to signify an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given to us, ordained by Christ Himself as a means of receiving that grace, and as a pledge or assurance of Christ's promise. From the earliest times, the sacraments have been understood by the church to be religious rites that carry the most solemn obligation of loyalty to Jesus Christ and His Church.

1. The RC church teaches seven (7) sacraments: baptism, the Lord's supper (or "mass",) confirmation, ordination, extreme unction (or 'last rites,') penance (or 'confession,') and marriage.
2. All Protestant churches recognize but two: baptism and the Lord's Supper.

SACRAMENTS ARE PLEDGES OF LOYALTY TO JESUS CHRIST; THEY ARE TESTIMONIES THAT MARK CHRISTIANS AS SEPARATE, DIFFERENT FROM THOSE WHO DO NOT BELIEVE.

- D. It is vitally important that we reach out for God's grace in every way we can. [Perhaps we do not take seriously the parables of Jesus when He warned us that it is mortally dangerous to have talents and not use them!] We are responsible not only for what we are, but for what we might be by God's free gifts of grace!

Along this line John Wesley once said: (in 1736) "I think the rock on which I had the nearest made shipwreck of the faith was the writings of the Mystics; under which term I comprehend all, and only those, who slight any of the means of grace." GFH, p541

In other words, Wesley said that even people who seem to be so very, very spiritual nearly led him astray when they picked out which means of grace they would adopt, and which they would avoid. Wesley was saying 'I want to be faithful to God through Christ's church!'

- E. And if you wonder what John Wesley thought the 'true church' consisted of, here is a quote from H. Ray Dunning: "There were two major means that Mr. Wesley seemed to identify as constitutive of the church: the pure Word of God preached, and the sacraments duly administered. This puts him squarely in the Reformation tradition." GFH p542]

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF BAPTISM AS A MEANS OF GRACE

Baptism is clearly one of the sacraments of the church. It was instituted by the Lord Jesus, first by His example, and then by His unmistakable command (in the words of the text:)

Baptism means three things for the believer:

1. BAPTISM MEANS IDENTIFYING WITH JESUS in His baptism.

John the Baptist baptized many people in the Jordan. This was not clearly outlined in Old Testament law, but it could have some meaning of preparation for the coming of a new order, in that just before the giving of the Law on Sinai, God told Moses to sanctify the people, and He specifically said: "Have them wash their garments!"

But the baptism of Jesus was unique. Jesus was identifying with sinners, even though He knew no sin. In coming with the sinners, JESUS TOOK THE ROLE OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT; and in the descent of the Holy Spirit HE CLEARLY EXEMPLIFIED THE ROLE OF THE ANOINTED ONE, THE MESSIAH.

No one else was sinless that day, or any other day. But Jesus identified with everyone who has failed; he came to bear our sins and sorrows to the Tree.

No one else could ever hear the Father say: "This is my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!" and have the Holy Spirit descend without measure.

But if Jesus identified with us, with sinful humanity that day of His baptism; then we, as His spiritual sons and daughters identify with Him.

We are not called on to die as the sinless sacrifice; but BAPTISM IS THE WAY OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT; and we identify with Jesus in death to sin (He died for sin.)

We cannot know the fullness of the Holy Spirit as Jesus knew Him, but WE ARE CALLED TO ACCEPT THE ANOINTING OF GOD, indwelling us, and live in the new life and power of that life the Holy Spirit brings.

2. BAPTISM MEANS INCORPORATION INTO THE CHURCH. The washing of baptism by John indicated a preparation for a new age of the Spirit of God. But Jesus transformed John's baptism, and made it the sacramental portion of His Great Commission: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
3. BAPTISM MEANS THE INITIAL RECEPTION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. The Holy Spirit is the gift of the Son, and of the Father. He comes to make Jesus real to us. He is the Spirit of Jesus. He does not testify of Himself, but is the fulfillment of the promise: "Lo, I AM with you always, even to the end of the age."

The connection of baptism with the reception of the Holy Spirit seems clear in the New Testament. Sometimes the people received the Spirit as, or after they were baptized; sometimes it was a witness or a seal after they had already been saved.

Acts 2:38 (Peter says:) "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, AND YE SHALL RECEIVE THE GIFT OF THE HOLY GHOST." Here, clearly, the people to be baptized did not yet have the Holy Spirit.

But later, at Caesarea, Cornelius and his household received the Holy Spirit as Peter was preaching to them. And the question there was: "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, WHICH HAVE RECEIVED THE HOLY GHOST AS WELL AS WE?"

In obedience to the command of Christ, we can expect that the sacrament of baptism will be a confirmation of the promise of God the Father and God the Son to bestow the Holy Spirit, personally, and powerfully, into each believer's heart!

The Sacrament

Dearly Beloved: Baptism is the sign and seal of the new covenant of grace, the significance of which is attested by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans as follows: (Romans 6:3-5) "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of His death, we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection."

The earliest statement of Christian faith, into which you come now to be baptized, is the Apostles' Creed. Shall we all affirm our faith as we read it together:

Congregation Read (with the baptizands) the Apostles' Creed: #513 in WS

- Question #1 - Will you be baptized into this faith? (If so answer, "I WILL."
Response: I WILL.
- Question #2 - Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, and do you realize that he saves you now? Response: I DO.
- Question #3 - Will you obey God's holy will and keep His commandments, walking in them all the days of your life? Response: I WILL.

[OPTIONAL brief statement of testimony.]

[Y o u r n a m e], I baptize YOU in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Miracle at Cana

Seeing Jesus in His Miracles—Part 1 of 7

- **Miracle at Cana**
- The Healing at Bethesda
- Five Thousand Fed
- Jesus Walks on the Water
- The Man Born Blind
- Jesus Raises Lazarus from the Dead
- The Miraculous Catch

January 8, 1989

John 2:1-11

Introduction:

From now until just before Easter, with a number of interesting special services and guest speakers and a revival series interspersed along the way, I propose to preach a series of sermons about Jesus; specifically, "Seeing Jesus in His Miracles." I propose to take the miracles of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of St. John, and look at them one by one as we ask ourselves the question: "What does this miracle reveal to me of the person and character and purpose of Jesus Christ my Lord?"

When Philip "discovered" Jesus, he wanted to tell his friend, Nathaniel. When Nathaniel found out Jesus had been living in Nazareth, he asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And Philip's answer remains valid: "Come and see!" See for yourself! And that is what we want to do again: to see Jesus!

And to begin this morning: THE MIRACLE AT CANA.

I. JESUS DEFIES COMPARISON OR 'NEAT' CATEGORIZING

We have to meet and know Jesus for ourselves!

Probably every devout Jew had an idea what Messiah should be, and do. A Messiah should be a strong man to bring political deliverance; or else an ascetic like John the Baptist. He should be "this," or He should be "that!" But who would ever think that the Messiah would perform His first miracle at a common wedding in a little out-of-the-way hill village far away from the center of things?

We had better be careful in 'assuming' we know 'all about Jesus!'

We love to categorize people and institutions. It helps us to pigeonhole them in their "proper" place in our scheme of things; and to some extent it gives us power over them, at least in our own minds. This is an inner arrogance, this being so sure that we understand other very complex people.

And if it is sad that we do this quickly with each other, it is even more sad when we think we know all about the Lord Jesus even before we give Him a chance to be Himself, and say for Himself what He has to say.

JESUS IS NOT TO BE NEATLY BOXED, AND 'EXPLAINED' AND TAMED!

When we meet the living Jesus, we are meeting Almighty God Himself! We are dealing here with MYSTERY! - Jesus cannot be "owned" and "packaged;" He must own me!

Jesus is NOT capricious. He can be depended on to keep His word. But at the same time Jesus is never limited to our predictions. (Why would He do the thing with wine?)

SO, THIS IS HOW JESUS INAUGURATED HIS MIRACLES, HIS MASTERY OVER THIS UNIVERSE!

It is a "dawning." It gives a hint at what shall follow. It is not out of character with Christ, even though it is surprising to many that Jesus would begin here, in this way.

It was an unveiling. It brought a glimpse of His glory to His disciples; and they believed on Him.

II. JESUS SET THE EXAMPLE OF JOY - OURS IS AN AUDACIOUSLY JOYFUL WAY !

- A. The very nature of salvation is that it must deal with sin, and guilt, and the darker side of existence that robs us of real life. But our God does NOT delight in GUILT! Jesus came to destroy the works of sin! There is a time and a place to face up to sin. But a religion that is habitually long-faced, and always engrossed in ascetics is NOT the faith Jesus manifested here.
- B. The ascetic way seems harder. Somehow it seems more pious to keep on wearing the hair shirt. It denies pleasures; it boasts of what it gives up; it revels in sacrifice. Actually it is self-centered! It refuses to let go control! It has set, rigid rules; it determines who can or cannot "enter into the kingdom."
- C. Jesus' way is not asceticism, but holiness. Christ's way does not deny pleasures, it denies self! And that is different from denying pleasures! Yes, there is a cross. But there is also JOY at the goal; and there is wonderful FELLOWSHIP ALONG THE WAY— and there is laughter and there is love!

III. THE MIRACLE AT CANA REVEALED A PATTERN OF ABUNDANCE

[... But why did He have to make His first miracle about 'wine'? !!!]

Abundance? Why it was even OVER-ABUNDANCE!: 6 times 20 or 30 gallons ...120 or 180 gallons times 4 (quarts per gallon) = 480 or 720 quarts of wine. At \$10.00 a quart there was \$5,000- 8,000 worth of wine ... WHY?? Was it ...a gift to the couple? ..a message about the Holy Spirit ? ... was it a pre-cursor of the message that "faith is wealth?"

- A. We "spiritualize" these truths— and say they have NO application in material things . . . life is to be "hard here" but we persevere. To those who would be "Essenes" and retire from life and living and fast all the time Jesus spoke by His example: I do not deny the finer things of life. I can enjoy social times; I endorse marriage; there are times when the thing to do is simply have a good time!
- B. Or, we go to the other extreme, and "materialize" all the promises: we say, "God intends us to live in luxury!" "Health and wealth indicate great and pure faith!" To those who would

go to the other extreme and use faith to serve self and procure material things, Jesus spoke clearly: Seek ye first the kingdom of God ... The Son of Man was a homeless person much of His life!!

- C. But Jesus "actualizes" His abundant life! "All things are YOURS!" And no one savors life [more], even here and now, like people who are in love with Jesus Christ!

John Wesley said: "Christ does not take away human society, but sanctifies it. Water might have quenched thirst; yet our Lord allows wine; especially at a festival solemnity."

His people LIVE even here, in the NOW! And His people have the assurance about the THEN, too!

IV. THE MIRACLE AT CANA BEGAN TO REVEAL THE AUTHOR OF LIFE

"Whatever He says to you, do it!" Advice from Mary that we may well heed: and as the disciples OBEYED they saw Christ's GLORY, and they BELIEVED!

- A. To obey Christ, and to reveal Him, is the ESSENCE of Christian faith: and we will not get to know what Jesus is like until we begin to trust and obey Him.
 - 1. Go, carry water, fill the pots there!
 - 2. Now, carry some to the governor of the feast! ... as the miracle unfolded, the disciples believed!
- B. To obey Christ, and to reveal Him, is the EVIDENCE of the Christian faith: and OTHERS will never know who Jesus is until we begin to obey Him in the little and big things of life!
 - 1. Christ will bless others through our obedience!
 - 2. But there is risk involved! We cannot "carry miracles" if we compromise in the obedience! ... the GLORY of Christ and His POWER and AUTHORITY was evident as the disciples obeyed!
- C. To obey Christ, and to reveal HIM, is the EVANGEL of the Christian faith: when we come to KNOW WHO JESUS IS, others will want to know Him, too!

[Jesus lived in a real world. The life of JOY and ABUNDANCE begins the moment HE, JESUS, comes into our lives. God's world— we don't deny the good things— we DENY

SELF! That is a lot more radical than denying self OF THINGS! But Jesus says: DENY SELF...AND ALL THINGS ARE YOURS, AND YE ARE CHRIST'S AND CHRIST IS GOD'S.]

Conclusion: WHAT DO WE SEE OF JESUS IN THIS MIRACLE AT CANA?

And how can what we see make an impact on our lives?

1. I SEE A TENDER, LOVING, JOYFUL SAVIOR.

Don't mistake: we need the discipline of fasting; we need the times of extra prayer, and waiting before the Lord. BUT, do we tend to have the self-centered ethic of asceticism?; if only we pray harder, or if we dig in, we can do anything we want! Do we begrudge a day in the mountains— or try to make an evangelistic message out of every sunset, rather than simply enjoy being with God and with His people? GOD WANTS WHOLE PEOPLE! The JOY of the Lord is our strength!

2. I SEE A SELF-GIVING SAVIOR, LIVING EVEN IN HIS "OFF MOMENTS," HIS TIMES OF JOY FOR OTHERS!

[Rather than being fanatical about fasting and abstaining from the pleasures of life, we are more likely to have the self-centered ethic of easy- believism. Many Christians would never say it, but they ACT AS IF God exists to make all our water into wine, so why should we work hard? Why bother about the cross? THIS isn't the Jesus you are seeing at Cana!]

Can we come to the place where we will simply OBEY Him? I want to obey Him every time I know that it is Jesus Who is speaking. I want to be attuned. "Go fill the pots with water!" Why? How can that help? What do You want me to do that for? Seemingly futile actions in obedience to direct command; as well as risking personal embarrassment if something miraculous doesn't happen.

3. I THINK MAYBE JESUS CHOSE TO BEGIN HIS MIRACLE-WORKING AUTHORITY AT A WEDDING BECAUSE HE WANTS US TO REMEMBER THAT IF WE FOLLOW HIM WE WILL ONE DAY END UP AT ANOTHER WEDDING FEAST!

Miracle at Cana

Do we dare to follow this Jesus away from the "expected" into the fullness of abundant life?

"Whatever HE says to you— DO IT!" The LAST will be better than the first! He will be our 'security!'

#46 *He Hideth My Soul* (At least verses 1 & 2)

The Healing at Bethesda

Seeing Jesus in His Miracles—Part 2 of 7

- [Miracle at Cana](#)
- **The Healing at Bethesda**
- [Five Thousand Fed](#)
- [Jesus Walks on the Water](#)
- [The Man Born Blind](#)
- [Jesus Raises Lazarus from the Dead](#)
- [The Miraculous Catch](#)

January 15, 1989

John 5:8 "Arise, take up your bed, and walk."

This is the third miracle that John records.

[Perhaps we ought not go past the second miracle without at least taking a brief glance: Jesus tells a man to go home, and he will find his son healed. It is a miracle of authority; and of faith that would believe even when it couldn't see.]

But here in John, Chapter 5, is the story of how Jesus healed a helpless man among throngs of lame, blind, and infirm at Bethesda, the House of Mercy, the Pool of Siloam.

I. A MAN WHO SIMPLY COULDN'T HANDLE LIFE

- A. He was a man with severely damaged HOPE. He had been 38 years among the disabled. Vaguely he kept feeling: "I'm made for something better than this!" He was always looking for a tomorrow that he never really expected would come. When hope is faint or damaged, it becomes just wishful thinking. This is the mentality that takes what little subsistence it has and buys a "Megabucks" ticket.
- B. This man was asked: WHAT DO YOU REALLY WANT? Jesus asked a key question: "Do you want to be made whole?"

We all want to be free from certain aspects of our situation; we want to believe we will never have to face the consequences of our sins. But we do not want to simply let them go; we do not want to be free of the twisted pleasures, the gratifications of our sins: the forbidden thoughts of lust — the secret thoughts of revenge — the bitter thoughts of ill-will — the petty thoughts of jealousy.

But this man thought it over. he thought, 'I don't know what difference it will make— and I don't have anyone to help me- - but, yes, I DO want to be well! And so this powerless man received:

C. The challenge of FAITH! STAND UP! YOUR WEAKNESS IS OVER!

Cruel words? If you or I said such a thing to a disabled person it WOULD be cruel! But Jesus is NEVER cruel!

The words of Jesus are always compassionate, at least to the lowly in heart. But the words of Jesus are also always challenging. When JESUS speaks then we know, somehow that this is not human persuasion. This is not a technique. We grasp the authority in the Speaker! This is God Himself!

But He is asking us to do what we alone cannot do! "Rise and walk!" "Go and sin no more!"

But Jesus' words are not just compassionate and challenging. JESUS' WORDS ARE ALSO ALWAYS ENABLING! If we know it is Jesus, then we can do whatever He says! This man, catching the spark of faith in Christ's authority, was made whole as he obeyed.

It seems as though there ought to be more to it than that! There ought to be spiritual fireworks! [Isn't there supposed to be a great crowd-reaction— and an appeal for "funds to keep this faith-ministry on the air!" ?? It is wonderful when we simply hear the voice of Jesus say: YOU ARE FREE RIGHT NOW! IF YOU WILL GET UP AND WALK AS I SAY!

English pastor Spurgeon used an illustration of a wealthy American woman who brought her "servant" aboard a British ship anchored off the port in which she lived. (Servant = slave!) The rich lady made the observation that if she sailed to Britain, and the servant went ashore on British soil, she would be "free." But the captain said, "She was a free woman the moment she walked on this deck!" And the black woman refused to go ashore with the woman that had been her mistress. She sailed to England a free woman! WHEN JESUS SPEAKS, WE ARE FREE!

- D. To be HELPLESS is not a liability when we are dealing with Jesus. It isn't just the OBVIOUSLY disabled who are helpless in the eternal things that matter!

We hate to relinquish the appearance of control, but the fact is we cannot save ourselves!

Certainly there are gifted, strong men and women. Certainly God can and does use great gifts to His glory. Thank God for the gifts He gives, of intelligence and personality, of creativity in arts and music, of keenness in perception and insight in science and business.

But the greatest of gifts are still helplessness before the Lord until they come under the love and power and authority of God Himself. And THEN they take on dimensions of eternity! They begin to really matter! And we helpless men and women begin to LIVE!

II. HERE IS A SAVIOR WHO SPECIALIZES IN MAKING PEOPLE WHOLE

And in keeping with the theme of this brief series: "What does this miracle reveal to us of Jesus?"

- A. Jesus always acts in union with God the Father. What we see in Jesus, we know about God; and what God does/will do in resurrection and judgment. He will do through Jesus Christ! ("Do not marvel at this (miracle of empowerment; verse 28) for an hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs shall hear His voice and shall come forth ..." This making one powerless man whole is no problem for the One who holds ALL OF LIFE AND CREATION in His creative Fiat!

- B. Jesus (and thus God Almighty) has great respect/regard for the human will.

God never comes into our lives over the resistance of our will. The greatest single hindrance to spiritual power in people's lives is the lack of genuine desire. People who profess to be Christian do not really want to be HOLY! If we desire to be like Jesus Christ then He will find a way to get to us, and speak a Word that will enable us! but if we just say the words we will remain helpless beside the Pool of Mercy.

DO YOU WANT TO BE MADE WHOLE? God has great regard for your will! You will never achieve spiritual greatness unless you desire it supremely, and unless you answer His question, "Will you be whole?"

- C. Jesus can and does use His authority to make people whole! Jesus is still speaking words of compassion. He is still speaking words that challenge. But His words are still enabling words, as well!

[But this miracle is set in a chapter that contrasts a powerless man who was made whole, and some supposedly very powerful men who refused the very Source of Life.]

III. A GIFTED, PRIVILEGED GROUP OF MEN WHO NEVER FOUND LIFE

At the beginning of the chapter is a man who COULDN'T— but at the close are men who WOULDN'T come to the Source of Life, even though HE was right before their very eyes!

- A. It would seem that such love and kindness ought to provoke an outpouring of joy and celebration. "Messiah is here!" Or, at least, "Someone is here who cares about people, and is helping the helpless!" But instead there was bitter opposition- - and it came along the line of CONTROL! The "power structure" of the religious society attacked Jesus at the point of His UNION WITH GOD THE FATHER!

To acknowledge His claims would mean for them a relinquishing of the CONTROL they THOUGHT they had over their own salvation BY WORKS, by keeping the "scriptures" THEY had interpreted.

B. SAVING FAITH IS IMPOSSIBLE WHEN OUR MEASURE OF FAITH IS ONLY HUMAN.

We compare ourselves with one another: "I am as good as..." Or, "What matters is that we are true to ourselves!"

What is more, we sit in judgment over the scripture: WE select which part or parts we shall obey!

C. It wasn't as though these people were shut away from the means of grace. They did have the true scriptures! (Jesus said [verse 39] "You (do) search the scriptures!" BUT IT WAS IN THE SCRIPTURES, IN THEIR SMUG CERTAINTY THAT THEY HAD A HANDLE ON TRUTH, THAT THEY THOUGHT THEY HAD ETERNAL LIFE.

But Jesus went on: "The scriptures point the way to ME!" Verses 39-40 "You search the scriptures, because you think that in them YOU have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life."

D. These people were damned because they were UNWILLING to come to Jesus! This is what HE said!

Conclusion:

We are catching the threads of continuity that run through this portrait of Jesus at work: threads of compassion, and of understanding.

But the thread I see is this constant of DIVINE AUTHORITY! It is the untameable and awesome power of God!

1. When Jesus speaks, it IS the voice of God! When GOD speaks, something within us responds! No one can presume to say, "When I preach you will hear God!" We trust and hope that by the Holy Spirit that often takes place. But no one can speak for Jesus, finally, except Jesus Himself, by the power of His Holy Spirit!
2. When we come seeking God (in prayer/worship/preaching worship/wherever) and that connection is made, THERE IS SOMETHING BEYOND INTELLECTUAL BELIEVISM!

The Healing at Bethesda

A genuine encounter with Jesus Christ will be more than just a parade to an altar to say some words! It is an encounter with compassion, and with a challenge to a new way! And it will also be an enabling Word!

The powerless man stood up, carried his bed, walked— in obedience to the Word of Jesus Christ!

The nobleman from Capernaum turned around, and went back toward home in obedience to the Word of Jesus Christ!

WHAT IS JESUS THE CHRIST SAYING TO YOU?

#12(EH) *This is Thy Will, I Know* (Introduce these two couplets:)

*This is Thy will, I know,
That I should holy be;
Should let my sins this moment go,
This moment turn to Thee.*

*O might I now embrace
Thy all-sufficient pow'r;
And never more to sin give place,
And never grieve Thee more!*

Five Thousand Fed

Seeing Jesus in His Miracles—Part 3 of 7

- [Miracle at Cana](#)
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January 22, 1989

John 6:1-11 (verse 11) Jesus therefore took the loaves; and having given thanks, He distributed to those who were seated; likewise also of the fish as much as they wanted.

INTRODUCTION:

In this miracle, which is so important that it is recorded in all four gospels, there are enough different lessons to keep a scholar busy for a lifetime, I suppose. There is a basic truth about "little is much, when God is in it" that almost applies itself. A lad's lunch: five small loaves and two small fishes, given to Jesus, feed 5,000. But, Look again with me at...

I. THE MIRACLE ITSELF

(text verse) Set the scene; and then:

- A. (verse 6) Jesus knew ahead of time what He was going to do. GOD IS ALWAYS AN ACT-ER, AND NOT A RE-ACT-ER. Circumstances do not "sneak up" on God. In this situation it looked as though Jesus and His disciples were the embarrassed victims of their own success. Thousands had come to hear the wonderful words of life. But now the very mass of people was more than could be handled.

God permits the 'rain to fall on the just and the unjust.' And God respects the free moral choices of human beings in ways we cannot always understand. But God is NEVER surprised by life's twists and turns; and He is never "out of control."

- B. (verse 5) Jesus asked Philip to consider the problem. GOD INTER-ACTS WITH PEOPLE AND WITH THINGS AT HAND. And Philip took an inventory. Other evangelists record the "treasury as low: five loaves, two fish;" But it was good old ANDREW that saw the LAD who owned the "treasury"— the one person who had something of his own to eat.
- C. (verse 11) Jesus therefore took the loaves; and having given thanks, He distributed to those who were seated; likewise also of the fish as much as they wanted. JESUS TOOK WHAT THE DISCIPLES HAD— TOOK ALL OF IT, INADEQUACY AND ALL— AND WORKED A MIRACLE OF GRACE!
- D. (verse 26 "Truly, truly I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled. Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life...") The miracle had some unforeseen re-actions. SOMETIMES GOD'S GIFTS, AND THE BENEFITS OF GOD'S LOVE CAN BE THE FOCUS OF AMBITION AND DESIRE, RATHER THAN THE LIFE IN CHRIST ITSELF.

II. SEEING THE PERSON AND WORK OF JESUS IN THE MIRACLE

This story is another documentary about how Jesus met with people, and gives us a clear example of the interwoven strands of the kingdom of God:

These three strands are LOVE, and SERVICE, and HOLINESS. Put into inter-human terms, they are loving fellowship, caring service, and faithful proclamation; (the Greek, or New Testament terms are koinonia, diakonia, and kerigma.) Jesus taught, and Jesus showed by his example that all three, LOVING, and SHARING, and PROCLAMATION, were vital, important to Him.

We're tempted to try to bring in the kingdom of God simply by telling people, "this is HOW to become a Christian!" And we prefer if a minister does the telling in a revival or church service. But look at how Jesus modeled the kingdom:

- A. THIS MIRACLE SHOWS US THAT JESUS LOVED PEOPLE. John simply records that Jesus looked up and saw the crowd coming. But Mark tells us (1) that Jesus had gone on a retreat, to get away; no doubt He was tired, perhaps even worn out. But Mark also says (probably with the eye-witness of Peter prompting him) that (2) when Jesus saw the multitude, He had compassion on them, because they were like a sheep without a shepherd.
- **IT IS JUST ABOUT IMPOSSIBLE TO EVANGELIZE APART FROM LOVE.**

The Gospel is GOOD NEWS; the evangel is the message of God's love. And somewhere along the way it has to be fleshed out.

(Illus: The story is told of a little boy on a bitter, snowy, windy day in Chicago, coming into Dwight L. Moody's Sunday School, stamping the snow off his feet, and looking almost frozen to death.

"Where do you live?" the boy was asked. When he told, the questioner said, "You walked past several good churches to get here this cold morning. Why didn't you go to one closer to your home?"

The little boy answered: "I guess its because they love a feller here!")

- B. THIS MIRACLE ALSO SHOWED US THAT JESUS SAW PEOPLE AS MORE THAN SOULS TO BE SAVED. JESUS UNDERSTOOD PEOPLE. He knew that they were not just lost souls, or damned sinners, but they were also hungry stomachs. He knew that they were teenagers wondering what people might think of them— or what they were thinking of themselves. He knew they were older folk wondering if the health would hold out as long as the savings. He knew they were middle-aged people carrying burdens for grown-up children as well as aged parents.

So, when He saw the multitude, He knew they were hungry. And He said, "Where are we going to get food for these people?"

Mark has it a little different, again. The disciples knew it was impossible, so they said: "Send them away before it gets too dark to see the road to the store!" But Jesus aid: "YOU feed them!"

This can have a literal application: we need to share our food. It also is a principle:

****IT IS JUST ABOUT IMPOSSIBLE TO EVANGELIZE "SPIRITUALLY."**

At least this is true if we are defining "spiritual" to mean apart and separate from the all the rest of the person.

We might begin our witnessing with a genuine interest in the person we want to bring to Jesus. The need may not be bread, but there is a need. And we may not have what the person needs, any more than the disciples had bread for the 5,000. But we can care, and we can share what we DO have.

- C. BUT THIS MIRACLE ALSO REVEALED WHAT TO MANY SEEMED TO BE A 'NEW SIDE' OF JESUS. JESUS LEVELED WITH PEOPLE. He didn't sail under false colors. He knew when the people wanted simply to USE Him. And He said: "This is what I AM! I AM the Bread of heaven!"

This was a watershed miracle, and a watershed time.

****THERE IS NO EVANGELISM THAT BY-PASSES THE CROSS OF CHRIST!**

Sooner or later, and the sooner the better as a rule, we have to come face-to-face with the eternal needs of the people we love. We have to be faithful in saying: "JESUS IS LOVING, JESUS IS CARING, BUT JESUS IS LORD! AND JESUS IS LIFE! AND ONLY JESUS IS LIFE!"

CONCLUSION:

1. From this miracle, ultimately, came a DIVISION (6:66). "Many went back, and walked with Him no more!"

If it had simply been "Loaves and fishes Day" every day there never would have been a problem. If we simply had Praise gatherings, and hand-clapping, toe-tapping times all the time there would be no problem.

But Jesus spoke of DEATH and of SHARING HIS DEATH AND HIS LIFE! And that has a repulsive side to it! It is a humbling thing to NEED a sacrifice! It is a humbling thing to be DIED FOR!

So— the GIFT-SEEKERS BEGAN TO LEAVE! The FREE-LOADERS, and the SCRIPTURE-EDITORS WENT AWAY FOR GOOD!

2. From this miracle came also came a reinforced DECISION (6:67-8) "Do you want to go, too?"

There is real pathos in this scene. Jesus looks at His closest friends, The Twelve, who have only recently been out working for Him. Are YOU looking for what I can DO, rather than for ME?

Peter speaks for us all: "Lord, to whom shall we go? YOU have the words of eternal life!"

3. JESUS CLAIMS HE IS THE ONLY WAY TO ETERNAL LIFE!
 - HAVE YOU MADE A DECISION ABOUT JESUS? Have YOU / ARE you a partaker in the blood and body of the Lord? Through GRACE, by FAITH, have you come to eternal life?
 - ARE YOU WILLING TO SHARE THIS MESSAGE? Will you be an evangel? To CARE? To SERVE? And then, as God gives you grace, to SHARE YOUR FAITH? If you follow the Lord Jesus for Himself, and not just for what He gives and does, I challenge you to take someone on your heart to care about, and to serve, and as the opportunity presents itself, to introduce them to Jesus Christ.

#391 *At Calvary*

Jesus Walks on the Water

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January 22, 1989 PM

John 6:15-25

Introduction:

After the feeding of the five thousand, (remember that Jesus had gone to the remote region trying to get some "time away,") Jesus was still very weary, and needed some time alone. So he sent the disciples back to Capernaum in their boats and went alone up into the hills to pray. A series of things challenged the disciples:

I. A TIME OF CHALLENGE

[Scene: The Sea of Galilee lies 600 feet below Mediterranean Sea; channels of valleys cut toward the mountains of Lebanon in the north; Mt. Hermon. Winds whip down the valleys— treacherous storms blow up. One does just NOW!]

The certainty of change.

It was a quick transition for the disciples. From the excitement of a disaster (not having enough to eat with thousands hungry) that was turned into a triumph (the feeding of the 5,000); from the "starring role" of miracle-helper and from gathering in baskets of left-overs, the disciples had gone to rowing against the wind, in the dark, with water slopping into their boat.

The mystery of the adverse winds and waves.

Christians experience dark hours when they cannot see/know the Presence; we are NOT called to be fair-weather sailors. So— the gales stirred up the sea. Why? The scriptures don't say. Did Jesus "cause" the wind? Or did it begin with a storm far out over the Mediterranean Sea miles and miles away? Who knows? Does it help to know? GOD PERMITS SOME THINGS WE BLAME HIM FOR. Some things we can/never will understand this side of heaven.

The mystery of the timing of Jesus.

The disciples were on the sea at Jesus' direct command. They were NOT out of His will for them. But they certainly were without the comforting re-assurance of the presence of the Master. Sometimes JESUS SEEMS NOT IN ANY HURRY TO ALLAY FEARS:

Certainly He does see; He does care. But He does not always do what we might THINK He should do. (Martha said: "Lord, if You had been here my brother would not have died.")

Even God's people, on His assignment, for a time experience fear and danger and storms. But Jesus has NOT deserted His own; He knows. And He will never abandon His own!

II. A TIME OF REASSURANCE Jesus Came!

He came in an unexpected way. He just about always does! The very elements that threaten and terrify are the stepping stones, the pathway on which Jesus comes.

He makes Himself KNOWN. There are times when we must hold on in naked faith— there are times when we have no assurance. But in this case Jesus, Himself, assures them it is He: "It is I! Don't be afraid!"

The Presence of Jesus is assurance. They invited Him aboard! And immediately the boat was where they were headed (at His command in the first place!) Sometimes we must build an altar where we are— that the fire may fall where God intends it to do the task assigned!

Jesus bids us be like Him! (Matthew records the episode of Peter asking Jesus to let HIM walk on the sea, too: Peter on the sea... the significance... I'll come to that again, perhaps ???)

III. BUT WHAT DO WE SEE OF JESUS HERE?

(Our series is "Seeing JESUS in His miracles: AND THIS IS ANOTHER CANDID CAMERA SHOT OF JESUS AT WORK)

He still needed that time alone with God the Father— and he got it!

He was the Master of His disciples. They moved at His command. He gave direct commands to the disciples: they knew what the next step was. And He was obeyed.

He was AWESOME: A GLIMPSE OF HIS MAJESTY HERE— beyond the mere "trick" of walking on the water— the elements knew their Master. Something of the TERROR of the night comes through in the telling— first of the storm— then of the seeming apparition— but then of the AWESOME LORD! ("He is NOT "safe" but He is good" is what one character said of Aslan the Lion in the C.S Lewis series in the Chronicles of Narnia.)

He was in CONTROL! (That is beyond "command.")

He permitted Peter (and us) a hint/glimpse? of the FUN/JOY of mastery! There are deeper lessons than that, I'm certain, and yet I have the sense that it was no big deal to Jesus to walk on the water!

IV. APPLICATION(S):

Some people here just NOW may be in a "night-storm" of trouble- financial crisis— absent friends; perhaps facing the reality of DEATH: [we ALL will one day pass through the waters of death: we will see Him then ... "When thou passeth through the waters, I will be with thee..."]

There is STRONG ENCOURAGEMENT in this miracle! This glimpse of our great Lord, Who is not just strong in so-called "religious" matters, but is Master of the entire Universe, including, and maybe especially, the "material" Universe! ... THE LORD

JESUS CHRIST'S Kingdom is a kingdom wider in its range and more profound in extent than we are capable of understanding.

I CAN SEE THREE LESSONS:

1. Jesus can "use" the surges, billows, waves, unrest. Christ's commands to us, as we carry them out, will be opposed. But He can overrule, He does see us; and our part is not to whine or complain.
2. Jesus comes to us where we toil. NO one cries out to Him in vain; He does not turn deaf ears. If we are following His commands, the wind may be against us. We may be afraid, but Jesus has never turned a deaf ear to the cry for help, for assurance, for succor. He may seem "late" by our measuring, but He comes all the same! And the worst of the trouble is gone when Jesus comes and shares it with us.
3. What we see Jesus do, we can ask to do, too!

The Christ-life- the way God expects us to LIVE as we walk with His Son, Jesus Christ, is in many ways as foreign to the way we "naturally" live as literally walking on water. (How many people have said, "I can't LIVE like that!") But when Jesus bids us, we like Peter, can begin to "walk on water." Not in a literal sense now, of course. And not perfectly, unhesitatingly. Like Peter we get our eyes on the waves and stumble and start to sink down. But by God's grace Christians can do some things even harder than walking on water! Sometimes we can be Christ-like through transforming love.

It is natural to be small and petty. It is natural to love friends and hate enemies. Perhaps the hardest thing of all is to find grace to forgive real injustice. The desire for vengeance is great, especially when we have been offended. Jesus enables us to forgive from the heart, as He forgave His enemies:

Don Ratzlaff in his book *The Christian Leader*, from Ernest Gordon's *Miracle on the River Kwai*: (and I quote)

The Scottish soldiers had been forced by their captors to labor on a jungle railroad, and they had degenerated to barbarous behavior, more and more acting like animals. But then something happened:

"A shovel was missing. The officer in charge became enraged. He demanded that the missing shovel be produced, or else. When nobody in the squadron budged, the officer got his gun and threatened to kill them all on the spot. .. It was obvious that the officer meant what he had said. Then, finally, one man stepped forward. The officer put away his gun, picked up a shovel, and beat the man to death. When it was over, the survivors picked up the bloody corpse and carried it with them to the second tool check. This time, no shovel was missing. Indeed, there had been a miscount at the first check point.

"The word spread like wildfire through the whole camp. An innocent man had been willing to die to save the others! ... The incident had a profound effect. . . the men began to treat each other like brothers.

"When the victorious Allies swept in, the survivors, human skeletons, line up in front of their captors . . . [and instead of attacking their captors] insisted: 'No more hatred. No more killing. Now what we need is forgiveness.'"

To forgive like that, to my mind, is as impossible as walking on water. And I know that concentration-camp stuff is extreme— but a lot of what Jesus expects us to do is just about as hard. To love our enemies. To love people, and use things, and not the other way around. All that stuff in the Sermon on the Mount about not even harboring anger or resentment in our hearts against those who spitefully use us.

Jesus did those things. But He is God. But He says to us: YOU CAN DO IT, TOO!

#58 I Lay My Sins on Jesus (all three verses) "I long to be like Jesus, Meek, loving, lowly, mild; I long to be like Jesus, the Father's holy Child."

The Man Born Blind

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NOTE: This sermon is an outline and not a manuscript, which means in some spots you'll have to supply your own "polish."

January 29, 1989

John 9:35 *Jesus found him and said: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 38 And he said: "Lord, I believe!"*

Statement of purpose for this sermon: To show that the gifts of God's grace must be used to discern God Himself; to understand that better than having sight is to see Christ and worship Him.

I. QUESTIONS RAISED BY THE PRESENCE OF THE BLIND MAN

Was this caused by sin? Why is he here?

As old as the Book of Job and older— we tend to see life and especially to see our relationship with God as direct cause-and-effect; the good prosper, the bad suffer. But life is not as simple as all that. There is mystery in every "connection" with the eternal. Our challenge is to come to know and love God and to believe that He is GOOD.

Blindness as a curse. Shared curse of sin.

All evil derives from "The Fall." The significance of Genesis 3 can hardly be over-estimated. A particular person's blindness may not be the result of his sin— but all humanity groans under the curse that blinds us from the light of God's pure love.

II. THE MIRACLE

Clay made - blind man sent away unseeing: he had never seen Jesus face to face. But he went obediently, and came seeing. But still he had never seen the face of Jesus. He could not identify Him.

The simple story here is fascinating. Who could/would invent such a thing? Jesus *spit* on the ground and made a little mud and rubbed in on this blind man's eyes. He didn't *need* to do it— just a word would have sufficed. The blind man simply did as Jesus told him. *We* are so sophisticated we probably would have argued.

III. DECLARATION: I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

One of the seven great "I AM" statements of Jesus found in John's Gospel- - each of the seven miracles cited illustrates and illuminates a facet of Jesus' divine glory and power.

The "Door" the "Good Shepherd" the "Way, Truth, Life," the "Bread of Heaven" the "Resurrection and Life" and the "True Vine" combine with the "Light of the world" to give us a glimpse of the radiant, many-splendor-ed glory that is our Lord.

IV. THE FUROR CAUSED

There is something wrong when a great problem is caused by HONESTY. The blind man speaks what he knows from experience: "The facts speak clearly: I was blind. I now see."

Jesus is a threat to comfortable religion-in-power. The authorities cannot deny a miracle— but are quick to try to get the formerly blind man to denounce Jesus. Remember— this blind man has never seen Jesus! He had to go away and wash in the Pool of Siloam while Jesus went on about his business. This miracle resonates with the elder brother character in Luke 15, and with the parable of the Pharisee and

the tax collector— where grace extended to those outside the circle bring up resentment.

When pressed, in all honesty, the blind man confounded, infuriated the power structure. "What's your problem?" he seems to say to the authorities.

But there was more than just a division of opinions. There was a threat to the control of the power bloc. The need to analyze: "Give God the glory: "we KNOW this man is a sinner"

THEY CAST HIM OUT.

V. WHAT DO WE SEE OF JESUS IN THIS MIRACLE?

1. The "usual" compassion, yes.
2. Jesus, although a part of the religious community, established the fact that He is the Leader of the true Church; man cannot excommunicate the man or woman who is "included in" by Jesus.
3. Jesus is in the business of "including people IN!" Not in setting up ways to keep people OUT.

[Illus: Long ago and far away a young woman "protected the integrity" of a church I attended by slapping a cigarette out of the mouth of a man who lit up as he left a service. The message was clear— *we* don't do those filthy things! But it was no wonder if he never returned. We have to WANT people to be "IN."]

Jesus FOUND him and took him IN! Spiritual insight was added to physical vision: "WHO IS HE?" The reality of Jesus as a Person cannot be assumed; it cannot be accepted as fact just because someone says so. There must be a revelation, built on faith/obedience: "acting as if."

Jesus made the statement: "I AM HE!" "LORD, I BELIEVE!" ...AND HE WORSHIPED!

APPLICATIONS:

1. We cannot "force faith." We cannot see what we cannot see. But to each of us there comes a Word of faith; we cannot see until we obey.

2. Obscurantism. The facts are not allowed to confuse the issue at hand. We cannot ask people to believe what is patently untrue. But there is such a thing as obscurantist "Christianity."
3. The danger— of trying to understand— to "see" before we are healed!
4. Also the danger of stopping short of a commitment! Thomas was honest. This blind man was honest! But honest doubt, coupled with a willingness to be shown, and a willingness to obey when shown is not a hindrance to Jesus. Jesus revealed Himself to Thomas. Jesus said to this blind man: "I AM the Messiah!" And He will say to you, if you are willing to see: "I AM Almighty God!"
5. Jesus is the Light of the world.
6. This man actually was excommunicated because he would not "see things" the way he was told.
7. Preclude the arguments of the need for expression of sin.

In accommodation to changing times "seeker friendly" approaches could degenerate into excusing Christ's clear demands for self denial and taking up the cross. There is only ONE Savior, and Jesus says "I AM HE!"

The beginning of a moving of the Spirit in New Jersey 25 years ago— the Maranatha Church of the Nazarene's foundings from "hippie" roots— started when Jack White, a very "straight" even old-fashioned but humble, Spirit-filled man of God preached a weekend series in New Milford, New Jersey. His messages were anything but "hip." But they were loving, simple, personal testimony to Jack White's own conversion as a teenager in Indiana. "I don't understand all your music or language," Jack seemed to say. "But I know I needed a Friend and a Savior to forgive my sins." It was the same testimony of the blind man. "I don't know a lot about this Jesus. But I know I was blind and he made me see!"

8. Our culture is BLIND to the word "sin." It does not "compute." But even the fact that there are good reasons for keeping the Ten Commandments does not obscure the fact that it is SIN, not just poor judgment, to break them.

CONCLUSION

Warning!! Finding your spiritual sight will put you at odds with the way most of the world views life!

Jesus understood that VISION had gotten the formerly blind man into trouble. Just being honest about how he had received his sight got the formerly blind man kicked out of his "hope of heaven!"

But Jesus went looking for him. He found him; and brought him into fellowship with the Father. This fellowship is OUR privilege, through grace!

Warning! The religious power bloc said: ARE WE BLIND?

Jesus: If you admitted you were blind you might have hope. But no, you have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil— you "know" without God's help what is right and wrong— and so on you go in darkness that leads to outer, utter darkness!

**** Outline incomplete**

Jesus Raises Lazarus from the Dead

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February 12, 1989

John 11

Introduction: In this passage of scripture we have the crowning miracle of all the miracles that Jesus did before His passion. It is the climax of John's revelation of the mastery of Jesus. It brought about a crisis in His opposition that led directly to his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. From the point of view of Christ's enemies, desperate measures were needed against One who could demonstrate authority even over death.

But we are interested in what this miracle reveals to us of the character of Jesus:

Jesus is 'beyond Jordan' in a wilderness area, under pressure and threat from the religious leaders. He gets word that Lazarus is in trouble. It looks like He is afraid, because He remains in place two days longer. And He is warned (v 8) NOT to go back. Thomas (v 16) says: 'Let's go die with Him!' Jesus is on the way. But He is "late."

I. THE TIMING OF JESUS IN RESPONSE TO EXPRESSED APPEAL FOR HELP ...

Jesus' TIMING is usually far from what WE might think He ought to be doing:

Verse 6 "When therefore He heard that he was sick, He stayed then two days longer in the place where He was."

I cannot hope to explain why Jesus, when he heard that Lazarus was sick, stayed right where He was and apparently let Lazarus die. But I am convinced that Jesus had reasons we will not know until eternity why he tarried. Jesus has the "timing" of the whole world in his control. And Jesus does not toy with personalities; He does not treat people like laboratory animals.

As Jesus drew near, we know what He is going to do. In a few minutes Lazarus will be restored to his family. But still Jesus is deeply moved in His spirit (v 33). He weeps with those who are weeping.

II. THE OBVIOUS AND APPARENT EMPATHY OF JESUS FOR THOSE WHO MOURNED

Jesus shared in the grief of those who mourned. He knew that bereavement and sorrow are the keenest of pain; and He knew that His delay had added to the pain.

Verse 35 "Jesus wept."

1. WHY? WHY DID JESUS WEEP?

Was He simply weak, and couldn't stand to see tears? Personally, I believe that Jesus was strong like no other man or woman was ever strong. In the words of the songwriter: "He had no tears for His own grief, but sweat drops of blood for MINE!"

I believe Jesus wept because He cared! And I still think that God grieves, and cares. I DON'T KNOW WHY HE DOESN'T INTERVENE AT TIMES. HE HAS LIMITED HIMSELF. BUT I CHOOSE TO BELIEVE THAT HE IS GOD, AND THAT HE IS GOOD.

2. WHEN DID JESUS WEEP? at least two times:

Here. Over the sorrowing.

Over the city of Jerusalem. When He knew the city of Jerusalem was rejecting Him. Over the lost, the rejectors.

Jesus cares enough about others — about YOU and ME to have His heart broken. Have you ever had your heart broken because people you love were hurting themselves, or were going through deep water and you couldn't help them?

Have YOU ever broken the heart of Jesus?

But one other thought here:

3. WHY and WHEN do WE weep??

[It certainly isn't weak or wrong to weep occasionally.] But what do we weep about? "As the World Turns?" 'A dent in the new car?' Lost opportunities?

Or, do we care enough about others to listen, and to love, and to weep???

If Jesus wept, Jesus certainly also changed the expected course of the proceedings that day! Jesus was not weeping because He knew that death was the end! Jesus didn't see Lazarus illness and death the same as anyone else there that day:

III. THE PERSPECTIVE OF JESUS ON THE ILLNESS AND DEATH OF LAZARUS, AND THE MASTERY OF JESUS REVEALED

... This different perspective is apparent early on:

(11:4) "But when Jesus heard it (that Lazarus was sick) He said: 'This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of man may be glorified by it.'"

Jesus certainly did not view the situation in the same way as any one else could view it. He said: "This illness is not unto death." — and yet Lazarus did die. How can we understand what Jesus meant??

Jesus Raises Lazarus from the Dead

1. He could have been mistaken. (I discount that.)
2. He could have meant: "I know in advance that I will be in Bethany in four days and I will reverse the process of death and disintegration, and so the end will not what it seems now." It looks on the face of it that this is what Jesus meant. But I am convinced that Jesus had reasons we will not know until eternity why he tarried. Jesus has the "timing" of the whole world in his control. AND JESUS DOES NOT MANIPULATE US like laboratory animals.
3. What Jesus said is: "This illness of Lazarus, OR ANY OTHER ILLNESS OR SITUATION IN MORTAL LIFE, does not finally end in death."

DEATH IS NOT THE FINAL GOAL FOR WHICH WE ALL ARE HEADING. And Jesus could say that because He also could say what no one else ever can say: "I AM the Resurrection and the Life."

In the far reaching eons of eternity, when this wonderful Universe has gone through stage after stage of re-Creation the kernel of reality that is your PERSON, your SPIRIT, the real YOU will still be self-aware!

4. We grasp at the illusion of 'being in some semblance of control' of our lives. We don't like to think that there is so much about life and death that we cannot understand. Only Jesus can speak with authority about life, death, and eternity:

ILLUSTRATION: [In 1975 Henri J. M. Nouwen wrote (in his book *Reaching Out*),:

"Recently a student who had just finished his long studies for the ministry and was ready to start in his first church suddenly died after a fatal fall from his bike. Those who knew him well felt a strong, angry protest arising from their hearts. Why him, a very noble man who could have done so much for so many? Why now, just when his long, costly education could start bearing fruit? Why in this way, so unprepared and unheroic? There were no answers to all these reasonable questions. A strong angry protest seemed the only human response.

But such a protest is the continuation of our allusion that we know what life is all about, that we rule it and determine its values as well as its goals. We do not, and are challenged instead to convert our protest against the absurdities of the human

existence into a prayer lifting us beyond the boundaries of our existence to him who holds our life in his hands and heart with boundless love and mercy. In our attempts to accept this challenge, we are wise to say to ourselves with the words of the Psalmist:

You men, why shut your hearts so long, loving delusions, chasing after lies? Know this, Yahweh works wonders for those he loves, Yahweh hears me when I call to him. (Psalm 4:2-3)]

Our perspective is necessarily limited. We cannot see anything redeeming about the death of a distinguished student in a biking accident. The loss of a Rev. Dale Parry is stunning, unmixed tragedy to us, and I do not even try to explain it away. I cannot see anything attractive about burying a young man of 26 who is fast "losing" a 10-year struggle with cancer.

But it is precisely when we cannot see or understand that we need to listen to Jesus. We need to hear Him say: "This sickness is not unto death!" And by faith we need to see that HE, and not WE, are the masters of life. He, not we, determines what are life's greatest values, and what are its eternal goals.

And by faith we understand that when we put our faith, our trust, our life in Christ's keeping, then nothing of this wonderful, mysterious, transient, tragic, joyful thing we call LIFE is meant to END in death.

Conclusion: And so in this miracle we see THE MASTERY OF JESUS TO BRING HOPE BEYOND HOPE

We still use these words of Jesus at just about every Christian graveside. "I am the Resurrection and the LIFE!"

At Lazarus's grave he proved His Mastery by calling the dead man forth— but to the same kind of good life he had known before, not to the glorified life that all the Church shall know when we see Him in HIS glory.

Jesus Raises Lazarus from the Dead

But Jesus is just the same today as He was in Bethany; He loves YOU as much as He loved Lazarus, as hard as that is to believe. He cares about YOUR deep hurts and needs.

Prayer: Be present in a healing, assuring way in our Communion this morning. Weep with us, O Lord, but also call forth the power of HOPE into our lives! YOU are the Life! You are the Resurrection of Hope! And You are HERE!

EH #28 - Oh, How He Loves You and Me

The Miraculous Catch

Seeing Jesus in His Miracles—Part 7 of 7

- [Miracle at Cana](#)
- [The Healing at Bethesda](#)
- [Five Thousand Fed](#)
- [Jesus Walks on the Water](#)
- [The Man Born Blind](#)
- [Jesus Raises Lazarus from the Dead](#)
- **The Miraculous Catch**

February 19, 1989 PM

John 21:1-11

Introduction: [I believe that the Book of John was intended to end with the 20th chapter. But there was the personal matter of Simon Peter that John wanted to relate. It may be one of the most beautiful and personal stories in the Bible. It is also the occasion of Jesus' last miracle on earth: The Miraculous Draught of Fishes.]

PETER RETURNED TO FISHING.

There may be many reasons, many ways to "go fishing. " Not many of them are bad. Personally, I have found that going fishing is almost ALWAYS a GOOD thing. But here...

It could have been a bad thing; a return to an occupation once abandoned. It could have meant "It's over!" Anyway, this is where Jesus first came upon Peter, Andrew, James, and John.

I. JESUS REVEALED HIMSELF

... IN A UNIQUE WAY, BY TELLING SEASONED, EXPERIENCED FISHERPEOPLE HOW TO FISH.

Do it MY way! And as His advice was followed there was a demonstration of mastery. Luck? Well, anyway, in this act of mastery it was the beloved disciple, John who discerned "It is the Lord!"

Jesus knows more about your business than you do! In this age of electronics and computers and public relations the Galilean Carpenter is still Almighty God! And He is eternal in His understanding. (He even understands physics!)

[I think sometimes about the story of a prosperous London businessman who was asked by Queen Victoria to leave his business for a while and tend to some of her interests in India. It meant quite a sacrifice on his part.

But when he returned home several months or years later he found that his business had prospered far beyond his fondest hopes. For, as Her Majesty said, "You have been looking after MY business, and while you were, I have been looking after YOURS!"]

The fishermen are elated: 153 LARGE fish! Not 'about 150!' Not "counting them as they came there were almost 200 seekers ... "But exactly 153 large fish!

II. JESUS DEMONSTRATED HOSPITALITY

... the first 'Men's Prayer Breakfast' had fish on the menu! This wasn't a psychological ploy: "Feed 'em, and then give 'em the business!" Jesus isn't that kind of Person. But can you imagine Jesus fixing breakfast?

III. JESUS RENEWS THE CALL TO PETER

- HE NEVER GIVES UP ON US! BUT HE WILL NOT ACCEPT ANY RIVALS!

He had simply ONE question: Do you love Me? !!

1. Hold everything and everyone else "lightly." There are no rivals. There is no expiration date on either God's call or His love. I called you once. Will you follow Me?
2. Unspoken: 'Lord, You know as well as I know that that call has been invalidated! I bragged how I would never deny You. And I did!')

Do you LOVE Me, Peter? Let's get it straight! Love is what matters! Will you let ME by Lord and God?

3. But this call is at once a CORPORATE and an INDIVIDUAL thing! I am calling you to help Me build My church! I am giving you the keys to the kingdom.

But I am calling YOU in a way that is unique to YOU!

"What about John, Lord? You love HIM more than you love me!?!?"

"What is that to YOU? Follow ME!"

[This is essentially the way I "prepared" this message: Then this noon after church Bert VanEgmond loaned me a little book by Henri Nouwen, just out (1989), titled In the Name of Jesus. It is based, partly, on this 21st chapter of John.

Henri Nouwen, whom I quoted from this morning, has left Harvard and the glitter of academia and the speaking circuit to minister in a community called L'Arche in Toronto. It was John 21:18 that gave him the courage to go. His words seem to have a fresh "bite."

This little book was written to priests (and ministers) but let me share its outline:

- i. From Relevance to Prayer The Temptation: TO BE RELEVANT The Question: DO YOU LOVE ME? The discipline: Contemplative Prayer
- ii. From Popularity to Ministry The Temptation: To be Spectacular The Task: FEED MY SHEEP The Discipline: Confession and Forgiveness
- iii. From Leading to Being Led The Temptation: To be POWERFUL "Somebody Else Will Take You" The discipline: Theological Reflection (as opposed to the psychologies and sociologies which are necessary, but NOT at the heart of Christian ministry.)

[Bill Van Buren, a member of L'Arche, went with Henri Nouwen on the original presentation of this new book as a lecture, at the 15th anniversary for the Center for Human Development. They stayed at the Clarendon Hotel in the Crystal City, a very, very posh place as Henri described it. He stood with Father Nouwen on the platform, and chimed in from time to time. They did it together.]

IV. RE-AFFIRM OUR LOYALTY TO JESUS!

1. If we need help in our BUSINESS ... whether that business is studying— or electronics— or selling— Jesus knows and cares about the kind of work you do!
2. But beyond "busyness"— even the tasks of doing the work and will of God— Jesus cares about our love! HOW DO WE ANSWER THE ONE QUESTION JESUS ASKS US ALL?
Are we doing what we do because we love HIM?
3. Can we say: "What is that to ME? I will follow Jesus!"??

EH #22 O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus

A Fellowship of Glad Hearts

February 26, 1989 AM

Psalm 105:3-4;43

"Let the heart of those who seek the Lord be glad. Seek the Lord and His strength; Seek His face continually." (verses 3,4)

Introduction:

When the word "seek" is coupled with God, and with His promises it is a magnificent word. Jesus said, "Seek and ye shall find!"

Never be ashamed to be known as a "seeker."

It is a humbling thing, sometimes, to admit to being a seeker. By definition a seeker does not have what he is seeking; he wants more. Possibly everybody is seeking for something. But the Bible says that those who are seriously seeking after more and more of God are more and more aware of a growing JOY! The old hymn says:

*I love to tell the story;
'Tis pleasant to repeat
What seems each time I tell it
More wonderfully sweet...
I love to tell the story,
For those who know it best
Seem hungering and thirsting
To hear it like the rest.*

Here is a text about seeking. About seeking after God. In this passage the word "seek" is used with three shades of emphasis. It says that we are to (1) seek the Lord; and we are to (2) seek the Lord's strength; and we are to (3) seek the Lord's face continually.

It is a beautiful focus for our thought.

I. WE MUST SEEK THE LORD.

A. It certainly is God's will that we seek Him!

The prophet Isaiah says: (55:6) "Seek ye the Lord while He may be found; call ye upon Him while He is near." And Hosea says (10:12) "It is time to seek the Lord, till He come and rain righteousness upon you." And Jesus said: (Matthew 6:33) "Seek the kingdom of God first, and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you."

B. How does a person go about seeking God?

1. Actually, God seeks us first! God calls us by His Spirit, with what we call CONVICTION. The Holy Spirit says: "You need to know God! You need to change the direction of your life! You need LIFE!"
2. And we respond in OBEDIENCE, with REPENTANCE. Obedience is a foundation in all seeking after God. [Illustration: Saul (Paul) on the Road to Damascus; said (1) Who ARE You, Lord!; and then (2) What do You want me to do?] We CAN and we WILL find God if we will come with a willingness to OBEY!

C. What "seeking God" and "knowing God"— what "finding God" means: It means NEW LIFE IN CHRIST:

- justification ...
- regeneration...
- adoption...

[But as wonderful as it is to find GOD in salvation, that is not all the seeking we must do. The text says:]

II. SEEK THE LORD AND HIS STRENGTH!

A. Living the Christian WAY is NOT "automatic."

It takes all we are and all we have PLUS the love and grace of God. We cannot live the Christian life without God's strength.

B. And, too, we find out that God has not just saved us in order that we can "enjoy" LIFE. We are called to live with a purpose. And we are challenged to find and do God's will for our lives. God wants us to BEAR FRUIT!

C. How do Christians go about seeking the Lord and His strength? How do Christians go about finding God's will for them?

1. Once again, the initiative is God's! The Holy Spirit calls us to "Present our bodies, our whole beings, as living sacrifices to God, in order that we can find out what is God's good and acceptable and perfect will for our lives. (Romans 12:1,2)"

2. And we respond with OBEDIENCE, yes; but now we are coming to another word: CONSECRATION. The very HEART of spiritual worship is this act of presenting our bodies as living sacrifices to God.

There are studies of "gifts." There are what amount to spiritual aptitude tests. And these are fine. But the very heart of finding God's will and God's strength is CONSECRATION.

[But consecration is not quite ALL!]

D. OUR CONSECRATION MUST CULMINATE IN A COVENANT!

Our God is a covenant Maker.

God does NOT "make deals." [A deal means "I'll do this in exchange for that."]

Covenant is NOT "unilateral." It is not asking God to bless "my plans, and be with me" but rather it is letting God be God, and asking Him to let me do His will, whatever the cost! It is dedicating life to God's will: finding the purity of a single purpose. God's COVENANT with His people is: You be MY people, and I will be Your God! And we find God's strength when we SEEK IN THE CONTEXT OF COVENANT.

E. There is great beauty and strength in the knowledge of God's Spirit flowing through us to make us His Body, the Church.

[But the Scripture says: "Seek God's FACE!" What do you suppose that means? Can there be something beyond "experience?" Can there be something beyond sanctification?]

III. SEEK HIS FACE CONTINUALLY

- A. The whole purpose of salvation and the reason we are called to holiness is in order that we can come to KNOW God! There is nothing "beyond being saved." There is no other experience that goes beyond being filled with the Holy Spirit and finding God's strength. But being saved is not complete until we are comfortable in God's PRESENCE!
- B. How can we go about seeking God's FACE? [We do seek God for forgiveness of sins. We must seek Him for His strength and sanctifying grace. We will seek God's face when the crises come. But when will we learn that we are made for God, and that we desperately need God all the time?]
 - 1. Once again, the initiative is God's! If we listen, if we pay attention to His Word, we see how very much God is reaching out to us! "Fear thou not for I AM with thee ..." "Go— make disciples — AND LO, I AM WITH YOU!"
 - 2. And we respond WITH LOVE!

Oh, OBEDIENCE is still there: the foundation; and CONSECRATION /COVENANT is still valid. But we are still SEEKERS! SEEKERS AFTER GOD'S FACE!

We are not now seeking 'salvation.' Not now seeking 'a clean heart.' Not now simply seeking to be effective, or to bear more fruit. These are vital, and important; and we will, must should seek them. But what our hearts crave is LOVE. And God alone fills that craving.

C. GOD WANTS OUR LOVE!

Somehow we get the idea that God's greatest interest is destroying sin, and making us feel guilty so we will quit the sin business. And there is no question in my mind that God is sick of injustice and sin in this sin-sick world. But that is not the end God has in mind.

Or, as Christians we think God is primarily interested in what we can GIVE to Him, and what we can DO FOR HIM. And God has commanded us to go into this needy world and spend and be spent for Him. But God is not impressed with your great gifts or mine; your talents or mine. There is something even more important that God is concerned about.

Conclusion:

GOD WANTS OUR LOVE! He wants us to leave sin because we LOVE Him!

He wants us to spend and be spent because WE LOVE HIM! And we learn to love Him because HE FIRST LOVED US! God wants to fill the deepest need any of us can have: THE NEED TO KNOW THAT WE ARE DEEPLY LOVED!

The world is crying out for LOVE. We all want to BE loved; we want others to love US, but we want to love US, supremely, too.

Most of the sins of the world are twisted LOVE. It may not seem possible to look to God to fill this need for love; it may seem as though it would invalidate or take the place of other loves. Becoming a friend of God is a life-time project. It means a never-ending SEEKING!

But those who seek the FACE of the Lord find that along with the seeking comes a wellspring of JOY! And the seeking gets better, and goes deeper as we grow in the knowledge of God.

First we seek and find the reality of being saved from our sin. Then we begin to discover the purpose of God, and being saved from self-worship, and we begin to know the satisfaction of accomplishment in Him.

But then little by little we begin to discover the face of God. Remember, when the word "seek" is coupled with God, and with God's promises it is a magnificent word. Never be ashamed to be known as a "seeker."

It is one of the open secrets of faith: Those who SEEK TO live in God's Presence know JOY. And those who know God best are those most actively seeking after more of

A Fellowship of Glad Hearts

Him. "Glory ye in his holy name: let the heart of them rejoice that seek the Lord.
Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his face for evermore." Amen

#38 O for a Closer Walk with Thee

Watching for the Son

February 26, 1989

Matthew 25:1-13

During this Lenten Season we are looking forward to revival, and we are looking forward to Good Friday and Easter; Lent is a "forward looking" sort of time.

But wouldn't it be a sad irony if in all our anticipation, we were surprised by the really Big Event as it comes in all its inconceivable power and glory and trauma? [How much, really, do we think about "Thy kingdom come!"]?

Jesus spoke of being ready for His Second Coming. True, He used some cultural settings that we may not fully understand. [I have heard a great deal about mid-eastern weddings, ancient and modern, and I am not convinced about all the ramifications and details of what goes on, and how that applies to us today.] But I am convinced that the heart of what Jesus said strikes to the heart of your spiritual need and mine. It is impossible to miss.

We must not only be in the company that is watching for the Bridegroom, we must not only be dressed and equipped like the company waiting for the bridegroom, we must have "oil in our lamps," whatever that means! And, too, we cannot GET READY once He comes, we have to BE READY!

The sufficient supply of OIL in the lamps of the wise virgins is generally accepted to be the Reality of the Presence of God the Holy Spirit. It is God's Presence, by the abiding Holy Spirit in the believer that gives light and life to the witness. [Oil = The Holy Spirit in present Reality!]

And so the question is: "How may we be sure to have oil when Jesus, the heavenly Bridegroom, breaks in on the scene?"

[There are plenty of people willing to "help" you and me at this point. I get confused and I get discouraged and I get "guilty feelings" when I listen to people telling me what I need to do in order to have all God wants me to have. One says: "Experience

is everything!" Another says: "The way we worship or pray is everything!" Another says: "Correct agreement with correct interpretation is everything!"]

What does the Bible say? What does the Holy Spirit Himself say to me? To You? Are we listening?

All I know is I want to have OIL in my lamp! I want to be filled with the Holy Spirit!!!

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT THE HOLY SPIRIT?

1. We RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT in the miracle of the New Birth. In John chapter three, as Jesus is talking to Nicodemus, he says again and again that we must be born of the Spirit: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit: ye must be born again."

And in Romans 8:9 Paul says, "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ he is none of His."

So we receive the OIL of the Spirit, initially, in the miracle of new birth.

2. We ARE TO BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT in cleansing, empowering fullness, in a crisis of deliberate surrender, and in an on-going, day-by-day, even moment-by-moment carrying through of that surrender.

In Acts 2 we read of the initial Pentecost outpouring (Acts 2:4) and the disciples were all filled with the Holy Spirit. But other times we read that these same disciples were filled (Acts 4:31) "When they had prayed the place was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit."

AND WE ARE TO BE BEING FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT IN AN ON-GOING BASIS It is the command of God (Ephesians 5:18): "Be not drunk with wine wherein is excess, but be (being) filled with the Holy Spirit!"

And this is a dynamic thing, this 'having sufficient oil.' It is not enough to say: "I was soundly saved! I know I was sanctified! I am (smugly) all set for the coming of the Lord!" For the Holy Spirit is a Person, a living Presence.

3. We are to SET THE SPIRIT FREE WITHIN US, AND NOT TO QUENCH HIM.

It is possible to "quench" the Spirit! Look at the context of that phrase, in I Thessalonians:

[I Thessalonians 5:15-23 See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men. Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. QUENCH NOT THE SPIRIT. Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil. And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.]

Look at the imperatives Paul gives us to seek to be God's channels, instead of seeking to use God for our enrichment.

4. We are to PLEASE THE HOLY SPIRIT, AND NOT TO GRIEVE HIM. The Scripture also says it is possible to GRIEVE God's Spirit. Look at the context of that phrase in Ephesians 4:30 [READ IT:]

In this Golden Chapter, being loving and kind and gracious is contrasted with grieving the Spirit!

5. The HOLY SPIRIT IS MADE EVIDENT BY HIS FRUIT Galatians 5:22-23, and not by some "nominal" experience in the sometime past. The question is not: Am I orthodox? I should hope so! Not even 'Am I a tithing Nazarene? Wonderful if you are! But: AM I JUST NOW POSSESSED/FILLED/OWNED/USED OF/BY THE HOLY SPIRIT??

Conclusion:

The Holy Spirit is not a spirit of compulsion, of whim, of secretive directives. But He is found of those who SEEK Him; He is given to those who ASK for Him; He is God's Spirit of LOVE; He is Christ's Spirit of GRACE.

Are YOU "born of the Spirit?" Have you opened your life to the Spirit of Jesus, and have you confessed Him as Lord, and have you been baptized?

Have YOU set Him free in YOUR life?

Watching for the Son

Have YOU received Him in all His fullness?

Thomas Kelly, not a "holiness preacher," but a Quaker, put it this way:

"Meister Eckhart wrote: "There are plenty to follow our Lord half-way, but not the other half. They will give up possessions, friends and honors, but it touches them too closely to disown themselves." It is just this astonishing life which is willing to follow Him the other half, sincerely to disown itself, this life which intends complete obedience, without any reservations, that I would propose to you in all humility, in all boldness, in all seriousness. I mean this literally, utterly, completely, and I mean it for you and for me- commit your lives in unreserved obedience to Him.

If you don't understand the revolutionary explosiveness of this proposal you don't understand what I mean. Only now and then comes a man or a woman who, like John Woolman or Francis of Assisi, is willing to be utterly obedient, to go the other half, to follow God's faintest whisper. But when such a commitment comes in a human life, God breaks through, miracles are wrought, world-renewing divine forces are released, history changes. There is nothing more important now than to have the human race endowed with just such committed lives. . .

"We have plenty of Quakers to follow God the first half of the way. Many of us have become as mildly and as conventionally religious as were the church folk . . . against whose... mediocrity and passionlessness George Fox and his followers flung themselves with all the passion ... of a new discovery.. Religion as a dull habit is not that for which Christ lived and died." -A Testament of Devotion (52,53)

JESUS IS COMING AGAIN. That is His promise. More and more this world is groaning, waiting for its true Master to come and set things right. I want to be filled with His Spirit when He comes!

I don't know Christ's agenda. I do know that He said, Himself: "Watch! (verse 13 & Mark 13:33) You do not know when I am coming!" We can BE ready when Jesus returns!

#193 One Day

Sacrifices of Praise to the Lord God of Lovingkindness

March 5, 1989 AM

Psalm 107:4,10,17,23; 33 (Text: Say it with me:

"Oh that men would praise the Lord for His GOODNESS, and for His wonderful works to the children of men.")

Introduction:

One song we sing, "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing," was no doubt written by a Calvinist, for we Wesleyans have, perhaps correctly, changed some words in its final verse:

The other version reads: "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it! Prone to leave the Lord I love. Here's my heart, O take and seal it; Seal it for Thy courts above."

... and our version is the noble prayer: "Let me know Thee in Thy fullness; Guide me by Thy mighty hand Till, transformed, in Thine own image In Thy Presence I shall stand."

It is good and necessary to have a walk with God that is settled and steadfast. And we may be delivered from the "proneness to wander." But in this all-too-real world there are forces that seek to rob us of the reality of spiritual victory and assurance, and of the certitude of our standing in Jesus Christ unless we continually SEEK God's face.

Unless we make it the heart of every day's activity to WALK with God, and to learn to PRAISE Him as a way of life, that "proneness to wander" will re-enter the reality of our living, regardless of our sound doctrine and correct theology!

This Psalm (107) is a lesson in the recurrence of wandering and being brought back; or, perhaps better, in despairing of faith and being found by God. And it has a valuable lesson for us (for me!) in getting away from that "prone to wander"-kind of outlook. It has four "strophes" of

(1) being/going away from God, and of (2) crying out to Him, and (3) finding His salvation and His assurance, and THEN (4) praising Him for His goodness:

[Say it with me: "Oh that men would praise the Lord for His GOODNESS, and for His wonderful works to the children of men."]

I. (verse 4) WANDERING, LOSTNESS

"They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way; they found no city to dwell in."

A. THEY WANDERED

There is a lostness that comes of never having made personal living contact with God through Jesus Christ. Perhaps this describes every person who has not yet found that God is our HOME; the man or woman that doesn't know God in any personal way.

B. THEY CRIED TO GOD

When this lostness becomes a cry, God has already heard. And God draws near to make them a part of the fellowship. Lost no more,

C. GOD HEARD, AND CAME: AND THEY PRAISED HIM!

They have a heart full of praise!

[Say it with me: "Oh that men would praise the Lord for His GOODNESS, and for His wonderful works to the children of men."]

[If YOU have never found that God loves YOU, and wants YOU to be "at HOME" in Him, you can be sure that He is already listening for your cry! He is waiting to make you a part of His family, His fellowship! And then YOU will have a reason to praise!]

II. (verse 10) DARKNESS, THREAT, PRISONERS OF MISERY AS A DIRECT RESULT OF REBELLION

"Such as sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, being bound in affliction and iron; because they rebelled against the words of God .."

A. THEY FELL DOWN AND THERE WAS NONE TO HELP

There is a sense of lostness that comes because we are careless about spiritual things!

The pathway to glory is seldom smooth. There may well come periods of darkness, and some of these are the result of our own failure to trust in a heavy trial or temptation, or because we deliberately disobey God's will. Prisoners of misery!

B. THEY CRIED TO GOD

But when this helplessness becomes a cry, God has already heard. And God comes to bring light like the sun coming from behind a cloud. The darkness of their bondage is broken, and

C. GOD CAME TO THE RESCUE, AND THEY PRAISED HIM!

And their hearts again are lifted in praise!

[Say it with me: "Oh that men would praise the Lord for His GOODNESS, and for His wonderful works to the children of men."]

[Have you been there? Are you there NOW?]

III. (verse 17) FOOLISHNESS, AFFLICTION, NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE

"Fools, because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities, are afflicted. Their soul abhorreth all manner of meat; and they draw near to the gates of death."

A. THEY CAME TO HORROR OF INIQUITY

This almost sounds like a back-slider to me! One who is sick all over because of falling into sin!

B. THEY CRIED TO THE LORD

But God, full of LOVE, and everlasting in MERCY is ready to hear the penitent cry!

"Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and he saveth them out of their distresses..."

C. GOD CAME, AND THEY PRAISED HIM:

"He sent his word and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions."

And their hearts again are lifted in praise!

[Say it with me: "Oh that men would praise the Lord for His GOODNESS, and for His wonderful works to the children of men."]

**IV. (verses 23 - 30) MISERY OF TEMPESTUOUS STORM, MELTED COURAGE
EVEN FOR THE USUALLY BRAVE**

"They that go down to the sea in ships..."

A. THEY GOT INTO A FRIGHTENING STORM!

This strophe is not so simply defined! Here is a person on a journey; a business venture, perhaps— at least a necessary venture of life. And there is a storm! It certainly can be applied literally, as when the disciples at Christ's command were caught in a threatening storm on Galilee, and Jesus came to them walking on the water.

But this also stands for many a storm of life for which there is no simple explanation.

These wayfarers are not called rebels, or foolish, or wanderers. They simply are doing business in great waters. In the course of the bruises and risks and adventures of life, The storms do come. They come to us all.

B. IN THE STORM THEY CRIED TO GOD!

In the storm, God hears our cry. When it seems as though the howl of the gale snatches away our prayers before we can even hear them ourselves, God hears!

C. GOD HEARS, GOD COMES AND DELIVERS, AND THEY PRAISE GOD:

And when peace reigns again,

Again they are brought to the place of lifting their hearts in praise!

[Say it with me: "Oh that men would praise the Lord for His GOODNESS, and for His wonderful works to the children of men."]

V. (33 - 43) SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

The Psalm closes with a statement of the SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD; and with the observation: (43) "Whoso is wise, and will observe these things, even they shall understand the LOVINGKINDNESS of the Lord."

A. WHAT CAN THIS PATTERN TELL US? HOW MAY WE BE "WISE?"

1. Do we need to wander away?; to fall?; can we stay near to the Lord?
[CERTAINLY WE WILL BE TESTED. BUT WE NEED NEVER LEAVE HIM,
AND HE WILL NEVER LEAVE US.]
2. Do we need to wait until we are in trouble to cry out our dependency on God?
WE MUST BE SEEKERS AFTER GOD, AND WE MUST SEEK TO BE
PRAISERS OF GOD FROM OUR HEARTS.

B. COME BACK TO THE BEGINNING OF THE PSALM:

"O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is GOOD; for His mercy endureth forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, whom He hath redeemed from the hand of the enemy ... "

1. LET THEM SAY WHAT? Say "so?" That they are redeemed? Yes, but more specifically, Let them say the Lord is GOOD, and His MERCY, His LOVINGKINDNESS endureth forever! Let's be specialists in PRAISE!
2. Instead of being brought to praise after trials, which is proper, let God's people be specialists in praise at all times:
[34:1] I will bless the Lord at all times, His praise will continually be in my mouth!
3. Such praise helps us get the center of our lives back to God, and not simply to what God is doing for US! Praise the Lord for His GOODNESS! So much even of our worship revolves around how WE feel, and what WE are doing for God!

4. But it IS proper and right to thank the Lord for "His wonderful works to the children of men!" And we would be ungrateful if we did NOT praise God for what He is doing in and through US!

Conclusion:

The old song says "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it!" ... and perhaps rightly we have changed the words to "Let me know Thee in Thy fullness ..."

But remember, there are forces that will drive us away from freshness unless we continually SEEK, and unless we make it a part of our very daily rituals to PRAISE the Lord.

If we can just learn to praise at the outset, we can short-cut the length of the darkness. It doesn't mean we will never face the storms. But the sacrifice of praise keeps the center where it belongs.

Say it with me one last time: "Oh that men would praise the Lord for His GOODNESS, and for His wonderful works to the children of men."

#72 I Will Praise Him

Receiving the Good News

March 26, 1989 PM, Easter Sunday evening

II Corinthians 5:16-21 - I Corinthians 15:1-3,4-8

I. We Exist For The Sake Of The Gospel

. . . and the heart of the gospel is Jesus this is the heart of our faith: Jesus has conquered death and hell.

1. Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures
2. that he was buried (there was no mistake: Jesus was dead)
3. that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures
4. that he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time then he appeared to James ... then to all the apostles

That is the gospel! But it isn't quite enough for Paul!

5. Last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born — Paul said: "I had to receive this gospel for myself!

II. "What I Received ..."

This is something of what Paul is speaking about by "receiving" the gospel Paul cannot be content with simply human persuasion: Paul has to hear from God Himself. And so do WE!

The story of how Paul met Jesus is relevant to Easter Sunday evening. [My favorite story is the walk to Emmaus. The two people surprised by Jesus. But what I am saying this evening is; everybody can have an Emmaus Road experience. Paul had His— only it was a "Road to Damascus" experience!

Jesus did not appear to Paul out of the blue, un-introduced. I am not sure that He ever does come without some "human contact."

Paul met Jesus first through a man named Stephen.

Receiving the Good News

Paul's zeal. His nagging doubt about being "right" when he sees how Stephen died. But Paul is able to put all this behind him, and go on with his own way.

The encounter with the living, risen Savior changes Paul forever.

[It is wonderful if we truly believe but 'believing' is more than simply deciding that "now I will believe in Jesus, that he died for me and rose again!" Believing is a gift of God.

How we believe has mysterious elements.

- We cannot believe unless/until we receive the truth
- We receive from God, yes, but there are [?always?] human elements/human 'conductors'

'unconscious' factors: people 'living out' their faith deliberate factors: witness in the spirit to a decision

II Corinthians 5:17 "A new creature in Christ!"

Paul wrote later (II Corinthians 5:16-21) When you meet the risen Savior you will be a new creation! It will be beyond mere human persuasion! Not even having known Jesus in the flesh will suffice now!

You must have RECEIVED JESUS! What does this "RECEIVED" mean??? [Also found in I Corinthians 11:23-26 "Received ... Delivered"]

I have received:[received= (Grk.) paralambano/ to associate with/ to assume an office/ to take unto ones' self; a sacred trust; a permanent injunction; a challenge to perpetuate.]

III. But Paul Says: What I Received I Also Delivered!

I have delivered unto you: [delivered= (Grk.) paraDIDomi/ surrender/ yield up/ entrust/ transmit/ give over (as, an important prisoner, OR, as a doctrine carefully handed over we must be part of this 'receiving-delivering' chain. We must not be satisfied until we can say:

I have delivered this faith about life to ["you!"]

"Delivered ... Received"

Delivering the truth about life and death: This is not something Paul "made up." He wants us to see that it is the most precious thing he knows. Paul cannot "deliver" this truth alone. He needs help. Our faith must be REVEALED to us from God. but in the completion of receiving comes the acceptance of the fact: we are also to take some part in the task of delivering! "What I received I also delivered to you!"

The world needs the delivery of this truth: Jesus is alive. He is stronger than all earth's problems. He is bigger than YOUR problems and mine.

Can it be that the world doesn't get delivery because the church hasn't realized how rich it is when it is poor, and how poor it is when it tries to save the world with its own wisdom and strength and power?

We don't have to "arrive" to begin delivery. We don't have to be completely mature and finished. We just have to be pure vessels through which the Holy Spirit can pour Himself!

What a joy it is to 'make a delivery!' about this great conquering savior!

[Marion Janes (excuse me for talking in front of her!) sang last Friday in 1st Baptist, Braintree. On the way home she said: "I can't tell you how much better I feel after I sang than I did before!" She was delivering what she had received!]

Have you 'received' saving faith? By a deliberate acceptance of the challenge to lordship, to faith?

Will you seek to be a 'deliverer of the faith'? At least in some measure?

#52 Ye Servants of God

The Book The Lamb and the Song

March 26, 1989 AM

Revelation 5:9-14

"And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou was slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

""And Thou hast made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.'

"And I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice,

""Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and might and honor and glory and blessing.'

"And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard, saying,

""To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.'

"And the four living creatures kept saying, 'Amen.' And the elders fell down and worshiped."

Introduction

Easter, of all the days of the year, should be a time of praise to Jesus Christ for His mighty victory over sin and death for you and me. [Perhaps in a sense it is 'always Easter in heaven,' for praise to the Lamb that was slain is going on there even now.] The magnificent hymn that they sing is recorded here in our text by St. John. It is: "Worthy is the Lamb!"

[I am certain that heaven's melodies and harmonies will be beyond what we can imagine here. But until we get to heaven that final chorus of Handel's Messiah will do!]

From this hymn of praise comes the Easter message for us on this Resurrection Day. We do not have to wait until we get to heaven to join in giving praise to our Risen Lord!

In this passage John tells us of a mysterious book, and of a mighty Lamb, and of a magnificent song.

I. THE BOOK THAT WAS SEALED

[Much of Revelation is very difficult to understand and impossible to interpret to the satisfaction of others. and yet] In this waking vision John describes in Revelation, much of the imagery is only thinly veiled, and not too hard to understand.

Here AN UNOPENED BOOK CAUSES JOHN TO WEEP. There are things that we cannot understand; and things that cause us concern because we must remain in the dark about them.

God has a number of "books" that he keeps; some are open, some are closed, some are partially closed. God has an open Bible that tells us of His love and grace. God keeps records of all the deeds of personal human history. God writes the names of His redeemed in a Book of Life.

But there are SOME "BOOKS" THAT BRING US TO TEARS:

THE BOOK OF 'UNFAIR LIFE!': The sorrow of unresolved inequities. "Life just isn't fair!" When nothing which we can see or understand brings life back into balance. When we weep because that book of God's justice seems closed.

THE BOOK OF 'IMPENDING DOOM!': The sorrow of an unknown and often fearful future. It is frightening to contemplate the future, at least the future apart from an all-wise Guide. It is an act of faith to bring children into the world just now. It is not frightening only when we are sure of our Guide.

THE BOOK OF DESTINY: The sorrow of an uncertain salvation. An extension of fear of the future is dread of eternity without light and life. As long as we can keep the music playing, and the talk shows talking, we can drown out this existential fear. But at night, when we are alone, when the silence bears in we think of the unopened and unopenable book of God's knowledge of eternity and we are afraid.

[AND NO DOUBT THERE ARE MANY OTHER BOOKS!] "What is LIFE all about? WHY am I here? WHO am I? WHERE am I headed? The DREAD of nothingness!

John's sorrow is all mankind's sorrow. John weeps because no one is found to open the book. Apart from the Lamb and apart from the song there is sorrow. And even the Bible itself is a sealed book until we find the key in Jesus! Jesus unlocks the Book!

But that is getting ahead of the story! We need to know that John's story does not end with weeping.

II. THE LAMB THAT WAS SLAIN

- A. "Weep not!" An elder lifts John's vision. And the waking vision gives us a strange mixture of figures here: "Behold the LION!" Lion, Lamb, Root, Judah!

Slain in innocence, in meekness, and in patience, now Christ is seen as mighty and powerful. He strikes terror to the hearts of His enemies while at the same time He brings comfort to His people. (Because Jesus is the Lion of Judah, of David means that this is no "spiritual resurrection"; Christ is One with us!)

- B. One feature of the Lamb stands out above the others: It has been slain! At the very Throne, identified with God Himself, yet it bears the marks of having died! The heart of Easter truth is very, very near just at this point!
- C. The Lamb— identified with US, and yet having the seven eyes and seven horns of the sevenfold Spirit of God— is able to open the book that caused John to weep, the sealed book!

And when Jesus vindicates righteousness! when He opens the books! there will be rejoicing in heaven!

III. THE SONG THAT WAS SUNG

There was a song sung that day in the vision as the books were opened! Indeed, that song is being sung today! And it will always be sung!

- A. The song is BEGUN by the redeemed (verse 9.) The new song is a song of redemption. And while the angels are very quick to join in praise, they do not have part in the very first chorus, for the heart of Easter singing is about redemption.

The heart of Easter's song is NOT about the return of springtime, or the eternal conservation of life, or the beauty of flowers and bird song. The heart of Easter is the fact of bloody battle and stunning victory, of alienated mankind brought into fellowship with a holy God, and at the very foot of the throne of God becoming a great family that includes every tongue, people, and nation (verse 9.)
- B. The song praises the Lamb and is picked up by the heavenly choruses, because He alone is worthy to open the sealed book. Jesus Christ is our key to the mysteries of faith— death and eternity and salvation and redemption.
- C. The song is actually begun before the books are opened. We can begin to praise Jesus here and now; even before we know what is going to happen 'out there in the future,' we know Jesus! We know it will be all right if we are with Him!
- D. And we can begin now, joining in the myriads around the throne as we sing: "Crown Him . . . the Lamb upon the throne!"

Conclusion

But before we sing a hymn of praise to Jesus Christ, what SEALED BOOKS are causing YOU sorrow today?

IS THERE AGONY IN YOUR LIFE? Is the Bible a sealed book to you? Do you have deep concern about death and the future?

The word John heard is the word to us all:

"Weep NOT!" [Faith in God, and Christ's love is not an "instant fix" for all life's problems. But our Savior HAS DEFEATED SIN, DEATH, and HELL! With HIM we are on the winning side!]

The message of Easter is: The Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed!

Wrestling with God

Life-Changing Crises

April 16, 1989

Genesis 32:10 - (26-29) - 32

Introduction:

There are times in our lives when we feel we have to turn a corner or forever after settle for less than we might be. I think now and then of Stephen Crane's poem "The Wayfarer." When the 'Wayfarer' perceives that the ideal path, the noble path, the way of uncompromising truth is painful he says, "Doubtless there are other ways!"

Doubtless there are other ways than the way that seeks God first. But if we seek to go with God there will be these life- changing times when we face up to life at its elemental levels. It is a wonderful and yet risky time when we see that if we will, God will show us who we are and what we might be.

[This particular passage in Genesis pictures a struggle to put God absolutely at the center of life. It lends itself well to what we Nazarenes call the crisis of entire sanctification. I believe it is valid to help us see how we can enter into the Spirit-filled relationship with God.

[But it is more than just an illustration; more than a "how- to" for a "personal experience." It deals with change in character.]

It is my personal conviction that we are all called to nobility. I believe that we come to these "corners" from time to time when we decide whether or not to accept the challenge to go the first-class way, and do God's will without reservation, or whether we will simply die a little, and switch on the TV and settle back and wait for the pension (and the undertaker.)

I. JACOB'S CHALLENGE

He had left Canaan years before with the clothes on his back. Remember the night he spent at Beth-El? Surely you have heard of "Jacob's Ladder"? The covenant was begun then.

He had prospered, even if the prospering wasn't always all that pleasant to him. But little by little he had gained many, many things and had become something of a family man: Two wives, eleven sons.

But Jacob is restless. He is in alien territory. He knows it is God's will for him to be elsewhere. So finally he starts out. Even as he starts his motives are probably mixed. He is getting away from Laban. He needs to settle up with Esau. He wants to be in the Promised Land of Canaan. But at the heart of this: God said: return to the land of your birth (Genesis 31:13)

Does it bother you that you can't even know all the reasons you want to "turn a corner" in your life? It is helpful to know that you don't have to wait and purify your motives to your own satisfaction to begin the process of minding God. Perhaps the purifying comes as we proceed along the pathway of obedience.

- A. Jacob had humility before the Lord. I don't think you or I may necessarily have seen Jacob as humble. But he recognized that God had been good to him, and that he would have nothing unless God had been with him. That is better than false humility that says "I am nothing." That is different from "I am unworthy!"
- B. Jacob had honesty before the Lord. He said: "I am afraid!" It isn't necessarily the fearless who are brave! Fearless may mean foolish. Brave are those who are afraid as they approach the challenges of life and yet seek to face them with honesty.
- C. Jacob had a measure of faith. He reminds the Lord, "For Thou didst say!" I am here, this far, at this place, because I have been seeking to obey You! You got me into this as far as I am!

II. JACOB'S LIFE-CHANGING CRISIS

As the time to turn the corner came nearer Jacob faced a time of sifting. He began to think what was really important to him. His wealth was not insignificant. His position as a man of power and prestige was worth something. His eleven sons, his two wives, these represented his human hope for immortality, his progeny. In some ways these were more important than his own life.

The immediate threat was the unknown fall-out that would take place when he would finally meet his twin brother, Esau, face to face. he had shamefully wronged Esau, and Esau was an elemental, outdoors sort of man. There was danger written all over the possibilities.

But beyond this immediate danger was the challenge to swerve aside from the course God had called him to travel. God had said: Go to the Canaan!

Jacob sent his wealth, his herds and flocks, on ahead to meet the immediate challenge. It couldn't be avoided. he knew he had to meet Esau. But before he could meet Esau, Jacob had to meet God in a new way.

Jacob was left alone with his immediate, most important relationships. (22) He crossed Jabbok where the road crossed, at the ford. And then, somehow he went back across the stream— it isn't clear the sequence— but finally

- A. Jacob was left alone. Life change must deal with primary lines of control. Who am I when I don't have my toys? [Henri Nouwen in his new community (Daybreak) stripped of "Dr." and "Professor" is just "Henri" to the severely retarded. {By the way doesn't mean it is OUR business to strip one another of the common courtesies of "Mr." and "Sir" and "Madam"!}]
- B. Jacob made contact with God at this basic level. "I will not let go of You! It is not things I need! I want Your blessing!"
- C. Jacob had to say his name. "What is your name?" God asked. ["Name" always stands for "character."] What kind of person am I, really? It is not a superficial question. It is not an easy question. And I am not sure that a correct answer is as important as an open, non-

est, submissive answer. "YOU know who I am, Lord! Show me who I am!" (Psalm 139) In Jacob's instance he had to say, "My name is Jacob! I am a deceiver! I am a heel-grasper!"

- D. Jacob heard God say a NEW name for him. "Your name is Israel!" You have prevailed with God! [In Revelation 2 the risen Savior promises the church in Pergamos that those who overcome will be given a white stone, and in that stone a name written that no one knows except the one who receives it. Mysterious language, perhaps. But God is interested in changing us from who we are to what He has in mind that we may become. And we can be certain that His name will be glorious!] "Jacob" just doesn't make it next to "Israel!" Would you rather be a heel-grasper or a Prince with God??

Conclusion:

Are you still simple enough, or brave enough, or noble enough to want to go for God's very best in your life? There are times in our lives when we feel we have to turn a corner or forever after settle for less than we might be. I mentioned a poem by Stephen Crane at the beginning of the sermon. I can almost quote it:

The Wayfarer A wayfarer, perceiving the pathway of truth Was astonished. It was thickly grown up with weeds. "Aha," he said. "I perceive that No one has passed this way in a long time. Then he saw that each blade Was a singular knife. "Well," he muttered, "Doubtless there are other ways!"

And there are other ways than the way that seeks God first. There are many other ways! But if we seek to go with God there will be these life-changing times when we face up to life at its elemental levels. It is a wonderful and yet risky time when we see that if we will, God will show us who we are and what we might be.

One of those life-changing times comes when God speaks to you about being wholly, entirely consecrated to God. It is what we Nazarenes call "entire sanctification." You may not agree doctrinally, totally. You may not understand all your own motivation. There are some many mixed things involved.

But the question is: will you turn the corner? Will you be changed for the better?

Who are you? What is your name? Are you satisfied the way you are before God and your loved ones?

Who is GOD to you? Will you meet Him, and hold Him to His promises, and not let go until He gives you the name HE has in mind for you?

Prayer: Lord, You must have loved Jacob very much. Help us to see, to believe that you love each one of us like that, too. Give to us the blessing that will change us, and make us to prevail with You. Amen.

#71 (EH) *Sweet Will of God*

The State of the Church

Annual Meeting, April 30, 1989

John 15:16 "You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give to you." [NASB]

The "State of our Church" is a thing that only God knows in any complete and objective way. Even though I am pastor, my perspective is limited, and may well differ from yours.

But I would share with you where I believe we, as a congregation, are, and something of what we are doing. And I would also share with you some of the burden or desire that I have for this fellowship that means so very much to me and I trust to us all.

First, where do I see our church in spiritual development?

I. THE 'STATE OF THE CHURCH' AS "STAGES" OF DEVELOPMENT

- A. Stages of growth are perfectly normal. [Both people and churches go through stages of development.]

[Stages:] There is nothing as lovely as A BABY. There is nothing more winsome than A CHILD: [a little girl with a tea-set, as Brian Farmer portrayed with word-pictures last Sunday, or a little boy with a fishing pole.] And there is nothing more loving and loveable (even if sometimes they are exasperating!) than AN ADOLESCENT: a child one moment, and a philosopher the next. But all these are totally in character; and each in its place, wonderful beautiful. At each consecutive stage of development there is perfection and beauty.

[Growth, progression essential:] But what a sadness to see a grown man acting like a baby, pouting because he cannot have his toy. What a sad thing to know a beautiful and intelligent woman fighting teen-age battles,

who can never quite escape the instability of adolescence. For the goal of life is full maturity and achievement of that which goes beyond amusement and selfishness and personal enhancement and development.

B. CHURCHES as well as individuals are called to maturity.

In Ephesians 4:14-15 Paul says: "... we are to be no more children, tossed here and there by every wind .. we are to grow up in all aspects into (Jesus Christ)."

Individuals/ denominations/ and all in between go through stages of development; all are good, even beautiful: but all 'go stale' unless those 'lower stages' are left behind for the best of all: accepting the challenges of maturity, and entering into God's work in partnership with Him!

WOLLASTON IS CALLED TO FULL MATURITY.

YOU may be a "baby" in Christ; YOU may be 50 years an earnest Christian—but you have not yet "arrived!" There is new territory to take for Christ! And by the same measure, Wollaston is NOT a baby church; not adolescent, either. But Wollaston HAS NOT "ARRIVED!" We must press on in holiness into full maturity.

[But another way to profile our church is by looking at what it is doing:]

II. THE 'STATE OF THE CHURCH' AS "MINISTRY" For...

A. Doing reflects being.

What we ARE is more important than what we do, but the two things cannot be separated. We DO what we really want to do! What we DO reflects what we believe is important.

B. Wollaston DOES more, sometimes, than it tells about.

That is good. It doesn't keep score. That is good. But records are helpful if they help keep us on course.

C. No church is called upon to do everything.

And we must not accept feelings of guilt because we do not attempt every worthwhile ministry project. Churches as well as people can get "God-complexes" and assume that the success or failure of everything God does depends on our involvement.

D. But we must be sensitive to do ALL that God asks.

I deeply appreciate all that has been done this year. I know of ministry by God's people through the church, or directly because of the challenge of the church, that I cannot share publicly.

1. One area of concern is ministry to college students: I am mindful of an Ad Hoc committee that convened eleven months ago. It said, specifically, we would like to see progress in these four areas: (and I quote their report:)
 - a. a comprehensive effort on the part of the church to develop an environment of ACCEPTANCE of college students,
 - b. a broad-based program of discipleship and leadership training,
 - c. opportunities for fellowship sponsored by the church, and
 - d. the need for effective adult and student leadership in order to provide consistency and a public face to the ministry."

All of these areas have been addressed, and I fully recognize that some of them remain to be covered, at least in the specific way the committee recommended. I bring them to your attention for two reasons: one, for your sincere and continued prayer, with a willingness to be part of the answer to your own prayers; and two, to share with you the kind of challenge and choice the leadership of your church faces in regards to setting the basic goals and values and guidelines and parameters for ministry, the very purpose of being for God's church here on this corner.

2. Other areas of concern and possible ministry include "Men's Fellowship," the availability of small group and/or accountability fellowship for all who desire it,

as well as a ministry of resource and support for the people who do not now belong to any special age or interest congregations within our larger body.

3. But this is not a pessimistic, negative report! Any time we take inventory we tend to look more critically at the areas where we would like to do better. But in all fairness, this has been an excellent year.

We have dedicated, earnest, gifted people in leadership on our board, and on the church staff. We have received 20 (27 after this morning?) new members this year, and have several more immediately ready to join, and many others I trust will soon make their way into membership. We have baptized 36 in the new baptistry. We have had retreats, conventions, small prayer groups, larger fellowship groups, celebrations of worship in music, worship in praise and prayer, revival services with Dr. William McCumber and Dr. Jerry Lambert, and on and on in a list that is almost impossible to detail in a few words.

The obvious highlight of the year has been the completion of our new facilities for fellowship, administration, and education. Already we wonder how we ever got along without them.

That is the "state of the church as ministry," as I see it. But I also see the "state of the church" as a launching pad!

III. THE "STATE OF THE CHURCH" AS READINESS TO MOVE AHEAD

A. A year of spiritual growth

Even more exciting to me than the building of our new facilities this year has been the spiritual growth of our people. The church board has changed in character; not that it was "bad" before. But it has become more and more sensitive to God's leading, to spiritual need.

Such maturity can never be "completed" like a phase of a building program, and certainly we all have a long way to go and to grow. But the spiritual diet of our church includes meat as well as milk. While we are not the men and women we might one day wish to become, we are not the children we once were, either.

- B. We are seeking to be a healing place.

Maturity bears the load of community. Maturity cares. Maturity reaches out.

- C. We stand ready to do serious business for Jesus Christ

Not just discovering who we are, or finding our gifts, or settling our experience in God, or "being well adjusted," but realizing that Jesus Christ has chosen us, and appointed us that we might go and bring forth fruit and that our fruit might remain!

[Text:] The assurance and joy of bearing fruit comes from being CHOSEN! "YE HAVE NOT CHOSEN ME, BUT I HAVE CHOSEN YOU!" We did not simply set out to "do good." We have not taken on ourselves the task of reforming the world, or even reforming our little corner of the world.

And Christian maturity soon discovers that not only have we have been chosen, but that the Chooser will also enable us! "WHATEVER YOU ASK THE FATHER IN MY NAME, HE WILL GIVE YOU!"

IV. UNLOCKING GOD'S PROMISES

The final part of my annual meeting day sermon is in the form of a challenge, or a vision for this wonderful church:

- A. A CHALLENGE TO PRAYER

Prayer is not a separate task, but is central to the assignment.

In closing, the challenge of full maturity and the joy of bearing fruit is closely tied to God's promises to answer prayer. We tend to isolate prayer, and make it a very important entity all by itself. We talk of the power of prayer, and the secrets of prayer.

We have the idea that prayer gets us into the proper attitude, and shows us how to manage, and then we can manage on our own.

But God's great promises regarding prayer come in direct connection with His good and perfect will for our lives. And prayer is the heart of the work we

do for God; we exist by prayer, we produce by prayer, we receive and give by prayer. Here the promise is: "I have chosen you to bear lasting fruit that whatever ye ask of the Father in My name He will give to you!"

B. A CHALLENGE TO FOCUS OUR PRAYING

Some challenges to your prayer life and mine:

1. If I could be certain that God would answer my prayer by doing exactly as I asked Him, what would I pray for?
2. Excluding family salvation AND immediately pressing church/family problems, what would you ask God to grant to you if you knew that He would?
3. What would you do if you had no financial limitations?
4. What would you attempt for God if you knew that you could not fail?
5. Are the last two "dreams" the same?

God is not limited in the matter of carrying forward His will! If our personal concerns are mixed in with our kingdom commitment in a way that dominates, we will have mixed signals in our inner prayer life. Sometimes that takes a lot of sorting out.

C. THE CHALLENGE OF TWO WORDS

And those two words are "sanctification" and "maturity." I would like to take the best part of the new church year, starting in September, to explore what it means to fully accept the challenge to sanctification. This means, to me, sorting out all the mixed signals, making sure that our lives are in harmony with God's perfect plan at whatever stage we personally find ourselves.

I want to ask ourselves two questions: What does it mean to be wholly God's? What does it mean to be "sanctified?" and What does it mean to come to full maturity?

FINALLY: The quality of your spiritual life and mine contribute to the quality of the spiritual life of our church. The state of our church will reflect that condition of each of our lives before God.

We will always have all the various stages of spiritual maturity represented in our fellowship; and that is good!

But before God, I believe that the state of our church reflects a readiness to move as a church into increasing maturity, with all its responsibilities and joys.

In the coming year I challenge each one of us, each individual, us to accept the increasing responsibilities of spiritual maturity. Deliberately we must covenant to remain one in spirit even as we develop widely differing individual gifts and even widely differing ministries.

We must rejoice in Christ's authority, and submit to the best interests of Christ's church, even as we dare to exercise leadership in areas where we "break trail."

These are the "good old days!" In the spirit of Christ, and in obedience to His commission, let us be His Body as He builds His church.

Exalt Him #48 *Go Forth and Tell! O Church of God, Awake!*

That in All Things God May Be Glorified

Sober Living for Final Days

May 7, 1989

1 Peter 4:7-11

The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer.

Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.

Be hospitable to one another without complaint.

As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

It may not seem too important what or how we think about Christ's return. After all, Christian faith is for the here and now (isn't it?), and not just an escape hatch before the world dissolves and the elements melt in fervent heat (which, as Peter tells us, is going to happen. (2 Peter 3:10-12.)

It may not seem too important— and yet the last words of Jesus, and the words the angels spoke on Olivet to those who watched Jesus disappear into the heavens, convinced the early church that the time until Jesus returned was fairly short. At least this is the way it appears to many scholars. It is safe to say that the early church lived in the anticipation of Christ's Return. His NEAR return.

How, then, should we view these words:

"This same Jesus— will so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go!"??

Is it possible to OVER-emphasize eschatology? Can we be too fascinated by contemplating "end times?"

Is there a healthy way of living in anticipation?

I. THE DANGERS OF END-TIME LIVING

- A. **IMMINENCE:** One danger can be that will not fully engage in the concerns of this present age. We must fully accept the responsibility of maturity in community, but on God's terms, not our own or society's.

Earlier generations (during depression, or during wartime insecurity,) did a good job of persuading the rank and file that Jesus would come, and that His coming would be a good thing. But for one person at least, this emphasis was strong enough to discourage thorough preparation even for the ministry!

- B. **ISOLATION :** The impact of the "ME-generation" is being felt in the secular society. "Cocoon-ing" is a buzz-word.

This can even creep into the church until we forget the true importance of community. And if we add to this total involvement with "ME" the peculiarity that adheres to a belief that God interrupts history— has done it once, and is going to do it again— we have a built-in rationality for withdrawing from a society that needs to hear what we believe.

- C. **IMBALANCE :**

1. to say that is SOME is good, then MORE is better
2. to say that if a person is right in one area, then his word is scripture in every area (and so be diverted from simplicity of the gospel)
3. to major on secondary issues (no matter how vital and true)

- D. **IGNORANCE :** to despise history; to think that the profusion and proliferation of technology has added dimensions to the quality of life beyond virtues of integrity before God.

- E. **INTEMPERANCE:** much like "imbalance" except this has to do with playing games with reality (Peter says: "Be sober!") The "alcoholic personality" is not limited to drinking.

We try to escape the realities of life with a pill or "drug" for every occasion. Sometimes the drug is "humor." We joke when the heat is on. We joke when our inner self comes near to being exposed.

Often the "pill" is cynicism. We never expose our innermost feelings. Only the "in" speakers have access to our respect— even if sometimes God might wish to speak to us through a child or a student or a disadvantaged person.

But these are all negative effects of trying to use a truth of scripture rather than simply let the scripture shape our lives and thinking. We simply do NOT know when Jesus is returning. We know that it is considered naive to believe that He is coming soon- but His word to His church was "Watch ye therefore, for ye not neither the day nor the hour when the Son of man shall appear." (Matthew 25:13)

And there is a God-given GLORY available to those who live in the anticipation of Christ's Return, the return we pray for every time we say the Lord's Prayer:

II. THE GLORY OF END-TIME LIVING

- A. IMMINENCE : [The very same idea that puts off responsibility when viewed one way is that which keeps us digging when we realize we shall be called to account.]

Keeping short accounts. Paid up. Prayed up. And yet at the same time, fully engaged.

[Mary Hale is 93. She is going to die one of these days. She has been in the hospital several times in recent weeks, at the point of death, unable to get her breath, and Lorraine Crayton (her niece) has fully expected her to go.

But she bounces back. And "between times" she is ALIVE! She loves. She receives love. She does something meaningful. She is ready. When she dies WE will experience loss— but SHE will simply step on up!]

- B. COMMUNITY : God's answer to ISOLATION.

The text says: (9) "Be hospitable to one another without complaint." Hospitality is a hallmark of a healthy church.

That in All Things God May Be Glorified

I know we think of hospitality as inviting one another over to our houses [like my son, Mark.] And that is a commendable part of hospitality.

Henri Nouwen uses the term "hospitality" in a little different way which I believe is very applicable: making space within our hearts for other people. It is the willingness to actually bring people into our hearts, and care about them and their concerns.

Most of us have places in our homes where company would be "out of bounds." Brian and I laughed about those places, saying: "Don't go in the tool shed, there's a BEAR in there!" Places that are cluttered, or filled with things we cannot share.

But our inner lives can be ALL "BEAR-dens" where no one is allowed. And we must seek to live in COMMUNITY as we anticipate the Return of our Lord.

Being a part of the Church is NOT an option; it is the NORM. We denigrate the church to our own peril.

Being increasingly involved in community is the right and privilege of every believer. We need each other. We must live to enhance each other.

Not knowing when Jesus will come makes it all the more imperative that we have His Spirit, His mind. For THE MIND OF CHRIST, His Spirit within is the answer to ignorance, imbalance, intemperance.

We may be certain that the Second Coming will be at least as great a surprise as the First Advent was. There is only ONE way in which we can be prepared— one way we will be certain not to be deceived. We must know Jesus so well here and now that we will know Him when He returns!

Conclusion:

Is Jesus coming soon?

Sometimes I get to thinking that His return, AND SOON, is the only hope we have for any hope of fair and equitable society.

But He has waited now almost 2,000 years.

Some people were persuaded that last year was the year.

Some people are pretty certain that certain historical things need to unfold yet.

I don't know what "soon" is. When I was 20 I thought Jesus would come before I was ordained. Then I got busy preaching and working and raising sons. It wasn't very long ago that I began- and more than 30 years have gone by!

I have less time now to live than I have lived! I have less time to serve than I have served! I shall see Jesus soon, one way or another!

But Jesus IS going to return! We have that promise.

You have gifts. Use them to serve. Let God supply the strength. Seek to glorify God in all you do. And if Jesus doesn't come in your lifetime, it will be still a very, very short time until you are in His Presence.

#78(EH) When He Shall Come

[IF Jesus WERE to come soon— very soon— would you be comfortable in His Presence? You can do something about that NOW. Do you want to pray about it?]

The Promise: I Will Send You a Helper

May 7, 1989 AM

Luke 24:49 And behold, I am sending the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.

Introduction:

Next Sunday is one of the great days of the church: Pentecost. It commemorates the climax of the greatest promise God ever made to human beings: that He would come, in Person, and live with every man or woman who would receive Him.

We don't quite know what to make of Pentecost. We would like to control it. We would like to say "This, or that, is what happened, and what happens now."

Look with me at what Jesus said to His disciples just before He ascended to the Father.

(Lesson:) John 15:26 - 16:4a When the Helper comes, whom I will send you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness of Me, and you will bear witness also, because you have been with me from the beginning

These things I have spoken to you, that you may be kept from stumbling. They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think he is offering service to God. And these things they will do, because they have not known the Father, or Me. But these things I have spoken to you, that when their hour comes, you may remember that I told you of them.

Jesus made it clear that we would face conflict, and that we would need His Spirit in those times.

Jesus also said, in the closing words of Luke's gospel (text:) "And behold, I am sending the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

The Promise: I Will Send You a Helper

If only we might come to these words as though we had never heard them before! If we could come with fresh understanding, what might stand out to us?

I. THE PROMISE: YOU WILL HAVE THE HELPER

Nothing less than God's Presence in our everyday living will suffice to enable us to be truly Christian. "Christian" is not just another way among man; "Christian" is LIFE itself! It is intended to be vibrant, pulsing LIFE because we are vitally connected with the Source, the Author of LIFE. And that connection is the promised Spirit.

Those who heard the Promise for the first time could not grasp this new thing. It is hard to comprehend, even after all these centuries: that God Himself will make His home in the hearts of His people, and make them One in Himself. But this is the Promise.

And this was the central thing about Pentecost. There was incredible JOY as the disciples realized that Jesus WAS with them! He had said, "I am with you always!" And now He was!

II. THE PAUSE: A REASON TO WAIT

The Promise of the indwelling Presence was given with a strict command: Don't go out on the Great Commission until you are clothed with the Promise!

Why tarry? Jesus had finished His TEACHING. The facts were in, complete. The ATONEMENT had been made: Jesus had said: "It is finished!" A world was lost. Why not start out right now!! ??

Why not start out, indeed?:

- A. Because Jesus did not want the disciples to share THEIR lives, at least not the way they were just then. These were good and decent men, with sincere love for Jesus. But Jesus knew that they would make disciples just like themselves, and that would be disaster to any hopes of building a holy church.

- B. By the same argument, Jesus does not want us to make the church in OUR image. He does not want us to simply give other people our lives. He wants us to give them HIS life. And the only way we can give Jesus away is to have His Spirit filling us.
- C. Why wait? Because the Holy Spirit's empowering is absolutely necessary for doing the Holy Spirit's work. Kingdom work is never accomplished by human wisdom, human scheming.
- D. Why wait? Because "the mind of Christ" which is essential to "working out our salvation" (see Philippians 2:5-12) is only available to those who have received Christ's Promise, the Gift of the Holy Spirit.

III. THE PLENTY: THEY WERE (ALL) FILLED

What does 'being filled' mean?

- A. ARE WE SO CERTAIN THAT WE KNOW? We are so conditioned at this point that it will probably take an effort for you not to anticipate what you think I am going to say. You will be tempted simply to turn me off. We know the answers so very well— but do we have the questions clear?

So- to this question ("What does it mean to be filled?") there is a "holiness answer" and a "Pentecostal answer" and a "Reformed answer" and we are all so smug and so sure we are right and they are mistaken.

- B. But set answers aside, now: what does being filled with the Spirit mean?

1. An experience. [I don't deny it.] But lets come back to this. "Experience" as necessary and valid and crucial as it is, is not the end and all of what it means to be filled!
2. A mind-set. To be "filled" reflects a certain attitude of mind. [As: "He is certainly FULL of his subject!" Like a person who sells Nutri-Lite.] To be FILLED means to interpret all of life from a particular perspective.

A heart surgeon watches how people carry themselves, and says: "There goes an ailing circulatory system!" A shoe salesman once looked at my feet and told me where I bought my shoes and who

(probably) had sold them to me! And a Christian does and says all that she or he does and says in the consciousness of Christ's life.

Is there any reason that someone might look at your life and say: "Everything that person does somehow he relates to Jesus Christ!"??

3. A passion. Being "filled" can mean even more than a mind-set. It can be a passion. [Like springtime lovers full of each other (sort of sickening when it is too public, isn't it?) True passion is not always flamboyant and public.

In fact some of the deepest and most moving manifestations of love I have ever known have little or no resemblance to the flowers of spring. So we had better not judge the depths of commitment by the public displays.

But if the commitment is there— and a person is "filled"— if the love is real and true, it will exclude purely selfish commitments, and it will exalt the one who is loved.

Is there any basis for any person to say of you or me: "He/she is full of the love of Jesus!"??

4. To be filled with the Spirit is to reveal a way of life that 'overcomes.' The Holy Spirit must begin to manifest His Presence by His increasing fruit: Love, Joy, Peace, Longsuffering, gentleness, Goodness, Faith, Meekness, Temperance.

A life that is constantly defeated, or that manifests chronic lack of joy, or constant criticism, or a jaded attitude toward the means of God's grace, or that makes every hard place a call for a vote: (Shall I go ahead and do God's will, or shall I quit??)— such a life is hardly a great advertisement for Jesus Christ.

To be filled with the Spirit means a life that is, at least on average, "overcoming."

Is there any basis for an objective and impartial observer to say about your life and mine: "She/he is an overcomer!"??

5. To be filled with the Spirit will mean special grace for special assignments. I know this is probably a basic definition of our Keswickian brothers and sisters. But it is a valid definition. We do not always have great manifest power and great endowment from on high, because (Thank God!) we don't always live in a time of crisis.

But being filled means that the Holy Spirit will be there when we need Him. When the pathway of obedience leads us out over our own depth, the Holy Spirit must come through, according to the Promise. 6. But being filled IS an experience! It IS something which is more than just subjective, existential, or whimsical and capricious. It is a Promise which we can know even if we cannot completely control or categorize it.

The climate of fullness is always surrender. There must be a desire for and a submission to God's whole will. We teach, and rightly so, that we come to a crisis of deliberate surrender to God for time and for eternity.

Certainly there is a submission to God's direct commands. "Don't leave town!" God's will, not ours! This submission is epitomized in Romans 12:1,2 and Philippians 2:5-11.

There is also a submission one to another. (Ephesians 5:21) And Acts 2 tells us that when the Holy Spirit came to fill them "They were all in one place, in one accord."

Don't overlook that fact.

It was in this spirit of submission, surrender to God, that they WAITED!

- C. This experience of being filled should manifest itself by these five or six criteria, perhaps. Not "pass" in order to satisfy some self-appointed human panel, but in order to enter into the joyful realm of Christ's expectations and His Promise.

And the absolute essential manifestation of being filled with the Spirit is OBEDIENCE! God's will is now MORE than a law written somewhere in stone. God's will has become DELIGHT!

IV. THE PEOPLE: WHO MAY BE FILLED?

- A. On that great Birthday of the Church Peter said: "This Promise is to YOU and to your children"(to you people here, listening to me speak today.) "And," Peter also said, "to those who are afar off (even back home in Asia Minor where some of you live..) "And to as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself."(Acts 2:39)

So here, according to scripture, if God speaks to you in convicting, convincing, promising persuasion, then you are a candidate for this fullness.

- B. Only God's people may be filled. This must be more than a shibboleth of our tradition. I would far rather be dead wrong, theologically, and belong to God totally, than to be dead right and too rigid to acknowledge my own deep need!

To be a part of the 'holiness tradition' is to have both a great blessing AND a danger! We sometimes almost come to think that WE own the Spirit! We think that WE understand the Wind!

- C. CONSECRATED PEOPLE WILL BE FILLED. There will be a deliberate consecration! Remember Jacob at Jabbok? There will probably be a crisis time of surrender. It may be big and traumatic, or it may be quiet and sweet and almost uneventful.
- D. PEOPLE WHO SEEK TO BE TOTALLY OPEN BEFORE GOD WILL BE FILLED. "What is your name?" There must be confession, and understanding of our own UN-righteousness apart from God. Apart from GRACE we have no right to claim the Promise.
- E. There probably will be a challenge to our faith. Salvation— all of salvation— is by GRACE through faith! Not by "feelings." No some predictable, measurable response. Not the assurance of someone dear and trusted. On your own, for yourself, ALONE, you come to realize: This Promise is for ME! And then, I ACCEPT THIS GIFT!

- F. Then: This fullness will "work its way OUT" in a life-time of open-ness and obedience and surrender— and VICTORY AND JOY AND FULLNESS AND RICHNESS which we can then proceed to give away!

Don't you see: that is why Jesus didn't want the disciples to leave town UNTIL....

V. THE PLAN: WHAT DO WE DO WITH THIS FULLNESS?

- A. I say it reverently: That is Jesus' problem! If we will tarry until we are filled with His Spirit, then we are simply to witness wherever we are led.

The disciples did not have a great Master Plan to win over the world. They didn't even have a world-wide vision, even though Jesus had said: "Go to the uttermost part!" The very idea of sharing their faith with Gentiles was almost too much for them.

But the disciples were genuinely filled! They were God-soaked people! And God could NOT be contained!

- B. The people who accomplish for God are people who are filled with God.

Mother Teresa prays four hours a day. We rightly stand in awe of WHAT SHE DOES for Jesus. But she does much because she prays much; and she prays much because she needs the strength because she in herself cannot do what she does.

Too often we are TOO STRONG or TOO SMART for Jesus to use. Or we are TOO SURE that we know what Jesus wants.

- C. But if we will be filled, then Jesus will not be CONTAINED. Jesus will out! "They took knowledge" of Peter and John "that they had been with Jesus!" They simply lived out Jesus, and went where Jesus said, and did their best to do what Jesus ordered. And without computers or jet planes or copy machines or tremendous organizational ability they turned their world over for Jesus in one generation!

The Promise was also their Plan!

Conclusion:

The Promise: I Will Send You a Helper

I'm glad that I was brought up in a Nazarene church to hear about the fullness of the Spirit, and the Promise of Pentecost. I'm also glad that I learned about consecration, and I believe I have given my whole being to Jesus forever and ever.

But I want to probe to the depths all that this Promise of Jesus, that I may be filled with His Spirit— probe all that it means! Will you claim with me the promise of our Ascended Savior?

Exalt Him #37 *Hail the Day that Sees Him Rise* OR #38 *Come, Holy Spirit*

Pentecost

PENTECOST, May 14, 1989

John 14:1-3,15-16,27

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Counselor to be with you forever. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid.

I called my mother Friday evening and told her I was proud of her. This is Mother's Day weekend, you know. And I said to her in the course of conversation, "What is your church doing for Pentecost this year?"

And she said, "Is it Pentecost this Sunday?"

Here we are, celebrating one of the three greatest days of the church... and probably MOST of the evangelical Christians say: "Ho-hum— Pentecost Sunday? so what?" So, what indeed!

I. THE CHRISTIAN PENTECOST IS VERY SIMILAR TO SINAI

- A. The giving of the Law and the giving of the Spirit. The first Christian Pentecost was a Great Day in the history of God's relationship with humankind. It was an event of importance at least equal to the giving of the Law on Sinai. The coming of the promised Holy Spirit on the 120 was the establishment of a new order of Chosen People, a New Israel of God.
- B. First a covenant, then writing of the Law:

The First Israel was established, first in Covenant with the Fathers; and then, in the giving of the Law on Sinai to Moses, who humanly speaking, was the Convener of the nation.

The New Israel, the Church was established, first in the promise to Peter and the disciples: (Matthew 16) "Who do you say that I am?" "Thou art the Christ!" "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church!"; and then in the writing of the Law upon the hearts of the believers.

(John Wesley says: "At the Pentecost of Sinai in the Old Testament, and the Pentecost of Jerusalem in the New, were the two grand manifestations of God, the legal and the evangelical; the one from the mountain, and the other from heaven; the terrible and the merciful one." Explanatory Notes, Acts 2:1)

- C. It is highly significant that the Feast of Pentecost was both a feast of first harvest, the wheat harvest; and a remembering of the giving of the Law on Sinai.

For the Christian Pentecost was a great day of harvest, with 3,000 souls added to the New Israel; and it was the day that the Holy Law of Christ's New Commandment was written by the Spirit on the believer's very hearts. [Pentecost established a New Israel- the Church!]

II. PENTECOST IS DIRECTLY CONNECTED WITH CHRIST'S PROMISES

- A. Pentecost was/is a Christ-centered event:

We like to think we know all about Pentecost. We have doctrines that tell us about the Holy Spirit, and what He DID, and what He DOES, and what He is supposed to DO. But I wonder sometimes if we could do better if we didn't already know so very much!

The disciples didn't know what to expect. They did, however, recall what Jesus had told them. They had ten days of waiting and prayer and talking together, and when the Holy Spirit came, Jesus was the focus of Peter's great message.

B. Jesus had said (in the words of our lesson):

1. I AM GOING - There was to be a period of temporal, physical separation: (We are in that period of time just now.)

Jesus had given them to understand that He would be physically leaving. It would certainly be a transition time. A shaky, testing, wrenching time.

"But," He said, "I am going to my Father's house— to prepare a place for you. And ..." (Jesus had also said:) "I WILL COME BACK AND TAKE YOU TO BE WITH ME."

By this they understood and believed that Jesus would be physically returning. He would be literally coming back in His resurrected body to gather His own to be with Him forever.

[But that is not all that Jesus had said that the disciples thought about before the Day of Pentecost was fully come:]

2. Jesus said, "I COMMAND YOU TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER":

This was a vital part of Christ's Plan. He said, "I am concerned about your love. It is what I value. If you love Me, then be sure to do as I have commanded you." What, again, was Jesus' New Commandment? John 13:34 Love one another as I have loved you. Not just "Do unto others." The Golden Rule in some form or other is a part of many codes; usually negative (i.e., "Do NOT do to others what you wouldn't want them to do to you.")

But: "Love like ME! Give like I have given!"

And so when Pentecost came, and the Holy Spirit was given, IT WAS IN GREAT PART AN ENABLING FOR THIS COMMANDMENT!

3. Jesus had also spoken about 'another Comforter.' Here was something of a new concept— the dawning of the revelation of God as Trinity.

Jesus said, "I WILL ASK THE FATHER AND HE WILL GIVE YOU ANOTHER COUNSELOR." But at the same time Jesus had said, "I WILL COME TO YOU!"

Jesus seemed to contradict Himself: I am going away, but I will be with you even if you go to the uttermost part of the earth. I'll be with you, Peter— but I'll also be with you, John. And I'll be with you, Bill Restrict, and you, Louise Dygoski, and you, Fred Cawthorne! How is this possible?

Jesus said He would come again ... but He also said: "I will go with you to the uttermost part of the earth.

"Before I come again, I will come to you!" What does this mean? It is the secret of our faith! God resides in the human heart!

4. But Jesus also had said, in this passage of promise: "I GIVE YOU MY PEACE." 'The Holy Spirit, when He comes, will bring you My most precious inner resource!'

'I'm not going to exempt you from struggle. But I AM going to give you a supernatural peace that you can draw on!'

And these promises were what the disciples drew on as they waited— and what they experienced as the Holy Spirit came upon them and made them The Church!

But are these same promises valid today? What about the purity and the power and the feelings and the fruit and the manifestations?

III. PENTECOST FOR YOU AND ME TODAY

- A. Pentecost is given for real people in real life situations: It is hard for us to realize how tough a world situation the Early Church was born in:

1. It is hard to get perspective; is OUR world better or worse than Jerusalem in A.D. 30 ?

There are probably good arguments on both sides. THEY didn't have any of the left-over influence of generations and even centuries of Christian faith. But OUR generation has advanced in technology much faster than it has developed morally. So we have the means to destroy ourselves much more efficiently.

Still, the prospects of 120 followers of a crucified Jewish rabbi capturing their world for good and for love and for righteousness seemed pretty remote. Just about as remote as having Mikhael Gorbachev come to the altar and be saved!

2. But if there was no Master Plan in the minds of the believers, there WAS a willingness to live and die for the Master. And the Master always has a plan!

B. IF WE WILL BEGIN WHERE WE ARE, AND LET THE PRESENCE OF GOD CLEANSE AND PURIFY OUR HEARTS AND OUR HOMES, GOD HIMSELF IS THE ONLY ONE WHO KNOWS HOW GENUINE REVIVAL WILL SPREAD!

1. But we need to begin, NOT with the world, but within our own hearts and lives:

We need the power and the purity of Pentecost to begin to make difficult personal choices:

- a. you middle-school kids can choose to keep your minds pure. When most of your friends spend several hours a day watching MTV and other music that fills their minds with garbage, God's kids can dare to be different! You can say "I'll let Jesus watch TV with me!"
- b. you business-type people can choose to make decisions on the basis of what Jesus would have you do, and not simply what turns the biggest profit:

[Illus: One of our ENC representatives came back this week to tell of a church in NY that had a key layman who was transferred away at a huge raise— but who turned down the transfer to "stay in the ministry" of that local church. Is profit wrong? Of course not! But Jesus is Lord of ALL!]

2. If 120 could do what THEY did, what can 120,000 or 1,200,000 or 12,000,000 do in our world today? [And certainly there ARE many, many sincere believers today saying: "Lord, Fill ME with Your Spirit!"]

Once again, I say it reverently: "That is God's problem!" But I want to be one of those who is available for God to use. And I certainly want to see those I know and love saved.

But I do believe that God wants revival more than WE do! And I also certainly do believe that only Pentecost can save our nation and our world from self-destruction.

Being filled with God— not just some narrow, parochial experience that WE own— BUT BEING FILLED WITH GOD UNTIL HE CAN DO WITH US ANYTHING HE WILL— is the heart of what Pentecost means. Are YOU filled with God? Are YOU asking God to give to you, in all your failure and weakness, all that He has for you?

HAS PENTECOST HAPPENED TO YOU?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, You have promised to come to us! You have promised us Your peace! Grant to us this Pentecost Sunday a fresh infilling of the same Spirit the disciples received 2,000 years ago— and do with us as You see fit! Amen.

#39 - Spirit of Faith, Come Down

Holy Holy Holy Lord God Almighty

May 21, 1989, Trinity Sunday

Isaiah 6:1-8 "I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, High and lifted up..." "...thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged."

"Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'"

Introduction:

Much of our worship, private devotions and public prayers, is imperfect. We come to the place of worship for many reasons. We come because we have needs. We come seek to "explain" and "understand" the Infinite. We come to release our tensions and feel "holy" or "happy."

But somehow in spite of our imperfection it happens! God comes! And again and again we are face to face with God, (in some small measure) as Isaiah was in this text passage.

True worship is a wonderful thing! It is never an "ordinary thing" or something to be taken for granted when we perceive that God is very near.

True worship is more than just thinking about God. And yet as we talk about God, and invite Him to help us know Him better, perhaps He will grant that we shall worship even as we think about the mystery that is "the Trinity."

I. THE TRINITY IS MYSTERY

A creed, such as we have read together is not a "puzzle to solve" but rather a statement of truth; a revelation, an opening to our hearts and minds something of the reality of the way God IS. We think (ponder) on such truth:

A. God is ONE, not three Gods.

Dr. (William) Greathouse said this week (at district assembly) that many people are professing monotheists but practicing polytheists. By that, he

explained, he meant that we worship many other things beside the Almighty.

But there is also a danger of worshiping the God we "understand." The God that we have become "comfortable" with; the God we have "tamed" or brought down to our size so that we may live comfortably with Him.

God is ONE because the Bible says so. Deuteronomy 6:4 "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord..." and Jesus quotes from it in Mark 12:29 and added "mind" to the list: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, MIND, and strength."

B. Jesus Christ is Himself God.

Many passages ascribe deity to the Lord Jesus Christ. The first to come to mind is the Prologue of John's Gospel. In the beginning WITH God, the Word WAS God. The Son was with God in CREATION "All things were made by Him."

Jesus prayed to the Father. They are One [see John 10:30, and John 17:11;] and they are separate Persons. This is part of the Holy Mystery of the Godhead. But We have a Christ-like God. God is LOVE, because Jesus is love. (Philippians 2:5-11)

C. The Holy Spirit is spoken of as Person and as God.

In the final discourse of John's Gospel Jesus spoke of the Promise of the Spirit. In John 16:13 Jesus says: "When HE the Spirit of truth is come, HE will guide you into all truth: for HE shall not speak of Himself, but whatsoever he shall hear that shall He speak: and He will show you things to come. He shall glorify Me: for HE shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you."

Certainly the Spirit is more than just an impersonal Force.

Gift of the Father and of the Son, the Spirit from all Eternity is part of the eternal, unchanging Godhead.

- D. We must accept all these truths as scripture: Ralph Earle says, "None of these facts can be surrendered without giving up the faith of the New Testament."

[But what does this possibly have to do with you and me, where we live and struggle day by day? It has a great deal more to do than we may realize!]

II. GOD AT THE PLACE WHERE WE ARE

[What does the vision of Isaiah have to say about meeting with the reality that is God?]

God does not exist for us. We exist for Him. But from our perspective, we understand God as He relates to us. And God reveals Himself to us just at the point of our need:

A. GOD ON THE THRONE OF THE UNIVERSE.

We need a God high and lifted up.

There is within us the need to know something of the AWE of God Himself. Idols will never satisfy. The most subtle idols are those we construct mentally of scraps of truth; without realizing it we desire to control even the idea of God.

But when GOD begins to reveal Himself the idols pale. The young prophet was good, dedicated, true to the best he knew. But the dawning of God's reality forever cured him of lesser objects of worship.

THE HOLINESS OF GOD DEMANDS HOLINESS ON THE PART OF THOSE WHO WOULD BE IN HIS PRESENCE. A glimpse of the awe of God begins to reveal the true limitations, weakness, and sin of our own nature. The proof of genuineness of theophany: "Woe is me!" [Peter: "Depart from me!"

Disciples: "What manner of man is this that even the wind and sea obey Him!?"]

B. GOD ON THE CROSS; THE ALTAR OF SACRIFICE.

We need a God who can take away our iniquity.

The vision of God high and lifted up does not excuse sin, and it does not deny sin; but it does reveal our own sin. But there is ACTION from the throne: a messenger comes to take a cleansing coal from the altar to purge the sin away! Fire. Purging. A voice declaring: "Thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged."

There is no contradiction between the high and holy One and the provision for cleansing. This God who fills the temple, and indeed fills the universe, this Infinite and Eternal One is also the one who sees that a young prophet is cleansed from sin.

THE LOVE OF GOD PROVIDES A CLEANSING SO THAT THE HOLINESS OF GOD IS NO LONGER ALIEN. [John 3:16]

C. GOD CALLING: "WHO WILL GO FOR US?"

We need a God who will actually bring us into His own work of CREATION and REDEMPTION.

"Who will go for US? Whom shall we send?"

The communion of God, of God the Holy Spirit, brings salvation near to us. But then God the Holy Spirit also calls for us to be a part of the plan of salvation.

III. FELLOWSHIP WITH THE HOLY ONE IN THREE

- A. The Trinity is not "a puzzle to solve" but as we reverently open our hearts and minds to its truth we begin to grasp that our God is greater than we can ever know— and yet that He makes Himself known even to our little children!

(Conclusion:)

- B. So: How shall we worship?

How does this magnificent vision of God which Isaiah describes help us in our worship today? How are WE to worship in our personal prayer times, and as we come together?

1. The best we know how.

We will continue to be creatures of our culture. I will probably continue to preach sermons trying to explain the unexplainable. And we will continue to think to ourselves that the services where we "feel good" are better than the services where we are challenged ("dug out") and stretched and brought under conviction.

2. But we must not limit our God!

We must not 'create Him' in OUR image. When "Uzziah" dies— when we seek to "Draw near to God ..." — when we seek for Him for Himself alone!

3. And our God WILL reveal Himself!

And we will cherish the "high moments." They will come as we seek to worship the best we know, with open hearts.

We may actually be dismayed when God begins to reveal Himself in awe, as Isaiah was dismayed. He said: "WOE is me!" But that dismay is the opening of a door on life as we have not experienced it before.

It may not neatly fit into our theology, but as Dr. William Greathouse once expressed it (in his book *The Fullness of the Spirit*) "Again and again we must break through into spiritual reality!"

Prayer:

O God, Help us not to be satisfied with anything less than YOU! Come to us where we are— as YOU will— how YOU will— in Your holiness and your grace and mercy and in your love and purpose. At any cost, O Lord, grant that we may please You, and live for Your glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We pray in the Name of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

#21 Come, Thou Almighty King

The Battle for Our Children

May 21, 1989

Isaiah 49:23-25 "... and thou shalt know that I am the Lord: for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me. Shall the prey be taken from the mighty, or the lawful captive delivered? But thus saith the Lord, Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible shall be delivered: for I will contend with him that contendeth with thee, and I will save thy children."

[This past week Pastor Nielson and I sat down and deliberately watched a "video" on MTV. It was by the rock star Madonna, and I believe the name of it was "Like a Prayer." It was well-planned, full of symbolic meaning, calculated to appeal to the people who are least equipped to defend themselves against temptation, and it was hellish, demonic.]

By some estimates, the "average" young teenager watches TV, and many of them MTV, three or more hours per day!

[Illus: What does that have to do with our families?: I'm reminded of a cartoon I saw recently in Christianity Today— a father and mother are watching their children watching TV and saying: "I sure hope the government bans that program soon! It shouldn't be on the air!"]

But as evil as much of our culture is today, I want to do more just now than say: "Let's agree, isn't it awful! Shame!" I want to prayerfully consider: What can we do in this life-and-death struggle for our children?

I. THE NEED AND THE PROMISE ARE CONNECTED: "WAITING ON THE LORD"

A. I don't know too much about the times in which Isaiah wrote: times of captivity and idolatry and pagan worship that threatened the worship of Jehovah God.

But I believe I know something of our times: I see a tidal wave of Satanic influence. And while the violence and the sex and the drugs are "out front"

where we can see them— the abortion on demand— the hard attitudes of "Me-ism"— the root cause THAT IS NOT SO OBVIOUS just might stem back to the way our children have subtly been taught for the last seventy years or so.

The Word of God has been supplanted, and made "irrelevant." This exactly parallels the first attack of Satan in garden of Eden: (1) God has not really said that! (In our "culture" we do not talk about "right" or "wrong"— we just talk about "values" and "what is right for you" or "wrong for you." But the idea that a thing is right or wrong on the basis of the authority of God is to be ridiculed.

B. So— what do we DO about this captivity?

God says (in direct connection with this promise: "The people that wait hopefully for Me will not be put to shame."

God's people must wait on HIM. The need to WAIT. Certainly we must "do something!" But before we "do" we must be "endued." This does not mean then that we will do nothing BUT wait. That quite the contrary, we will work harder than anyone else, perhaps.

C. What does "waiting" mean? A certain amount of hours in prayer? Waiting is itself hard work. How do we pray? [I am not now "telling" you how to pray; I am asking!] Do we have to say the words? Out loud? We had better be working on our own answer for this! We had better learn to WAIT by ourselves, in the quiet hours! And we had better learn to WAIT together, when the crises comes, and we need the help of one another, to call and say: "Will you WAIT with me?"

D. The Lord says: "They shall not be ashamed that wait for Me!" I'm pretty sure that we can't "do it wrong" if we keep at it!

II. THE PROMISE: IF WE ENGAGE IN CONFLICT FOR THE RIGHT, GOD WILL FIGHT WITH US! AND HE WILL SAVE OUR CHILDREN!

A. CLAIM THE PROMISE

Please don't tell me this isn't what these words mean! I believe they are MINE! And I want them to be YOURS, too!

B. PRESS FOR SALVATION

We must believe that our children need to be saved. We must believe that there is a Lamb's Book of Life, and "ark of safety." We must ourselves be saved. Backsliding is so subtle! It is so easy to become "intellectual" and "casual" about really important things!

C. GO ON A "WAR" SCHEDULE

We must accept the fact that as long as we live this side of eternity we must be on a war-time mobilization; either we are part of the solution— or we are a part of the problem.

D. DON'T GIVE UP!

If our precious loved ones are saved it will not be by accident. No merely casual, hope-so approach will do for this most important of earthly assignments.

[Illus: A young lineman brushed a high tension wire one day and was electrocuted, and fell senseless and lifeless to the ground. His fellow-workers rushed over to him and did what they could to revive him; but they found that he was beyond help, and they grieved.

But at that very instant a jeep pulled up and the supervisor saw what had happened, and what is more, he saw that it was his own son lying on the ground. And he would not accept defeat without making an heroic struggle; he applied the CPR techniques and kept at it— and the life began to flicker and the boy revived. The difference here was love.]

The Battle for Our Children

Whatever your age, or the age of those you love— let's accept the challenge to be partners with God in setting people free from the captivities of evil! God has promised that, if we wait for Him, He will fight FOR us— fight along WITH us— and that He will save our children! I believe Him!

EH #58 Soldiers of Christ, Arise

Life Through the Open Door

May 28, 1989, Second Sunday after Pentecost: Kingdomtide

John 10:10

Introduction:

The promises in the New Testament are always finally in the context of the community of faith. We are to live and move and have our being in the fellowship of the church.

[As independent-minded as most of us are, we often seek to appropriate the promises of God for our own felt personal needs. We think how "this promise" or "this church" meets me where I am just now— of what "I" need. I suppose that is normal and understandable.]

This favorite verse, John 10:10, about abundant life, a verse to which we come back again and again, is about belonging to the fold, the flock of the Good Shepherd. We will find our life in the context of the true church.

But what do we know for certain about "the true church?"

I. JESUS IS THE CHURCH: THAT IS, JESUS IN YOU AND ME IS THE CHURCH

A. Jesus is the Head of the church. Jesus is the LIFE of the church. Jesus is the VINE. But also in this present world JESUS IS ONLY PRESENT IN HIS CHURCH! H. Ray Dunning says: "The church is the Body of Christ, hence to be in Him is to be a part of his Body." Alan Richardson says: "The Church is thus the means of Christ's work in the world; it is His hands and feet, his mouth and voice."

B. The branches are NOT the vine— and yet the Vine is the branches. In a wonderful way— if we are in Christ, we are in the church; and if we are in the church we are IN CHRIST! There is no such thing as being "in Christ" and not being in His body, the Church.

II. JESUS IS THE TOTAL PURPOSE OF THE TOTAL CHURCH

- A. The church (we Christians) exist(s) for ONE reason only: to be Christ's BODY in this world. The proclamation of Jesus Christ is the total task of the total church.

THE PROCLAMATION OF JESUS CHRIST IS THE TOTAL TASK OF THE TOTAL CHURCH!

- B. We tend to identify the proclamation of Jesus Christ with the preaching of the Word of God from the pulpit of the church. And I would certainly hope that the pulpit exalts and lifts up Jesus Christ.
- C. But the pulpit exists primarily to edify, to equip, to prepare the total church to proclaim the majesty and love and grace and salvation of God in Jesus Christ. And that has to happen outside the four walls of the sanctuary.

III. JESUS IS AT HOME IN THE CHURCH GATHERED

- A. We ENTER IN to the place of worship; the sanctuary of His Presence. [11 o'clock on Sunday morning is (in most ways) my favorite time of all the week!]
- B. We "ministers" love our calling. We sense its high importance and privilege. We have been made to understand that our role is "key" to kingdom growth.
- C. But the "cutting edge" of ministry is when the entire BODY of Christ accepts the TRUTH that we are ALL to take Jesus Christ wherever we are: TO PROCLAIM HIM!
- D. We ENTER the sanctuary to fellowship and worship. We NEED the food, the edification. But we LEAVE the sanctuary to enter into "life." And life on Monday is REAL life out there in the world!

IV. JESUS IS ALSO VERY MUCH AT HOME IN THE CHURCH SCATTERED

- A. We need new ways to measure "church growth." Buildings and numbers and dollars are well and good— even necessary. But when people think of their ministry and value to Jesus in the church they do not need to think ONLY in terms of what they can do when the church GATHERS.
- B. In the ideal church 100% of the flock will GATHER in order to be fed, edified, strengthened.

In the GATHERING they will give and receive support in prayer, and see that fellowship and education are happening.

- C. But in the ideal church a full 80% WILL HAVE THEIR PRIMARY TASK FOR JESUS OUTSIDE THE WALLS OF THE SANCTUARY.

This means that only about 20% of the Body will have "inward directed" tasks of teaching, administrating, keeping the wheels turning.

- D. This will mean "witness" in the old-fashioned meaning of the word: Helping people to the decision: Jesus is Lord! (Romans 10:9,10) That is true!
- E. But somehow it will also mean witness in the broadest sense of the word! It means a total life involvement: letting Jesus 'LOOSE' wherever we are! Not from "ought" and from "should" but from abundance and life and joy!

Conclusion:

V. JESUS HAS PROMISED LIFE TO THE FULL IN THIS CONTEXT: COMING IN AND GOING OUT!

This week a young person told me frankly: "You aren't preaching where we live! We have heavy responsibilities you aren't covering!"

I want to preach where you live! But I may not always be able to meet you where you are.

But I recall a testimony on a Wednesday night some years ago, now. A testimony I have often returned to (insight!)

[Illustration: Cindy Knox was a brand-new social worker in some of the toughest parts of Boston. One day she was shocked again by a particularly sordid case of neglect and abuse to little children. In her revulsion and anger she cried out, half aloud: "Oh God, Where are You?"!! And in her own words, Cindy said, "Jesus spoke to me, and He said: 'I'm in you, Cindy!' THE CHURCH was in that tenement that day!]

I'm not sure that I can preach where each of us lives! The businessman, tempted to shave corners. The student, tempted to cheat "like everybody else." The parent, tempted to let TV do all the babysitting. [How about the pastor, wondering what in the world to say as he faces pain and suffering??]

But I can assure you! I grasp these promises of the Good Shepherd, the Vine, the Door— that if we COME IN by the Door and gather in Jesus' name to fellowship and learn and worship— —and then GO OUT by the Door to proclaim Jesus, and let Him live out through us— WE SHALL KNOW REAL LIFE! WE SHALL BE THE CHURCH! AND THE WORLD WILL SEE JESUS!

#84EH Let the Beauty of Jesus Be Seen in Me

It Pays to Serve Jesus

June 18, 1989 AM

Psalm 84:11,12 For the Lord God is a sun and shield: the Lord will give grace and glory: no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly. O Lord of hosts, blessed is the man that trusteth in thee.

[There are times when we walk through the deep waters of pain, and cannot find a ray of light, spiritually. And then there are times when it seems as though our hearts will burst with joy because of the blessings of God. And strange as it may seem, we may be pleasing God just as much one time as another. Feelings and faith do not always correspond in any way we can understand.]

Introduction:

[This is the "doorkeeper Psalm" to which we often refer when someone opens the door for us. But it has a deeper significance than that:]

The Psalmist is 'away.' Very evidently he misses the place of worship. And he interprets his longing, correctly, as a longing after God.

Often when we have a craving, or a deep longing— when we "cry out" for something, we don't quite know what— that "something" is really Someone! OUR HEARTS ARE MADE FOR GOD!

Can that desire for God ever really be met? What does this great promise mean?
"Sun, shield ... grace glory ..."

Just how literally may we take these words? And WHEN do these words apply? Are they for "happy" days or for "homesick" days?

The question is, does it really PAY to serve God? Are Christians "blessed" above others?

I. THERE IS MYSTERY INVOLVED IN GOD'S 'BLESSINGS'

A. God will never be manipulated.

We can never push God into a simple "cause-and-effect relationship" in order to make Him do what we think ought to be done. We can never simply use the promises of God to accomplish our own desires and selfish schemes. If you can do that, then your God is too small!

Yes— there ARE promises— promises that if we pray, then God will hear and answer. There ARE spiritual LAWS.

But God IS! God is GOD! He is unlike all others.

B. God can never be fully understood.

We believe that he is GOOD and that He is HOLY. But we can never be certain we understand why things happen. Remember, the Book of Job is full of very wise sayings that simply ARE NOT TRUE! [You must be careful as you read Job to see who is speaking!]

C. And yet here is the Word: GOD HAS PROMISED HIS BLESSINGS ON THOSE WHO LOVE HIM! What does this mean?

II. THERE IS THE FACT OF STRUGGLE INVOLVED IN ALL HUMAN EXISTENCE

A. If you DON'T know the Lord, you will know pain.

The Bible declares that "The way of the transgressor is hard" (Proverbs 13:15): It does not always seem so, but ultimately

1. Life gives back what is sown (Galatians 6:7), and too, in the end regardless of what we see of outward circumstance,
2. the transgressor is separated from God. And that is the ultimate tragedy, for we are made for God; made to live in His Presence and to know His blessing.

B. If you DO know the Lord, you will (also) know pain.

Even the life of faith means struggle!

1. There is struggle to enter INTO life! Matthew 7:13-14 says: Strait is the gate! It costs to CONFESS! (Confess need of Savior! Confess SIN! Confess helplessness to save self!) It costs to REPENT! (To TURN FROM our own wicked way!) It is never easy! Jesus said: "STRIVE! (Agonizomai!)"
 2. God's way demands FAITH! Fight the good fight of faith! This way demands that we trust God's LOVE and trust His WORD! It demands that we renounce our claims to our self-centered ways!
- C. If you DON'T ... and if you DO! There is PAIN both ways! So— what is the difference?
- There IS a fundamental difference in the 'hardness' or 'difficulty' of life and living with and without the Presence of the Lord God as Savior and Friend!
- GOD, HIMSELF, IS THAT DIFFERENCE! And that difference is what I want to look at now:

III. THE FACT IS: GOD IS INTERESTED IN MAKING HUMAN LIVES THE VERY BEST THEY CAN BE!

"No good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly!" Where men and women will permit Him, God works His best will:

A. GOD'S WAY BRINGS

1. Free forgiveness for all our sins!
2. Life changing purpose: we become partners with God in His work of Creation and Salvation.
3. Genuine meaning and satisfaction: our lives can make an eternal difference!

B. (Our text tells us:) GOD IS A SUN AND SHIELD

(Romans 8:28 "In all things God works— for them that love God.) God will and DOES give grace and glory! God is in the 'construction business.' "I will MAKE you!" God takes great delight in making people like His Son Jesus.

I John 3:1,2: "Beloved NOW are we the sons/daughters of God ... and it doth not yet appear what we shall be..."

C. (Some 'personal insights:') WHAT MAKES LIFE RICHEST OF ALL? [When we realize (or re-realize:)]

1. THE PRESENCE OF JESUS!

Jesus is present with all believers. And He is now present with you/me. But from time to time we get this insight, this assurance: WE HAVE CONTACT WITH A VERY PRESENT FRIEND! THAT is worth everything!

2. THE LOVE/TRUST OF JESUS!

He loves US; we love HIM. We are brought into Christ's company ... fellowship ... salvation .. or whatever we call it ... by loving Him the best we can!

And as poor as our love may be, Jesus appreciates it and He refines it! Jesus loves US! Jesus loves ME! Jesus loves YOU!

D. This is NOT mysticism! IT IS THE SCRIPTURAL 'NORM' OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE SAVED! We must have a know-so contact with God!

1. We dare not throw away the old formula: Saved by faith. Confess. Believe.
2. But all the same we cannot coldly pursue a 'matter-of-fact' salvation, trusting in "the facts of truth" apart from an utterly sincere, open, friendship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion:

Does it PAY to serve Jesus?

Can this "craving after God" ever be filled?

The answer is: YES!

God does not promise to remove the tensions of life. He does NOT guarantee that we shall be free from pain. To be human is to suffer,

But to LOVE and to serve the Lord is to come to know Him, to know His Presence, to share His love.

BUT "HOW?"

(Verse 5!) The Psalmist says: I want MY HEART to be the HIGHWAY TO ZION!

1. Our hearts' deepest cravings are for God!
2. As we invite Him, He comes with His LOVE! He comes with His TRUST and LIFE PURPOSE! He comes with His ASSURANCE OF SALVATION!

All this PLUS:

The one dimension that is the most important of all is the eternal view! This seems so worthless to modern minds that it has even influenced to some extent the thinking IN the church— the importance of the long-term view!

It does pay to serve Jesus right NOW! Right HERE! But it will be paying one hundred years from today ... and one thousand years from right now, as well!

Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father,

We have all experienced the deep longing of our hearts after love and peace and joy!
We know those cravings are for YOU!

Please make our hearts "highways to Zion!" Come with your Presence and make us all that You have in mind for us to be!

You have said: "No good thing You will withhold!" So, help us to serve You because we LOVE You! And You work in us as you will!

In Jesus' name, AMEN. #70 *It Is Well with My Soul*

Peter and Cornelius

July 2, 1989

Galatians 2:9-21, Acts 10:1-16

Purpose:

(1) To appreciate the great grace of our Lord, Who extends His mercy to all those who seek His face; and (2) to get to know and appreciate St. Peter as a very human, very great man of God.

Introduction:

What sort of man do you envision when you think of the great Apostle Peter? Do you think "impetuous" or "forward" or "talkative"? These are the stereotypes.

I am not certain that we grasp the scope and power of this man whom Jesus chose, and who was the acknowledged leader of the early church. I am not sure that we understand this man very well, who, along with St. Paul, was one of the two great heroes of the Book of Acts.

Peter was the undisputed leader of the Jerusalem believers; he was powerful in his persuasive speaking; he was powerful in his dealings with believers and unbelievers. Peter was such a man of God that people followed him around, and tried to get lame and halt people into his shadow, believing that his shadow brought healing.

I. PETER VERY MUCH A KOSHER JEW

Peter was comfortable with keeping many rules

Peter had never read Romans or Galatians. They had not yet been written, even though the truth in them is eternal. The early church was still feeling its way.

Peter knew that Life was a free gift of God in Christ. But Peter had been raised a strict Jew. Never in his life had he ever tasted pork; never had he ever had any social dealings with Gentiles. Peter knew that Israel was favored of God; and perhaps in his

mind he thought that Jesus had come as a Jewish Messiah to set up a Jewish kingdom.

Years later this upbringing was still very much with Peter— as we read in Galatians 2, where Paul says that Peter had grown comfortable in the freedom from legalism that real salvation brings- but when some of his old Jewish friends came from Jerusalem to Antioch, where Peter had been eating with Gentiles (as well he should!) Peter reverted to his old, comfortable ways!

This is not to criticize Peter. I can identify with him in many respects.

Peter's heart and mind were 'stretched' by God's LOVE

We get some insight into just how great a man, how great a servant of God that Peter was by the fact that, given his background, he was still the instrument of God's choice to bring the Good News to Cornelius.

Here we see Peter dealing with a man with whom he had very little in common— at least so far as we might think.

We might think God would rather choose a "Luke" or at least a cosmopolitan Paul to witness to a professional soldier Gentile. But God's ways are beyond our understanding.

[Illus: I cannot help but think of Jack White, from Indiana, and the "Jesus Revival" at New Milford— totally incongruous from our understanding and perspective.]

(Transition: "But there are two men in this story in Acts 10...")

II. CORNELIUS .. A GOOD MAN SEEKING AFTER GOD

Does God ever answer the prayers of a "non-Christian?"

A professional soldier ... hardly where we would expect to find a gentle man. Yet here was a devout man, a man who prayed. Here was a man who gave to others. Yet he was not saved.

MY answer: God does what HE wants to do!

Cornelius was SEEKING AFTER GOD! How many are doing just that?

Does God answer the prayers of a non-Christian? Does God love non-Christians? DO WE? [One of the moving moments of General Assembly was the introduction of a District Superintendent who happened to be a South American Indian (from a tribe very similar to the Agauruna head hunters.) Head of one of the church's largest districts.

As a completely unlettered pagan he "saw" a man all in glowing, gleaming robes who appeared in his hut (dirt floor, grass roof, and all) and spoke to him about a Book and about finding a man who could get HIS name written there. This Indian man came to Larry Garman ...

WHY DON'T WE HAVE SUCH VISIONS? Do we walk in all the light we have? I JOHN 1:9

I believe

1. God will honor those who SEEK Him.
2. There are people LOOKING after God that God will guide US to if we are prepared— if we pray— of we are FILLED with the Spirit.

(Philip— taken to the Ethiopian eunuch)

III. GOD ANSWERED THE PRAYERS OF A PAGAN BY SENDING PETER

Peter had a viable prayer life

1. If we ever are used of God in any significant way we, too, will have to be people of prayer; available to God; in "right relationship" with Him.
2. Peter was "wrong" in his thinking— but God gently talked with him about his prejudice. [In the "discussion/argument" Peter was on the side of law and order— God was on the side of love and redemption.]
3. Peter was CERTAIN of His relationship to God in Christ. And that certainty never left him. But Peter was also "certain" of a lot of other things. Certain that HIS rightness had to do with his keeping of kosher law... certain that the chosen people were the nucleus of the church.

4. And Peter came aware of the heuristic quality of genuine faith! Peter was open to the Lord's leading

He was uncomfortable with change. He had a pure heart— that was filled with prejudice And yet PETER WAS OBEDIENT TO THE SPIRIT

5. Peter walked in the light ... and Peter reaped a great harvest! (10:44)

Conclusion:

1. Aren't you glad that Peter was open to God's Spirit? Aren't you happy that we are saved by FREE GRACE, and not by the keeping of kosher laws?
2. But wait a minute— are WE (you and I) AVAILABLE to God, even as Peter was? EVEN WHEN IT STRETCHES US AND CAUSES US GROWING PAINS [Illus: At General Assembly the entire Church Growth Convention heard Jim Couchenour tell of his dealings in a saloon in Columbiana, Ohio.]
3. And there are still many, many Cornelius-type people out there praying as best they can: "Oh, God! Send someone my way to show me how I can know You in a personal, satisfying, sin-forgiving, heart-cleansing way!"

Are YOU (am I) available if God should need someone to tell them?

PRAYER: (For a faith that stretches us— to be more like YOU!)

EH 47 God of Grace/Glory or EH 52 Ye Servants of God

Called to Good News

July 16, 1989 AM

Romans 1:5 "... we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for His name's sake"

Romans 16:25-27 Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.

People want to KNOW God and they CAN know Him

[People desperately want to make contact with God! AND THEY HATE RELIGIOUS FAKERY. Yet, when they think there is a chance that God will "materialize," or be visible; when they believe there has been an authentic miracle, people will spend money, take time, make pilgrimages. 'WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE SHROUD OF TURIN?' At best an aid; never can be a central "proof."

It is a cry of our heart! We want to know!]

Paul says he KNOWS! He has been CALLED! And his call involves telling people God is calling THEM, too!

As we read the opening sentences of Romans, our attention is drawn to the word "called." Paul as he writes testifies that he is called. Paul has had contact with God! And he in the same breath says his call involves letting us know that we, too, are called of God. If we will LISTEN God is calling!

A KEY to KNOWING: Link of "obedience" and "faith:"

What does this mean? Is God literally "calling" every person?

What is faith? Is it believing what dad and mom told me? Is it saying "my church must be right"? Is it hearing the call? Is it answering a call that is already heard?

Is "obeying" faith? Or is "faith" obeying? Or is there any connection at all? Is the call simply a matter of informing us of the facts of God?

THERE IS CONTACT FOR YOU!

You can make contact with God! You can know that He is in your life. And you do not have to make a pilgrimage. But when a man or woman comes to know God in reality, he or she must come to God on HIS terms! And while you don't need to go on a pilgrimage*, you do have to desire God! You'll never know spiritual reality until it is important to you! ((*Let's go to the Holy Land again!!))

I. THE TESTIMONY OF PAUL TO BEING CALLED

- A. Paul was a religious person before he was converted. He desperately wanted to "make contact with God." He wanted to "matter" in religious things; he wanted "reality." Later Paul's testimony was: "I was zealous, I thought I was doing a good thing in opposing what I saw as a "sect" that contradicted the old way of salvation by works of the Law.
- B. God made contact with Paul. He "called" him. It was a forceful call; there was no doubt in Paul's mind that God wanted him. The details of this call are in Acts 9, and repeated in Acts 26:18.
- C. But also there was the element of choice in that call: Once Paul knew it was God, Paul had to make a choice! And in the very next verse (Acts 26:19) Paul says (26:19): "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision!" I said "Yes" to the heavenly call! ["Obedience" is linked with "faith." It is what validates the call, and releases the reality of God into our lives.]

II. PAUL'S CALL WAS TO BE A GOSPEL MESSENGER: TO CALL OTHER PEOPLE!

PAUL'S CALL IS YOUR CALL!

A. A PERSONAL CALL

Set apart to the "good news." The "gospel" is the truth about God's LOVE in Jesus Christ: [John 3:16 made personal!] God still makes the Gospel personal! (My own testimony; Bill Wagner & Charles Stanley on TV. etc.)

B. A RESPONSIBLE CALL

This message of "good news" demands a response, even as Paul had to choose, of whether or not to OBEY! "Faith" involves "the obedience that comes from faith" or, "The obedience that brings faith??"

C. A UNIVERSAL CALL

That "call" extends to you! To me! God wants US to know Him! That is what the New Testament is all about! That is what the true CHURCH exists for! God wants us to hear His call, and respond to HIM!

D. A CALL OF JESUS HIMSELF

(1:6 "The called of Jesus Christ") Paul says, "This call is not PAUL'S call— (I am just the messenger)— It is a call of Jesus Christ; it is a call to Jesus Christ:

1. Here is our call to spiritual reality. If we will heed the gospel- give God our attention— we do not need to go on a pilgrimage, or find a super-gifted leader. Jesus can make Himself known to each of us!
2. But it is both a call to Allegiance and, ultimately, to Ownership. One step beyond the "surrender" or even the "joining with" is the deliberate decision to "belong TO!"

E. A LOVING CALL

It is a call of LOVE! (Verse 7 "beloved of God in Rome") Be certain, God doesn't have any unwanted children! God loves you! And that is why He calls you!

F. AN AMAZING CALL TO SAINTHOOD!

It is a call to (are you ready for this?) sainthood! What is a saint? One who is super-spiritual? Isn't a saint who has 'one of those 'things' around his head? ...and where he walks things grow?

No— one who regularly walks and talks with God because he or she loves God! Saints are friends of God!

Conclusion:

People desperately want reality in their dealings with God! THEY'RE WILLING TO DO 'SPECTACULAR THINGS' TO FIND 'REALITY!'

But our ideas of reality runs to our five "senses" and God has ordained that we move into the realm of HIS reality, the realm of TRUTH and of LOVE and INTEGRITY. We all must live and walk by the FAITH that His grace enables.

[And faith is always linked to obedience; and obedience to faith. (see 1:5 again, and 16:25-27)] Remember this connection between "faith" and "obedience." We cannot wait to understand and explain everything before we begin to follow God. We do not need to obey if we are not convinced it is God that is speaking, calling to us. But when we DO know in our hearts "This is GOD!" then we obey unto faith, or we draw back into uncertainty and defeat.

Exhortation:

1. STAY IN TUNE PRAYER LIFE IS A KEY:

"Pray through" each day ... an admonition I took to mean "get blessed" (feel happy, religious.) But "pray through" means to get "in tune" ... has to do with obedience and trust: and with this confidence comes the assurance—"I'm where God wants me to be!"

2. TRY TO SERVE FROM LOVE

Seeking after "reality" may not satisfy as much as seeking after God's will and seeking to be of service. (Our team that went to Scotland went to serve, but they found God's LOVE!)

3. TRUST GOD'S WORD ... BUT THERE WILL BE DIFFERENT LEVELS OF ASSURANCE! TRUST YOUR HIGH MOMENTS!!

Reality comes on different "levels" as we walk by faith. But from time to time there comes great reinforcing assurance!

[Dr. Greathouse, after being elected General Superintendent, in his kitchen early the next morning; In "Canastota?" on my way to ENC (1949) I discovered Isaiah 41:10; in my study in Edison, unsolicited: I knew I was saved!]

You don't have to travel to France or the Holy Land! Somewhere along the pathway of obedience the assurance of faith will come! Along the pathway of obedience God gives His gift of the knowledge of His Presence!

Paul says: I've been CALLED! No question! I've been called to tell you that GOD IS CALLING YOU! He wants you to belong to Jesus! And He wants you to be a saint!

Prayer: O Jesus, Be Thyself to me a Living, Bright, REALITY!

#42 Close to Thee

The Way of Hope

July 16, 1989 PM

Psalm 130

(1) Out of the depths I have cried unto Thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let Thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. (2) If Thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? (3) But there is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared. (4) I wait for the LORD, my soul does wait, and in His word do I hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than the watchmen for the morning; indeed, more than the watchmen for the morning. (5) O Israel, hope in the Lord; for with the Lord there is lovingkindness, and with Him is abundant redemption. And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

This Psalm speaks about hope. It was sung on the way to Jerusalem. And it speaks of seeking God, and of calling out to Him even when it is a struggle.

The Psalm has five natural sections, as I read it, for us to consider:

I. THE HELPLESSNESS OF MAN'S EXTREMITY

The very best I can do is not enough to bring me to God, or to "force" God to satisfy my felt needs. It is a victory when I realize this, and I cannot really begin the journey to hope until I acknowledge my helplessness. There are many different kinds of things that make people cry out to God.

Jeanine Van Beek cried out to God because of the horror and injustice of the Nazis in her native Holland, during WWII. As a girl of 15 she went to her room and cried out to God— and God met with her in a faith-kindling way, even though she had no adult encouragement.

The Peruvian Indian I mentioned before, now a church leader, was met in his primitive house by a shining being who spoke to him about a Book of Life.

Lewis Smedes tells of a black man, the son of a prostitute and a white travelling salesman; a man whose mother was so violent at times that he became a hobo at eleven years of age, and finally found himself in a black hole of solitary confinement in a Texas prison. As he began to crack mentally and emotional he cried out loud: "Help me!" And a voice said to him, "You are not an animal!"

And in the 9th of Acts is the story of Paul, who did all he could do to be the best he could be in his fundamental mindset in his own religion, who sought through sheer zeal to prove that he was right. But Paul was struck down by the arresting Holy Spirit until in anguish he cried out: "What would you have me to do?"

II. THE WAY OF HOPE LIES THROUGH THE DOOR OF CONFESSION AND OPENNESS BEFORE GOD

"If Thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities NO ONE could stand!" The Psalmist is saying, "My sins can and will separate me from the hope of knowing God, unless they are dealt with!" There is only ONE thing that can permanently separate you from God and hope! And that one thing is refusing to face your own sins, and refusing to let God deal with your sins! It is not the fact that we are sinners that keeps us from God. Every one of us has sinned, and do not deserve His love. But what keeps us from hope is refusing to acknowledge our sins! The only sin God cannot forgive is the sin we refuse to confess.

III. GOD IS A GOD OF FORGIVENESS AND GRACE

"But there is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared!"

- A. It is not always sin that causes our life crises! We need to know that, and understand it. But we need to "clear the decks" and know that we are open and above-board with God! Grace is a New Testament word, perhaps. But the Psalmist knows that God is love! He says, "If you held my sins against me, I could not stand! But there is forgiveness with You!"

God has promised to meet the sinner. God has promised to support His children.

In Old Testament times God had made provision for sacrifices, which, while not very satisfying perhaps, pointed forward to the Perfect Sacrifice that was to come. This provision, and the Day of Atonement and the Passover taught the people that while sin was serious, and while it brought a great sense of separation, there was atonement for sin!

But now we know that the place where God meets the sinner is called Calvary! The place where God's hatred for sin, and His justice, and His great love for each one of us is at the Cross of Jesus Christ!

But we must be convinced, convicted in a personal way of this truth. It sounds like a story that is too good to be true! we think, "There IS forgiveness with Thee! But can you forgive ME?"

And He CAN!

- B. And when we have sought God for our sin, we can be certain that we can also seek Him succor for our sorrows and our burdens! And we seek Him with His own gift to us: F A I T H !

IV. TO PERSONALLY EXPERIENCE GOD'S GRACE WE MUST EMPLOY GOD'S GIFT OF PERSONAL FAITH

The Psalmist says (1) I have cried to you from my extremity! (2) I have begun to grasp the fact that You care about sinners, and that You forgive them. (3) So now I will begin to cast myself on Your Word. I will begin to trust Your mercy, Your revealed grace!

Once again a key word (that we have heard a lot lately :) "Wait!" "I wait for the Lord, my soul does wait."

I wait, not because God wants me to jump through hoops and over hurdles to be saved. And certainly not until I get "good enough" or earn or merit, or come to the place where I am sad enough or have wept enough tears.

But I wait because there is a reality to this salvation that we dare not miss! We dare not accept someone's pale version of the genuine article. We dare not PRESUME that

because we have a reasonably accurate understanding of the plan of salvation, and have acknowledged the mere FACT that we are sinners, that the "facts" or the "truth" will save me. No! We must be certain that we meet with God Himself! We must be certain that we have heard His word of pardon!

HOW MAY I FIND CERTITUDE? HOW DO I KNOW GOD HAS HEARD? Sometimes this step of personal faith is straightforward, and rather businesslike. Sometimes it is very emotional. Sometimes there is a need to take hold and hang on "by naked faith"- particularly among the children of the church, it seems.

But the important thing in this seeking is— it must be OUR OWN faith! And it must find God's reality. And always there is the element of obedience, or a willingness to walk in revealed light! That's a key!

V. THERE IS ASSURANCE!

Verses 7,8 — although to the day we meet Jesus our faith will be tested ... and we must walk by faith, and not by sight ... and we will need the encouragement of the people of God, and the strength of the means of grace—

There is assurance in the matter of our soul's salvation: We can know that our sins are forgiven! Don't settle for second-hand assurance here!

There can be God's assurance even IN our trials, too! I believe that we can have God's assurance at the time we need it most.

In Acts 27 Paul is a prisoner, with a group of prisoners on a voyage in first one ship and then another on his way to Rome. When the centurion and the captain of the vessel determined to sail on from Crete, even though it was the dangerous hurricane season, Paul spoke up in warning (27:10.) But his warnings were not heeded, and there was nothing, as a prisoner, that he could do about it. And sure enough they ran into a storm which ultimately destroyed the vessel and threatened all their lives.

Then in the darkest hour of despair it was Paul, the prisoner, who "took charge!" He spoke to the assembled passengers and crew (and there were 276 of them!) with great peace and confidence. And these were his words:

"This very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and who I serve stood by me, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.'

"Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God, that it will turn out exactly as I have been told. ... "

Conclusion: Let's look at that Psalm again:

(1) Out of the depths I have cried unto Thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let Thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. (2) If Thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? (3) But there is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared. (4) I wait for the LORD, my soul does wait, and in His word do I hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than the watchmen for the morning; indeed, more than the watchmen for the morning. (5) O Israel, hope in the Lord; for with the Lord there is lovingkindness, and with Him is abundant redemption. And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

And let's pray:

43 WS O Master, Let Me Walk

The Joshua Challenge

August 20, 1989

Joshua 1

The death of Moses was a great trauma for Israel. His name was synonymous with deliverance. He spoke face to face with God. He brought down the Ten Commandments. He was a one man National Resource. He was full of life force one day— and he was gone the next!

Moses' death was also a personal shock to Joshua. Joshua had been a loyal follower. He had taken orders and obeyed them faithfully. Now he knew that things would never be the same again. The future loomed threatening and uncertain.

And it was in this fearful time of transition that God spoke to Joshua. God challenged Joshua, and promised him prosperity and success. But from the first word there was no question: this success must be on God's terms. It was to require both faith and courage!

God said: Moses my servant is dead. He stated the obvious. Joshua had to face the facts as they were. It was the end of an era. His life and the life of his people had already changed. The restrictions of listening to Moses and obeying his orders were forever lifted. But so was the security of leaving the responsibility of final choices to Moses.

Moses had shown to Joshua, and to all Israel, the power and grace and salvation of God. Moses had obeyed God. He had marched into Egypt to confront the Pharaoh. He had instituted Passover. He had parted the Red Sea. He had led his people for forty years.

Moses' very life spoke of God's grace and power in deliverance. Moses' message was "being saved from!"

Most of us have some Moses-type influence in our lives. We have had authority that has taught us of God's grace and love. We have learned of the Blood of the

The Joshua Challenge

Everlasting Covenant and of deliverance from sin. Parents, the church, teachers, leaders— all have shown us the truth and lessons of faith. Thank God for our own Moseses!

But now for Joshua and Israel the limits of Moses' leadership had arrived. Moses was dead. And now came a new challenge! It was a challenge to find the rest of God's will, beyond being saved From.

God's plan from the very first was to deliver from Egyptian bondage, and bring His people into the land of promise. From the very beginning God had a destination as well as a destiny in mind for the people that bore His Name.

Forty years wandering the wilderness trails had not been God's first choice. Moses went to the mountain (Pisgah) and viewed the Promised Land from a distance, and then he died. And then God called Joshua to leave the wilderness and cross over the Jordan into new and exciting territory.

God said: "Now therefore arise, cross this Jordan!"

"Deliverance" is never quite enough! Getting out of prison is wonderful— but now there is valid work to do! Joshua hears God calling him to go beyond the bounds of what the great man, Moses, has been able to do!

Every generation is called on to break molds and exceed models, even of good and godly fathers and mothers. Every generation needs to reverently stand on the shoulders of all that is good that has gone before.

God said: "Every place on which the sole of your foot treads I have given it you ... (and) no man will be able to stand before you." God seems to be given to extravagant promises, like: "If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you." (John 15:7) Or, here, "Every place you tread on will be yours!"

Walter Brueggeman says that a key question in the Christian faith is found in Genesis 18:14 "Is anything too hard for God?"

Of course there are dangers in taking God's promises seriously, in two directions at least:

We can over-simplify what we read, and perhaps even identify OUR will and our perspective of the situation with God's. Again Brueggeman says: "Faith does NOT make every desirable thing possible; not everything IS promised. What IS possible is characterized only as everything promised by God. That is, only what corresponds to God's good purpose is possible. He has promised a future in a new community, but not everything we would seek." [1]

We need to remember that Jesus prayed: "If it be possible..." then He ended His prayer as we always must: "Nevertheless, not My will but Thine be done!"

Another way we can mis-use God's promises is to over-spiritualize them, until they do not "connect" with the real world of blood, sweat, and tears at all. We can explain away all God's promises until we accept some level of mediocrity as the normal way God intends for us to live here and now, on earth.

God wills that every believer, like Joshua, shall not only be saved from sin, and guilt, and the scars of the past, but saved to a measure of love, joy, peace, and all the other manifestations of the fruit of the Spirit! God not only wants us "out of Egypt," He wants us "into Canaan, the Promised Land!" And that, in God's promise, is success!

God said: "Be careful to do according to all the law which Moses my servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go."

Seems a contradiction: Moses is dead! But still keep the rules!

But God is not saying "Keep the rules!" Rather He is saying, "Submit to Divine Authority! Walk humbly before ME!" There is no success, as God measures success, without obedience to His will.

God says: "Be strong and courageous! Only be strong and very courageous! Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous!"

The Joshua Challenge

This is not Disney World. The crocodiles are REAL! A man can get KILLED here! Disobey— and you will certainly suffer! The need for courage is very real, or God would not have repeated Himself again and again!

God said: "Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord you God is with you wherever you go."

This is a familiar theme, and here we are again at the heart of what faith is all about: a personal walk with God. It is the open secret of the ages. God loves YOU, and wants you to love Him and walk with Him.

The Joshua challenge is our challenge, too!

[1] Footnote needed here with the book name, etc., of Walter Brueggeman; will be looking for it...

From Many One

September 17, 1989 AM

Ephesians 4:4-7 There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

INTRODUCTION

The profound message of this chapter [maturity in Christ] begins with the importance of UNITY. Christians are to understand that they have important things in common with all other Christians. Jesus prayed that we might be ONE. It is written on the top of our worship folder: ONE Lord, ONE Faith, ONE Baptism.

But 'lesson two' lets us know that UNITY and UNIFORMITY are not one and the same thing. Even if suddenly, somehow, all genuine Christians were to achieve the ideal of perfect love for all other Christians [which obviously we have not] WE STILL WOULD NOT ALL BE ALIKE!

[I am not sure just how this fits in here, but] THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN ALL GOD'S CREATION IS PERSONALITY. And God has certainly got Himself a VARIETY of characters, doesn't He!

And the amazing thing about it is, God loves ME! God loves YOU! Just as you are—He sees something so very precious that He wants to perfect it and preserve it and develop it through all eternity.

So the first thought today is

I. GOD LOVES VARIETY IN HIS ONE GREAT CHURCH

A. I would like to read a companion passage (from I Corinthians 12:4-14:)

"Now there are VARIETIES of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are VARIETIES of ministries, and the same Lord. And there are VARIETIES of effects (results?), but the same God who works all things in all persons.

"But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues.

"But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills."

- B. God has as many different gifts of grace as there are people. In God's SOVEREIGNTY He wills your very best, and mine!
Still—

II. GOD INCLUDES EVERYONE IN HIS GREAT PLAN

(text)" to each one..." (& I Corinthians 12:14"to each one ..")

- A. WE ARE CALLED [We do not need to worry about being excluded.]

"Am I really 'called'?" Am I among the chosen? [We have all— well MOST of us— had the experience of being the last to be chosen for "sides."] YES YOU ARE CALLED! YOU ARE CHOSEN!

- B. WE ARE CALLED ON GOD'S TERMS [A call to COVENANT]

We DO need to COVENANT with God. We DO need to begin to grasp THE COMMON MISSION.

- C. WE ARE CALLED TO FULL MATURITY

But every one of us is DIFFERENT! And GOD says: GOOD!

We speak of "gifts"- properly- and yet—

III. GOD HAS BUT ONE GREAT GIFT

A. [It is true that God has many, different GIFTS; and leaves out not one of His children; and]

ALL GIFTS RADIATE FROM GOD from I Corinthians:

Variety of GIFTS: ONE SPIRIT. Variety of MINISTRIES: ONE LORD. Variety of EFFECTS: ONE GOD AND FATHER.

This has to do with our individual development, and our place within the Body of Christ. There is a place for each of us. And if we will seek to "fit in" we can bless and help each other, and do God's best will!

In this local church we have an opportunity to demonstrate the truth that UNITY does not mean UNIFORMITY.

Sometimes I hear you say that "'YOU" don't fit into this "BIG CHURCH.'" [Come on, get perspective. "Big" is very relative. But perhaps YOU are exactly what is needed: as we all submit to the Master Craftsman, He is meting out grace to make us EFFECTIVE in His kingdom.]

B. But there is ONE GREAT GIFT

The text does NOT say giftS; rather it says "grace was given according to the measure of CHRIST'S GIFT(singular!)"

1. It is CHRIST'S Gift: GRACE: [What a beautiful word!] Undeserved love.

Unmerited favor. God loves the GOOD people. But NO one is GOOD. No one can get near God, because our hands are filthy, and we can't wash them. Our hearts are foul and we can't make them clean.

We admire Mother Teresa for going among the smells of death in Calcutta. But what do you think WE smell like to God? We smell of death itself!

CHRIST died for us! GOD COMES AMONG US. He doesn't enjoy the filth, the odor. He does, somehow, genuinely care about US!]

2. It is Christ's GIFT: GRACE: A word about Christ's GIFT

It is LIFE. It is RECEIVED and not earned. There is no reason to brag or be "superior" because we have this Gift.

Christ DIED for us! Jesus paid it all. There is nothing we can ever do to repay Him. But we may take His GIFT!.

3. GOD'S GIFT, AND HIS GIFTS, ARE FOR YOU

(text:) "to EACH ONE OF US grace was given..."

God apportions grace to each person. God loves each person. We do not see people as equally worthy of love. But the Bible says that God does not just see us as we are, in our rebellion, but that "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us!"

Christ died FOR US!

CONCLUSION

You have to be ALIVE in order to MATURE

A. GOD IS CALLING YOU TO FULL MATURITY IN HIM

It is exciting to be part of God's Plan; to be an important co-laborer with God in His work of Creation and Redemption. It is pretty exciting to realize that God has a great diversity of gifts, and that He apportions them to each one of us in a unique way. Each of us within the Body of Christ has special grace apportioned to us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

But the first GIFT is LIFE itself!

B. BUT BEFORE WE CAN GROW AND MATURE WE MUST BE ALIVE!

The GREAT Gift is Life itself!

And there may be those here today who are not sure in their hearts that they have ever really received THE Gift!

This Gift is a PERSONAL COVENANT WITH GOD. It is more than just trusting in the fact that we were baptized somewhere, sometime.

It is more than living all one's life in church— even in the Church of the Nazarene. It is more than studying the Bible, important as that is!

The fact is: RECEIVING THE GIFT OF CHRIST, OF LIFE MEANS EITHER YOU HAVE- OR YOU HAVE NOT!

C. AFFIRM YOUR COVENANT WITH GOD THIS MORNING!

We cannot simply begin using our gifts for Jesus unless and until we are "IN GRACE."

God wants YOU more than He wants what you can do! God loves YOU more than He loves what you can bring to Him. God NEEDS YOU to make His family complete! Have YOU received the GIFT OF CHRIST?

It is not too commonly known that the great evangelist, Dwight L. Moody, had an elder brother.

Shortly after their father died, the elder Moody brother left home without word, without a forwarding address, without a word to his widowed mother. Years and years went by, and it was a perpetual grief on the mother's heart. She waited for a letter, but none came.

Years went by, and the mother had grown old and grey. One summer afternoon a sun-burned man came to the village of Northfield, and came up the drive of the Moody home. He knocked at the door, and old Mrs. Moody herself opened the door. She invited the stranger to come in.

But the man held back, and tears of shame started. He said, "No, mother, I can't come in until you forgive me!"

He didn't stand out on the porch for long. Mrs. Moody's mother heart forgave him, and in later years she rejoiced more over her prodigal that had returned than over her other children who had never run away.

From Many One

Jesus never keeps sinners waiting outside the door of His love and grace. The forgiveness of all our sins is the very first GIFT OF GRACE that a penitent heart will know!

GOD IS CALLING EACH OF US TO BE MEN AND WOMEN, TO COVENANT WITH HIM TO BE PART OF HIS BODY.

Ephesians 4:4-7 There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

Prayer:

#202 *And Can I Yet Delay!* (C. Wesley)

Invitation RSVP

September 17, 1989 PM

Matthew 11:28-30 Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me. For I am meek and lowly of heart. And ye shall find rest unto your souls.

INTRODUCTION

The words of our text are just about the most beautiful words in any language.

But they are universally misunderstood or mis-appropriated: as (1) to be an emergency escape in times of trouble only; or, (2) a take-it-or-leave-it viable alternative among many ways to go. Or, (3) it is thought to be unworthy of respect because it seems "cheap." [That's too easy! Just 'Come unto Me!']

[But these are words we all need to hear. And welcome, too, just NOW!]

I. THIS IS NO CHEAP, EASY SOLUTION TO LIFE'S PROBLEMS

- A. Only QUACKS promise "Salvation is the end of your problems!" JESUS doesn't!
As a matter of fact, salvation may INCREASE the number of your problems.
It is neither simple nor easy to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ.
- B. But only Jesus can say these words: (text) "I will give you rest!"
- C. But these words are not meant for us to take lightly, either. We can never simply "Add Jesus!" and find instant relief! JESUS IS NOT LIFE'S ROLAID!

II. THESE WORDS ARE A CALL TO ALLEGIANCE TO A PERSON

Jesus said: "Come unto ME!"

- A. It is not a call to blind allegiance to a system or to a human organization. I hope you trust me, and love my church, but you cannot come to Jesus simply on the authority of MY say-so. I want to help you, and be a faithful messenger. But the call is to JESUS!

- B. How may we know the 'real Jesus?' So many versions are being marketed. So many "ways" being thought of as "the" way!
1. I must know personally, for myself! I can and may invite Jesus into my life to teach me by His Holy Spirit. Mentors and teachers and helpers are fine. But when I cannot move except for a discipler, I am in deep trouble! Jesus is capable of setting me free to follow HIM!
 2. I will know Jesus for myself through the Word. Jesus never contradicts the written word.
 3. I must have the witness of the Spirit within. This is NOT some outward sign, or some universal stamp. It IS an inner persuasion: we dare not be satisfied until we KNOW we have HIM in our inmost being to live!
- C. Only this personal faith in JESUS will survive! "Orthodox" Christians, even by-the-book Nazarenes without HIM will be sadly disappointed. Every life not built on Jesus will crumble and disappear.
- D. No mere nominal profession will do. No lip-service will 'cut it.' Appearances will not make it with God. Jesus can never ever be a 'minor part' of life! JESUS IS LORD OF ALL- OR NOT LORD AT ALL!

III. THESE WORDS ARE A CALL TO A YOKE

- A. "Rest" would seem to be the exact opposite of a "yoke." A yoke is in some ways a form of bondage.

But "no work at all" is NOT what the human soul craves. What we really CRAVE is work that really MEANS SOMETHING! Real REST is finding satisfaction and accomplishment in what we do.

[I heard Dr. Mann say many years ago "I haven't WORKED in 30 years!" Now many of us had seen him put in hours and days and miles; had seen him very tired in the work of the college he served and loved. But what he meant was clear: he LOVED what he was doing!]

- B. "Rest" means we are free from bondage to sin. We may be "bound" but it is by cords of LOVE! We are doing what we WANT to do!

- C. Being "yoked" with Jesus puts us in harmony with all that is GOOD and RIGHT and CREATIVE in the Universe that He made!

IV. THESE WORDS ARE A CALL TO THE HUMILITY OF LEARNING

Jesus said: "LEARN of Me!"

- A. Our testimonies sometimes seem to imply: "God is really LUCKY to have a person like ME!" We also say: "I found the Lord!" Which is something like falling out of the boat and saying, "I have FOUND the ocean!"

Our culture has taken a good thing- the need for a healthy self-image- and made an idol of it until humility is something quaint and ancient, something to be despised.

But Jesus said: "Apart from ME, you can do NOTHING!" Until we learn of Jesus we don't REALLY know what life is about!

- B. It is an accepted theme: "Don't be TOO religious!" Emil Brunner said: "The demand to put religion first is religious arrogance."

Well, I agree- sort of. Don't put "religion" first! Don't be always "spiritualizing" everything. But Jesus Christ first? THERE SIMPLY IS NO OTHER WAY!! He wants to have THE word on every aspect of our lives!

Augustine said it: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God! And our souls are restless until they find their rest in Thee!"

Jesus said: "Learn of Me!"

- C. HUMILITY IS THE PRE-REQUISITE FOR LEARNING!

Perhaps I am editorializing here. But I speak of the difference between learning and training, between education and guidance for career. The difference somehow has to do with submission to Truth; a willingness to change, rather than just acquiring knowledge and skills in order to accomplish one's own ends and purposes.

"Learn of Me!"

CONCLUSION

When Jesus began the "exclusive" part of His ministry the Apostle John tells us that people began to leave. Ones, twos, groups simply walked away.

And Jesus turned to His disciples and asked: "Will YOU go away, too?"

Peter spoke up. He always spoke up! And I don't know whether you will let him speak for you or not, but I want you to know he was speaking for me, at least that time! he said: "Master, where shall we go? To whom shall we go? YOU have the words of eternal life!"

"Learn of Me!"

The Peace Corps used to have a saying: "The hardest job you'll ever love!" They said: "Hard work!" "Low pay!" "Long hours!" "The hardest work you'll ever love!"

And people signed up— because they knew that is some small way their lives would make a difference!

Jesus challenges every one of us— old and young. "Live before you die!" "Are you TIRED? Come to Me! I'll give you REST!"

"Come to Me, and share My YOKE! Help Me do My work! LIVE BEFORE YOU DIE!"

"Learn of Me!"

And best of all— as you RESPOND to the Great Invitation, you'll find JESUS WILL BE RIGHT THERE, TOO!

[What do you do when you get a gracious invitation from someone you admire and respect?]

#13 (WS) *O Thou In Whose Presence*

Battle on the Mountain

September 24, 1989 PM

1 Kings 18:21

And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him. But the people did not answer him a word.

What is God saying to His church these stressful days? How can we hear from Him?
[The background for our text is a story:]

It was a brilliant, sunshiny day. There was a cloudless sub-tropical sky. On a flat mountaintop overlooking the sea several thousand people were standing silent, intent, totally engaged in the matter at hand. No one was looking around at the scenery for there was a confrontation going on- a battle!

It was NOT a battle of God versus evil. That is no contest.

And it wasn't really a battle of Elijah versus the false prophets of Baal (although that was very interesting.) But there was a very real battle that day. The battle was in the hearts and minds of God's people. They had never really settled it once and for all for themselves:

1. WHO GOD WAS; and
2. WHO GOD WAS TO THEM!

They knew their sacred stories. They had their doctrines down cold. They knew all about Moses and the Exodus and the pillar of fire and cloud. That was part of their tradition. History. They were proud of that.

But they also knew how their neighbors lived. They didn't want to be behind them in any way. They knew the Canaanites insured the comfort and success of their way of life by the worship of Baal. Somehow along the way God's people had all but forgotten that Jehovah God had promised to be a Father to them.

Now Baal had failed. They were miserable. The drought had lingered. The land had come to ruin. It had come to a showdown.

Elijah called to them: HOW LONG WILL YOU HANG BETWEEN TWO OPINIONS? And they answered Elijah not a word. WHAT A PREGNANT SILENCE!

I. SOME TIME OR ANOTHER WE ARE ALL ON THAT MOUNTAINTOP

The question comes: When are YOU going to decide for yourself about God?

Who IS God? Who is God TO ME?

Our false prophets and empty idols have failed. It is time for God's people to declare their faith.

[URGENTLY, EVEN PASSIONATELY]

II. WE ARE CALLED TO WORSHIP GOD AND REJECT IDOLS

- A. The difference between an IDOL and the true God is: PEOPLE USE IDOLS TO GET WHAT THEY WANT. But the true God IS TOO BIG TO BE USED!

An idol demands sacrifice and promises rewards, but the motivation remains self-centered and self-serving. The true God says: I AM HOLY! I AM JUST! I AM LOVING! AND I WANT YOU TO BE LIKE ME! God, too, demands our sacrifice, and promises eternal life. But the motivation of true worship tends to lift us out of selfishness and into God-serving.

- B. Most of us today are not "into" literal idol worship; we do not have little figures that we worship. But there ARE modern idols that we have to decide once and for all to forsake:
1. Worship of EMOTION. "Gratification now!" We want what we want to make us feel good and we want it now. Religious people want to FEEL GOOD and feel happy NOW! So what is so bad about that? ONLY that when you or I let some emotion dictate how we shall act- when we reject holy discipline and demand immediate everything- we deny the God who IS, and we declare that for us some other, lesser god is calling the turns.

If we FEEL spiritual we are "up." If we FEEL bad we are defeated. Feelings make good servants. Feelings are NOT unimportant. Feelings always mean something. But feelings make horrible masters. We cannot afford to serve them. And we can master them with God's grace and help.

2. Comfort and ease is a dangerous idol. We are so spoiled in our culture that we think it is the blessing of God that we do not have to work hard at anything, especially serving God. But God has not promised us an easy time!
3. The subtle worship of SELF! A MOST DECEPTIVE kind of idol is the worship of our own IDEAS OF WHAT IS RIGHT AND WRONG. We reject AUTHORITY, and we want to be our own God and give our own version of the Ten Commandments.

We have a strange occurrence these days of people who have a "private faith" that permits them to be one thing "in their hearts" and then to live a completely different thing in the marketplace or in public. We want to grow personally. We want to develop and "be somebody." But at the same time there is less and less loyalty to any group or organization, even to a local body of the church of Jesus Christ. The idol of our culture says "If its right for you, do it!"

[Eternity magazine wrote a few years back that Dr. A.W. Pink, a noted author who wrote a lot about the glories and wonder of the local church for the last 30 years of his life worshiped at home because he couldn't find any local church that suited him.]

Regardless of what we think, there are objective truths to be believed and to shape our lives. the Ten Commandments have never been changed to the "Ten Suggestions."

And there is no holiness that is not social holiness.

This MOST INSIDIOUS idol of all says that the good, orthodox, Bible-believing Christian can fail to surrender his or her will AND SIMPLY OBEY GOD WHEN GOD'S CLEAR WILL IS KNOWN.

[We rationalize and explain away every kind of sin and sinful living. We live like the world and do business like the world and entertain ourselves like the world and become almost indistinguishable from the world, and when crunch time comes we wonder why GOD has failed!]

C. The battle is on: God is waiting! Silence prevails!

"How long can you waver?" asks the prophet. We don't have to be smart or powerful or good looking to carry the work of Jesus Christ forward to victory. But we do have to be faithful and obedient!

I'm not arguing for simplistic answers, or saying that it is ever easy to know God's will or easy to be all-out for Him. But I am saying that God's people can settle it once-for-all that they belong to Him, and that HE IS GOD! It will not be a matter of debate every time a decision arises: SHALL I OBEY THIS TIME OR NOT?

CONCLUSION:

Every individual— every generation— has to settle these two questions, the questions God's people had to decide there on that sunny mountaintop.

That day God's people turned back to Him! And God was gracious to them! The drought was broken.

BUT THE BATTLEGROUND IS STILL THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF GOD'S PEOPLE:

1. WHO IS GOD? and
2. WHO IS GOD TO YOU?

Don't make any mistake about it: God is going to win!

But who is God to YOU?

Not just "Whom do you 'believe God to be?"

Nor even "Whom do you INTEND to follow?"

Sooner or later you will have to settle the question once for all! I challenge you to settle the question NOW! By a decisive act of your will, as the Holy Spirit deals with you, you can say with the people that day a long, long time ago on Mount Carmel.
"THE LORD, HE IS MY GOD!"

And if you want Him to be— if you INVITE Him to be— and are willing to WALK WITH HIM DAILY— he will give you victory and joy and a genuine sense of accomplishment.

He will become the LORD OF YOUR EMOTIONS!

He will be the LORD OF YOUR MIND!

And as you trust Him, He will be the LORD OF YOUR DECISIONS!

What is God saying to His people? What is God saying to the world?

To His people God is saying: Be holy, for I AM holy.

Don't rely on what you know, or how good you are. "Holy" means set apart to Me!
Make certain that you belong to ME!

Don't walk away from me, and I won't leave you! Isaiah 41:10.

To the world God is saying: I love you. I am going to set things right.

God is concerned with the world situation. Either He is God, and in control and overruling, or He is not God at all. We choose to believe with all our hearts and lives that He indeed is God, and that He is OUR God- HE IS GOD TO US!

God is concerned with the wide world— BUT ALSO—

God is concerned with YOU! ! !

Prayer

#14 O God, Our Help in Ages Past

Benediction: I often use a benediction from the last chapter of Hebrews. This morning I want to use it again— but I want to "lead up to it" by reading what comes before; perhaps this is what God is saying to His church today:

Hebrews 13:1-21

Let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body. Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge. Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me. Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever. Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein. We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle. For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp. Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come. By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is

unprofitable for you. Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly. But I beseech you the rather to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner. Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

A Hymn to Christ the King

November 26, 1989

Revelation 4 and 5

Introduction:

We have come to the end of another church year's cycle. Next Sunday we begin the year all over again with Advent, as we look forward with faith and joy to the celebration of the coming of our Lord to this earth.

On the "last Sunday" of the year it is good to set aside a little time to simply reflect on the greatness and the goodness of our God, and to affirm with joy that we believe He is the King of kings, the Almighty, the Sovereign of all existence.

If we try to keep up with "the news" from all parts of the world, and from all areas of society, we might be asked by skeptics, "What does reading dead poetry from an old book have to do with what is really happening?" And that is probably a fair question. We can only speak with conviction about what we believe to be real and important.

But it is precisely because the "news" of our day is (at once) thrilling and threatening that we need to AFFIRM OUR FAITH IN THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD!

Such an affirmation is an affirmation of an already existing personal and corporate faith. It may never convince a skeptic. But it gives great satisfaction to those who know God. [And we may know Him! God reveals Himself to those who seek Him!]

And just such an affirmation is found in the Book of the Revelation, chapters four and five. After John's vision has begun, and he has met the glorified Christ, and after John has received Christ's message to each of the seven churches, then comes a vision of the majesty of heaven, and a glimpse of the Throne of God Himself. Let me read to you at some length from these two chapters:

[From Revelation 4: 1-8. (This is an hymn of praise to God in His eternal mystery.)

A Hymn to Christ the King

[Then 4:9-11 (entire.) (This is an hymn of praise, acknowledging God's creating and sustaining glory.)

[Then, from Revelation 5:1-14. (This is an hymn of praise to God for the great love and condescension He has shown to all mankind. God has spoken to us in His Son; and God has spoken peace and life and salvation!)]

The simple reading of these chapters is the message of the morning, on this "Christ the King" Sunday. But I would like to simply make a few comments on these three basic hymns:

I. A HYMN TO THE MYSTERY OF THE ETERNAL GOD

- A. It is a given: WE CANNOT UNDERSTAND GOD. And we will never "understand" God. The angels in heaven do not "understand" God.
- B. Which is not to say we have a "magic" God— or a God that contradicts logic and truth. He simply goes beyond what we can understand.
- C. We have an holy God who inhabits eternity: "His ways are past finding out." But everything we do discover points to His greatness.

II. A HYMN TO THE MAJESTY OF CREATOR GOD

- A. When I began to study theology in a primitive manner forty years ago we were still using the "cosmological" and "teleological" arguments for "proving" God's existence.

We have since come to realize that God cannot be proved to anyone who refuses to believe. The arguments for God's existence from 'First cause' or from 'the fitness of things' can never really satisfy the longings of a hungry heart, perhaps, but they certainly can and do rejoice the heart of one who already accepts the simple fact of God, and who seeks to know Him better.

[And the burden of the disproof of God is, to my mind, a far greater load than proving that He exists.]

- B. But there is great wonder in the handiwork of God. The heavens and the earth, and all that is in the created Universe declare God's wonder. The heavenly host, as described by St. John, are not backward or reticent to sing His praise. The "real world" does not deny

God's existence. It underscores it!

[Even the creation of ourselves! The Psalmist said: "I am fearfully and wonderfully made!"]

III. A HYMN TO THE MERCY OF A LOVING HEAVENLY FATHER

- A. Perhaps we will always be probing the wonder of God's MYSTERY and His MAJESTY throughout all eternity.
- B. [And that love centers around the GIFT of the Father, the SON, made possible by the HOLY SPIRIT drawing near to us!]

Conclusion:

To my mind, right now is both a thrilling and a frightening time to be alive. It is thrilling, because there are opportunities for service and growth in God's kingdom. It is frightening because much of the "glue" that has held societies together, and much of the "insulation" that has held them apart have disintegrated, and it is very difficult to predict what may happen next.

If God is truly SOVEREIGN, we believe that He can bring about spiritual renewal over the face of this earth. The teachings of our Lord would seem to indicate that the "wheat and tares" would come to harvest time together. And God's Spirit has been moving in powerful ways throughout what we term 'the Third World.' Here in our nation we have many freedoms, but in a strange, de facto way, the outlets of news and information often seem to be mostly controlled by people who seem antagonistic to the message of a Sovereign holy God. Those who speak out about living an evangelistic, aggressive faith are painted as the 'lunatic fringe.' And often, perhaps, we may give good reasons for criticism; we need to be, as Jesus said, wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

But what does this have to do with the end of the year, and "Christ the King" Sunday?

We have lived for more than 40 years in the fear of Communism and nuclear holocaust. We are living to see what appears to be an amazing accommodation to democracy and freedom behind the Iron Curtain, while at the same time our "free

society" is staggering under the weight of greed, and lust, and drugs, and violence until decent people are afraid to walk their streets at night.

[It would be ironic to see the final spiritual renewal and revival of Christian faith surge westward from Korea and northward from Central America and even eastward from Russia itself, before the King of kings returned with judgment and justice and His righteous reign of peace.]

Our part may not seem to be a major part in the drama of faith. But every child of God can be an active player in this vital action. We are not to be coordinated by "the media." We serve a great God, who by His Holy Spirit is able to do with His people what He will! Our main concern, so far as I can understand it, is to be sure that we are HIS people! Available to Him for sacrifice or service!

And we do not have to wait until "eternity" to join the hymns of praise to our great Christ the King. We can join the heavenly chorus which John portrays for us in these chapters:

We can praise God for His greatness! He is THERE!

We can praise God for His condescension! He has MADE us, and we are His!

We can praise Him for His MERCY!

#36 (Exalt Him) *Alleluia! Alleluia!*

Jesus on the Spirit of Advent

December 10, 1989

Luke 21:29

And he told them in a parable: Behold the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they put forth leaves, you see it and know for yourselves that summer is now near. Even so you, too, when you see these things happening, recognize that the kingdom of God is near!

I Thessalonians 5:1-11

Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.

But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation.

For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him.

Therefore, encourage one another, and build up one another, just as you also are doing.

Introduction:

Advent is a wonderful time! But Advent is not simply a time of wonder, but a serious time of expectancy. Advent is a time to look for the hand of God in history, both past, present and future, if we can speak of history that way.

[Did the eternal God really choose a point in linear time as we understand it, and become personally involved in everyday life?]

[Does God ever really "bang in" on the affairs of time?]

[I shudder sometimes to hear someone say so very certainly: "God told me this!" I have had people very certain of what God's will was for me; and God hadn't told me, yet!]

[But at the same time, I pray and ask God to help me through the everyday issues and events of life. I try to maintain a constant inner conversation with Him. Don't you?]

[By the same (paradoxical) simplicity, I (constantly) ask God to intervene in the affairs of people! I believe He hears those prayers— and sometimes He answers them the way I pray them...]

In just how personal a way are we to "be looking for God's hand?" Will God ever invade history in a personal, visible way again?

Do we really dare to believe that He does, and that He WILL?

God's people belong to an eternal truth that has deeper goals than merely holding on for dear life to the status quo or whatever is the best that we know.

Some simple facts about the Second Advent:

I. WE ARE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR ESOTERIC KNOWLEDGE

- A. "But of the times and seasons ye have no need for me to write." Why not? It seems as though I am expected to know something I don't!!

This companion scripture to our text begins with the phrase "times and seasons." It speaks of two ways to look at what we call "time." The words in

Greek are "chronos" and "kairos." We are all familiar with the ideas represented by them both. But sometimes it is important that we separate the two.

"Chronos" means time as we measure it in passing segments we call minutes and hours and days and years. "December" is a chronological division of time.

"Kairos" means "an opportunity" or "a moment or a period when something happens:

2 Corinthians 6:2 "I have heard you in an accepted TIME (kairos): behold NOW is the accepted TIME (kairos)"

Paul is saying that it is not necessary to write to the Thessalonians the details of Christ's Second Coming because nobody knows the time (chronos) and everybody with vision will know the season (kairos) when it gets here!

- B. We are not to worry too much about "end times." But that does not mean we have no responsibility in history!

II. WE ARE TO BE PEOPLE OF HOPE

- A. End times will be shaking times! It may well be that a shaking time is coming even now! Good and bad things are happening, faster and faster.

One thing is certain, according to Jesus and His prophets: Cataclysmic changes are going to occur; men's hearts will fail them for fear. And if our primary concern is to see peace until the end of our days, and then let all hell break loose on our children or their children we will not be prepared when the earth shakes and the firestorm sweeps.

When the frightening times come is it possible that Christians will have a different attitude? How should Christian's attitudes be different from any others?

- B. The SPIRIT makes the difference! Christians should experience and manifest the fruit of the Spirit: Love, Joy and Peace.

What about LOVE? Not just talking about love, but doing something about it! [We cannot all be Mother Teresa— but there are people who are lonely we could visit!

What about JOY? I believe that real JOY is one of the scarcest commodities in all the modern world! There is no shortage of laughter, or humor, or pleasure. But JOY?

If it is true that JOY is the clearest evidence of God's Presence, and that the world for all its laughs doesn't know real joy-- then it stands to reason that we Christians need to be joyful exponents of a clear and sure note of HOPE! The KING is COMING!

What about PEACE? How can we have a sense of peace when we are frightened, too? It was PEACE that appealed to John Wesley when he was seeking assurance and salvation!

The Moravians had a doctrine that differed from ours; it differed finally from the doctrine that Wesley refined and adhered to. But on the ocean voyage from England to Georgia, when a storm threatened the ship and all aboard with death, the German Christians were unafraid. They sang praises to God.

I'm not sure that I would be physically unafraid like that. But I am sure that it was a grasp of God's Sovereignty, a belief that went to the core of their being— there was something that made a life-changing difference in those Moravian Christians.

[Conclusion:]

III. A SIMPLE FORMULA FOR CHRIST'S PEOPLE IN ADVENT

- A. TREASURE THE LIGHT. "You are all children of light! Children of day!" IF we walk in the light, as Jesus is the Light, we have fellowship! In some misguided false assurance of what "grace" means, let us not think it a light thing to walk in less light than is available to

us!

We have almost incredible resources for helping spiritual growth available to us. And at the same time we often act like spiritual pygmies!

- B. DON'T STOP LOVING GOD AND GOD'S PEOPLE! "For God has not destined us to wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live TOGETHER with Him." Live TOGETHER with the risen Lord.

William Johnston, in a book called Christian Mysticism Today (cited by Benson) says:

"I say unhesitatingly that there are three sources of Christian ... experience ["authentic experience: the joy of being "in God's Presence"]:

(1) the Word of God in sacred scripture, (2) the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, and (3) the Word of God in the community called church.

"If you ask for practical advice... I do not advise you to take the plane to Tel Aviv and the bus to the Judean desert. I do not tell you to travel to Cairo and then to Sinai or to the desert south of Alexandria. I do not tell you to sit in the lotus and breathe from your abdomen. All this [HE says] is good, very good, but in the end peripheral. Instead I say:

Listen to the Word! Read the scriptures! Read them again and again with faith and love until the word comes to life within you, penetrating the deepest layers of your unconscious.

Again, celebrate the Eucharist! Break bread with the community! Be present TO the mystery of faith and partake of the bread of life. This will lead you into that rich inner desert of silence and joy where your life lies hidden with Christ in God. This will lead you to say with Paul: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." (Galatians 2:20) This will lead you to cry out with Jesus: "Abba, Father!"

Again, listen to the community. Be part of the community. Get guidance from some representative of the community . . . never get isolated. Never go out [{ALONE}] on a limb. Community!"

- C. We, as God's people, looking for the Second Advent, must seek to build our very lives, and the lives of our families, inasmuch as it is possible, into the living, breathing life of the true church of Jesus Christ. And that church is manifest, imperfectly, but manifest nevertheless, in the local body of blood-washed, born-again believers!

Hear it again: THE WORD! THE SACRAMENTS! THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE CHURCH!

- D. (And, finally, we need to seek to help our brothers and sisters be strong in the Lord. We all can see faults in others. But instead of justifying ourselves on the basis of others' faults, or, instead of simply criticizing, we must encourage and build one another up.

One song we sing almost celebrates what we do NOT know about the mysteries of our faith; one verse particularly speaks about the Second Advent:

"I know not WHEN my Lord may come At night or noonday fair, Nor if I'll walk the vale with Him Or meet Him in the air.

... and that is the way real Christian faith IS! Each verse begins with the mystery and uncertainty with which we as believers must live. "I know not WHY, I know not HOW (twice), I know not WHAT, and I know not WHEN." But the whole point of the song is that it is all right as long as we can genuinely sing the chorus:

But I know WHOM I have believed!

This is a WONDERFUL TIME IN HISTORY to be alive, and to be looking for the great God of History to break in once again! Let us be children of LIGHT, children of the ADVENT! Prayer: Lord, I believe what I am preaching today. But help me not just to say words, but to know You, and to live in Your Presence, I pray. Amen

#449 I Know Whom I have believed

The Week after Christmas

December 31, 1989

John 1:12

Galatians 4:1-8

What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were children we were in slavery to under the basic principles of the world. But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

The day after Christmas we sat down for dinner. The Advent Candles were lit, and after the meal we started to read and have a word of prayer. The smallest member of the family present was quick to inform us that "Christmas was over!" We didn't need to carry on with the candles any longer.

And Christmas IS gone for most people, I suppose. But for us Christians?

You have to admit, whatever your religious faith, that Christmas has a powerful effect on most people. It is a curious blend of private and public traditions entwined with a supernatural story that (probably) most people regard as largely myth.

Christmas is a perfect set-up for let-down. It brings huge expectations. Expectations as to "magic moments," and "love," and "togetherness." Somehow it almost always seems that the best Christmases are in the past— Christmases that we dimly remember. It isn't necessarily true- but it seems that way, perhaps.

Some thoughts, the week after Christmas:

I. THIS YEAR'S 'TRADITIONAL' CHRISTMAS IS PAST.

By "traditional Christmas" I mean that human overlay of what once was a spiritual theme. A lot of things about Christmas are beautiful and wonderful and traditional, and that's just fine. [The date itself is traditional, the end of the southern journey of the sun was 'overlaid' on the story of the Prince of Light. And that itself tells a beautiful story. But tradition is never at the heart of Christmas.]

1. Some parts of Christmas are over- and we're glad. (Some parts of Christmas will be over when we get the bills paid.)
2. Some parts of Christmas are over and we're sad. I love the soft light of candles; I enjoy visiting and being visited.

II. BUT WE MUST ALWAYS REMEMBER, CHRISTMAS IS NOT OVER!

THE REAL CHRISTMAS, THE TRUE CHRISTMAS IS A BEGINNING, NEVER AN ENDING. "True Christmas" is that transcendent blending of the human and the divine, where God touches you and me. Heaven did bend low that first Christmas; and heaven still does bend low! Like Jesus Himself — so simple anyone can understand: A baby. Helpless. And yet so wonderful in mystery that no one ever will understand: Great God Almighty! Come to live with you and me!

- A. The HEART of Christmas is never over.

"Immanuel" means GOD ... WITH US. And Jesus Himself said to those who believed in Him: "I will never leave you or forsake you." "I am with you to the end of the age." 2. This is where our text comes in: This 'continuing Christmas' is for those "who received Him Who came." (John 1:12) He came unto his own, and His own received Him not. But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the children of God, even to as many as believed on His name. 3. So, if we have "received Jesus" then we are children of God

[Lesson:]

We are adopted as God's children because: (Galatians 4:4) God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption [THE 'FULL RIGHTS'] of sons.

We are able to know that we are God's children because: (Galatians 4:6) God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father. As sons and daughters of God: then (heirs) of God through Christ. WE MUST PRESS INTO OUR FULL INHERITANCE. (Galatians 4:6) God has made you also an heir.

- B. Our world cries out for sons and daughters of God to come to full maturity, and claim their full inheritance!

The word in "maturity" is not simply "what are my rights?" It is also "God help me to assume my responsibility!" The full word is "fellowship" or "partnership" — working with Jesus Christ in partnership with God Himself! And this the highest privilege known to men or women.

[The "collect" of the Old Book of Common Prayer for this Sunday reads: Almighty God, who hast given us thy only-begotten Son to take our nature upon Him, and as at this time to be born of a pure virgin; grant that we being regenerate, and made Thy children through adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by thy Holy Spirit; through the same our Lord Jesus Christ, who giveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.] Christmas is never over IF we are daily being renewed by the Holy Spirit!

III. We Must Carry The Heart Of Christmas With Us All The Year

- A. Some people still don't have a clue to what they miss at Christmas! And it may well be that some people will never know unless God chooses to show them through you or me! 2. We have seen again that the important parts of Christmas are available now. We need to know that ourselves. And we need to be able to tell everyone we can: "As many as receive HIM can become sons and daughters of God!"

- B. John 1:12 is stated in the past tense. But it is not over, yet! As many as Christ comes to, by His Holy Spirit, and as many as receive Him by inviting Him into their lives— to those the promise still stands! 4. We can't "keep Christmas alive" in the sense that many people might understand it. And I'm thankful that that Christmas comes only once a year. But we can do something about keeping the spirit of the TRUE Christmas!! [We can never BUY Christmas. We can never CONJURE UP Christmas. But] Remember, GOD IS WITH US!

CONCLUSION

[This hasn't been much of a sermon, homiletically, perhaps.] But I do have a word from the Lord for you this morning. I received it myself late this week in the course of a conversation with a friend of mine who loves Jesus. It does so happen that we attend very different churches. The word was a GREAT reminder to me. My friend didn't know when she gave it to me, but it was clear and helpful, and I told her so.

She was asking me for help in dealing with a pernicious heresy; she believed I would know Scriptures— and I think I did help her. But she said, "I've been asking the Lord to forgive me for trying to play God in this person's life, i.e., the person to whom she is witnessing.) I need to just love her AND LET GOD BE GOD!" That was the word: LET GOD BE GOD!

If Jesus has really COME, if by His Holy Spirit, He is really here, then in whatever situation I find myself — the real, on-going truth of Christmas is: God is HERE and I can LET GOD BE GOD! How can we find grace to face the challenges of life? How can a pastor speak about wisdom and grace for so many different needs? This past week a new baby came into our church family. One of our dear saints left us for heaven. One person is wrestling with depression. Another family stands at a crossroad of decision. That's the way life is. How indeed! The answer is 'the Gift we got for Christmas!' And the LOVE of Christmas never ends! Jesus is really with us! He is Immanuel! He will give us grace, day by day. LET GOD BE GOD WHERE YOU ARE JUST NOW!

EH 86 *Infant Holy, Infant Lowly "Christ the babe, was born for you."*

A Year of Sabbath Rest

January 7, 1990

Matthew 11:28 "Come unto Me ...and I will give you rest."

Introduction

[Today is the first Sunday in "Year of Sabbath"]

The words "rest" or "freedom" probably remind us of lazy summer days with a recreational book and a warm summer sun. And that's probably all right.

But I want to talk with you this morning about a different, deeper quality of rest and freedom. What about "rest" as a way of life? What about a life of perfect "freedom?" Is it possible?

I really believe that it is. And if what I want to tell you is God's truth, it is worthy of your full attention.

I. REST IS MORE THAN VACATION

- A. REST AND FREEDOM ARE MORE THAN SIMPLY DOING AS WE PLEASE. Bernard Ramm quotes Barth as saying 'the usual definition of freedom that people write for themselves is a definition of sin.' That is a disturbing statement. But isn't it true that we think of freedom as being able to do what we want to do, regardless of what anyone else may think? Isn't it true that we define freedom in purely individualistic terms?

It is not that sitting in the sun and reading is wrong or evil. Thank God for lazy summer days and vacations where we can read about Captain Horatio Hornblower if we wish!

But when we think of freedom as only as doing what we want to do with no thought of God we are making islands and idols of ourselves.

- B. REST AND FREEDOM MUST BE MORE THAN NEGATIVE TERMS. We may rest IN labor; we may have FREEDOM TO obey.

Jesus says: "Come, I will give you REST" and in the same breath "Take my YOKE upon you ..." REST and WORK [- at least the kind of work Jesus has for us -] are NOT mutually exclusive.

The Children of Israel in slavery in Egypt thought that rest was simply not having to do as they were told, and not having to make bricks without straw. But God knew that their "rest" and "freedom" was much more than that!

In Exodus 13, before the Exodus even began, the scriptures record God as telling the Children of Israel through Moses that they were headed for a land of promise, of milk and honey.

But on the way to the rest and liberty they stopped by the Mountain called Sinai and received Ten Commandments!

- C. THERE MUST ALWAYS BE A POSITIVE SIDE TO TRUE FREEDOM. We don't understand true freedom until we see it as the enabling to become! God has made us with certain innate longings and desires. We are built with a yearning after God.

But in ourselves, in our own power, we are not free to enter that fullness! We do not have the capacity to satisfy that longing! But when God sets us free FROM sin, He also sets us free TO FULFILLMENT.

THAT IS WHY CHRIST'S CALL TO REST IS ALSO A CALL TO A YOKE. When we really meet Jesus Christ, and follow Him, then for the very first time we can be certain of beginning the kind of living we are capable of living.

II. PRAYER IS THE ROYAL PATHWAY TO REST

- A. "COME UNTO ME!" The invitation to REST is a personal invitation to the Presence of GOD. REST is not just some thing, REST is some ONE!

Prayer is God's gift to us that enables us to function fully. Whatever we need to be wholly human we may unlock with prayer.

If we can live without prayer we can live without God. And if we can live without God, we may be sure that we will live without true rest or freedom.

- B. Prayer must be seen as much, much more than a duty or a chore. Prayer must be seen as the VEHICLE OF GOD'S GRACE.
- C. Prayer must be LEARNED. "Lord, teach us to pray!" We learn to pray by praying. We learn to pray by not giving up. We learn to pray by praying all alone. We learn to pray by praying in the great congregation. We learn to pray by praying together in twos and threes and small groups.
- D. Prayer is seeking to be in tune with God's will. Prayer has several facets, and we usually use just a few. Our favorite is "petition." (GIVE me!) But some people's front yards are so full of garbage and junk that if God did choose to deliver on some of their petitions, He wouldn't have any place to back up the delivery truck!

LET'S TAKE THIS YEAR TO SEEK TO LEARN HOW TO PRAY BETTER!

III. WE CAN HELP EACH OTHER FIND THIS REST

- A. The power of a common cause. People unite around common causes. Common causes cost something! Avoid "busy work" but foster "support systems." The work of the kingdom need not come to a standstill; but we need to ask ourselves what purpose each function serves. [Make everything bend to the mission statement!]
- B. "Sacrifice" is a key to fellowship. It may seem strange to talk about "sacrifice" so we can "rest." But a worthy goal means deliberate choice. People will suffer and give up comfort if they believe they can achieve significant goals; and in the process of achieving, or even just in the struggling, they are bonded together in love that is deep and satisfying. [The "sacrifice" times of the ancients were times of feasting.]
- C. [Let's not worry about 'keeping score.']

Conclusion

- Practical:

How may we make 1990 a year of rest and freedom? Perhaps this is a great place to return to our text. I'm sure you thought I had forgotten it! Jesus promises us rest!

- Desire:

HOW MUCH DO WE WANT GOD? Jesus says "If you want REST— come unto ME!" How much do we really WANT God? And how much do we simply want OUR way— want OUR prayers answered?

It isn't a matter of being "earnest" or "fervent" when we pray! Not how much do we "feel" in our prayer life; but will we ask God to help focus our desire?

- Discipline:

ANYTHING WORTHWHILE TAKES SOME CONCENTRATION. Jesus says "If you want REST— take my YOKE and learn!" What will we set aside of lesser or distracting goals?

Not the rigid discipline of a drill sergeant (although that may be helpful at times and in certain circumstances) but the surrender of lesser to higher; the willingness to pursue worthy goals. Perhaps as simple a thing as planning TV watching; or going to bed earlier in order to be fresher for devotions the next day.

- Devotion:

THERE IS A PERSONAL, GENTLE, CARING FACTOR HERE: Jesus says: "I will give YOU rest!" We must cultivate that CARING! "Devotion" has shades of meaning:

- Adoration:

Having to do with God and love.

- Esteem:

Having to do with looking with fresh eyes on the riches of God's grace: the joy of being God's children

- Fellowship:

Committing to God's family!

- Enthusiasm:

Simply asking God to help us come alive! "Boring" is a simpleton's word!

"Boring" is the password of a jaded generation! To follow God and lay aside the drugs of the day is to discover a fresh enthusiasm for life. In that setting off for the Promised Land is both rest and freedom!

A year of JUBILEE has exciting prospects! Together, as the writer of Hebrews says it: "Let us labor to enter into that rest."

EH 57 *The Servant Song*

Adequacy of Atonement

February 4, 1990

Lesson: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we [him] no more. Therefore if any man [be] in Christ, [he is] a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things [are] of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech [you] by us: we pray [you] in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him [to be] sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

Prologue to the sermon:

Early on in the service (an old chestnut) Children's Sermon- the "Hayford Street Gang" story. How a "big boy" walked me right through a gang of tough guys.

Introduction:

- A. [How I came to this short series:] Hardy Powers, Oct '58, in Pilot Pt, Texas, delivered an address on "What Nazarenes Believe." And I took notes: Dr. Powers said Nazarenes believe in:
 - 1. The authority of scriptures;
 - 2. The adequacy of the atonement;
 - 3. The reality of personal experience; and
 - 4. The urgency of Mission.

- B. Today we look at (2) The adequacy of the atonement. By "adequacy" I do not mean that all we need as Christians and as humans is religion. Dr. Bill McCumber had a "throw away line" this summer that brings us down to earth from making ultra extravagant claims. He said, "Some people say, 'All I need is Jesus!' But I need Doris, too!"
- C. The heart of this question is: Is what Jesus has done in and of itself ALL I NEED in order to have eternal life?

The adequacy of the atonement does not negate the inequities of life. It does not deny the fact that we really do need each other.

[The adequacy of the atonement has to do with the ultimate success or failure of each of us as creatures of God. But first, what do we mean when we speak of the ATONEMENT?]

I. THE ATONEMENT: WHAT IS IT?

- A. The word "atone" is its own ("pocket") definition! It is being "at one" again, when there has been a parting of the ways. It is what our text calls "being reconciled" to God. Atonement is the basic gift of Jesus to each one of us. The story of the atonement IS the Good News. It is the story of Immanuel.

To understand atonement we begin with the scriptures, and they tell us of the manger and of Christ's miracles. They tell us of the cross of Calvary, and of the resurrection. They tell us of the ascension and of Pentecost, and all this has to do with making us at one with God.

- B. One fresh way of looking at the atonement is summarized in the first chapter of 2 Corinthians:

[2 Corinthians 1:3-4 Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.]

Here God's Presence is called COMFORT! God coming alongside! God with us! The "Hayford Street gang" story all over, every day!

[But I made the statement: "The ADEQUACY of the atonement has to do with the ultimate success or failure of each of us as creatures of God."]

II. THE ADEQUACY HAS TO DO WITH ULTIMATE SUCCESS OR FAILURE AS CREATURES OF GOD

- A. Adequacy means a place where we can STAND! Adequacy means that we are dealing with ultimate reality. God is not mocked! This way of faith can be trusted. Wasn't it Archimedes who was supposed to have said, "(I am so sure of my theory of the power of a lever that) 'If you give me a solid place to stand, I can move the world!'"?? The adequacy of the atonement means in Christ we have all that we need to be all that God wants us to be.
- B. Adequacy means a personal realization. Adequacy as people of God may not seem as important as, say, adequacy in business, or in finance, or in the things that give people status in our present day society. But each person here is more valuable than all the money on Wall Street. Each person here will outlive and outlast all the kingdoms of this earth. We have such an earthbound view (i.e., We identify our Christian faith with "democracy" or with our viewpoint on politics. The idea of a genuine Christian socialist seems absolutely foreign.)
- C. Adequacy centers around eternal matters, but matters that can and do carry over into everyday life and tend to make it significant.

Not every Christian will be recognized as "great." But every Christian is called to be noble, and good, and holy. And holiness is God-likeness. And that is adequacy!

III. HOW THE ATONEMENT IS ADEQUATE TO WHERE WE ARE DAY BY DAY.

Let me leave you with some solid scripture to take home and re-read and digest:

Here in 2 Corinthians 5 are some of Paul's 'testimonies of adequacy'. [I'm once again using "therefores" as markers:]

Paul writes THAT BECAUSE OF THIS GREAT GOD OF COMFORT, THIS GOD THAT COMES ALONG SIDE we may know:

Adequacy of Atonement

A. Adequacy of ASSURANCE (5:6 Therefore we are always of good courage...)

Do you ever need ASSURANCE? Do you ever wish that God could call you on the telephone? This is a way of faith! We have battles along these lines!

Being reconciled to God means that we have an inner persuasion that we are saved; that we have passed from condemnation.

B. Adequacy of MOTIVATION (5:11 Therefore we are made manifest to God) God knows what we do, and He cares about us! Having an observer while we do anything can be a source of encouragement or frustration. It is sobering to know that we shall give account at Judgment Day- and we shall!

Being RECONCILED TO GOD means that He knows what we're doing, what we're thinking. Not just that we shall stand and give an account at the judgment- but that we are manifest (open) to God NOW! And we can live in openness and honesty before Him without fear! We know that HE knows! We want Him to know!

C. Adequacy of LIFE ITSELF! [Of CONNECTION with 'the Vine;' Of RELATIONSHIP that is FILIAL, for we have become adopted children of God!] (5:17 Therefore we are new creatures...)

To really KNOW God, to be AT ONE with Him is much, much more than informational knowledge.

Here is an open secret: verses 16 and 17 tell us that we have to know Christ by His Spirit! We cannot even know Him as His disciples did before Calvary and the Resurrection!

Being reconciled to God is more than just book keeping. There is a new quality of life. There is correspondence with REALITY.

D. Adequacy of OPPORTUNITY FOR MAKING LIFE COUNT

(2 Co. 5:20 Therefore we are ambassadors...)

In the plan of the atonement, every believer is assigned a place in the SHARING of the message of reconciliation!

And what is more, we are not all that God would have us to be— we are not fully adequate- unless and until we have begun to take seriously the fact that we each have a place, a task, an assignment in the Body of Christ to help Him do the Work of Christ!

Conclusion:

Well, do we Nazarenes really believe in the ADEQUACY OF THE ATONEMENT?

Yes!

We believe in the adequacy of the atonement! Jesus IS (finally) all we need! For it is through Jesus that we receive all good things! The atonement is adequate because sin has lost its power to bully us and dominate us! Not that we never hurt, or suffer loss, or face situations that cause us involuntary dread.

We ARE reconciled to God! The atonement means that we are "at one" with Him. God's wonderful and mysterious plan and purpose through the ages— of sharing His life with us, and of living with us here and now, so that we may live with Him forever- - is already under way in the lives of those who know Jesus Christ.

Its a little like the story of "the Hayford Street gang." If God is with us, really with us, then we don't have to face life alone!

#283 Dear Lord and Father of Mankind

Joys of Belonging

February 11, 1990

Romans 8:1 "Those who are in Christ Jesus"

Introduction:

[Just ten days ago a new little baby boy made his first appearance on Planet Earth: my latest grandson, Russell IV. Along with his birth came FULL ACCEPTANCE into our family: A NAME, AN ESTABLISHED RELATIONSHIP WITH ALL OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS, and ALL THE SUPPORT AND GOOD WILL YOU CAN IMAGINE. YOU know what I mean, exactly, because it has happened in your family, too.]

Last Monday I called Russell III, the proud father, just to see how the new boy was doing. I said, jokingly, "Has he said 'Ma- ma' or 'Da-da' yet?"

Russell said, "Don't be silly." Then he added, "I have been carrying him around the house, saying, 'That is a refrigerator' and 'That is the microwave' and 'That is the telephone.'"

We certainly enjoy the baby just as he is. But WE LOOK FORWARD TO WATCHING HIM LEARN AND GROW AND FINALLY ENTER INTO THE CONVERSATIONS OF THE ENTIRE FAMILY.]

Romans 8 is written in celebration of those who have been BORN into God's family and are alive in Christ.

AND ROMANS 8 IS ABOUT ENJOYING THE PRIVILEGES OF BELONGING IN THIS GREAT FAMILY. Romans 8 is a chapter filled with the practical contact of the Holy Spirit with believers. Depending on your version or translation, there are between 15 and 19 references in this one chapter, references to the Holy Spirit as He works His sanctifying grace in our lives. Romans 8 is a syllabus on sanctification.

I. SANCTIFICATION IS "THE DISCOVERY" OF THE CHURCH IN THE 90'S

A. "Sanctification" is "old stuff" to us Nazarenes. But believe me, sanctification is being re-discovered throughout the entire Church of Jesus Christ. There is a proliferation of books on holiness, written by everyone from Billy Graham to British Anglicans to Roman Catholics.

Perhaps we Nazarenes have been "sanctification-ed" to death, with everyone explaining until no one understands. Maybe sometimes we have talked about sanctification, and have sometimes confused our talking with seeking and finding and enjoying.

Still, sanctification and holiness of heart and life are big with God our Father. The entire Christian community is vitally interested. Even veteran Nazarenes are full of questions. I believe that I am aware of some of the questions that growing Christians ask:

- "Is holiness as we preach it relevant to everyday life?"
- "Do we sometimes make 'sanctification' to mean just a crisis experience and so limit the full scriptural expression of the word?"
- "Do sanctified people ever sin? Can they?"
- "Do we push 'experiences' instead of 'relationships'?"
- "Aren't all Christians 'sanctified'?"
- "Do some Christians have the Spirit 'with' them and others 'in' them?"
- ... and on and on!

B. I propose to begin a deliberate walk through this rich eighth chapter in Romans, looking for old and for new insights into sanctification. I promise not to depend on clichés and worn shibboleth.

It is always a dangerous thing to tackle great passages of scripture. I ask you to help me; let's do it together! I don't ask you to 'set aside' your present understanding of what it means to be sanctified. I do ask that we all seek to be open to the riches and glory and even power that come when we give ourselves to meditation on God's Word.

- C. "Sanctification" doesn't belong to us, or to any other human organization. The beauty and truth of holiness are there for all who are "in Christ Jesus." And "sanctification" certainly is NOT some new fad— it is in the doctrinal statement of every orthodox church, including the Roman Catholic.

Some terms may sound new, at least to our ears, such as "spiritual formation;" but the verity of sanctification is as old as God's dealings with humankind. No, we do not have a corner on sanctification, and I am not sure that we have taught our "cardinal doctrine" very well.

- D. Romans 8 begins "in Christ Jesus." This is salvation. To "be saved" means that we have life in God through Jesus Christ.

To be "in Christ" means that we have the full acceptance and the name and the established relationship that comes instantly upon our coming into God's family. [Just like Russell IV, my grandson!] We're IN! This full acceptance can be termed justification. It is what God has done FOR us. It has to do with standing. We're IN!

But also, just like Baby Russell, we have to be learning and growing and experiencing this LIFE that is ours. There will be significant milestones along the way. This growing Christ-likeness, both gradual and crucial, can be termed sanctification. It is real change, in our character, in our state. We're ON THE WAY WITH JESUS! And that growing and experiencing is what I want to look at here in Romans 8 these next several weeks.

- E. Please, as we go through Romans 8 together, let's not make this just a "head trip" or a just a series of "lessons." These words are scripture! Let's take them for our very own! Let's ask God to make them live in us! Romans 8 should be the way all Christians live. It is the NORM! It certainly is NOT the way that the average Christian lives.

II. FACT ONE: ALL WHO ARE SAVED ARE 'IN CHRIST JESUS'

- A. To be saved is to be "included in!" [It is an amazing and wonderful discovery to new Christians: the "inclusive aspect of saving faith." God accepts us as we are! True, God hates sin, and never simply excuses it or ignores it. But we can be sure that God loves His

children! His purpose and intent is to help them! Not to exclude, but to preserve and keep them!]

B. Wonderful things are concurrent and simultaneous with being "in Christ." The list of joys and privileges is long. In this chapter we get a perception of the great joy and privilege those who are "in Christ" know. To be "in Christ" means:

1. (verse 9) THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST LIVES WITHIN. "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he/she does not belong to Him." ONCE WE ACCEPT THE REALITY OF A GOD WHO IS, AND WHO IS GOOD, AND WHO SPEAKS—AND ONCE WE CHOOSE TO PUT OURSELVES UNDER HIS AUTHORITY, EVERYTHING CHANGES! [PERSON TO PERSON REALITY!]
2. (verse 14) THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST LEADS. More about this leading later, but in short, (verse 28) there is not a situation where God excludes Himself from us, from our lives!
3. (verse 15) THE SPIRIT MAKES US "AT HOME." Adoption, trust, belonging.
4. (verse 17) THE SPIRIT PERMITS US TO ENTER INTO THE SUFFERINGS OF CHRIST. (ALL humankind knows pain; Christians are not excluded. But Christ's sufferings are redemptive. If we do not shrink back from the Cross, we may have fellowship with the Christ.) We are not facing the facts if we do not realize the fact of spiritual warfare.

C. This is not an exhaustive list of the "joys and privileges" of course. But it gives an idea of the richness of life into which we are born as God's children.

[But let's continue to look at basic truth:]

III. ALL OF SALVATION, STANDING AND STATE, IS BY THE GIFT OF FAITH

(Romans 10:9,10) We can be sure that we are "in Christ Jesus" and know that we are eligible for all the joys of Romans 8. How?:

A. The initiative is from God. God seeks us. God speaks to us. God enables us to hear and to believe. [Mystery!]

1. There must be a gift of faith, a touch from God, a conviction that God has spoken in His Son, Jesus Christ.
 2. The old, old story (old for many of us) suddenly becomes very personal! God speaks to YOU! (ME!) Or, it may be the very first time the message is heard (as my own father- saved in the first gospel meeting he attended, at age 21.) But we KNOW God wants us to let HIM into OUR lives!
- B. When God speaks, we can respond. We do not need to fully understand or comprehend in order to have a real, genuine, relationship with God. We are not saved when we pass a certain comprehensive test. We are saved when God speaks and we hear Him, and we say, "Present!"
- C. Are YOU willing to let God be God in YOUR life? We must combine the gift of faith with a deliberate response of our will. Our will can not, and does not save us. But our will may open the door for the Sovereign God to enter! HE can save us! And He WILL enter! Have YOU permitted Him entrance into YOUR life? Can you hear Him knocking just now?

Conclusion: Invitation. [Revelation 3:20] Prayer.

Hymn EH#33 *Behold the Throne of Grace* (repeat verse 2 for invitation)

The Urgency of Mission

February 18, 1990

Text: 2 Corinthians 5:14 "For the love of Christ COMPELS us..."

(Read 2 Corinthians 5:14 - 17)

Introduction:

[We are at the fourth of the distinctive statements about what Nazarenes believe made by Hardy C. Powers at Pilot Point, Texas, in 1958: i.e., authority of scripture; adequacy of the atonement; reality of spiritual experience; and now, the urgency of mission.]

Our faith is God-given, and true, and satisfying. Authority! Adequacy! Spiritual reality of experience! But our faith is also for doing!

Psalm 126 talks about "Going forth weeping, sowing seed ... and doubtless coming again with rejoicing and with results!" The paragraphs immediately following the text (2 Corinthians 6:1-10) tell of the awful, serious, glorious urgency which the author himself felt about working together with the Master. [This passage (2 Corinthians 5:15-17) means more to me now than when we started looking at it a few weeks ago.]

I. LOVE COMPELS

'What I Did for Love' [5:14 "...the love of Christ controls us ..."]

Throughout the annals of memory we human beings have astounded one another at the amazing 'sacrifices' carried out in the strength of love.

We do things because we love that we would not do for any other reason. We do things that simply do not "make sense" and that certainly do not "profit" in any way except personal satisfaction.

STORIES:

James Robert McKane (Russell Metcalfe's cousin)

On a sunny morning in March, 1945, just five months before the end of the war, an American patrol walked into murderous machine gun fire on the island of Luzon near Baguio... [A man runs into murderous machine gun fire to rescue a fellow patrol member who is lying bleeding. He is killed. Here love of country & love of fellow soldier & love of family all mixed in together = "hero"]

Elizabeth Elliot

[A woman joins her husband in a very dangerous mission. When he is killed and the entire world is distressed, she goes back to the same tribe and actually wins them to the love of Jesus Christ. Here love of Jesus Christ + love of another human being + love that cannot be explained = "standard of excellence in Christian love!"]

John Stark

[A man tenderly cares for his wife year after year; love of Jesus + love of fellow Christians + (tragedy, life's partner incapacitated) + faithfulness year after year = "A personal revelation of what it means to be called 'Christian'."]

II. LOVE MOTIVATES

["... The love of Christ controls us ..."]

- A. Real love somehow enables human beings to get outside the entrapment of their own self-worship. [Some things that pass for 'love' are undisguised selfishness!]

To say "Love motivates" may be saying the same thing as "Love compels" in other words. But there is a certain kind of love the Bible tells us "compels" us. It is AGAPE love.

- B. Agape is that kind of love which is centered outside of ego; it is a love which transcends and around which all other things in life center. It does not have to be Christian [1 John 2:15 reads "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." In each case the word "love" is the Greek word "agape." Therefore it must be possible to "agape" the world- - to center our lives on things other than the Father!] It is people who have centered their very lives outside their own little world that have caught the 'urgency of mission.'

III. LOVE TRUSTS

["...we have received the ministry of reconciliation ..."]

- A. The kind of "faith" that changes the lives of people in need— and the kind of "love" that really is "AGAPE" has to be more than a mental concept.

We may often think of "the faith of our fathers" as a body of doctrine or creed which we are taught, and learn and believe with our minds. It is [FIDE.] But there are TWO Greek words for our common idea of faith: in addition to this (important) doctrinal truth (FIDE), there is the faith that is what we believe with our whole beings! (FIDUCIA). "FIDUCIA" is the kind of faith that trusts another person because of a relationship of respect and love. It is hard to put into words just what the difference might be.

- B. I wonder, especially in a church on a college campus, if we come to church and expect our "faith" to be mainly HERE (in our heads.) If we learn something new, or if some truth is put to us in a fresh way, then we think our faith is strengthened.

BUT HOW SELF-CENTERED WE ARE! Even in our worship we are the center! We need control!

- C. We think that faith is a matter of being convinced that a thing is true or not. Certainly that is a part of it. But a critical attitude of mind can be a copout for not wanting to spend enough time with God to let Him really LOVE us! It is in the relationships of LOVE that FIDUCIA is revealed. It is in our personal relations with God that our 'FIDE' ALSO BECOMES 'FIDUCIA'.

- D. Throughout the Bible the emphasis is on fiducia, and hardly ever on fide. ["Fide" is assumed!] It is assumed that there is a God; that this God has a right to make demands on us; that God is good; and that our surrendered lives can and will make a difference eternally. What a wonderful thing it is when "fide" becomes "fiducia" as well!

Conclusion:

- A. All my life I've heard all sorts of reasons why I should be doing this or that for God! If you are like I am, we've had mixed feelings, mixed reasons for doing what we've done. I wonder if we can ever really say: The love of Christ compels us?

The Urgency of Mission

- B. When it does, what we do will matter! You can make a difference! Together we can make a BIG difference! This church can be a place where healing takes place. Our fellowship can be a saving fellowship. But it will be love that drives us, if such work is done!
- C. [Story: Lawrence Richards' wrote of two college classes given identical material with the exception that in one case it applied directly to their life and a commitment of themselves; in the other case it was simply material to be learned to pass the course.]
- D. The question that brought Peter back into vital relationship with Jesus was not "Peter, am I really the Messiah?" That was absolutely vital- but it had been settled! The question that restored Peter, and sent him on his way to marvelous service was, "Peter, son of Jonah, do you LOVE Me?"

Prayer:

219 My Savior's Love

What Do You Say to the Great I AM?

February 18, 1990

Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly.

And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.

Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.

Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, "Here am I; send me!"

Introduction:

What do you say to God? [I know, it depends on how big your understanding of God may be! "Now I lay be down to sleep!" is perfectly appropriate for a two or three-year old.] As we come to grasp the greatness of God— not that He is less than loving, nor less than caring— but as we come to grasp that this Sovereign of the Universe wants to speak to us— what is appropriate?

What do you say to God? "Anything He wants you to say! Look how BIG He is!" ... but no! .. that is not really how it is! At least, not always!

I. THE PROPER THING TO SAY TO GOD IS: "PRESENT!"

- A. When God speaks to us, believe it or not, it is always because there is an exciting, wonderful, life-changing prospect ahead for us.

God doesn't deal in trivialities! God deals in LOVE!

- B. We are always trying to bring God into our reality, and into our standard of values. If talking with God doesn't make us richer, or doesn't seem to be amusing, or seems as though it might cost us comfort (deferred gratification) then it is hard for us to see what a high honor and privilege to be addressed by the great I AM!

- C. The real story of the Bible is the life-history of men and women who said: "Here I am!" when the Great I AM called their names:

People like:

- Abraham (Covenant of faith)
- Moses (Shaper of the Nation of the People of God)
- Isaiah (Messiah's fore-teller (text))
- Mary ("Behold, the handmaiden of the Lord!")

- D. Saying "Here I am!" does not entirely mean we are "passive" before the God and the truth of the Bible. But GOD DOES HAVE TO CALL US FIRST! And when He does! a proper response is: "Here, Lord! I'm HERE!"

But just how simple is it to report "Present" to God?

II. INITIALLY, IT MAY BE JUST AS SIMPLE AS THAT!

- A. If we can be open and simple with God, God can be direct and even confrontational and forgiving and cleansing with us!
- B. Can you remember when God spoke to YOU? And you said, "Here I am!" ??

III. BUT TO CONTINUE TO SAY "PRESENT" TO GOD WE HAVE TO LEARN TO SAY "ABSENT" OR NO! TO OTHER THINGS!

- A. We have to learn to say no to bad things like sin and guilt and anxiety.
 - 1. Like SIN. Going against God's will. God gently leads us. (Illus: Herb Frame and his cigarettes.)
 - 2. Like GUILT. God doesn't expect perfection of performance from any of us. But He can and does expect our best, and our honest love! Openness. Confession.
 - 3. Like anxiety. I'm working on WORRY!

- B. And, believe it or not, we have to learn to say no to "Good" things like somebody else's expectations that overload and sink our little boats.

There is a tremendous power in expectations. We tend to fulfil the prophecies of those we let influence us! How else to explain dynasties of doctors— of politicians— of merchants— of ministers?

It is hard to over estimate the power of positive and loving expectations within a loving community! [And the opposite is sadly true, too!] [MORE ABOUT EXPECTATIONS LATER]

- C. WE NEVER SAY "NO" TO GOD! But we sometimes need to distinguish between GOD and God's people and God's various organizations.

We have to be alert to the claims of competing values: we want to be liked/loved/appreciated. We want to value ourselves and people who "can."

It helps to have a personal "Mission statement." DO YOU?

We need to say "yes" to the tasks of the church that we can do, and that God approves of. To say "no" to church tasks when we are simply loaded down with selfish agenda is to deny the kingdom.

But God is a reasonable Boss- of we want to use that title.

[Certainly He is our Master; and this is His church— so He is the Boss!] No one should be so busy that she cannot stop and listen for the great I AM when He speaks!

What Do You Say to the Great I AM?

D. So, we need to say "No" to that which complicates and ruins our lives!!

This is not to say that we do not bear one another's burdens. That is not a matter of "expectations."

Conclusion:

HOW DO WE TALK TO THE GREAT "I AM" ??

I said just a moment ago: 'It is hard to over estimate the power of positive and loving expectations within a loving community!' What a power it is to know that people love us, and think we're the greatest!

People care about what we do, what we choose!

But if that is true about PEOPLE, how greatly true it is about GOD! THE GREATEST POWER THAT CAN BE RELEASED IN OUR LIVES IS GRASPING THE GREAT EXPECTATIONS THAT GOD HAS FOR EACH OF US!! GOD MADE US AND HE KNOWS WHAT WE CAN BECOME!

[Isaiah, already well on his way to being a good, even great servant of God— but not aware of JUST HOW GREAT! God reveals Himself to Isaiah! Isaiah says: HERE AM I! PRESENT!]

[Say "YES" to Jesus, and He will help you to say "No!" Can we build a church with people who say "No!"?? If they have said, "YES!" then we surely can and will!]

The Alone-ness of Jesus

March 11, 1990

Isaiah 53: 1-3

John 16:31-32 *Do you now believe? Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be scattered, each to his own home, and to leave me alone; and yet I AM not alone, because the Father is with me.*

Introduction:

Being alone— being apart— being by one's self— is an experience that is common to all mankind. At times being alone is good and to be sought. At times it is bad, and we will do almost anything in order to avoid it.

Being alone is sometimes a vital necessity. But then there are times when the sense of alone-ness is excruciatingly painful. Perhaps loneliness is the greatest single source of pain in our society today.

Alone-ness can be the agony of isolation, the punishment of solitary confinement. Or, alone-ness can be the stimulation of solitude, the setting for monastic retreat. Being alone can be the deliberate counterpoint to social intercourse, or it can be the very essence of hell itself.

When Jesus cried out from the cross, in the words of Psalm 22, "My God, My God, Why hast Thou forsaken Me?," He was expressing the culmination of an alone-ness that was both solitude and isolation, an apart-ness and separation that was very much a part of His life from the very beginning. The text from Isaiah calls Messiah "A root out of dry ground— despised and forsaken of men." Jesus knew what it was to be all alone.

In His final separation from God and man, Jesus was unique; on the cross Jesus knew an alone-ness such as we have never known, and which we never need to experience. But much of the separation and even isolation and loneliness that Jesus knew throughout His life was common to us all.

I. HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT ABOUT THE ALONE-NESS JESUS KNEW?

There were reasons beyond those common to all humanity WHY JESUS WOULD EXPERIENCE BEING "ALONE."

- A. Jesus had an awareness of separation because He, and He alone of all humankind, was absolutely pure and holy. Purity and holiness are at one and the same time very attractive and very threatening and repelling to people tainted with selfishness and sin. To take a stand for the right, for justice, when it is unpopular is to feel something of the separation Jesus must have known. To be alone and in the right is to be in company with Jesus.

And the heart of this difference, this separation from all the rest of humanity, was the fact that Jesus was and is God Almighty. Those who 'understood' Him the very best understood Him in the most partial way—they never fully understood Him. Those who 'knew Him' the best never really knew Him to the depths. His was the alone-ness of a genuine superiority.

He was patient, yet there must always have been the hint of that impatience that every mother of small children knows when she has talked to small children all day. She dearly loves her children, but she gets tired of just talking small-children-talk all the day long!

Certainly we are not incarnate God, and so we cannot know these very special ways that Jesus experienced isolation, separation— alone-ness. But still in keen ways we experience misunderstandings, the superficial and partial ways others think they know us, and the separation that those misunderstandings bring.

- B. The Bible tells us of a number of times when Jesus was alone. No doubt there were many, many other times. But these recorded times are particularly significant:
1. Early in Luke's account we read of a time when Jesus was separated from His parents, and was found alone in the temple. At the age of twelve, Jesus said kindly to His mother: "Don't you understand that I must be about my Father's business?" Don't you understand?

And even though he continued in subjection to His parents, as was right and proper at the time, still it is clear enough that Jesus knew the alone-ness and separation that comes to us all when we realize that mother and dad's faith are not sufficient for 'me!', and that I must learn for myself to do the will of the heavenly Father.

It is a lonely business when we begin to confront the great challenges of life, and to discover God for ourselves. Do you remember when you were challenged to be a Christian, a believer, by a direct relationship of obedience to God? It is a scary time for parents and for young people. It is a time when it is easy to have misunderstanding and mistrust.

But we may be assured that Jesus knows what it is like when God challenges us at 12, or 15, or 17, — or whenever— to be about the Father's holy business, and to live for Him without reservation.

2. Another time that Jesus was all alone was in the desert, where He was tempted by Satan. After His baptism the Spirit led (or drove) Him into the wilderness where, weakened by long fasting, He faced excruciating temptation, in depths we cannot fully understand.

Temptation is most devastatingly strong when we are physically and emotionally "down," and when we are isolated and alone! But when we are alone, we have a Friend at God's right hand praying for us! One Who understands what we are experiencing! Jesus knows, and is able to strengthen us if we will ask Him.

3. Then, Jesus was alone often in the place of prayer. When He was pressed by many demands and the burden of other people's cares, as He carried out the most important assignment ever given to one Person, Jesus simply had to take time— to make time when He could be in the company of the Father alone. To seek the company of God in solitude when there are other demands is never easy. But if Jesus the pure and holy One needed to do it, then we, too, need to seek to be often— regularly— alone with God in the place of prayer.

4. Jesus was alone in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is one time when it appears as though He did not want to be alone with God. He wanted human company. He was facing the supreme test. He took the eleven with Him to a place they knew. He took Peter, James and John as it were into the inner sanctuary, and asked them just to "Watch one hour with Me..." But they could not. It was not just that they were unwilling. They simply could not go into that inner sanctum of surrender with Jesus.

We are on holy ground here. (I recall being in that grove of olive trees, all gnarled with age!) But we all must come, sooner or later, all alone, all by ourselves to the place where WE pray that prayer! We must come to the decision that if no one else goes with God, WE are still going to go all the way!

5. Finally— in the history of Christ's recorded times of being alone— come the anguished words from the cross: "My God, My God, WHY hast Thou forsaken Me?" Jesus was alone on the cross of Calvary. Thank God! There really is no parallel here for OUR lives, at least in the most central and holy sense. The horror, the hell of what Jesus knew in THAT alone-ness there was at the heart of His sacrifice for our redemption. Because He cried in utter darkness we do not need to ever know and experience that final, utter separation and loneliness!

[But how does the alone-ness of Jesus speak to your condition today, and mine?
Think with me about how my alone-ness can be transformed by uniting with Jesus.]

II. HOW MY ALONE-NESS CAN BE TRANSFORMED BY UNITING WITH JESUS

[There will be many times when we will want to seek to be alone in good and wholesome solitude. But we are not called upon to seek to be lonely!]

- A. Still, we can be certain that loneliness— the "dark side of apart-ness" or "alone-ness" will come unsought— unbidden— unwanted. We will know, as Jesus knew, the pain of misunderstanding, the isolation of superficial, partial friendships. We may well know what it means to be alone because we are trying to follow our conscience and seek justice and holiness. But in those times we may be sure that we ARE understood— that we are

completely and thoroughly KNOWN!

- B. And yes, there will be many times in seeking to follow Jesus when we will need to seek a holy solitude. We will need to be alone with God on a regular basis. We must stay in harmony with Him, and stay so sensitive to His leadings that when the times call for it we can appear to be out of step with everyone else if need be because we know we are in step with King Jesus.

God help us that we can live so conscious of God that when purity or justice call for taking a stand we will have the courage to appear to walk alone, if necessary.

- C. May God help us to be like Jesus in His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane to be able to say: "Nevertheless, not my will, but Thine be done!" These are holy, lonely times we must face, and we MAY face them with God's blessing and strength.
- D. But when the "bad alone-ness" comes to us, and to those around us— and it will!— how can Jesus help us then?
1. We must believe that in our loneliness Jesus can reach into our isolation and transform it. If it is an isolation of injustice and insensitivity or bereavement or loss it will be hard or even impossible to understand. But by God's grace we must not allow Satan to use alone-ness to destroy our faith, or even more important, the LOVE that faith demands! Bitterness and hatred and division and pettiness are the end result of what is probably Satan's favorite weapon.
 2. Do you understand that ISOLATION IS PROBABLY SATAN'S FAVORITE WEAPON? For isolation is the sheer essence of hell. All real fellowship and loyalty in the name of sin and selfishness are just illusion. And believe me, Jesus is seeking ways to break through YOUR isolation and loneliness right now!
 3. Remember this, too. If YOU have experienced isolation and loneliness, if you ARE EVEN NOW experiencing it— there are many others around you— many here right now— who are experiencing it, too. And if we would seek to have the mind that was in Christ Jesus, and let His life flow into our own— then the 'Jesus in you' and the 'Jesus in me' is always seeking ways to break through

that isolation in those we know are hurting in order to bring love and healing.

That is what Jesus did when He was here on earth.

Conclusion: I see a man short in stature, and perhaps somehow small in his own self-esteem— but a man who had abundantly compensated by making a great deal of money in a despised kind of business. I see him absolutely alone in the midst of a throng of people.

Oh, Zacchaeus was not physically alone— but in that crowd there was not one friend, not one person who knew how much he really wanted to love God, and how much he wanted to love his fellows and be loved by them— how much he wanted to do the right, to live right. Not ONE! Except for Jesus!

I want the keen kind of sight that Jesus had! I want to see Zacchaeus off to the side, peering through the leaves of his sycamore tree! I want the love of Christ that can help penetrate the alone-ness of others.

But remember that in that crowd there were at least TWO people who felt isolated and alone. But Jesus, misunderstood, and in many ways apart, reached out of His alone-ness into the desolation and isolation of Zacchaeus and said: "I see you! I want to be with you!" And something wonderful began in the heart of that lonely man!

And out of the loneliest hour in all creation Jesus has reached in love into your isolation and mine. He has asked us to take HIM home with us. And He wants to transform our alone-ness into life-sharing love!

(Exalt Him #27 *GENTLE SHEPHERD*)

The Prayer Jesus Prayed for You

March 25, 1990 PM

John 17:1-3 (3) - And this is life eternal: that they may know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent.

INTRODUCTION: When Jesus came to the very last moments He would share alone with His disciples, it was not a time for small talk or idle words. Not one of them would ever forget how He gave them a new commandment, or how He said He was leaving them His joy.

But then Jesus stopped talking to the disciples, and began talking to His heavenly Father. It was a prayer that electrified them as they heard Him pray it.

He prayed for Himself that night. He spoke of unimaginable glory, and of perfect union with the Father in that glory. As He prayed He revealed as never before the single purpose of why He had ever left the glory of heaven. The hearts of the disciples were stirred as they realized the Presence of Deity.

And then Jesus prayed for them! They listened as He asked the Father to make them a part of the fellowship and life which Jesus Himself shared with the Father.

But then, wonder of wonders, Jesus prayed for you and for me! In this, the holy place of all the Holy Bible are words that reach to where we are this very hour:

I. JESUS PRAYED THAT WE MIGHT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE

- A. This is the only reason Jesus came. Everything else augments, enhances, points to-LIFE!
- B. If you have eternal life you are a Christian! If you are a Christian you are alive in Christ! It is as simple as that! If you do NOT have life, then you are NOT a Christian!

There may be "stages of faith" and certainly there are different levels of understanding— but in the final word there is only one test of being a Christian:

Either you are alive unto God— or you aren't!

- C. Other good and vital things— the spiritual growth, the service, the following after— are essential. Don't throw them away. But remember: ETERNAL LIFE IS OF GOD. ONLY GOD HAS ETERNAL LIFE, AND ONLY GOD CAN MAKE US ETERNALLY ALIVE. AND THAT IS WHY JESUS CAME!

II. ETERNAL LIFE IS ALWAYS CONNECTED WITH KNOWING GOD

- A. GOD-knowledge is the central issue of our faith; it can never be peripheral. We come to know God at times by "roundabout" ways; fear of punishment, weight of guilt, seeking to be fulfilled; selfish ways, usually.

But Jesus said: "THIS is life eternal: that they may know THEE. the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou has sent!" That is HIS definition, not one I made up!

1. This knowledge is always revealed; never self-obtained.
2. It is always more than knowing about God; it is knowledge OF God.
3. This "knowledge" is always a relationship, and it is reciprocal; we come to know God as we make ourselves known to Him! it is not something "free-standing" and simply "facts."

It is important that God know us! The saddest words that will ever be heard will be: "Depart from Me, I never knew you!"

- B. This necessity of knowing God makes the sin of PRESUMPTION (false faith) one of the basic sins of unbelief. Presumption is assuming that one knows what God is like. Presumption is saying: "I know what God expects." David prayed (Psalm 19) "Keep back thy servant from presumptuous sins."

Have you ever noticed how many people are EXPERTS on God?? BUT THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR REALLY KNOWING GOD!

III. THIS ETERNAL LIFE WILL MANIFEST ITSELF IN:

- A. SECURITY (verses 11,15) "Keep them!" Implying that faith will be tested; that we are not exempted from the common troubles of mankind ... but also assuring us that God can and

will KEEP His own!

- B. JOY (verse 13) "that they might have My JOY fulfilled in themselves!" To have the privilege of walking with God; having the witness that we please Him; this brings an underlying JOY to life and living! Jesus knew the JOY of being totally at one with the Father. He gives us His Spirit so that we may know something of that joy. (Fullness!)
- C. UNITY WITH GOD/GOD'S FAMILY (21) "That they all may be ONE ... that they also may be one in Us ... that the world may believe"
 - 1. "Unity" is a modern shibboleth
 - 2. Jesus prayed for unity on the basis of being one with the Father, Son and Spirit. We cannot be "one" with those who deny the holiness and uniqueness of God. There is no basis for unity apart from this divine connection.
 - 3. "Causes" in and of themselves can never be the basis for unity. We are not one because we are against anything— even sin. We must be one because we are IN God!
 - 4. "Unity" is LIFE at the SOURCE— unity in spirit! Doctrines are important; and we must maintain our distinctives in a spirit of humility. But unity is NOT a matter of agreement on thoughts or ideas. In Christ this unity will manifest itself!

CONCLUSION: Can you imagine how those disciples could scarcely breathe for the holy wonder of it all as Jesus prayed that night? As they heard Him speak with the Father about glory— and then realized that He was praying for them?

Can you imagine how they thrilled as they heard Jesus ask the Father to sanctify them, and make them one with Him and with each other?

Can you believe that Jesus was praying this prayer for me and for you? Believe it!

Jesus prayed this mighty prayer for you! And nothing can defeat that prayer, if indeed you invite the Holy Spirit to reveal God to you!

Will YOU be alive to God to all eternity?

Will you make it the consuming passion of your life to know God, and Jesus Christ, whom God has sent?

The Prayer Jesus Prayed for You

#28 - EH - Oh, How He Loves You and Me

Holiness: A Family Resemblance

Becoming Like Jesus (Romans 8) Sermon 2 of 5

The connection with the CHURCH as God's FAMILY

1. Mindset of Belonging
2. **Holiness: A Family Resemblance**
3. Sanctification and Suffering
4. Resurrection Hope
5. The Filling of the Holy Spirit

April 1, 1990 PM

Romans 8:15-17;29

For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as children by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren."

Introduction:

This past week, in southern Lebanon, a member of your family- - and my family— was murdered. You may or may not have read or seen in the newscasts that a William Robinson was robbed and killed by people who said that he was establishing an Israeli settlement in their country. Mr. and Mrs. Robinson had 29 Lebanese orphans in the little Christian orphanage they had begun there.

The newspaper said that Mr. Robinson belonged to a small fundamentalist Protestant Christian sect.

Did you notice those adjectives? (1) small, (2) fundamentalist, (3) Protestant, (4) Christian. And did you hear the noun? "Sect"!

In actuality, Mr. Robinson belonged to the greatest family on earth: the FAMILY OF GOD. If, as I believe he did, Mr. Robinson owned Jesus as Lord, then my brother and yours died this past week in Lebanon. [Does that make any sense at all??]

I. IS THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST REALLY ONE?

A. THERE IS CERTAINLY OPPOSITION TO UNITY IN CHRIST'S BODY

There is something that hates the very idea of all Christians actually and in fact being one in Christ!

1. [THE PRESSURE TO PRIVATIZE FAITH]

The belittling designation of anyone who takes his Christian faith seriously is pretty much the rule, not the exception. Remember again how the newspaper pictured William Robinson? (Small: He was only caring for 29 orphans. Not very significant. Only about 29 more than most of US! Fundamentalist: pretty much a catch-word for anyone who takes any kind of stand on anything any more. Protestant: They probably got that right, but here in this market where there are many more Catholic than Protestant it makes Mr. Robinson definitely in the minority. Christian ... but SECT! A pejorative term, usually. A dissenting group, splintered away from the main body.)

2. [THE PRESSURE TO ISOLATE BELIEVERS]

The mind-set of the media is to blur the TRUE distinctions of faith: (SUCH AS THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS CHRIST- which in all fairness they cannot understand, anyway) and to magnify artificial differences: (SUCH AS CULTURAL WAYS OF WORSHIP, or DENOMINATIONAL NAMES, or MINOR DOCTRINAL DOGMA) until finally each Christian becomes a religious movement of exactly

ONE! [THE ENEMY WOULD HAVE US TO BELIEVE THAT WE ARE WEAK AND INSIGNIFICANT AND ALL ALONE!]

It doesn't seem to matter what weirdness you believe, (so long as you are SINCERE), and it doesn't really matter how hungry you are for righteousness, or how much your heart cries out for God JUST SO LONG AS YOU KEEP IT TO YOURSELF!

B. IT IS CLEARLY GOD'S WILL THAT ALL WHO CALL JESUS LORD BE UNITED AT THAT POINT— OF THAT OBEDIENCE AND LORDSHIP TO JESUS!

IT WAS THE PRAYER OF JESUS: MAKE US HOLY, MAKE US ONE!)

1. This was Christ's High Priestly prayer. It was as much to bring us all together as it was to make us pure and holy!
2. IS THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST REALLY ONE? In one true and holy sense, THE ANSWER IS YES! CHRIST'S BODY IS ONE! All believers who share the Christ LIFE share a common life. (We ARE brothers and sisters to Mr. Robinson, if in fact he IS alive in Christ.)
3. IS THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST REALLY ONE? THE ANSWER IS ALSO "NO!" At least NOT IN THE WAY THAT IT CAN BE! It must BE more of a priority, if we are to heed our Lord's command.

[Transition: Which brings us back to "family."]

II. HOLINESS IS SOCIAL IF IT IS GENUINE

A. WE ARE SAVED ONE-AT-A-TIME INTO GOD'S FAMILY

The fact that we come one-by-one to Christ is highly reinforced by our American frontier mentality. We worship "individuality."

In emphasizing the INDIVIDUAL SIDE OF SALVATION (usually translated "I" and "ME") we are in danger of missing the BEST of what God intends that sanctification - holiness- will actually bring to us!

[What do I mean? Look at some examples:]

- B. The way the word 'saint' or 'saints' is used in the Bible is very significant. The word "saint" means "holy one." It is a name used for the people of God. We are called to be saints.

Did you realize that the word "saint" appears in the Bible exactly three times: two of them in the OT- in Psalm 106 referring to "the saint, Moses;" and in Daniel where the prophet has a vision of one saint talking to another. The lone place in the New Testament where the word "saint" appears is Philippians 4:21, where Paul says: "Salute every saint in Christ Jesus."

By contrast, the word "saints" shows up at least 95 times. Every place in the New Testament the word appears, it refers to the church— to the group— to the collective family of God.

- C. The gifts of the Spirit, Paul tells us plainly (in Ephesians 4 and elsewhere) are for the building up of the body of Christ.

- D. And here in the great Chapter on the Spirit-filled life we get the "family picture" again. We are adopted, not as "only children," but as part of a growing, happy, loving FAMILY!

Look at these text verses again: (15-17 We have not received a spirit of bondage and fear, but we have received (WHAT?): The Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry "Father! Daddy!

"The Spirit Himself tells us unmistakably that we are (WHAT?): CHILDREN OF GOD!

"And if we are children, then we are HEIRS .. HEIRS OF GOD AND JOINT HEIRS WITH CHRIST!"

We are in the family! We are together with Christ AS WELL AS WITH ONE ANOTHER!

We even have a family resemblance! (29) (We are) predestined to be conformed to the image of (God's) SON!

- E. HOW IMPORTANT IS THIS CONCEPT OF 'FAMILY'??

WHY SAY "FAMILY?" What is "family?"

"Family" on God's terms is a place where torment and tormenting fear are ruled out; a place where bondage is replaced by responsibility discharged in liberty and freedom.

FAMILY IS VERY IMPORTANT!

THAT IS WHY A CHURCH IS DIFFERENT FROM SUPER STOP AND SHOP!

[There isn't any LOYALTY involved in 'supermarket shopping.' But a CHURCH isn't really like that, if it becomes FAMILY! It isn't just a place to get your groceries! It is a place where we invest in each other's lives!]

Where there is deep commitment and loyalty, there is the promise of great reward! [Haven't your greatest JOYS as well as your deepest sorrows come from your earthly families?] This is something of what God expects in HIS BODY, the church!

IS FAMILY IMPORTANT? Is surely is!

[What we begin here on earth will continue into the freedom of eternity:]

F. GOD WILL REVOLUTIONIZE OUR CONCEPTS OF FAMILY IN ETERNITY

Our most precious relationships here will not necessarily be destroyed— for in eternity we will "know as we are known." But our best relationships here are embryonic and incomplete in the light of eternity.

In Jesus Christ, in His image, we begin a relationship that is satisfying here and now, but that extends beyond the known and the seen into the greater realities of forever.

We cannot let the precious trinkets and imperfect promises of this passing moment overshadow the wealth of what it means to be a joint-heir with Jesus Christ in inheriting the riches of reality that will endure when Donald Trump's billions have vanished like smoke, no matter how the wisdom of this age undervalues them. We are God's family!]

III. SANCTIFICATION AND THE 'FAMILY OF GOD'

A. [NOT EVERYONE WITH OUR NAME IS A RELATIVE!]

REAL LIFE TRUTH OFTEN BRINGS TENSION! [Jesus: "I came not to bring "peace" but a "sword!"]

In the tension that is truth, we need to be tough-minded, and to realize that not every group or individual that proclaims itself "Christian" really intends to follow Jesus and make Him Lord.

[BUT ALL OUR RELATIVES DON'T SPELL IT EXACTLY LIKE WE DO!]

By the same token, we need to be warm-hearted, and realize that not every group or individual that does worship and follow Jesus will agree with us on every detail. How can a family be "tolerant" and "intolerant" at the same time? [Illus:(?) My four sons explained that one to me without even trying. They fought among each other— but when one was threatened they CAME TOGETHER.]

THE KEY TO REAL FAMILY IS JESUS! "WHO IS JESUS TO YOU?"

B. IT COSTS TO BE LOYAL PERSONALLY AND TO A GROUP

Being "family" does not let the individual "off the hook." We are each one answerable to God. We are each one responsible to keep his or her spirit sweet, and in tune with the will of God. We are each one gifted (at least potentially) by the Holy Spirit in unique ways which benefit the family!

We must each one— you, me— be seekers after HOLINESS! WE MUST PERSONALLY BE SANCTIFIED WHOLLY— AND LOYAL TO GOD!

[Transition: But here's a DIFFERENT thought...]

C. HOW ABOUT AN ENTIRE FELLOWSHIP OF BELIEVERS SEARCHING AFTER HOLINESS? Can it be done? What level of participation will it take? What level of trust? What percentage of people will have to be serious about seeking the mind set which the indwelling Spirit brings?

How about setting out to find out how we can be a community that rejects bondage and legalism, and at the same time adopts the disciplines and the concentrated effort we need to discover what God would like to accomplish through His church, THIS CHURCH! ??

[Am I an impractical dreamer? Somehow I am sure that IF we ever see spiritual impact in any significant way we will have to learn what FAMILY — the family of GOD— means!]

Conclusion: How can we conclude this message?

1. Let us unite in prayer for the ministry of our murdered brother, William Robinson. If God was in it, let us pray it will confound the enemies of God and multiply. [And certainly let us pray for his widow and his loved ones.]
2. Let us pray for THE SANCTIFICATION OF the FAMILY OF GOD WHERE WE LIVE! Let God's great LOVE and POWER flow in concentric circles from each of us— in obedience to the Holy Spirit. Let it come to our homes— to our friends— to our entire church fellowship— through the churches of our district— to the brothers and sisters in our community, Protestant and Catholic— who are members of the FAMILY of God! O God, don't just "make ME holy!" Come upon us, and MAKE US TRULY YOUR FAMILY!!

Prayer: Closing Hymn #57(EH) *The Servant Song*

Mindset of Belonging

Becoming Like Jesus (Romans 8) Sermon 1 of 5

1. **Mindset of Belonging**
2. Holiness: A Family Resemblance
3. Sanctification and Suffering
4. Resurrection Hope
5. The Filling of the Holy Spirit

April 1, 1990 AM

Romans 8:6 - 9 For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.

We are reading Romans 8, seeking to find out what something of what it means to know the sanctifying grace of God. [It is all too easy to begin anywhere and end up exactly where we want to come out.]

INTRODUCTION

There are some strong statements in this opening part of Romans 8 that, taken out of context, contradict common sense and experience. One such statement is: "They that are in the flesh cannot please God."

What this is sometimes interpreted to say is: As long as we are flesh and blood, here in this life, we can not hope to please God. Even Christians are under sin's dominion!

But the very next statement is also easy to misunderstand: "You are not in the flesh if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you."— which is misinterpreted to say that people

who are inhabited by God's Spirit are somehow "other-worldly" and so they do not fully enter into life here on earth.

What we can understand immediately is that there is conflict and struggle, tension and even warfare that we experience even as we seek to know God's sanctifying grace.

I. THE BATTLEGROUND OF THE HUMAN PERSONALITY

Why there should even be a battle of good and evil is a mystery. Occasionally even little children will ask profound questions like: "Why doesn't God just squash the devil?"

Why this battle should continue even after a person has chosen to go with God is beyond our understanding. But the battle continues. And the center of the battle, at least so far as we mortals can understand, seems to be our very minds and souls, the human personality.

Romans 7:21 declares there is a principle that good is always opposed: "I find then a principle that when I would do good, evil is present with me." God's Word reveals the true extent of the struggle. Our minds become a microcosm of the mystery of good and evil.

This struggle sharpens with the revelation of a God who IS, and who is GOOD, and who SPEAKS to us, who challenges us to believe in Him, to KNOW Him, and to come to LOVE Him and TRUST Him.

You are personally involved in this titanic battle.

II. THE BATTLE OF GOOD AND EVIL INTRUDES INTO EVERY ASPECT OF LIFE AND LIVING

[Philosophers and peasants, great men and little children- all of us have tried to understand the dimensions of the warfare of good and evil.]

- A. Our society has largely taken the approach to the problem of denying that it exists. With no absolute good and no absolute evil, each individual in our society is free to do as

he/she pleases, just so long as no absolute standards are proclaimed.

[And consequently we have the tragic enigma of parents berating their children for doing drugs, when they themselves are addicted to alcohol; of public officials whose personal and private lives are full of broken promises and rotten selfishness making pronouncements on what is and what is not "moral" for society; we have liberal church leaders speaking for God who have lost all personal contact with God; we have fundamentalists who know all the answers even before the questions are asked. And the heart of the whole matter is this thing Paul calls "mind set!"]

All these failures are merely human solutions to human problems. All these are evidence of lack of trust in a God Whose Word reaches to where we live!]

- B. [We cannot be "good without God!] We have forgotten that the One who made us knows us better than we know ourselves. We have forgotten the instructions that come with the Manufacturer's Guarantee. And whatever we may think or say about ourselves, human beings still respond at the deepest level to what is right and what is wrong. Our souls bear witness to a battle that we do not ever fully understand. We are a bundle of contrasts.
- C. [We are called on to choose.] This is the message of the Evangelist. God has spoken; His way is GOOD. All other ways lead to death. (Deuteronomy 30:19-20) "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live ... "
- D. This chapter is a litany of the personal fallout of our choosing: (v 1) contrasts of condemnation/freedom; (v 26) of weakness/attainment; (vv 2,6, 13, +) of death/life; (v 18) of suffering/glory; (vv 35-39) of separation/love.

All of these contrasts come to a focus in what Paul calls "mind set." (KJV = "carnal mind" and "Spiritually minded".) There are only two ways to think about life, so far as Paul is concerned— in the flesh, or in the Spirit.

- E. [Several statements are made about THE MIND SET ON THE FLESH.]
 - 1. It has as ITS LIFE GOALS (verse 5) the things of the flesh; temporal things, things that will pass away. It believes that THINGS are the cause of joy.

2. It has as ITS BASIC TEMPER (verse 7) a hostility toward God. It sees God as the enemy, the One who takes away joy.
3. It has as ITS LIFE STYLE (verse 7) a law-breaking way of living; in fact it couldn't keep the law if it wanted to.
4. IT CANNOT PLEASE GOD (verse 8) even though God loves the sinner, and seeks his salvation, the way the sinner LIVES is not pleasing to God.
5. THE MIND SET ON THE FLESH IS DEATH (verse 6.) Not just "will be" death, nor "leads to" death— which are both true— but is NOW spiritually DEATH!

F. In contrast, here is what is said about THE MIND THAT IS SET ON THE SPIRIT:

1. It is LIFE and it is PEACE (verse 6.)
2. It has as ITS LIFE-GOALS the things of the Spirit (verse 5.) "But you can't eat "love and Joy and Peace..." Perhaps not, but don't forget Matthew 6:33!
3. The mind set on the Spirit is WHERE GOD LIVES. The Christian is possessed BY GOD HIMSELF! God comes to live in us! (verse 9.)
4. PLUS ... all the other benefits of this chapter!!

[So, how may we come down on the side of God, and of good— not just on Sunday when we're all dressed up— but out there on the job where the rubber meets the road?]

III. THE BATTLE BOILS DOWN TO: WHO SHALL BE GOD?!

[Is it really possible to be 'Spiritually minded'? Those who are in Christ Jesus HAVE ENCOUNTERED THE LIVING GOD. And so they have a particular way of looking at God. And because they do, they also have a particular way of looking at all of life.]

- A. [God can/must be encountered as a Person.] If you are a Christian this morning it is not (just) because of WHAT you have believed, but because of WHOM YOU HAVE ENCOUNTERED! If you have met the living God who is bigger than all your universe, you have been introduced to the way of the 'spiritually minded.' If you have a lesser god who perhaps serves to make you healthier and wealthier and wiser, but does not fill all the Universe, then you are still "in the flesh!"

THERE IS NO 'MIDDLE GROUND:' TO BE SPIRITUALLY MINDED IS TO SEEK TO LIVE IN GOD'S REALITY. TO BE FLESHLY MINDED IS TO TRY TO SERVE A GOD WE CAN BRING INTO OUR REALITY.

- B. The challenge is to let God truly BE GOD! THIS IS NOT A NEW THING, THIS "STRUGGLE OF REALITIES." The First Commandment is still the hardest one to truly keep! NO OTHER GODS!

Every generation of God's people has had its form of "secular humanism" under one form or another. It seems so simple to follow Jesus Christ: But there are always logical, attractive, compromising alternatives to following God with all our hearts. There are many "lesser gods." There always have been.

Jesus said we are to be "In the world but not of the world." One Jewish historian saw it as a battle between the children of Zeus and the Children of YHWH: between the people who saw their gods as super-humans, needing to be placated, but serving to define the ideal Man and the ideal Woman, and the people who saw human beings as made in the image of the Invisible and Holy One who said "I AM THAT I AM" and "BE YE HOLY FOR I THE LORD YOUR GOD AM HOLY!"

IN THE WORLD! Christians can buy and sell for profit, can run computers, can compete in the marketplace and the arenas of life. "All truth is God's truth—" and certainly not all pagans are deliberately God's enemies, and not all the world outside these doors is evil. BUT NOT OF THE WORLD!

Christians are different! They have a different mind-set. They refuse to bow down and worship any Creature. Only the Creator is worthy of that loyalty.

To be Christian, then, to have one's mind set on God, MEANS THAT WE HAVE A PERSONAL, LIVING, VITAL CONNECTION WITH GOD ALMIGHTY!

IV. THE BATTLE IS WON AS WE CONTINUE TO BE PRESENT TO GOD

- A. To "be saved" is to encounter God. It is to be "present" when He calls [... and not just believing a creed or joining a church.]

- B. But to be 'being sanctified' is to continue to be "present" to God in the out-living of our lives. [I need to be careful here— careful and kind. I am dealing with some of the finest Christian people I know. People who are highly motivated and actively engaged in the work of God's kingdom.]

WHAT we do may or may not be exactly what we need to be doing. But HOW we go about doing what we do— the SPIRIT we demonstrate-, and especially WHY we go about doing what we do will reflect whether or not we really know God! That is what "mind-set on God" is all about!

- C. And there simply is no short-cut to "being present" to God. There is no "fool-proof" formula, no ritual that will not dry up and become an end in itself, no "prayer wheels" we can leave on while we go about doing as WE please. We simply have to spend some time with God. If we will take time to "be present" to God, He will dominate our lives and make us like Himself.

CONCLUSION:

When we are "in Christ" the battle is won, but it is not over. There is still suffering to face. There are weaknesses to be endured. There are separations that will come. But be assured: God IS! God LOVES YOU!

If our minds are stayed on the God who transcends, we will find that He is the God who never, ever leaves us nor forsakes us.

EH #82 Like a River Glorious

Sanctification and Suffering

Becoming Like Jesus (Romans 8) Sermon 3 of 5

1. [Mindset of Belonging](#)
2. [Holiness: A Family Resemblance](#)
3. **Sanctification and Suffering**
4. [Resurrection Hope](#)
5. [The Filling of the Holy Spirit](#)

April 8, 1990 - Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday Romans 8:16-17

"... fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him ..."

Romans 8 Series: Becoming like Christ involves more than just beautiful theory.

INTRODUCTION

This is Palm Sunday. The jubilation of the throng is recognition of Christ's divine majesty. Shining through every word Jesus ever spoke, and every deed He ever did is the fact that Jesus is King of Kings. But this is also Passion Sunday. It is time to think of how much the love of Jesus costs Him.

[We usually relegate the serious thoughts of Christ's sorrow and suffering to the Thursday and Friday services of Holy Week — and this year Holy Week is 'getaway time' for many of our people.]

On that first Palm Sunday, before He entered Jerusalem proper on the back of a donkey— before the Triumphant Entry, Jesus paused on the Mount of Olives, probably at a place opposite the Temple, and there He wept openly.

What made Jesus weep?

And what does that weeping have to do with you and me?

Does this text - "... we are fellow heirs with Jesus if indeed we suffer with Him ..." — have anything to do with Christ's sorrow on the hillside that first Passion Sunday?

I. WHAT MADE JESUS WEEP?

A. NOT THE CROSS

It was NOT the cross that made Jesus weep. "He endured the cross, despising the shame." And why? For the JOY that was set before Him. The cross was the final scene of a battle that Jesus won for all of us. Jesus did not weep because He was about to suffer.

B. NOT THE SHAME OF BEARING OUR SIN

It was NOT even the separation that was the final, keenest agony of the cross. "Don't weep for Me!" Jesus told the women that followed Him along the route to Calvary.

Jesus hated the idea of bearing sin's penalty. He prayed that if it were possible that the cup would pass from Him. He sweat as it were great drops of blood in the agony of the burden of my sins. But that is NOT why Jesus wept.

C. JESUS WEPT OVER OTHERS

JESUS WEPT OVER THE LOST! For "Jerusalem! Jerusalem! How often I would have gathered you ... but ye would NOT!" Jesus saw the suffering and sorrow and death that lay ahead for the people who would reject the salvation that only He could bring them.

II. WHAT DOES THAT WEEPING HAVE TO DO WITH YOU AND ME?

[What is the "sorrow" which we can share with Jesus?]

A. IT IS NOT SACRIFICE TO GIVE UP ANY SIN

Certainly NOT a sorrow for the sins we have had to leave behind. Some people have bought into the idea that God is GOOD, but God is NOT ANY FUN. Never ever feel sorry for people who give up their sins to follow Jesus!

B. GENUINE SACRIFICE IS NOT WORTH MORE THAN A PASSING TEAR

And don't shed more than a passing tear for the genuine sacrifices you may be called upon to make for Jesus. [Have you ever made any real sacrifice?] (See verse 18)

Jesus didn't spare Himself. He knew that there was real JOY set before Him if He endured His cross. He calls on us to take up our cross, each one. If there must be tears, let's get them over with. THAT is not what made the Master weep!

C. SHARING JESUS' SORROW IS CARING FOR OTHERS, AND PARTICULARLY FOR THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THE FATHER

The nearer we come to Jesus, the more we will see that we need to weep for the sorrows of those who refuse the Gift of Life! We need to weep for the things that made Jesus weep!

D. MOTIVATION IS EVERYTHING!

1. Weeping isn't something we can simply turn on and off like a faucet. There must be emotional involvement. We will weep over the things that really matter.
2. One must get the focus off me and mine and even ours. Even in following and serving Jesus it is all too easy to find the focus HERE. It is all too easy to want the right hand of Jesus, the place of prominence, the seat of authority.

The necessity of "building the church" or even of "witnessing" and laying aside things of this world and lesser pursuits and following Jesus— all good and to be commended— all these can still be done in order that the "I/WE" might be lifted up!

3. Can you see the purity of Jesus' motivation? On this day of celebration — in the Garden of Gethsemane— on the Via Dolorosa —and hanging on the Cross between heaven and earth, Jesus sought the salvation, the reconciliation, the peace of OTHERS!

4. IT IS (PROBABLY) IMPOSSIBLE TO CHANGE ONE'S OWN MOTIVATION

The question then is, "How can you and I submit our mixed motivation to God, and be willing to share in Christ's love for others until it breaks our hearts, and we can in some small measure share in His suffering?"

Charles Wesley prayed with his pen, and I echo him and pray his prayer for myself, and, I hope, for you:

Oh, that in me the sacred fire Might now begin to glow, Burn up the dross of base desire. And make the mountains flow!

Refining Fire, go through my heart; Illuminate my soul; Scatter Thy life through every part, And sanctify the whole.

We cannot simply decide that we shall love like Jesus and weep like Jesus and be redemptive like Jesus. But if we are willing to share in Christ's love, the love that CARES, I believe the scriptures promise us that in some measure, we may!!

[CONCLUSION:]

III. DOES JESUS CARE? IS JESUS WEAK? DOES JESUS BRING HOPE?

A. DOES JESUS CARE?

Does He care for ME, that my motives are mixed? For YOU, in your search for holiness? Certainly Jesus cares! The writer of Hebrews tells us that "Jesus, that He might sanctify (us) with His blood, suffered outside the (city) gate." Jesus suffered OUTSIDE for us! Jesus CARES for a lost world, too. Jesus died for the lost.

B. IS JESUS WEAK?

From this side of Calvary, from this side of the Resurrection— YES! Before the cross— YES! Isaiah the great prophet tells us that Jesus:

" ... 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 is silent before its shearers, So He did not open His mouth. By oppression and judgment He was taken away; And as for His generation, who considered That He was cut off out of the land of the living, For the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due? His grave was assigned with wicked men, Yet He was with a rich man in His death, Because He had done no violence, Nor was there any deceit in His mouth. But the Lord was pleased To crush Him, putting Him to grief; If He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, And the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in His hands. As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; By his knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities. Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, And he will divide the booty with the strong; Because He poured out Himself to death, And was numbered with the transgressors; Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, And interceded for the transgressors. - Isaiah 53:7-12

What a picture of weakness! What a Man of sorrows! Can we always be seeking the pathway of power when Jesus deliberately chose the way of weakness?

C. DOES JESUS BRING HOPE?

Hope for what? [What do we mean by "hope?"] That we won't have any hard times? That we will always be healed of that life- threatening disease? That we will never physically die?

Hope for what? [What do we mean by "hope?"] That if we come to Him we will somehow be His favorite children, and the rest of the world can go to hell in a handcart but that somehow we won't have to suffer?

Hope for what? That if we ask Him He will let us suffer with Him, and then reign with Him, and know the JOY that He knows? Isn't that what our text is saying?

IF WE REALLY WANT TO SHARE IN CHRIST'S PASSION, WE HAVE THE PRIVILEGE OF "GOING OUT TO JESUS":

(Hebrews 13:12-13) "Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. HENCE, LET US GO OUT TO HIM OUTSIDE THE CAMP, BEARING HIS REPROACH." [Here in the Book of Hebrews is that theme of sharing Christ's suffering, again. We begin by being willing to have our motives purified, by being willing to identify with the suffering, rejected, "out-side" Savior! We continue as His concerns and His sorrows become our very own!]

This is Palm Sunday. The jubilation of the throng was the recognition of Christ's divine majesty.

But this is also Passion Sunday. We often limit serious thoughts of Christ's sorrow and suffering to Holy Week and Good Friday.

But if we are going to let God do a work in our fellowship as well as in our individual lives, we will ask God to help us to go to Jesus, where He is [outside the gates] to see what He sees [the needs, the spiritual death of others] and we will ask the Father to have His way in us, even in OUR weakness.

[SHALL WE PRAY:]

Lord Jesus, the sin and sickness of our world is almost overwhelming! But You have taken Christ's weakness, and through His Cross You have demonstrated Your power and victory over sin and death.

Will You let us enter into Christ's weakness? Will You help us to go to Jesus and bear His reproach? Will You demonstrate Your power in Your church once again?]

EH 23 Jesus Comes with All His Grace

Resurrection Hope

Becoming Like Jesus (Romans 8) Sermon 4 of 5

1. [Mindset of Belonging](#)
2. [Holiness: A Family Resemblance](#)
3. [Sanctification and Suffering](#)
4. **Resurrection Hope**
5. [The Filling of the Holy Spirit](#)

April 15, 1990 - Easter Sunday

Romans 8:11 If the Spirit of Him Who raised up Jesus from the dead dwells in you, then He Who raised up Christ Jesus from the dead will also restore to life your mortal bodies through His Spirit Who dwells in you.

John 11:25-26 Jesus said to her, I AM Myself the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in Me, although he may die, yet shall he live. And whoever continues to live and believes in Me shall never actually die at all. Do you believe this?

[Easter] Romans 8:11

Introduction:

We have been looking into Romans 8 for several weeks now, seeking to define the word "Sanctification". We have seen that it means "Belonging to God." And we have seen that it means "Becoming like Jesus."

We do not need to take time out from this emphasis for Easter because the resurrection of our Lord is at the heart of what God wants to do IN us as well as FOR us. In every part of our salvation, our LIFE, Jesus, our Living Lord, is the KEY:

I. JESUS IS RESURRECTION LIFE!

[John 11:25] Jesus said to [Martha:] "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

Resurrection Hope

- A. Easter is all about life. Not just animation, breathing, moving about, renewal of the beauty and greening of spring. I am talking about eternal life. The kind of life that God IS.
- B. Jesus came to bring us life. [John 10:10] "I am come that (you) might have life, and that (you) might have it more abundantly." Jesus came to open the circle of eternity, and bring us into the fellowship of glory.

- 1. Jesus is the Word. He brought us a message of life from God. And Jesus still is the way, the ONLY way that we can come to know God.
- 2. The "message" is Himself. The message Jesus brought when He came to earth was not (primarily) something to learn, or a new way to behave. Certainly that was part of it. Jesus taught us how to walk and to talk and to live. But the message IS: We can come to KNOW God!

The eternal life, THE EASTER LIFE, IS in coming to know God. [John 17:2-3] [Jesus, praying to the Father in heaven:] " ... You gave HIM (speaking of Himself) authority over all mankind, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. And this is eternal life, that they may know YOU, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."

- C. Jesus has forever defeated death. That is what we celebrate this Resurrection Day morning! That first Easter Morning the stone was rolled away- NOT to let the imprisoned risen Savior out— He was already GONE. But the stone was rolled away to permit us to see that the tomb is empty. The empty tomb speaks of mighty HOPE!

II. JESUS CAME TO OFFER ETERNAL LIFE TO YOU AND ME

- A. EASTER MEANS HOPE FOR YOU. We tend to make holidays of the events of the faith we can adapt, and to ignore those we cannot.

['EASTER' RELATES TO THE WHOLE OF CHRIST'S MESSAGE OF LIFE]

Christmas is a family occasion. That isn't bad— but how often the Advent of Christ is almost totally overlooked.

Easter is a Spring Rite— and not too many walk the Lenten pathway, or follow the Via Dolorosa— not too many really put the Open Tomb in context.

Two other great Days in Christ's "message of life" to us are largely overlooked. But when the whole message is put together, we can see an open door into Everlasting LIFE!

B. EASTER IS ONLY PART OF THE PICTURE. Christ's MESSAGE OF LIFE is the sum total of all He does in our behalf. Let me quickly put these four great Days of Christ into perspective with four great WORDS:

1. The first great word is ADVENT: Jesus CAME!
2. The second great word is PASSION, which climaxes at what we call EASTER: Jesus showed us how to live, He taught us how to pray— and then He died for our sins and rose again for our justification.
3. The third great word is SESSION, which is revealed to us in PENTECOST. Where do you think Jesus is right now? (Ben: In our hearts! Right! But HOW?) Jesus is at the right hand of God the Father. We know because He has sent His Spirit to live in our hearts! No Spirit, no Session! No Spirit, no LIFE!
4. There is a FOURTH GREAT WORD! PAROUSIA! Jesus is coming again! He is to be seen by every eye! He will be acknowledged by every tongue!

C. EASTER CELEBRATION IS SAYING: "JESUS IS LORD!" It is good and right to celebrate Christmas and Easter and recall what each of them means. But they don't finally make sense- we don't get the total picture of AVAILABLE EVERLASTING LIFE until we put all Christ's MESSAGE OF LIFE together and see how Jesus IS Lord of all history, and how He wants to be Lord of each of our hearts today!

III. JESUS WANTS A HOME IN YOUR HEART

[We come now to where Easter "comes in" to our series on sanctification:]

A. Romans 8 is not just for learning, it is hope for living! And yet, here are some hints at the magnitude of the victory Jesus has won, and won for us. We see:

1. THE BIRTH OF A NEW RACE (8:22) "Pains of childbirth" indicates a new and utterly incomprehensible qualitative change in life. [Matthew 25 hints at the

scope of the New Race, i.e., "Ruler over many things."]

2. CREATION SET FREE FROM DECAY. (8:21) Free from the tendency to "wind down" and "wear out."
3. By this we understand that these poor, frail bodies will be set free from the limitations of death, illness, aging. (8:23) ... These are indications of the LIFE that "Easter" (I prefer Resurrection Day) is all about.
4. But these are GENERAL truths. They must be made PERSONAL. We have to know them in EXPERIENCE! We MAY know God personally! That is why Jesus came! [Remember John 17:2-3 ?]

B. The text speaks directly and personally about Resurrection: [Romans 8:11] If the Spirit of Him Who raised up Jesus from the dead dwells in you, then He Who raised up Christ Jesus from the dead will also restore to life your mortal bodies through His Spirit Who dwells in you.

1. Jesus wants to live IN US by His Spirit. "If the Spirit dwells in you..." Do you know what I am talking about? Do you want to know? You MAY know! Listen!
2. The Spirit is God making the truth PERSONAL. By the Spirit we come to understand that Jesus —came in ADVENT to live among us. Can you believe that? And we come to understand that Jesus - [PASSION] ... died for our sins. For YOUR sins! For MINE! Do you believe that?

It is the Spirit that makes us really believe that Jesus - [PASSION] ...was raised for our new life in Him. Has that happened to you?

And the Spirit's very Presence in conviction assures us that - [SESSION] ... Jesus is at God's right hand! He is there to channel His life and love into OUR poor, imperfect vessels.

Conclusion:

C. The text is a promise. It is the basis of Resurrection Hope.

1. Other scriptures express it other ways. St. John says that we have never SEEN Him, and yet we KNOW Him! But then John says that "When we shall see Him we shall be LIKE Him!" (I John 3:2)

Here we walk by faith, not by sight. Here we get only a glimpse of glory from time to time. It does not yet appear— we cannot fully understand what we shall be. But we shall see Him!

2. Our text uses the word "IF." It is a great promise, IF we let the Spirit of God come into our lives!

Is God welcome in YOUR life this Easter Sunday morning?

Romans 8:11 *If the Spirit of Him Who raised up Jesus from the dead dwells in you, then He Who raised up Christ Jesus from the dead will also restore to life your mortal bodies through His Spirit Who dwells in you.*

[Shall we pray:]

The Filling of the Holy Spirit

Becoming Like Jesus (Romans 8) Sermon 5 of 5

1. [Mindset of Belonging](#)
2. [Holiness: A Family Resemblance](#)
3. [Sanctification and Suffering](#)
4. [Resurrection Hope](#)
5. **The Filling of the Holy Spirit**

April 22, 1990

Romans 8:9 " ... if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him."

Introduction:

Defining Sanctification

We may scripturally define the "sanctified life" as Belonging to God, and as Becoming Like Jesus. But we may also define sanctification as Being Filled with the Holy Spirit.

We can understand the concept of belonging to God. We can even understand becoming (more and more) like Jesus Christ. But what does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit?

Somehow this seems to mean many different things to different groups or individuals. Like the blind men and the elephant, all too often we seize on some facet of truth and make it the controlling emphasis of our thought on this matter of critical importance.

We emphasize the gifts of the Spirit and we compare and contrast them to the fruit of the Spirit. We debate about the manifestations of the Spirit, and we discuss heatedly about the baptism and the infilling of the Spirit. These are all vital and important topics.

But in the meantime very little is said about the Spirit Himself. And for good reason—for not too much is known about this mysterious Person of the Godhead.

I. WHO IS THE HOLY SPIRIT?

- A. One way to grasp the truth about the Holy Spirit is to see what the Bible calls Him, or more particularly what He is called right here in this chapter. He is called:

[verse 2] The Spirit of life [verse 9] The Spirit of God [verse 9] The Spirit of Christ [verse 11] The Spirit of Him Who raised Jesus from the dead [verse 14] The Spirit of God [verse 15] The Spirit of Adoption

- B. The Holy Spirit is MYSTERY. God is always Holy Mystery. But this is particularly true of the Third Person of the Trinity.

(Revelation 4:5 Speaks of the "seven Spirits of God," and describes them as lamps of fire burning before the Throne. But the Glorified Savior is described as a Lion and as a Lamb; both of these mysteries of faith are Persons of the Godhead, and not to be lightly treated in our minds and imagination, but rather, reverently worshiped.)

- C. We can be sure that the Holy Spirit is like Jesus. Jesus called Him "another Comforter." The Holy Spirit is God in the normal living of Christian faith.

1. He IS power for extraordinary manifestation; and
2. He is ENABLING for special assignments large and small. But most of all, best of all,
3. He is also A COMPANION IN DAY BY DAY LIVING.
4. The Holy Spirit comes to make JESUS real. He comes to glorify Jesus.

[Illustration: Mildred Bangs Wyncoop tells of a student rising to his feet in a college chapel to say, "I've found something better than the Lordship of Jesus! I have found the Spirit!" And she goes on to say, that is NOT what the scriptures say!]

What DO the scriptures say? (John 16:13 But when He, the Spirit of truth is come, He will guide you into all truth. for He will not speak of Himself, but what He hears, He will speak. And He will show you things to come. He shall glorify ME; for He shall take

of Mine and disclose it to you.) The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Jesus. But what does the Spirit DO in our lives?

II. WHAT DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT DO IN OUR SANCTIFICATION?

A. Romans 8 tells us a number of practical things about the Spirit's ministry to us:

1. (verse 2) As the Spirit of life, HE SETS US FREE in Christ Jesus FROM THE LAW OF SIN AND DEATH.
2. (verse 5 and 9) As the Spirit of God (context) HE ENABLES BELIEVERS TO SET THEIR MINDS ON THE THINGS OF THE SPIRIT. This can also be coupled with (verse 13): ...by the Spirit (we) are PUTTING TO DEATH THE DEEDS OF THE FLESH.
3. (verse 11) As the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead, HE ASSURES US OF ETERNAL LIFE.
4. (verse 16) As the Spirit of adoption, HE BEARS WITNESS WITH OUR SPIRITS THAT WE ARE GOD'S CHILDREN. He brings ASSURANCE!
5. (verse 26) HE HELPS US IN OUR WEAKNESS. [If we have any!]
6. (verse 26 & 27) HE MAKES INTERCESSION FOR US; He helps us pray, or He actually prays FOR us.

B. How does this translate, practically?:

[A 'SUB-SERMON' HERE, using the outline REAL WORLD, REAL PEOPLE, REAL POWER:]

1. REAL WORLD! THE SPIRIT KEEPS OUR FAITH SWEET AND PURE IN THIS REAL WORLD. Many kinds of faith would seem to work under ideal conditions, or textbook situations. But conditions are never ideal. (Verse 22) "For we know that THE WHOLE CREATION GROANS AND SUFFERS PAINS OF CHILDBIRTH TOGETHER UNTIL NOW." We have to live in a groaning, suffering world. [WORLD OF "FUZZY GRAYS!"]

The freedom and the assurance of the Spirit help the Spirit-filled Christian to find it increasingly possible to live with life as it really is

(the paradox of reality:) (verses 23) Even the Spirit-filled Christians groan as we await the fullness of glory.

In other words, we can have a child-like faith that is not childish. The mature, Spirit-filled Christian knows groaning which cannot be uttered; but he or she also knows that the Spirit is there to make intercession.

What does it mean to hear: "Blessed are the poor in Spirit (Matthew 5)" and at the same time hear "You are complete in Christ, seated with Him in power (Colossians 2:10, 3:1)"? or how can we reconcile "God is Sovereign: His Will MUST be done" and at the same time "You and I have Free Will: We are 'Free Moral Agents.'"??

Part of this mature child-likeness will ponder the imponderable questions, like: "Why do the righteous suffer?" and "What about the billions who will never hear of Jesus Christ before they die?"

2. REAL PEOPLE! THE SPIRIT HELPS US TO BE REAL PEOPLE. The Spirit helps us IN our weakness and infirmity. Some preaching I have heard seems to say that the Spirit-filled Christian doesn't HAVE any weakness any more. The Spirit is POWER— so any weakness indicates a moral lack.

But verse 26 indicates clearly both weakness AND ignorance. But it tells us that the Spirit will HELP the one, and INTERCEDE for the other.

Our natural tendency is to cover up our failures. Certainly there is no virtue in parading them before one another. But God wants us to be REAL.

[Illustration: Someone ought to write a story about a community where everyone wore masks every time they came together in order to fit a special edition of a Script they all revered.

They were subtle masks— almost always smiling— and they fit well, most of the time. But as these people lived together the masks didn't grow along with the problems of everyday living. And when the real people emerged from behind the masks, no one in the fellowship knew who these people really were— and they didn't even recognize themselves— for there was confusion as to which was mask and which was real— or if there even was a real ... is such a story a possibility for someone to write?]

Beyond the normal and necessary courtesies of politeness, we need to learn to live without sham. [Not everyone wants a full organ recital when they say, "How are you?"!!] Somehow we need to come to see that God loves us in spite of our faults and weakness. If we dare to open up to Him, He will HELP us in our weakness. If we don't have any weakness, we don't need any help! If we know HOW to pray all the time, we may not need the Holy Spirit to groan for us!

Somehow I am certain: God wants us to be REAL!

3. REAL POWER! THE SPIRIT LEADS US INTO THE MINISTRY OF COMPLETENESS. Remember, the ministry of completeness reflects a basic concept of God. (Verse 31) If God is for us (NO ONE) can be against us!

Somewhere in the backs of our minds we have hidden something that we heard somewhere in Sunday School class— that God made all the beautiful things like the sun, moon and stars, but then God was lonely. So out of His loneliness and need God said, "I will make man so that I can have fellowship!"

That may sound nice— but it isn't true. And it is very dangerous. GOD COULD NEVER LACK ANYTHING! It sounds nice to say "God has no hands but our hands!" and there is an element— a paradox— of truth in that statement of God's "need."

But we need to remember that God the Lord is GOD! God is Sovereign! God is complete!

And when His Spirit dwells in us, we share in His love and His completeness! So when we serve and minister, it is not with the idea of building goodness, or earning merit, or even seeking to save our own souls, but rather we must give and serve from LOVE, like God!

The Spirit leads us, in all our weakness and ignorance, to serve in the power of God's might, and in the clarity of His will, and in the provision of His power. (Verse 31-32) What shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?"

III. HOW MAY YOU AND I BE SANCTIFIED WHOLLY ?

A. MAKE SURE THAT WE BELONG TO GOD. (Consecrate)

Objects can be consecrated without their consent. People need to give themselves. If there are hindrances or other claims on your life, this claim will supersede. (Romans 12:1,2)

B. MAKE IT OUR AIM TO BE LIKE JESUS. (Ask, Seek, Knock)

Different people will tell you different things about being filled with the Spirit. But there is nothing higher than being like Jesus. Ask God to bring that to pass in your life and you can be certain that you are asking according to His will (Philippians 2:5)

C. WE MUST GET FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT AND STAY FILLED.

(Romans 12:1, Luke 11:13, Ephesians 5:18) It isn't hard to be sanctified when you are ready to say "YES" to God! The thing is to STAY filled— day by day! To "be BEING filled!"

PRAYER: Help us dare to ASK for what we need!

#38 EH Come, Holy Spirit

The Crooked Yoke

May 6, 1990 PM

2 Corinthians 6:14 - 7:1

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temples of the living God. As

God has said:

"I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."

"Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you."

"I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Introduction: The message of Jesus Christ to fallen mankind is a message of liberation, of hope, and of freedom. In Colossians (2:20 — 3:1) Paul writes: "If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees ... in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? ... If then you have been raised with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God."

And so a message which says "Do!" or "Don't!" seems to be a contradiction to that freedom and liberty. [It is NOT! Trust the Spirit! He hates legalism and grudging service! He is the Spirit of Christ and of God and of love!]

What does it mean to obey: Come out from among them and be separate? Is this valid for today? Is this a "Nazarene" problem?

Clarify "separate" and the motivations for "separation."

I. THIS IS A MESSAGE OF LOVE, NOT LIMITATION

- A. This message is not to unbelievers but to God's children. God doesn't begin His great salvation by saying: "I want to make you my child, so for the rest of your life you have to be different from everybody else— (different=weird)!" He starts by saying: "I DON'T WANT YOU IN BONDAGE TO ANYONE!"

The people who are in bondage in this world are those who have never met God in Jesus Christ. The Bible says that all sinners are slaves to sin!

- B. THE MESSAGE IS MORE A STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLE THAN A LIST OF RULES.

1. There is probably a proper time for all children to learn life-rules; growing up in our society or any society we teach children, "DO this because I say so!" or "DON'T do that!" We don't let six-year-olds get driver's license— we don't allow thirteen-year-olds to marry, usually. There are good reasons.
2. But with growing maturity comes growing personal responsibility for personal choices. We think: "Now I am able to make my own choices!"

- C. BUT IT IS CLEAR, AND STRAIGHT: COME OUT FROM AMONG THEM AND BE SEPARATE! DO NOT BE UNEQUALLY YOKED TOGETHER WITH UNBELIEVERS!

1. How are we to receive such a word? The message of separation is spoken to believers.
2. It is not a message of salvation. We do not separate in order to be saved. We are saved by grace: "just as I am, without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me."

[In answering that question ("How shall we receive such a word...") Paul asks several questions. One of them is ...]

D. WHAT DOES A BELIEVER HAVE IN COMMON WITH AN UNBELIEVER?

1. One answer is ... quite a bit, actually! We are human ... we have families to raise ... we hurt the same ways.
2. Perhaps in our day the question might be turned around: What does a believer NOT have in common? What is it that is offended by being unequally yoked?

That one sacred thing A LOYALTY TO GOD AS FATHER AND A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST AS SAVIOR.

THE PERSONAL LOVE OF GOD! IT IS LIFE, ETERNAL LIFE— the reality of knowing God. It is precious. It must be nourished. To "believe" is not just a matter of facts we know— To believe— to be able to believe— is precious! It must be nourished.

It is hard to describe, perhaps— but it is unmistakable:

[I ran into Mrs. M told me how she had been raised in an extremely conservative setting by a strict religious order. She "knew" that all other churches were wrong. Then the Holy Spirit showed her the difference between "churches" and "sects." He seemed to tell her that the heart of the matter is the Lord Jesus Christ. I believe this insight to be valid! This is the one thing that believers and unbelievers do NOT have in common.]

It was a thrill to sense the acceptance and one-ness of this Protestant pastor and that very Catholic lay-woman.

II. THIS PASSAGE IS A CALL TO LIBERATION, NOT TO BONDAGE

- A. A. The command is: DON'T BE YOKED! ["Don't stick your neck in a noose!"] WHAT DOES BEING YOKED MEAN? Certainly it is neither possible nor desirable to have nothing to do with unbelievers.

But to be YOKED means to enter into binding, intimate, partnership relationships with people that fundamentally disagree with what is most important and vital to our very lives!

One kind of UNEQUAL YOKE would be to marry someone who did not love Christ! This all too often leads to real sorrow!

But there are many relationships and intimacies that will challenge the firstness of the Christ-relationship. We are called to take Jesus Christ with us into every part of our lives.

OUR INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS MUST NOT DENY WHAT WE REALLY ARE!

[Another question asked here is:]

B. B. WHAT AGREEMENT IS THERE BETWEEN THE TEMPLE OF GOD AND IDOLS?

C. How is this question relevant?

1. We know the temple is not a building. But perhaps the building itself can illustrate the point. Would we have purely social times in this building? Would we allow worship of idols?

2. There are things which are appropriate at certain times and in certain places. there are other things which are never appropriate, anywhere, ever. We need to be careful in blurring all distinctions between "sacred" and "profane" that we do not "homogenize life" in a way that is theoretical and sad and deadly.

[1. is there a sacred and a profane? 2. if all of life is sacred, what do we do with vulgarity? 3. where do we put the garbage cans? 4. what is the difference between garbage and poison? Both must be disposed of— one is deadly.]

3. Is bringing someone else's idol into the house of God ever appropriate? ... under what circumstances?

[Properly, I would be angry to have someone promote worship of some 'deity ' that pretends to equality with Jesus Christ. I would not tolerate it here in this place, dedicated to the worship of God. But ...]

4. If we wouldn't feel comfortable about doing some things here in God's "house" what, then, about bringing profanity and vulgarity and values antagonistic to

Jesus into the corridors of our minds? What about holding on and letting go of questionable things? What about toying with X-rated videos? What about tolerating suggestive thoughts? What about greed and envy and hatred? DO WE HAVE TO SIN IN THOUGHT? IS IT REALLY NECESSARY TO COMMIT ADULTERY OR TO COVET OR TO HATE IN OUR MINDS SIMPLY BECAUSE WE ARE 'HUMAN'?

[Transition: SO, WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO OBEY: COME OUT FROM AMONG THEM AND BE SEPARATE? Is this valid for today? Is this a "Nazarene" problem? Is it even a viable possibility, to think that we can separate our minds and bodies from the filth of the pervading sins of our time?

[Of course it is possible! I CLOSE WITH AN OBVIOUS OUTLINE FROM II COR. 7:1 — "Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God."]

III. THE CALL AND THE PROMISE ARE FOR CLEANSING

[How may we begin to comprehend the richness of being a child of God, in good standing and fellowship, having His divine approval on our lives?

How may we be so unbelieving as to think it makes no difference how we live in relation to how we fellowship with the Father?

How may we expect to be life-sharing, world-changing, Christ-revealing people when we are absolutely no different from the world we seek to serve?

How can we call ourselves God's children when we, ourselves, sit upon the throne of our little kingdoms, and refuse to have God tell us anything we do not first want to hear?]

- A. As believers we are called to A PURIFYING! ("Having these promised, BELOVED, let us cleanse ourselves ...")

Such a cleansing is possible, or the imperative would not be here. We can be set free from the garbage piles of the day and age into the freedom of pure fellowship with God.

B. We are called to be active in this cleansing process:

Only God can sanctify— but here the imperative is "Purify yourselves!" Take some initiative! Get out of the manure piles of the world!

C. The secret to cleansing is CONTROL!

Dare to turn things over to God! We think we have a Nazarene problem... when in fact we have a "control" problem. We (naturally) do not want ANYONE to tell us what is good for us. If we will cooperate with God, He will purify from "all defilement;" OF FLESH (anything that keeps us from pleasing God in our "BODY", FLESH") AND SPIRIT! (God can even deal with our attitudes and motives!)

CONCLUSION: Listen to these words again— not as a challenge, now, to reprobate sinners, or to rebels— but as a loving call to God's own dear children:

"Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.

"I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Will you ask God to perfect His work of holiness in your heart and life, beginning just now?

#246 Is Thy Heart Right With God?

The King and the Kingdom

May 6, 1990 AM

Matthew 6:33 *But seek first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness...*

Psalms 93:1-5; 97:1; 99:1

To think of God as King- to say that Jesus Christ is the King of Kings- may not have the impact that the words deserve.

[Did the children reflect our own thinking at all?] To say that God finally gets His will sounds foreign to our ears. But the Bible clearly teaches us that God is Sovereign.

The doctrine of the sovereignty of God is not particularly popular because it reveals God as God— not the servant of man's ambitions. The man or woman in the street has another deity that shouts like hell itself whenever the idea rises that there is one great, Almighty God Who has the right, by creation and by the purchase of redemption, to see that all this Universe finally does His will.

The idea of a Sovereign God does not lend itself to manipulating God for selfish reasons. And if all holiness and goodness and salvation come from Him the idea of a sovereign God removes all provision for earning salvation.

Perhaps we want to think of God as the perfect President of the perfect democracy. We have elected Him, and we can go along as we choose with His administration. If anything goes wrong, blame God!

But we didn't elect Him! From beginning to end, the Bible declares that God is sovereign, and that Jesus Christ is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The Bible declares a God who IS. [The late Francis Schaeffer wrote a book called, *The God Who IS THERE*.] What I say will not change the fact of God. What you believe God to be will not alter the objective fact of God.

Three Psalms begin with (what we could call) an Old Testament statement of God's sovereignty: "The Lord Reigneth!"

(93, 97, & 99) I use these opening statements just now as a framework on which to focus the claims of Jesus Christ as Sovereign Lord from the New Testament (and no apology!). First the statement itself: The Lord reigneth!

I. THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

"The LORD reigneth!" [Jesus said: "All authority is given unto Me in heaven and in earth" (Matthew 28:18)]

A. This is present-tense truth Not "shall one day reign" ... but even NOW He is in charge.

Certainly that raises many questions. We hold God accountable for all the injustices of the world in our puny courts of logic. I do not defend God— that is as foolish as defending the sun when people throw mud at it. And I know it is a statement of faith, but I do declare: God IS and God is GOOD!

B. The LORD himself is in charge. Not some intermediate power, and not some impersonal force. Jesus declares that the authority is given to Him! It makes a difference when we pray. God cares when we speak with Him. The cry of our hearts is heard at the center of all authority.

C. To believe otherwise is to live in a pre-Copernican age, spiritually.

1. We have a God-centered universe. The Universe is not centered around ME, or around YOU— or even around the human race!
2. The universe is not here by mere chance, or chaos. "The heavens declare the glory of God," Psalm 19. The personality of man in its highest capabilities echoes the image of God ["Let us make man in our image" Genesis 1:26].

Even though the finest minds in philosophy and science cannot finally provide adequate theories to allow us to understand unifying patterns of all we can observe of creation, the Bible gives us this word which we may choose to believe: The LORD is in charge of His universe!

II. THE MAJESTY OF GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

"He is clothed with majesty!" (Psalm 93:1) [Jesus declared: "Before Abraham was, I AM! (John 8:58)]

- A. How can we speak of the transcendent majesty of God? I pity those who cannot see His hand in the heavens. We do not worship creation. But creation speaks to us of a Creator. (Springtime of all times of the year, speaks to us of God!)
- B. The Psalmist sees God as unperturbed by the noise of many waters. He is not a figurehead ruler; the disasters and appalling happenings that threaten our very sanity are not beyond His control. (93:5) We may depend on God's WORD!

III. THE MERCY OF GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

"Let the earth rejoice!" (97:1) [Jesus said: "I am come that they might have life..." (John 10:10)]

- A. [Majesty is not always synonymous with caring, but] THIS majestic (transcendent) One is also involved with a people which He calls His own. This great God "preserves the soul of His saints" (v10) Certainly there is MYSTERY here! But God will make Himself known to us all. If we SEEK, we shall FIND. IF we will listen, God will speak.
- B. This great God "preserves the soul of His saints." (v10) He takes care of His own!
 - 1. To say that God overcomes evil is not a simplistic statement. We may never understand all that is involved here. I sincerely believe that we do not need to become experts in evil— but true Christians are specialists in belonging to God.
 - 2. God's people are called to a clear clean separation from evil. (v 10) "Ye that love the Lord, hate evil." [It is a mark of low spiritual attainment to continually ask 'What is wrong with this?' or 'Can I do that and be a Christian?' The person who loves the Lord lives in order to draw nearer to Him. What offends the Holy Spirit offends those who are His temple.]
 - 3. The LORD (Himself) is the touchstone of that righteousness. (v 12) "Rejoice in the LORD!" Not the certainty that we are "right."

I am interested in democratic process and in doing what I can in saving the United States of America. But God is NOT American, and He is not committed to preserving our way of life as WE see fit. God may well be more interested in you than he is in any institution! If I understand the teachings of Jesus, YOU will be alive and conscious

long after the United States of America is ancient history! The church of Jesus Christ will be Christ's BODY eternally! Are you in tune with that fact?

IV. THE MIGHT OF GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

"Let the people tremble!" (99:1) (From Revelation 1:17-18) John the Beloved says "I fell at His feet as a dead man." And Jesus, the glorified Savior King lays his hand on John and says: Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last, and the Living One; and I was dead, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of hades."

- A. The Old Testament Psalm gives us just a glimpse of God seated between the cherubim. Majestic, YES! LOVING, certainly! But staggering the earth in His holiness. He is executing judgment in Jacob. (v 4) The God who is faithful in nature and in creation ...faithful in mercy and lovingkindness .. faithful and just to forgive when we confess our sins ... is also faithful in judgment.

The first part of the New Testament is mostly about the earthly ministry of Jesus, the meek and lowly Nazarene. But that is not how the New Testament ends!

- B. All mankind shall be judged by our response to the Word Christ brought into this world, A word of love and of justice. Christ's love and Christ's justice are not decided democratically. We begin to define them and to understand them only as we come down off the throne of our own kingdoms, and acknowledge Him Lord.

Because He is King, we stand or fall in His Kingdom by our identification with Him (in FACT, and not just superficially by mental agreement). There are no part-time Christians, no compromises are accepted.

It is by our belonging to Him that He makes us His own! Anything less than a total belonging to God brings us into conflict with His great purpose. And this should cause us to tremble at this "Sovereign God."

To think of the holiness of God is reason to tremble. For there is NO holiness apart from God. ONLY God is holy! All holiness is HIS! But there is GRACE! God accepts sinners! In fact He ONLY accepts sinners!

CONCLUSION:

Why speak of this [God's Sovereignty] at all?

- A. Maybe I am doing some recruiting! It might be that to think of the greatness and goodness and holiness of God would prompt somebody here to seek repentance and a drawing near to Him.

This great King never violates your right to choose! He makes that CHOICE your privilege! By certain that your relationship with Him is right, You can join in rejoicing that God, the LORD, is King!

- B. Certainly as an act of worship! I have tried in a pitifully small way to lift up the sovereignty of God so that we might desire to exercise our highest privilege, of (ongoing) worship.

We do not have to wait until Sunday to tell God we love Him! We don't have to wait until we die to sing God's praises! Somehow I feel that when a humble boy or girl or man or woman really worships, there is an echo that sounds throughout eternity! GOD TAKES NOTICE!

Pray with me:

The Dawn Treaders

A sermon about The High Road of Love, Sex, and Marriage

May 13, 1990

Ephesians 4:29 - 5:10 Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. AND BE KIND TO ONE ANOTHER, TENDER-HEARTED, FORGIVING EACH OTHER, JUST AS GOD IN CHRIST ALSO HAS FORGIVEN YOU.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.

But do not let immorality or any impurity or greed even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.

For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.

Therefore do not be partakers with them; for you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth) trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.

Introduction: Ephesians 4 is one of the Golden Chapters of the Bible:

I. CHRISTIANS IN RELATIONSHIP

- A. After statements of lofty principle we come to PRACTICAL GUIDELINES FOR LOVING CHRISTIAN CONDUCT. Our speech is to be uplifting (edification .. giving grace to those who hear). Our attitude is to be that of kindness and forgiveness, not bitter or angry. Our actions are to be gentle and Christlike.
- B. The key to Christian conduct is A PERSONAL CONTACT WITH GOD:(1) Do not grieve the Holy Spirit (4:30); (2) Do be forgiving as God in Christ has forgiven you (4:32); and (3) Do be imitators of God the Father (5:1), as His dear children.

II. DANGERS OF BEING DECEIVED

- A. These instructions are more than just suggestions. They have clear prohibitions attached as well:

(From the text, 5:3-5) But do not let immorality or any impurity or greed even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. That is clear enough.
- B. To be engaged in on-going breaking of these prohibitions is to sever oneself from inheritance in the kingdom of God, along with the clear warning of (5:6): Let no one deceive you with vain words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. God expects His children to be different from people who disregard His clear teachings. God wants His children to "walk as children of light!" We are to be Dawn Treaders!

III. CHALLENGES TO ACCEPTED TEACHING

- A. A. Christians who are serious about following Jesus Christ must brace for THE CHALLENGE OF OUR POST-CHRISTIAN ERA. The "capital" of assumed piety left over from the simpler days of the McGuffey Reader has all been used up long ago.

We cannot depend on government or on public opinion. We may well see a revival of religious fervor in our time that does NOT include Christian faith. For Christian faith is not compatible with other religions. We must seek to be as loving and acceptant as Jesus Himself, while at the same time truly heed what He said: I AM the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except by Me.

B. B. EVERY TENET OF OUR FAITH IS BEING CALLED INTO QUESTION. To say that we accept Bible teaching as a standard for living is to come first into ridicule and then into violent opposition. THIS IS ESPECIALLY TRUE IN WHAT WAS ONCE THE VERY HUSH-HUSH REALM OF HUMAN SEXUALITY.

C. C. SEX HAS not only come out of the closet, it has in many regards TAKEN CENTER STAGE IN THE ARENAS OF LIFE. When I began my ministry IN 1956, in keeping with the mores of the culture to which I ministered, I probably would not have used the word "sex" in a sermon. It is very difficult for us to grasp just how far we have come in down many roads in 36 years.

[It seems almost silly that there was a flap over the use of the phrase, "I don't give a damn" in a major movie. Now, so far as I can discern, there is no garbage too filthy to be spoken and shown from movie screens or theater productions and the like.

D. D. Particularly, THE PREVIOUSLY ACCEPTED CONCEPT OF SEX BEING SANCTIONED ONLY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MARRIAGE OF ONE MAN TO ONE WOMAN IS UNDER SERIOUS ATTACK.

1. 1. Popular magazines and television sit-coms alike glamorize adultery, pre-marital sex, and all the things we used to call sin and perversion.
2. 2. The word homophobia is now being used as a bludgeon to attack anyone who disagrees with liberal lobbies. Until 1973 the American Psychiatric Association officially regarded homosexuality as a condition to be treated, an abnormality. How the American Psychiatric Association was "lobbied" is a matter of public record. Now anyone who disagrees with the idea that homosexuality is a normal, acceptable "alternative lifestyle" is accused of homophobia.

[Perhaps we ought to push a new word: homophobia-phobia. The fear of speaking the truth on any sexual matter because of fear of the opposition we will surely face. Before we were attacked with homophobia-phobia it was possible to be discuss and disagree without being considered hateful to individuals. Now all Bible-guided Christians are "bigots" and "fundamentalists" and worse.]

3. 3. A great deal is assumed about sex. To see things in the media— TV or the printed page— makes it easy to assume that what is shown or printed is the "norm." We should have enough sense to realize that just because TV makes people look happy and attractive doesn't make it so. Too much of our thinking is shaped by too few unregenerate people.

[Kinsey is NOT the final authority on sexuality, the Bible IS: [Paul Gebhard and Alan B. Johnson, in a book called, The Kinsey Data, say that Kinsey used a very large number of prisoners in his data. Abraham Maslow is quoted as saying to Kinsey that his volunteers were not representative of society. I believe Kinsey gives a distorted view of American sexual behavior and belief.]

4. 4. We must know what we believe and not be timid about teaching it to our children. The air-headed idea that children should wait until they are 18 to decide what and whom to worship and believe would be silly if the world were a spiritual vacuum, which it most definitely is NOT. If we do not know Christ ourselves, AND IF WE DO NOT INTRODUCE OUR CHILDREN TO JESUS, we will lose our children, and we won't need to wait to die to go to hell.

Already in some public schools there is mandatory sexual education where it is taught that homosexuality is a normal and even desirable appetite. [I cite Congressman William Dannemeyer, from California, who has written a book, Shadow in the Land, printed by the respected Ignatius Press, a Roman Catholic book house. Congressman Dannemeyer has been under attack himself as being "obsessed with attacking homosexuals." Just this week

the Globe ran a prominent article, largely pejorative, with lengthy quotes from spokesmen for gay and lesbian organizations.

Our old, accepted, scriptural values are under attack, make no doubt about it!

IV. CALL TO CHRIST-CENTERED LOVING [Conclusion:]

- A. WE CAN HAVE CLEAR TEACHING ON LOVE, SEX, AND THE FAMILY OF GOD, if we are prepared to live in a God-centered world and reject the me-ism that is glamorized in every public medium of communication. If we will accept the Bible as God's Word, we can find sound instruction as to how to live in these troubled times.
- B. THAT TEACHING INCLUDES CLEAR PROHIBITIONS: NO sex outside marriage, and such sex is always sin, no matter how right it "feels." There are names for sex outside of marriage— ugly names that have been mostly forgotten. In this day of explicit and graphic realism we need to say those names: sex before marriage is fornication; sex by a married person with anyone other than husband or wife is adultery; sex with members of the same sex is sodomy.
- C. SEX AND MARRIAGE ARE NOT THE SAME. The symbol or token of God's dealings with His beloved people all through the Bible is not just sex, but the intimacy of marriage. God loves His people with an intimacy that has covenant commitment. The Church is the Bride of Christ, and she must be true to Him. Each Christian is committed, married to God, and TO BE FAITHLESS TO GOD IS TO COMMIT SPIRITUAL ADULTERY.
- D. Marriage is based on these four things: (1) promise. (2) exclusivity. (3) gender. "For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave unto his wife, and they two shall be one." (4) permanence. "Until death do us part." Only as these vows be held as sacred, and as the Church and the community at large keep these uncompromisingly as the foundation for Christian marriage can society abide.
- E. But to save ourselves, and to live clean in a fallen world is not (quite) an end to our Christian responsibility in this matter of love, sex, and marriage:

WE ARE TO SEEK TO BE A REDEMPTIVE FORCE IN A FALLEN WORLD. We cannot simply ask God to help us keep our skirts clean and silently hope

that the wicked world will hurry up and leap into hell. For as a matter of fact, people who are wrestling with these issues are our own loved ones.

HOW ARE WE TO THINK ABOUT "HOMOSEXUALS?" Is it wishful thinking to say that we can and must distinguish between the person and the things a person may do?

We must hold out the hand of fellowship to homosexuals, but we cannot compromise in our condemnation of all homosexual acts. There is a critical distinction between these two things.

- F. WE ARE ALL CALLED TO BE GOD'S DEAR CHILDREN, "CHILDREN OF LIGHT," DAWN TREADERS! We must first be pure ourselves, and then we can help our society in its deep need.

If you are in a sexual affair— whether adulterous or fornication or homosexual— it cannot end except badly, with people getting hurt.

But BY GOD'S GRACE YOU CAN BE HELPED, you can do the right thing, YOU CAN BE RIGHT WITH GOD! I am not preaching a simplistic, "easy believe-ism," but I am confident that God is able to clean you up, inside and out.

Our text says, in part: Therefore do not be partakers with them; FOR YOU WERE FORMERLY DARKNESS, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light ! (5:8)

Listen to this (a similar) passage from I Corinthians 6: (9- 11) "Do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate [margin: effeminate by perversion], nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

"AND SUCH WERE SOME OF YOU; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God."

Every one of us here has done things in the past for which we are ashamed. We are sinners by birth, and have been sinners by choice. But we are called to walk with

God. We are called to holiness for that very purpose- to walk with a loving God in covenant relationship. As a people, and each one in our own lives- - let us heed that call.

Shall we pray.

Anticipating Pentecost

May 20, 1990

Text: 1 Peter 4:7-19 "The end of all things is at hand... be sober and watch unto prayer..."

But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer. And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins. Use hospitality one to another without grudging. As every man hath received the gift, [even so] minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If any man speak, [let him speak] as the oracles of God; if any man minister, [let him do it] as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy [are ye]; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or [as] a thief, or [as] an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. Yet if [any man suffer] as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.

For the time [is come] that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if [it] first [begin] at us, what shall the end [be] of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? Wherefore let them that suffer according

*to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls [to him] in well doing,
as unto a faithful Creator. —*

Peter is the writer— the 'preacher' here in this text passage. I cannot help but think that Peter had in mind the greatest prayer meeting he had ever been in when he told his church "Be sober and watch unto prayer!" He remembered when the Master had told him: "Things will never be the same again! But if you'll watch in prayer, I will come to you!" Peter was thinking of the great prayer meeting that anticipated the first Pentecost of the Church.

Since His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus had been with the disciples- but not all the time. Beginning with His appearance to Mary in the garden and the two on the Road to Emmaus, these weeks had been a wonderful and yet solemn "mystery time" when Jesus was teaching his disciples how they really had to know Him by faith.

Sometimes I wonder if Jesus was not "commuting" during this time. He was seen of those whose faith received Him. Above 500 people at once had seen the Lord.

But now He took His beloved disciples to a hill overlooking the magnificent temple Herod had built. Below was the 'eastern gate' that He had entered on His triumphal entry seven weeks before. He blessed them, and He told them He was now going to leave them, but then He said to them: (beginning at Luke 24: 49)

"Behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high." And he led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy: And were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God. Amen.

[THE TEN DAY PRAYER MEETING WAS ABOUT TO BEGIN]

I. 'THE END OF ALL THINGS IS AT HAND'

"But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer..."

A. HOW NEAR IS THE END? "(v 7) The END of all things is at hand"

1. In the days immediately after His Passion Jesus had predicted drastic things ahead for Jerusalem- certainly things were not going to be the same as they were — and as a matter of fact Jerusalem would 'cease to exist' as the Jewish capital in less than 40 years! Jesus had GONE, but He had gone with a COMMISSION and with a PROMISE, an enabling promise that Peter had experienced. He wanted everyone that he knew to experience that same enabling.

So here is Peter, in later years, echoing the warning: "The end of all things is at hand! Watch unto prayer!" How is this relevant today, in 1990?

2. How can we say "The end is at hand!"? For us here and now? Isn't it only the fanatics and cranks go around saying "The end is near!"??

In every age Christians need to ponder the transience of all of life. Nothing stands still. Every relationship moves, and becomes either better or worse. But perhaps this has special meaning in this day of ours.

If we don't have cancer, and if we have a little money in the bank to tide us over.. we forget that life is transient. "AIDS" doesn't raise the mortality rate one percentage point! Wars do not finally mean that more people die than if there were no wars! NOT ONE OF US IS GOING TO GET OUT OF THIS WORLD ALIVE! [Well, one day there will be a generation that does!]

Yes, we're in this race for the long haul! Yes, we need to find God's abiding peace. But we need a sense of urgency, along with the peace that passes understanding!

- B. Every generation faces the same situation: we are on the one-way road to eternity. The end of many things is looking us in the face. It is not easy to know who is and who is not... values have been turned upside down ... frightening forces in innocent disguise are enough to make us all paranoid.

II. OUR FAITH WILL BE TESTED

(v 12) "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you..."

- A. For some of our brothers and sisters throughout the world today this trial takes the form of physical intimidation, hunger, poverty. Mozambique, Central America, China, Albania—it takes stand-out courage to take a Christian stand there.
- B. But it may be that our testing is the hardest of all! Slowly, bit-by-bit, our values are eroded, our sacred commitments are questioned, our courage challenged in little increments. It is never easy to be loyal to God! It is often lonely!

III. OUR GOD IS ABLE TO KEEP US, AND TO CHANGE OUR WORLD THROUGH US

(v 19) "Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls [to him] in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator."

- A. WATCH UNTO PRAYER: Peter is here saying: Keep in mind the assignment— the purpose for which we are here at in the first place. Prayer is reaching out to God to receive His good promises.
- B. RECONCILE OUR HEARTS! (vv 8,9) "And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins. Use hospitality one to another without grudging. As every man hath received the gift, [even so] minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

This was the first lesson of the ten-day prayer meeting! "ABOVE ALL!" WE NEED TO STICK TOGETHER! LOVE! HOSPITALITY!

- C. CLEAR THE DECKS! Use all the means of grace! For all our great light and blessings WE ARE ACCOUNTABLE! (v 17) "For the time [is come] that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if [it] first [begin] at us, what shall the end [be] of them that obey not the gospel of God?
- D. THE "ANSWER" THE DISCIPLES RECEIVED is the same one JOB received: the PRESENCE— and that Presence is here, now— in the sacrament of communion:

Conclusion:

Imagine with me the state of mind, the thoughts, the expectations of the disciples in that period between the time that Jesus went away and the Holy Spirit came to them with assurance and power! It was a heart-searching time between Ascension and Pentecost:

1. there was an expectancy
2. there was a seeking after unity
3. there was a commitment not to stop seeking until the Promise came! Whatever the cost, the disciples were going to pray and obey until God came!

Will you take a few moments of quiet to think and pray with me?

Are YOU willing to be that kind of Christian? [Seems rather "fanatic" somehow, doesn't it?] Think with me...are there sins? Confess them. Are there fears? Name them. Are there unsundered areas? Give them. Are there weaknesses? God wants them, too. Are there talents? Give them to God? Are there relationships? Make them subject to the Master Relationship!

Write— perhaps on a card in the pew rack— your surrender. Transfer it to a piece of money, symbolizing life. Even a penny will do. If you don't have money, just use a piece of paper.

Now, as you come to receive communion, first place your offering— of the good and the bad and the day-by-day on the collection plate, then come, receive the elements. It is NOT in payment— it is a matter of emptying your hands—to receive God's Promise.

Jesus said:

- "I died for you— to take away your sins.
- "I rose for you— to give you life eternal.
- "I pray for you— that you will receive all I have for you.
- "I am sending the Spirit to you— but watch unto prayer! Empty your hands!

#75(EH) *Jesus, My Strength, My Hope*

Love: The Foundation for Pentecost

May 27, 1990 AM

Lesson (I John 4:7-21)

Text- John 13:34 *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this shall all men know that you are My disciples, if you have love one for another.*

INTRODUCTION

1. This is the Sunday between Ascension Day and Pentecost, one of the great days of the church. "Ascension Sunday" is a good time to think about preparing for Pentecost. We have "Lent" before Easter, and "Advent" before Christmas. But what do we do before Pentecost?
2. Before that first Christian Pentecost the followers of Jesus Christ prayed. John the Beloved (who wrote our text) was one of the participants in the ten-day prayer meeting that preceded the great birthday of the Church. During that time of waiting the hearts of the disciples were knit together in obedience and anticipation of the Promise Jesus told them was coming from the Father. What happened then (at that prayer meeting) marked John and Peter and the others for life.

"Love one another" became the hallmark of John's ministry, and John intended that it should be the hallmark of God's people. It was John that recorded the "Great Commandment" in his gospel, (our text.)

3. John shows us that the Great Commandment precedes and forms the foundation for the "Great Commission." The kind of love which John declares is not a soft, woolly, sentimental feeling, but a positive regard for good and for light and for truth, a God-likeness that will finally change and shape the entire Universe. This love of God is the most powerful thing there is. How can we begin to describe this powerful force?

[Look into this passage with me. It is:]

I. A STATEMENT ABOUT GOD

A. "GOD IS LOVE" (v 8)

This is not a comprehensive statement about God [-it is not all that may be said of God-] but it is a conclusive statement. Whatever else God is, He is LOVE! And so love characterizes God's family. From our limited and twisted perspective, we can look at the world's pain and suffering and say "How can God put up with this? God doesn't care!" Or we could say, "God must be limited in what He can do. God is not all-powerful!"

It is a statement of faith, given credence by the Word, to say that we believe that God IS, and that God is GOOD. John says: "God is LOVE!"

John Wesley wrote these words about this passage: "God is love. - This little sentence brought St. John more sweetness, even in the time he was writing it, than the whole world can bring. God is often styled holy, righteous, wise; but not holiness, righteousness, or wisdom in the abstract, as He is said to be love: intimating that this is His darling, His reigning attribute, the attribute that sheds an amiable glory on all His other perfections."

One stanza in Frederick W. Faber's hymn, "There is a Wideness", says it very beautifully:

*'For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of man's mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully KIND!*

B. GOD IS KNOWN, REVEALED BY HIS LOVE (also v 8)

John is so strong in his conviction about God being love that he says: Love is essential to knowing God in any degree! "The one who does not LOVE does not know God!" God is known by His love; somehow we come to know Him by receiving and reflecting that love.

How deficient some of us may feel as we hear this! Our capacity for pure and powerful love seems so small! How poorly we reflect such a great love! Never mind! God's commandments are also God's promises!

[But this passage is also a statement about God's people:]

II. A STATEMENT ABOUT GOD'S PEOPLE

A. GOD'S PEOPLE ARE TO REFLECT HIS NATURE (v 12)

"If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and His love is perfected in us." We reflect this love by openness and trust toward God, and by openness and fellowship with one another. God loves us, and has accepted us on the basis of grace and His own loving-kindness, and so God expects us somehow to reflect His life and His love in our everyday living.

B. THIS IS EXPRESSED NEGATIVELY HERE BY SHOWING TWO THINGS THAT ARE MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE WITH GOD'S LOVE.

If love is the hallmark of God's people there are some things that God's love does not coexist with:

1. GOD'S LOVE DOES NOT CO-EXIST WITH THE KIND OF FEAR THAT SPRINGS FROM TRYING TO HIDE FROM HIM.

Taken in its literal language this statement ("Perfect love casts out all fear") has been carried to logical absurdity. And John does modify his "fear" statement by speaking about fear that has torment. There are all kinds of fears— fears that have no moral or spiritual implications whatsoever— fear of heights, of pain, of spiders.

And, too, godly people still have a healthy "fear of God." The immensity, the majesty, the wonder of God the Creator, and above all else, the glimpse of His perfect holiness will inspire a holy awe, which the Bible terms "fear." The Psalmist has it right: "The fear of

the Lord is clean, enduring forever!" (Psalm 19:9) But there is a kind of fear that the love of God removes!

"God" is a pretty frightening concept in the "abstract." "God" is also pretty frightening when we think of Him only as coldly concerned with justice or holiness. The Genesis account tells us that our first parents ran from the voice of God when they knew that they had disobeyed. But that same story tells us that God sought them, and found them, and clothed them, and promised them a Savior.

When we realize how much God loves us, and when we begin to receive that love, we reflect that love and we lose the kind of fear that comes from trying to hide from God.

2. GOD'S LOVE DOES NOT CO-EXIST WITH HATRED OF OTHER HUMAN BEINGS.

We love what He loves, we hate what He hates. And that includes the most cruel form of hatred which is "un-love!" "Un-love" is that detached interest in which we view other human beings in their failures, sins and sufferings as though they were specimens in a laboratory— make observations on their motivations and their conduct, and say, "Tsk, tsk! Isn't it a pity!"

[But remember, don't despair because you feel you don't measure up!]

III. A COMMANDMENT THAT IS ALSO A PROMISE

- A. Which brings us back to John's "life emphasis": "Love one another!" It isn't original with John. It was the Savior's last commandment: John 13:34

"Loving one another" didn't come "naturally" to John! He was a son of thunder, and a seeker after "destiny." But it came. It came as John obeyed the Savior: "Love one another" is possible with God! God's commandment is also His enabling.

B. [HOW WE CAN OBEY AND FULFILL THIS GREATEST COMMANDMENT?]

Our struggle is not to love one another, or to love the unlovable; not to pretend to 'feelings' we cannot manufacture, but to MAKE GOD AT HOME— IN YOUR HEART AND IN MY HEART!

BEFORE WE CAN LOVE THE WORLD— OR EVEN BEFORE WE CAN REALLY LOVE EACH OTHER— WE MUST BE AWARE THAT GOD LOVES US! And when that reality begins to dawn on us, God's LOVE will transform us!

Before we can GIVE, we must be willing to RECEIVE! How hard it is for many of us to grasp: God knows us ... He knows our faults and sins ... and yet, if we will receive Him, He wants to make us able and fit to walk with Him. God loves YOU!

C. It is GOD'S GRACE that makes His LOVE a reality!

The world looks at what we do; and it cannot help it. The world does not care WHY we do what we do— but 'the WHY' is important to the Father, and it is everything to the Christian.

The world admired Martin Luther King (after the fact!) but it ignored and ignores the fact that HE DID WHAT HE DID ON THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE.

The world admires Mother Teresa for her amazing love of the un-lovely. But what the world does not care to see is THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER AND DEVOTION TO JESUS THAT FIRES AND EMPOWERS THAT SERVICE.

CONCLUSION

We cannot all be acclaimed as great 'saints,' or for that matter as great anything! But we all can love Jesus and seek to obey His word. It was not a gathering of 'great saints' that made up the ten-day prayer meeting before the first Pentecost.

Remember, before that first Pentecost, from Ascension Day until the Holy Spirit came, the followers of Jesus Christ prayed. During that time of waiting the hearts of those ordinary people were KNIT TOGETHER IN OBEDIENCE, and IN ANTICIPATION

OF THE PROMISE Jesus told them was coming from the Father. As they sought to obey the "Great Commandment" they were empowered to launch the "Great Commission!"

So- (v 7) "Love one another" became the hallmark of John's ministry, and John intended that it should be the hallmark of God's people for all time. Hear these words of our Savior once more: A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. BY THIS SHALL ALL MEN KNOW that you are My disciples, if you have love one for another.

Let us pray: O God of Love:

Help us to believe that You are GOD, and that You are GOOD.

Help us to know that the ability to really LOVE comes as we accept Your grace. Help us to OBEY and to ANTICIPATE Your Promise. Make us a Spirit-Filled Community. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

57 EH Brother (Sister) Let Me Be Your Servant

Aldersgate: A New Day of Evangelism

June 3, 1990

Today is Pentecost Sunday, but also this time of year reminds us of another very significant happening. Just 252 years ago a week or so ago, May 24 1738-1990 was the anniversary of Wesley's Aldersgate-Street "heart warming" experience:

Romans 1:16,17

*"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written: *' But the righteous man shall live by faith.'" (*Habakkuk 2:4)*

Introduction:

[It is hard for us to imagine a Christian faith being preached and practiced and rigidly enforced in many respects WITH NO ASSURANCE OF A PERSONAL SALVATION; and with NO CERTAINTY of going to heaven.

[But this was the norm when John Wesley began his ministry two-and-a-half centuries ago in England. It was like a new dawning when this priest in the Anglican Church began to proclaim that we could be saved by responding to God's grace—that God's prevenient grace was extended to all who would receive it— AND THAT WE COULD KNOW THAT WE HAVE PASSED FROM DEATH TO LIFE.

[TO MY MIND IT IS IMPORTANT TO KNOW THE HISTORY, THE STORY OF THE WESLEYS. There is nothing quite so predictable and at the same time unique as the rising of the sun. It came up at exactly 5:45 a.m. here in Boston today, although no one in Boston saw it because it is cloudy and raining. No one doubts it came up- - for it is daylight. And not very many people cared about the exact time, although technically at 5:44 it had not yet risen, and at 5:46 the sunrise was history.

The rising of the sun was preceded by light, growing almost imperceptibly from total darkness to full gray daylight. The exact beginning of the light just before sunrise is

almost impossible to trace with the naked eye, and varies with the atmosphere, and, in fact, with the latitude. In equatorial latitudes dawn and dusk are brief and darkness and light occur with surprising suddenness. In polar regions twilight lingers.

Sunrise, for the people called Methodists, and many others, including the holiness groups, dawned when one man of God discovered for himself that we could be saved and we could know it! John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed at 8:45 p.m., Wednesday, May 24, 1738. Let me tell you about the dawning of that sunrise, as I understand it, and of the clouds or fog that obscured some of the light in the dawning of that sunrise.

The story of Wesley's search for assurance is fascinating, and quite well documented:

He was born into a poor clergyman's home, and from an early age had the conviction that God had his hand on his life.

Cutting the story short, in 1725 he was ordained a priest in the Church of England. The Aldersgate experience marked a high point in his experience after 13 years of disciplined living in the priesthood:

There are some mis-perceptions about his up-bringing: He did have a godly mother— but with no teaching of assurance, for Susannah Wesley herself only came to know assurance September 3, 1739, more than a year after Aldersgate!

Certainly in his seeking after God and God's will Wesley held nothing back. He was in earnest— and if works would bring salvation and assurance, Wesley would have been saved over and over again.

But there came to the Wesley brothers the slow persuasion that salvation is by faith alone. They slowly began to know the relinquishing of the 'wealth' of acquired righteousness. On Whitsunday, May 21, 1738, Charles Wesley believed and was assured of his salvation. The following Wednesday John Wesley followed his younger brother.

[Look with me at this experience of the assurance of salvation:]

I. THE EXPERIENCE OF SALVATION

GOD HONORS THE HUNGER AND THIRST FOR HIM THAT HE PLACES WITHIN US, BUT THERE IS A PLACE, ALSO, FOR US TO ATTEND TO THAT HUNGER

- A. THE INNER PERSUASION: there was an instant of sun-rise (SON-rise!). Here are Wesley's own words:

5/24/1738

"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate-Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

- B. But this new assurance was NOT a simple, cloud-free sunrise; and it was NOT unchallenged, emotionally. I have read many, many accounts of Wesley's conversion. I do not recall any that go on with what immediately follows in his Journal. Here is the very next paragraph, on that same meeting in Aldersgate:

Wednesday , 5/24/1738

"I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there, what I now first felt in my heart. But it was not long before the enemy suggested, 'This cannot be faith; for where is thy joy?' Then I was taught, that peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation: But that, as to the transports of joy that usually attend the beginning of it, especially in those who have mourned deeply, God sometimes giveth, sometimes withholdeth them, according to the counsels of his own will."

[Then, later that same day, after he had gone to his own home, he wrote:]

"After my return home, I was much buffeted with temptations; but cried out, and they fled away. They returned again and again. I as often lifted up my eyes, and He 'sent me help from his holy place.'

Then, the next day after the 'sunrise' come these words:

Thursday 5/25/1738

"... the enemy injected a fear, 'If thou dost believe, why is there not a more sensible change?' I answered (yet not I,) 'That I known not. But this I know, I have 'now peace with God.' And I sin not today, and Jesus my Master has forbid me to take thought for the morrow.

"'But is not any sort of fear,' continued the tempter, 'a proof that thou dost not believe?' I desired my Master to answer for me; and opened his Book upon those words of St. Paul, 'Without were fightings, within were fears.' Then, I inferred I, well may fears be within me; but I must go on and tread them under my feet.

And the next day:

Friday 5/26/1738

"My soul continued in peace, but yet in heaviness because of manifold temptations.

Sunday 5/28/1738

"I waked in peace, but not in joy."

Monday 5/29/1738

"I was often tempted to doubt."

Why am I telling you this, to discredit Wesley? Far, far from it! Wesley's usefulness to God and the kingdom are beyond question. But I am bringing this to your attention so that you can see that the greatest exponent of 'know-so salvation' came to his own assurance by way of doubts and

struggles and extreme honesty, as well as by dint of single-minded desire to live for God and with God!

- C. Wesley thus had both sympathy and advice for others; as well as the insistence that none be satisfied short of the witness of the Spirit;

Monday November 19, 1739

"I earnestly exhorted those who had believed, to beware of two opposite extremes, -the one, the thinking while they were in light and joy, that the work was ended, when it was just begun; the other, the thinking when they were in heaviness, that it was not begun, because they found it was not ended."

II. THE PRACTICE OF GODLY LIVING

GOD USES THE LIFE THAT HE INHABITS, BUT HE IS MORE CONCERNED WITH FAITHFULNESS THAN HE IS WITH THE 'BELLS AND WHISTLES' OF OUR EMOTIONS

- A. God honors those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. John Wesley was a seeker!
- B. Wesley was led as he obeyed . . . not by human programming, nor by deliberate design; although this did not keep Wesley from being as methodical and as well-disciplined as he knew how to be: a round-robin circuit of all Britain, year after year.
- C. God begins to use JW in preaching out in the streets and fields, and a revival begins while preaching in a prison:

Thursday 4/26/1739

"While I was preaching at Newgate (a prison in Bristol), on these words, 'He that believeth hath everlasting life.' I was insensibly led, without any previous design, to declare strongly and explicitly, that God willeth 'all men to be' thus 'saved;' and to pray that, 'if this were not the truth of God, he would not suffer the blind to go out of the way; but if it were, he would bear witness to his word.' Immediately one, and another, and another sunk to the earth: They dropped on every side as thunderstruck. (A spiritual awakening was on at Newgate that reformed the prison!)

Sunday 5/13/1739

My ordinary employment, in public, was now as follows: Preaching an average of 22 times per week!

[Transition: But where does this Wesley study have to do with our world on this Pentecost Sunday in 1990 in 'post-Christian America?']

III. GOD IS NOT FRUSTRATED WITH THE EVILS OF OUR AGE

BUT CAN IT BE THAT HE IS FRUSTRATED WITH THE LEVEL OF HUNGER AND THIRST AFTER HIM ON THE PART OF HIS PEOPLE?

- A. Wesley's England was at least as barbarous as our own country today! There was rigid class discrimination; there was wide-spread brutality; there were debtors' prisons and capital punishment for minor offenses.
- B. When he died Wesley had not conquered all ills— but God in John Wesley had made a difference!
- C. AND WE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE! Jesus: Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled! Where, really, is our hunger? We, too, can make a difference in our world. We cannot all be John Wesley. But we can be saved and know it!

This way of living the Spirit-filled life— cannot be by dint of merit; we do not simply come to the place where we 'deserve' to be filled.

But it does not come to the casual seeker, either.

Conclusion:

Has the Sun of righteousness risen in your life, to take the central place in everything you are and do? If we were as concerned to let Jesus Christ dominate us as Wesley was, do you think we could come to the assurance that our lives are truly His? Do you believe we could make a difference?

Malachi 4:1,2 For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall

burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. BUT UNTO YOU THAT FEAR MY NAME SHALL THE SUN OF RIGHTEOUSNESS ARISE WITH HEALING IN HIS WINGS; AND YE SHALL GO FORTH, AND GROW UP AS CALVES OF THE STALL.

Let's keep looking with FAITH for the rising of the Sun!

#190 - A Charge to Keep I Have

Is Pentecost Just History

June 3, 1990 AM

Lesson: Acts 2:1-11;

Text: John 14:23 *"If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him."*

Introduction:

The story of Pentecost is familiar territory for us Nazarenes, or at least it ought to be. Seven weeks after the Resurrection, and ten days after the Ascension of Jesus back into heaven, the assembled disciples were astounded by the descent of the Holy Spirit upon them in such a wonderful way that we call it the 'Birthday of the Church.'

Nothing has ever been quite the same since.

But most of us have heard all that before. And so when we say, "What happened at Pentecost?" we know what we are going to hear before we hear it. We are told what we are supposed to need, even before we may sense any real personal need of being filled with the Holy Spirit. We are pre-conditioned as to what to expect even before we seek and find any personal experience of Pentecost.

To be exposed to the holiness teaching is for the most part very good indeed. Holiness truth helps us into the experience of full surrender plus faith that brings cleansing and power and fullness of the Presence! And yet I wish that we could come to Pentecost with "fresh eyes" and see if there are aspects of God's grace we may be missing. MUCH of what took place can never be analyzed and explained. We believe that the same Holy Spirit that came to and into the church in the second chapter of Acts still comes to live in the church today.

What does the Bible show us about the abiding Presence of God in the church and in our individual lives? WHAT HAPPENED AT PENTECOST ?

I. SENSIBLE EVIDENCES AT THE FIRST PENTECOST

[The Initial Signs of Pentecost:]

- A. RUSHING MIGHTY WIND: this signifies THE UNCONTROLLABLE NATURE OF THE SPIRIT, not that we are 'out of control, and made puppets; but He, God's Spirit, is NOT simply at our beck and call, for us to use); cleansing, powerful, breath of God Himself.

This very evidently was NOT something "private," or confined to the immediate participants. The NOISE was heard. It brought a crowd.

- B. TONGUES OF FIRE: this signifies CLEANSING. It reminds us of the awful holiness of God. God wants us cleansed so that we can come near where He is! He baptizes His servants with cleansing, powerful, fire from the altar of God.

These "tongues of fire" were evident to OTHERS, too. Each could see the other's glory, and NOT HIS OWN. Significant? It reminds us of Isaiah 6.

- C. OTHER TONGUES: this signifies COMMUNICATION! Here is intelligibility, universality, THE REVERSE OF BABEL; when man is glorified it does not 'make sense;' when God is glorified, there is communication from God to man to man; giving of the law into the very heart.

[But 'Pentecost' was more than outward and visible signs. 'Pentecost' was a time of promises being fulfilled:]

II. UNFOLDING PROMISES AT THE FIRST PENTECOST

[The mighty work of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus had promised, had now begun:]

- A. THE HOLY SPIRIT A TEACHER

(John 14:26) The Helper will TEACH you all things; and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.

- B. THE HOLY SPIRIT LIFTING UP JESUS

(John 15:26/ John 16:14) When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, He will bear witness of ME. He shall glorify ME; for He shall take of Mine, and shall disclose it to you.

C. THE HOLY SPIRIT CONVICTING SINNERS OF THEIR NEED OF SALVATION

(John 16:8,9,10,11) And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment; when the Church received the Spirit, (then) the world began to be convicted of sin!

D. THE HOLY SPIRIT GUIDING THE CHURCH IN ACTION

(John 16:13) But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide YOU into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come.

All these BEGAN to come to reality as soon as the disciples received the fullness of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

There was no higher Lordship than that of Jesus; and when the Church received the Spirit, the world began to be convicted of sin, and righteousness, and judgment! That is still the formula!

[But Pentecost is more than history!]

III. THE OPEN SECRET OF PENTECOST:

Jesus, who went away into heaven, is with His Church in the person of the Holy Spirit. He has come to abide in His disciples' hearts.

- A. THE ABIDING REALITY OF PENTECOST ... The ABIDING Reality: God making Himself at home in the human heart. The word "abiding" has various connotations: as, - constant, enduring, eternal, immutable, lasting, permanent. To "abide" also has the connotation of 'being at home.' Of "living there!" JESUS, AT HOME IN US!

[Look again to our text for this Pentecost Sunday:]

John 14:23 "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him." THAT is Pentecost!

1. This abiding, so far as we are concerned is initiated by love for Jesus Christ: ("If anyone loves ME!") We do not receive the "abiding reality" if we do not love

Jesus!

2. Love is genuine when it involves a desire to please: ("If anyone loves Me he will keep my words.")
3. Love for Jesus is returned: the Father responds when we seek to be like Jesus. ("My Father will love him")

B. The result: "WE" will come to live with the one who loves Me!

My heart God's HOME! "... My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him." GOD AT HOME IN YOU AND ME! THAT IS THE HEART OF PENTECOST!

Conclusion:

In our holiness tradition we give great importance to the experience of heart holiness. We (have a clear 'formula' which we use: we) understand that consecration plus faith will bring the fullness of the Presence! And WE DARE NOT STOP SHORT OF THIS EXPERIENCE!

We must have the fullness! We must know the blessing! But the EXPERIENCE is vitally connected with our RELATIONSHIP- the way we think about God, and act toward Him! We say: "What has God DONE for you?"!! "Do you have the EXPERIENCE?"!! And sometimes we talk as if the EXPERIENCE was something like a "thing" or a "gift" that we can have in and of itself.

The way into EXPERIENCE is by RELATIONSHIP! The question is not so much, "What has God DONE for you?" but "Who IS God to you?" It is not so much asking God to GIVE us something— but asking God to help us LOVE HIM, AND GIVE OURSELVES TO HIM! And then God gives Himself, His Presence, to us!

Jesus said: "If you LOVE Me . . . WE, the Father and the Son, by the ministry of the blessed Holy Spirit, will come to you, and live IN you!

Prayer: Lord Jesus, Make it so! Amen

#63 EH I'd like for us to close with a song by Paul Gerhardt, a German; one that John Wesley thought so much of that he translated and rhymed it into English: *Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me*

or #39 *Spirit of Faith, Come Down* or #267 *Spirit of God, Descend*

A Word of Encouragement

Summer Prescription for Renewal

June 10, 1990

John 15:1-17

The only thing wrong with the summer is that it is too short!

All too soon all the things we hoped to do, and all the books we hoped to read, and all the leisure time we hoped to spend re-charging our emotional batteries will be history!

But one thing I do hope the summer brings to us all is a little perspective- a little spiritual refreshing. All too many people see their religious duties as just that: chores! So summer vacation is a time to escape from things spiritual. I am really sorry if that is how you look at the summer. It just could be a time when you spend extra time in joy and fellowship with your very Best Friend! God wants to help us get His perspective— to grasp His great Peace, and to experience His great loving-kindness for us, each one.

The promises of God can give us reference points, to help us see where we've been, and where we are, and where we're going. They can help to hold us steady in the winds of success or adversity. Perhaps you have your favorite promises. Promises like: Proverbs 3:5,6; and I like Galatians 6:7,8 ("...be not weary in well doing...")

Instead of just a "promise," I would have us consider a whole "passage" as a reference point today. This whole passage is worthy of life-trust: (John 15:1-17.) A highlight is verse 7 "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will and it shall be done unto you." The truth here, of shared life with Jesus, is a frame of reference for a summer of renewal- and for a lifetime- the fact that we are chosen of God! The initiative for LIFE is with HIM!

I. I HAVE CHOSEN YOU (v 16)

- A. GOD HIMSELF HAS CALLED US! We come to know God because He makes Himself available to us. We did not simply set out and "find God." God found us!

God called Adam in the cool of the day; He calls to every person who truly will listen. Sometimes we say in our arrogance: "I found God." And so we did; but in reality God was seeking us all, each one.

OUR 'FINDING GOD' IS ALWAYS A RESPONSE TO HIM, TO HIS LOVE.

As Jesus spoke to the disciples that night, each of them may well have thought back to when he first met Jesus. For each of the disciples was "called." Do YOU remember when you first responded to Jesus? For before WE could RESPOND...we had to be "CALLED!" Jesus said, "You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen YOU!"

GOD HAS CALLED, IS CALLING EACH ONE OF US!

- B. But to be CALLED is not exactly the same as being CHOSEN! Jesus also spoke these words: (Matthew 22:14) "MANY are called, but FEW are CHOSEN!" It is not enough that God loves you, and that Jesus comes where you are and calls for you to follow! THAT does not make you one of the "chosen," not quite, yet!

[The Rich Young Ruler came running to Jesus. Jesus LOVED him (Mark 10!) and invited the rich young ruler to "Come, follow Me!" As far as Jesus was concerned, He wanted the rich young ruler to be "chosen." But there was lacking that element of obedience! He was unable to part with his "things." The CHOSEN are those who hear and heed and follow and keep on following!

To be among God's CHOSEN, there must be a willingness to follow Jesus! A choosing to OBEY Him! (John 7:17) "If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know..." It is NOT 'salvation by works. But we ARE chosen, when we are willing to leave all, and follow after Jesus!

II. I AM THE SOURCE OF LIFE (v 1, 5)

- A. Shared LIFE with Jesus. Here is the figure of the Vine and the branches...one we need to return to again and again. WHY? Because the Vine and the branches share ONE LIFE!

We do not receive LIFE and then proceed to go away and do with it as WE will. But forever we are to be in close connection with Jesus Christ.

- B. Perfect freedom comes from being 'ONE WITH JESUS!' THE PARADOX: Jesus is saying: "YOU ARE TIED TO ME/YOU ARE TOTALLY FREE"!

This is the "heart" of the message, right here:

1. ABIDE IN ME! REMAIN IN ME! KEEP THE CONNECTION TIGHT!

Seems like "conditional love."

Seems very much like it is not very adventurous!

The life of a grape-vine branch! Indeed!

If we do not learn to ABIDE...if we do not WAIT ON THE LORD...if we do not learn the secret of this obedient "passivity," we shall never learn the FULL SCOPE OF LIFE IN CHRIST!

2. ASK WHATEVER YOU WILL IN MY NAME, I WILL DO IT!

The other half of the truth of the paradox: A sense of complete liberty! Freedom to be what you were intended to be!

Keep ON sharing life in Me! "Be being filled with the Spirit!"

(Ephesians 5:18.) This intended to be an on-going, never-ending relationship.

III. I HAVE CHOSEN YOU...TO BEAR FRUIT (v16)

BE ASSURED! Jesus is interested in YOUR full potential! Fruit! Fruit that will last! Last—how long??

[What are the results of a lifetime of work without the eternal dimension? There is more, or less, satisfaction in all work, depending on various factors of usefulness, beauty, demand, and the like, BUT all such work will decay. Even the pyramids will

cease to be!])...but the promise is: THE CHOSEN WILL BEAR FRUIT IN THEIR LIVES THAT WILL REMAIN...LAST...ABIDE! [Illus: what has been achieved in "things" vs. "people"—the physical work, flooring, on the building of Akron 1st (in 1949) or the helping of a family to get back together (Barry & Paula)—which lasts longer?]

Fruit that is UNIQUE to you! What YOU were made for is fulfilled!

IV. THE FINAL WORD: LOVE EACH OTHER!

- A. I love YOU—that's why I have chosen you! Be sure of that!
- B. You love ME! Good! That's the way it must be!
- C. But more and more—SEEK TO BREAK DOWN THE WALLS OF INDIFFERENCE AND...LOVE ONE ANOTHER! [This NOT irrelevant to the rest of the message! We cannot be all WE should be individually apart from loving one another!]
 - 1. The 'kiss of peace' and the like is one thing, but at best it is superficial. Is it possible to really have a desire to be of help to one another?
 - 2. Perhaps it would be better to extend a hand of help— seek to do it as a regular thing
 - 3. My prayer is that each sincere heart might find a prayer fellowship; seek "accountability."

[Conclusion:]

This passage, or one like it from God's Word, is worthy of being a "lifetime passage!" It says: HERE IS THE RELATIONSHIP ON WHICH WE BUILD OUR LIVES!

Another way to look at it is 'Lining up our lives by the "THREE GREATS" of Jesus' teachings:

- 1. We're familiar with THE GREAT COMMISSION . . .and that is the "fulfillment" here: bearing MUCH fruit (Matthew 28/ Mark 16:15 Go ye...) John 20:21 AS THE FATHER HATH SENT ME, SO SEND I YOU! But the Great Commission cannot be realized unless and until the Church is heeding
- 2. THE GREAT COMMANDMENT: in this passage here: (v 12,13 This is my commandment, that ye love one another!) John 13:42 A NEW COMMANDMENT GIVE I

UNTO YOU, THAT YE LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE LOVED YOU. And yet in a very real way, both THE GREAT COMMISSION, and THE GREAT COMMANDMENT are dependant on another "great!" For Jesus has give to you and to me

3. THE GREAT PROMISE! The promise of the Holy Spirit! If you are at all alive in God, you have the Holy Spirit! But to be filled with the Spirit is our privilege, and the heart of God's promise of renewal.

[Illus: When D. L. Moody was being considered for a city-wide revival (perhaps in London) the pejorative question was asked: "Does Mr. Moody have a monopoly on the Holy Spirit?" The reply was, "Of course not! But it seems that the Holy Spirit has a monopoly on Mr. Moody!" That is approaching what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit!]

John 7:37: If any man thirst let him come to Me and drink. He that believeth on Me, as the scripture saith, out of his inmost being shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake He of the Spirit, which they that believe on Him should receive!) (16:7 If I go away, I will send Him unto you!)

There we have them . . . the great PROMISE! . . . the great COMMANDMENT! . . . the great COMMISSION! Our assignment for the summer! Have a re-creating time— and seek to let God flow into us in renewal and refreshing by His Spirit!

#98 Our Great Savior

I Will Extol Thee O Lord

October 14, 1990

Psalm 30:1 *I will extol Thee, O Lord, for Thou hast lifted me up, and hast not let my enemies rejoice over me.*

Introduction

This is a Psalm of thanksgiving to God because He has brought the Psalmist David through a time of deep trouble. Just what the trouble was this time, the Psalmist does not say. But David was certainly no stranger to trouble.

One reason that the Psalms have such great appeal to us all, why we find it easy to identify with David, is that in the Psalms we often find expression of our deepest, inmost feelings: David feels good for whatever reason- and he says so; he feels anguish for whatever cause- and he says that, too.

From time to time I can identify with both his highs and his lows. Can't you?

[Some of the "lows" David knew he brought on himself, by being careless, or disobedient, as when he numbered the people against the best advice of his counsellors, or when he backslid into the grievous sins of adultery and murder.

[Some of the "lows" David experienced came when he was being perfectly obedient to God, doing what he was supposed to be doing and yet he looked trouble in the face, as when Saul sought to kill him.

[And I like to think that some of the "lows" came because David was Jesse's son, and Jesse may have been a dour Geordie or a somber Presbyterian Scot by nature. I think I know a bit about that, too.]

Whatever the reasons for David's "lows," he refused to simply accept them as inevitable or normal. David fought them! In I Samuel 30:6 it is written that David was "greatly distressed," but also that "David encouraged himself in the Lord!" Then, after God had lifted him, and had come through to bring him victory and joy, David recited over and over to himself, and to everyone and anyone who would listen,

about how great God IS to hear and to come to the aid of those who cry to Him in their distress.

I. LIVING IN OPENNESS BEFORE GOD IN THE STORMS OF LIFE

- A. The storms of life, the "hard places," come to every one of us. And yet when those challenging times come they usually seem to surprise us. We do not think that any low places ought to be in our life.

David reflects this tendency for us to deny, (in verse 6,) when he says: "I said in my prosperity 'I will never be moved!'" I'm wiser now! I've had troubles before, but I'll never have trouble like that again.

Or, "I'm a Christian— so I should never even be tempted to be depressed." And yet in spite of our personal theology, of what and how we think, the "low times" come to us all!

- B. It is true that depression can follow sin or moral failure and breakdown. God has forgiveness and restoration as well as healing when this happens. But there are other causes for depression as well:

Some of the storms that shake us are related to the "passages" of life. Growing up, or growing older— facing new experiences— any and every form of cultural change brings a threat to the comfort of the status quo. Every move that a family makes brings about inevitable cultural clash. Every promotion at work, or demotion, for that matter, every adjustment we have to make brings an emotional price that we have to pay.

Physical illness often brings emotional depression, and with it a feeling of spiritual emptiness. Many kinds of disappointment leave us vulnerable to what David was feeling. Friends let us down. A job we wanted doesn't materialize. Family misunderstandings cause concern and even anguish and grief.

- C. But even though we may have said, like David, "I said in my prosperity 'I shall never be shaken!'"—this can't happen to me— when we wake up to find that it HAS happened, we

need, like David, to say so! To admit to ourselves, and especially to God, "I need Your help! Show me where I'm wrong, if I am— but help me!" God hears such praying!

II. THERE IS A GOD WHO HEARS US IN THE MIDST OF THE STORM

- A. God hears your prayer! David testifies here (verse 2) "I cried unto Thee, and Thou didst heal me!"

What I am telling you this morning, on the authority of God's Word, is that God loves us, and knows us, and that God hears every prayer that we pray, even in the middle of a storm of life!

- B. Every situation is unique! But I also need to say that there are very few 'textbook experiences.' We want to be insulated from the harsher sides of reality, and avoid pain at all costs, and live without strain or ruffled feathers. But then when the storms come we begin to realize that what we talk about may well be true, but also we find we know very little in actual experience.

[I recall a mini-storm that took place many years ago in another state. I was up in the wee hours with a couple undergoing severe problems. As a young pastor I was challenged to my depths and beyond— and I would be severely challenged by the same problem today!

[But the irony I felt most keenly that night was that I had recently written, and had had published, words of comfort that came to me in accusation during those hours of extreme stress: "You wrote about God's sufficiency! NOW you are feeling stress! You are a hypocrite!"

- C. [Well, I wasn't a hypocrite! But I was sure paying my dues! It is a comfort to know that someone else has weathered such a storm— usually!]

God works in His own mysterious way! What I am trying to say here is: We need to be careful HOW we speak for God! He is a very real Friend in our need! But I do not own Him. You do not have a corner on Him. He knows better than we know what our friends can bear, and what they need. And He does come through! Every time! God does not abandon those who trust in Him!

III. DELIVERANCE BEGINS WHEN WE HAVE THE ASSURANCE GOD KNOWS

- A. Be assured God knows! The enemy's tactic is to convince us we are isolated, alone— and not even God hears or cares to hear!
- B. Do not despise providential means! Often our deliverance comes along avenues of Providential guidance. God expects us to use what resources we have. It is useless to pray for help on an exam when we have never cracked a book in study.

{Illus: A religious man in flood time looked to God for deliverance. The waters came to his front door, and a boat came by with the invitation to ride to higher ground and shelter.

"I'm trusting the Lord!" said the brother with a smile.

Soon the waters were even with the second story, and another rescue boat came by his bedroom window. He waved it off- "I'm trusting in the Lord!"

But the waters came higher yet, and he climbed to the roof and then sat on the chimney. A helicopter pilot saw his plight, and a sling was lowered. The man gritted his teeth and waved the helicopter away: "I'm trusting the Lord!"

After the waters swept him and his house away in total loss, the man opened his eyes in the glory of heaven. He asked the Lord immediately, 'Didn't You hear me praying?"

"I sent you two boats and a helicopter!" was the Reply. More truth than humor in this story! }

- C. In all honesty, some times there is literally nothing more that we know to do, and still we are swept by the storm.

Psalms Now puts it this way: "There are times when I feel God's anger, but even then I know His concern and love for me remain eternal. And my nights of despair resolve into the dawn of new joy."

It pays, in times like these, when we don't know what to do, to hang on in the confidence that God does love us, God does hear us, and God will never abandon us. God will come through!

(Conclusion)

IV. THE BENEDICTION OF THE CONFESSIONAL LIFE

- A. The benediction I have been using this fall— "Humble yourselves...Casting all your care upon HIM, for He careth for YOU!"— comes from I Peter 5. I would like to read the entire short paragraph from which the benediction has been taken.

I Peter 5:6-11

Humble yourselves. therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you.

Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brotherhood who are in the world. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.

To Him be dominion forever and ever. Amen.

- B. This benediction tells us that there is a part we play in the fight against bitterness and despair. We can cooperate with God's grace! "Humble yourselves!" You need the mighty hand of God! And here's how:
- Be vigilant; don't expect an uncontested pathway to glory
 - Be resistant. This is a fight of faith. Don't give in to fear or despair or bitterness.
 - Be patient. There will be suffering. But it will pass.
 - Be Present to God! for GOD HIMSELF IS AT WORK IN YOU!

I Will Extol Thee O Lord

- C. Finally, our thanksgiving takes the form of a confessional statement. Back to the text: I WILL EXTOL THEE, O LORD!

This "confession" can begin even while we are in the struggle! It is effective there!

Confession is more than part of repentance and conversion, although it is that. Confession is even more than living in openness before God, although it certainly is that, too. Confession is more than a formal prayer to say every time we come together in worship. A confessional statement says:

This is MY God! I belong to HIM! HE does not exist for MY convenience, but rather, I EXIST FOR HIM!

But my God does not abandon His children, ever, ever, ever!

PRAYER:

#81(EH) *My Faith Has Found a Resting Place*

The Call of Jesus to Rest

October 21, 1990

Luke 6:20-26; Matthew 11:28

Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Introduction

Jesus had a way of turning things 'upside down' when He spoke. He said things like "Blessed are the poor" and "It is good sometimes to mourn." His words are...

I. A CHALLENGE TO OUR VALUES

['Things' do not truly satisfy.]

Just think what He said:

- A. "Blessed poor" "Happy hungry" "Hopeful mourners" ... we are familiar with the Beatitudes— but when we look at them again and again we wonder again, "What could this mean?"

Jesus certainly was not glorifying poverty. But somehow we get the message that life is bigger and richer and more holy than the things we often fill our days and nights with.

And, too, Jesus was not your run-of-the-mill 'power-of- positive-thinking-type guru. Jesus never taught "All things work together for good!"

- B. There is a negative side to truth, as well as a positive. There is death as well as life. There is blessing, yes. But there is also woe. Jesus taught that it is vitally important how we choose to order our lives, and what or whom we place at the center of our lives.

The message of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the fact that through God's love and grace we have...

II. A CHOICE OF LIFE CENTERS

...and a choice between blessing and cursing, ...and a choice between rest and turmoil of spirit.

- A. The first word Jesus taught His disciples to PREACH was "Repent!" "Turn!" "Change course!" Why? "Because the kingdom heaven is near at hand!"
- B. The kingdom of heaven is a mystery! It IS here already! Jesus is in charge! And yet it IS COMING! Jesus is NOT in charge in the same way that one day- perhaps sooner than any of us think- He SHALL be!
- C. This kingdom is what Jesus is talking about when He says: "Blessed!" His kingdom is for people! His kingdom is LOVE! ("Love your enemies! Pray for them that despitefully use you!")

But this kingdom is also militantly against SIN! That is why Jesus also said: "WOE!"
- D. Much of the religious community that passes for the Christian church is spread over a spectrum that goes from a damnable complacency with a legal, literal, mental conversion on one end of the scale to a militant worship of purely human values and wisdom at the other end.

Both the extreme fundamentalist and the Christians who reject the authority of the Bible share one common thing: they demand to be in control of their own religion or lack of it. They lack the poverty of spirit, the mourning for sins, the purity of heart that Jesus tells us is necessary to truly see God.

It is to these people— people with all the answers— that Jesus pronounces His woes:

The militants who would re-write the Bible are shocking:

The militant feminists have spoken of traditional worship of Jesus as "christo-fascism." The respected scholar Richard John Newhaus quotes a teacher at a divinity school here in Massachusetts as stating that the doctrine of the atonement, the cross, represents "the sadomasochism of Christian teaching at its most

transparent." And a further quote: "Is it any wonder that there is so much abuse in modern society when the predominant image or theology of the culture is of 'divine child abuse'- God the Father demanding and carrying out the suffering and death of His own son?"

The militant free-sex people, who tell us that Bible values are out-dated, are attacking the authority of the Catholic church, probably because many bishops are bold to denounce adultery, abortion, as well as homosexual promiscuity, and not too long ago interrupted a mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral, a violation of guaranteed civil rights as well as everything sacred.

But the complacent fundamentalists are in danger, too:

It is true that we are not saved by what we DO. But it is also true that Jesus said over and again that we shall give an account of how we live this life. And if our faith in God, and our commitment to Jesus doesn't go deep enough to have any effect on the way we live, we are in danger of the same eternal damnation that waits for the out-and-out Christ rejecters!

Whatever "brand" we give ourselves as Christians, we must learn that we cannot EVER separate the kingdom of God from the Present, Living, Reigning KING! That is why Jesus taught as no one else ever taught. He didn't merely teach "lessons." He taught HIMSELF! Instead of talking about rest, Jesus said "Come to Me— and I will give you rest!"

[Jesus still extends to all who will hear!]

III. A CALL TO PERSONAL TRUST IN HIM

- A. We are so "intellectually" or "scientifically" biased that we think that the most important thing about faith is to get our "facts straight," to be theologically correct. And I certainly want to be correct; to be orthodox.

But there is a different measuring stick that Jesus will use in the Day when He divides the nations! THAT SELECTION WILL BE ON THE BASIS OF WHETHER OR NOT HE KNOWS US! OF WHETHER OR NOT WE KNOW HIM!

The Call of Jesus to Rest

There will be people there on that Day who are as orthodox as the King James Version, who will be absolutely out of touch with what is going on; and there will no doubt be people WE would consider flaming liberals who have lived under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. There is no substitute for that PERSONAL relationship with Jesus! The word is: "COME UNTO ME! I will give you REST!"

- B. "Rest" does not come through ignoring the stress of the day, and it certainly does not come through trying to compromise with it.

The only finally unbearable and intolerable burden is sin. The only inescapable tyrant is the unsublimated, undisciplined self.

- C. Jesus spoke these words in troublesome times. The common people who heard Jesus preach were mostly poor people in a middle- eastern country occupied by a foreign power. It is hard for us to imagine the bleakness of their outlook, or the extent of their physical poverty. Still, Jesus promised them rest unto their souls.
- D. Jesus spoke these words in the framework of choice. You come, and I will. You choose not to come, and I will not. Rest is connected with deliberately coming to Jesus. Just because you hear me say these words does not necessarily mean that you hear Jesus calling you. Your hearing has to be mixed with faith. But if there is any kind of spiritual desire for rest, and if there is a willingness to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, you have the possibility of making that choice!

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, We press into Your promise for the Rest You have promised! We seek to draw near to YOU! Help us, each one, to know how to approach You, from where WE are, to where YOU are - in Jesus' name. Amen.

#29(EH) He has Surely Borne Our Sorrow

Link to Wollaston Choir singing this song:

<http://russellmetcalfesermons.nazarene.nl/Sermons/Sermons.htm#Audio/Music/Choir/Surely He Hath Borne Our Sorrows Choir.mp3>

Confession of Faith

November 4, 1990 PM

Acts 24:14-16

CONFESSION OF FAITH (Communion Service)

Introduction:

"But this I admit to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect I do serve the God of our fathers . . ." Paul, on trial for his life, admits to being a believer. If we were on trial for being Christian, would we have enough evidence to convict us?

I. BELIEVING

(14) "Believing everything that is in accordance with the Law, and that is written in the Prophets;"

FAITH is the first word that comes to us, usually, as we think about what it means to truly be Christian. Believing begins with that indescribable inner persuasion or confidence that we are in contact with truth.

God has spoken in the Bible.

We have to make a judgment as to whether or not we shall believe that the Bible is God's Word. There is some sort of continuum from obscurantist mouthing on one side to deconstructionist ranting on the other, and these have a thread in common that they both would deny, which is an over-weening desire to have human control of the material.

But whether unlettered or profoundly prepared, we come sooner or later to the radical watershed: is this or is this not God's own Word, His own revelation concerning Himself, and concerning sin and salvation, and the Incarnation and the Cross and judgment to come?

How we decide has momentous consequence for life now and hereafter. Believing is the action of faith. Faith centers around the cross, of what Christ has already

accomplished for us in bearing our sins so that we might be free from the accursed load.

It is a tragic thing to lose one's FAITH. To be able to believe is a GIFT. Think about that! Not obscurantism- deliberately ignoring facts to believe what someone else tells you; but choosing to believe that God has spoken! It is not a matter of authority: "If any man will do His will, he shall KNOW of the doctrine" John 7:17. Faith is more a matter of volition than it is intellect! Better, it is a matter of the whole person.

II. HOPING

(15) "Having a hope in God, which these men cherish themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked."

HOPE is not the weak word we render it in common English usage. It the trust of faith turned around and looking into the future. Hope is what makes life worth the living. And living hope comes from believing the heart of the Gospel which is the resurrection of Jesus.

Hope is not a vague and fuzzy belief in reincarnation. Resurrection is a continuity of personality, and Paul mentions resurrection both of righteous and wicked. This hope speaks of accountability for the power to choose. (Matthew 24)

III. OBEYING

(16) "In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men."

LOVE is the final word in living Christian faith, and it is incomplete without it. Love gives the necessary course correction to live out faith and hope in a constantly changing scene. Paul says here that it is necessary to maintain a good conscience—it doesn't just happen.

To speak of working at the job of pleasing God and keeping a pure and tender conscience is not a word for unbelievers. We don't talk "how" before we talk "what"

and "why." But with those who already know and serve God, we are eager to prove our love by seeking to do those things that enhance our relationship with God and with God's people, as well as that enable us to carry forward the mind and work of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Are you (am I) — are we Christian as Paul said that he was?

33 EH - *Behold the Throne of Grace* (Wesley)

The Cornerstone of Faith

"Jesus is Lord of All"

November 4, 1990 AM

Luke 14:25-27; John 6:66

Introduction

The course of the public ministry of Jesus is just the opposite of what we might normally expect a life's work to be. The American Dream is that we start out small with big dreams, and through hard work and applied skill and intelligence we grow and grow until we make it to the top. The ministry of Jesus is upside down and backward to this ideal blueprint of success. Early on Jesus experienced evident acceptance and success as thousands followed after Him. After three short years He was all alone, on a cross.

I. WHY WAS IT, DO YOU SUPPOSE, THAT THOUSANDS CAME AFTER JESUS?

- A. Jesus spoke the common man's language. People understood Him. He talked about baking bread and taking care of sheep. He talked about fields of flowers and lost coins.
"Never man spake like this Man..."
- B. Jesus had the common touch. He loved people. He loved children. He loved Samaritans. He loved, in a pure and holy way, women, who were downtrodden (and still are very much in the Middle East.) He loved rich people. He loved the poor. People understand the common touch.
- C. Jesus IS God. The Presence is a mysterious power that at once attracts and repels. God is LIGHT! Light is attractive, but it also reveals and can ultimately blind. God is LIFE!
- D. There were genuine THRILLS in following Jesus. Miracles happened. Loaves/fishes. Healings. The assumed promise of a new kingdom NOW. "Perhaps Jesus might fulfill MY dreams and wishes."

But this popularity did not last. Jesus did not raise false hopes or feed selfish ambition, and fairly early on in His ministry people resigned from His

campaign in crowds. Finally He was threatened, and arrested, and endured a mock trial. Then He was crucified.

II. WHY WAS IT, DO YOU SUPPOSE, THAT MANY 'WENT BACK AND FOLLOWED HIM NO MORE'?

A. Jesus had a distinct and demanding set of values. They contradicted those values commonly accepted. From the beginning Jesus said (although He was not heard at first): "My kingdom is NOT of THIS WORLD!" Jesus taught (that):

1. It is more blessed to give than to receive.
2. The truly GREAT must be TRULY SERVANTS!
3. He taught that HUMILITY is a virtue. His "ME-generation" didn't want to hear this, any more than our own ME-generation!

Jesus was out of step with the values of a world that rejects the authority of a heavenly Father God.

B. Jesus demanded a LOYALTY that was ABSOLUTE. It could never be

Jesus AND... It could never be Jesus, BUT... The choice must be clean and simple. Look at the stark words of our text.

"If anyone comes after Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, YES, AND EVEN HIS OWN LIFE, he cannot be My disciple."

Jesus is not preaching hatred, but He is saying that He will brook no rivals for the Lordship of our hearts and lives!

Still, if Jesus had stopped with just saying "Hate your father and mother" He might have kept a lot of those who left Him. But Jesus went on to say "Hate your own life also!" The hard part is that we must give up the lordship of our SELVES! We give up the right to order our lives to Jesus, and Jesus alone.

[It is still the test for heresy: Any system of trust that ultimately says "Jesus and.." or "Jesus, but . ." to that very extent is NOT Christian!]

C. Jesus demands a personal involvement(from John 6:) "Eat my flesh..."

A sincere, sober, intellectual agreement that Jesus speaks the truth is good, even necessary. But far beyond intellectual belief is the demand of Jesus: Follow Me! Get close to Me! See what makes Me tick! Learn to LOVE Me! And do what I tell you!

Can I leave what I am doing, NOW!, to be with Jesus, and do what He says, go where HE goes, BE what HE would have me be?

Can I make Jesus Christ all my hope and righteousness? Can I trust His sacrifice- His BLOOD- my only plan of salvation?

Can you see how this was the WATERSHED DECISION TIME of Jesus' ministry?? From THAT time many left Him!

III. WHY WAS IT, DO YOU SUPPOSE, THAT SOME STAYED WHILE OTHER LEFT?

A. Surely everyone felt both the attraction and the repelling. Those who left had felt the attraction; and those who stayed must have felt the sting of challenge to their own self-sovereignty.

B. This dilemma, why some are saved and others are damned, is not a modern question. But it is an eternal question. The modern mind does not accept guilt or sin as a fact. But it is as much a fact of existence as a round earth and a blue sky.

1. We can deny the realities of heaven and hell. The dilemma is solved by modern minds by refusing to believe that there is any need to be saved; by refusing to accept the authority of Jesus; by denying the reality of sin and hell.

But we have to re-write the Bible to accept this. To say "God is too good to send anyone to hell" or "Hell is right here and now" sounds philosophical and sophisticated. But it contradicts what Jesus plainly said.

2. We can seek to side-step choice. The dilemma was 'solved' a few centuries ago by some Christians by saying that it was pre-determined who would leave and who would stay.

Granted, we have a paradox, a mystery, when we speak of God's Sovereignty and man's free will. But the Bible says "Whoso ever will may come!" The Bible gives us reason to hope that no one is simply shut out of heaven because he or she is not among a select, elect group, and nothing to be done about it.

[I would reverently approach this mystery by saying that:]

- C. The Word of God invites each of us to make a choice. We have an awesome God-given power, the power of choosing our eternal destiny. Paraphrasing Augustine, "Our wills are ours, we do not know how, but they are ours so that we have the ability to agree with God, to make our wills belong to HIM!"

Conclusion:

A Very Human Insight: Jesus was God. But Jesus was also very Human. He loved His disciples very much. And He believed they loved Him, too. But what he had laid out as the demands of His LORDSHIP, and of PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT had become a WATERSHED, a division for time and eternity. John 6:66 says that from that time of CHOICE, "many turned aside and walked with Him no more."

This was a moment hard to describe in the lives of Jesus and His disciples. Jesus turned to them, as the crowds melted away. When He spoke it was quietly, and with great feeling: "Will you also leave Me?"

It was then that Peter spoke up: "Lord, to whom shall we go?" It was Peter as recorded in another place who said, "Lord, You are the Christ!" Peter speaks for me!

We have all felt the drawing, attractive power of Jesus! Have you been challenged by the high and noble.

We have all also felt the challenge of the relentless singleness of Jesus' purpose! He keeps boring in on our motives and our attitudes! "WHY are you following Me?"

And the question is. at the most basic, radical level: WHO is Lord? Whatever the cost, have you thrown in your lot with Him? to:

1. 1. Make His sacrifice on Calvary the only atonement for your sins? Your ONLY sacrifice, your ONLY hope of heaven?
2. 2. Make Jesus LORD without reservation? Accept the value system of Jesus for the rest of your life? Take your orders from HIM, even though it means cutting away all rivals for His authority? "Hate your father and mother" seems so cruel. But be assured that Jesus did not come to destroy families, or any other worthwhile relationship in life. But relationships will destroy YOU if you let them or any other good or even holy thing take the place which only GOD can hold in your heart and life.

I challenge you to say with Peter: "Lord, We will follow YOU! You have the words of eternal life!"

Hymn # EH- *Jesus Calls Me, I Must Follow*

Follow, I Will Follow Thee, My Lord

A Psalm of Renewal and Revival

November 11, 1990 PM

On the Sunday evening before special services dedicated to renewal and revival, it is good to turn to one of the Prayers of David and let him help us express and focus our need and our desire.

Psalm 40

This Psalm speaks both of "waiting" and of "seeking."

It is good and right to actively seek God, and most of the time way we well may know how to go about seeking Him. But even when we are seeking God, we need to admit that in reality God is the active party in any genuine renewal. Before we sought God, He was seeking us! Before we were thinking of Him, He was thinking of us! Our renewal always begins when we decide to listen, to be quiet, to wait for God, Who is already speaking.

David tells us that he waited patiently for the LORD; and God turned and heard him. This Psalm is full of certainty and praise! Incidentally David tells us what every believer needs to receive:

I. THE NEED FOR A FIRM PLACE TO STAND . . .

(2)"He ... gave me a firm place to stand." "He set my feet upon a rock..."

There are some things that we know that do not need to be proved. But in the profusion of learning, and the explosion of knowledge in our day, many people have lost their spiritual certainty. And then they cannot regain it by listening to the same people that introduced them to God, because they are listening to human explanations, or obscurantism, or anything except listening to God!

Still, however it is lost, it is a tragic thing to lose spiritual certainty! It is a tragedy when all you have is a slippery slope or a miry pit of destruction when you need solid

rock on which to stand! I'M TALKING ABOUT SPIRITUAL CERTAINTY! KNOW-SO SALVATION! IS IT STILL POSSIBLE IN 1990?

I don't know quite how to say this: I alluded to it in the sermon this morning, in that Rev. Tom Nees says he never has to prove God's existence or the reality of sin in the ghetto. We would say in our arrogance that the reason is because they are not as educated or sophisticated as we are. 'If they knew all that we know, etc. '

I'm glad for the study of epistemology, that study of how we know. It is humbling to realize that even in the common ideas of life, we hardly ever all see things the same, and probably none of us is ever "right" about the details of the facts.

What this means is when I talk to you about GOD, and explain Him, I can never be sure that (1) I am right, or (2) that you hear what I say the way I meant it; or (3) that if you do what I say it will make any difference in your life.

But there is all the difference in the world when God talks to you through me, or by any means that He has at His disposal— and you are listening— and when God gets through to you. When God speaks, and you hear— you can take it to the bank!

People who have been "talked into" cheap grace, and who never "wait patiently for God" may wonder about the "knowing" aspect of salvation. Call it a witness. or call it assurance, we need to know God, and know that we know God. It is possible today! But we have to get this firm place to stand on God's terms!

II. THE NEED FOR A NEW SONG TO SING . . .

(3)"He put a new song in my mouth"

A "revival" that simply beats us around the ears with new "oughts" and "shoulds" is something I can do without. I can recall many times as a lad when all I got out of revival was the scare of my life. And I even remember a few since I have been pastor where I wondered if anyone else felt as guilty as I did.

But I would like to remember the joy of first love of God; I would like to do more than stand against the evils of our day, I would like to be so full of the love of God that "Many will see and fear and put their trust in God."

I suppose (I think) that cheerless and dull gray religion is better than none at all, especially if there is any spiritual life at all in it. But somehow the very first casualty in the process of slipping away from God is genuine JOY!

We do not have any lack of religious excitement, or interesting seminars, or things to do to keep busy for the Lord. But David says that when he waited on the Lord he began to sing again! The song had left, evidently, but God gave David a new song of praise! The world can be changed by a people of God that are singing His new song of praise!

I'M TALKING ABOUT JOY, NOW! WE GET IT BY WAITING PATIENTLY (INTENTLY, ON PURPOSE) FOR WHAT GOD HAS TO SAY!

III. THE NEED FOR A TASK THAT DELIGHTS

Yes, there are things that we must leave in order to follow after Jesus. [Some people didn't hear me quite clearly a week or so ago when I spoke of 'leaving all to follow Jesus.' I did NOT say that Jesus would require us to sell our homes and follow Him. But I did say that there must be a willingness to leave all in order to be near Him.] I suppose there are some "sacrifices" that are necessary.

But clearly the Psalmist isn't into long-faced, sorrowful lists of things he has given up.

(6) "Sacrifice and offering you did not require" he writes "but my ears you have pierced." He goes on, "Burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, 'Here I am, I have come— To do Your will, O God is my desire (delight!); your law is within my heart.'"

Many scholars believe that the "ear piercing" has to do with the ceremony prescribed in Exodus and again in Deuteronomy when a slave was being set free, and he didn't want to leave his master's house. When a servant became a love-slave his ear was pierced, and he became a permanent family member; his "ear was pierced."

Romans 12:1 makes provision for believers to become "love- slaves" of God— to say, make me Your servant forever! I delight to do Your will, O God!

CONCLUSION:

What I am trying to express, or to let God express to me and through me this "revival eve," is the possibility that we can raise our level of the experience of spiritual reality if we will wait "patiently" (intently, on purpose) for our God.

You are some of the best people I know. I do not un-Christianize any of you. But again and again we need to break through to refreshing and reviving in the Lord.

And while the "waiting on the Lord" sounds passive, it needs to be done deliberately. It is obvious that we cannot "schedule revival" and say to God:

"All right now, Sovereign of the Universe, between Tuesday and Sunday of next week we would like You to bless us up a little— not too much, now— because we have very full schedules. But bless us enough to keep us out of hell, if there is one, and make us real nice people, and bless our relationships and keep us pretty comfortable. Amen"

But perhaps we can say:

"Lord God, We walk through whirling mists and hear shouting voices. Please help us make sure our feet are on the solid rock.

"And, Heavenly Father, We are full of causes and agendas and burdens; please help us remember the old songs of praise, and, if You would, give us a new song of praise that will lift us toward You.

"And, Lord, Help us to love You so much that serving You will be our delight and our joy!

"You have promised that if we seek You we shall surely find You! With the Psalmist we pray, 'May all who seek You rejoice and be glad in You!'

"We will do our best to clear the way to begin this week. You come as You see fit, for we wait patiently for You. Turn to us, and hear our cry! In Jesus' name, Amen."

#83 EH *He Touched Me* or

60 EH *Give Me a Holy Life*

Things that Matter

November 11, 1990 AM

Colossians 1:9-18

Why Do We Schedule Special Meetings?

Times have a way of changing. Churches change. You are not the same person you were last year. But what about our responsibility and relationship with God? Has that changed, too?

A textbook on pastoral ministry starts off with a story about a group of people who lived on a treacherous seacoast. They formed a band to rescue people when their vessels were shipwrecked, as often happened there.

The little band acquired a lifeboat, and built a small life-saving station on the shore. The building became the center of their lives, and between storms they spent a lot of time in good fellowship together.

After a while their little station became inadequate for the social times that developed. They built larger, and furnished more lavishly. Soon it actually it seemed a shame to bring half-drowned sailors in where they dripped all over the rug.

The life-saving station had evolved into a yacht club. Another little band down the beach had to take over the life saving chores.

A church can be like that. The basic purposes for which we exist can sometimes change. There is nothing wrong with fellowship on purpose. Still, we need to step back from time to time and ask ourselves,

- 'Why are we here as a church?'
- 'What is important to me as a Christian?'
- 'What do I really want for my family, my children, in the next year, five years, or ten?'

The special emphasis, the special services of revival this week, are opportunities for us to stop and pay attention to things that matter.

I. THINGS OF THE SPIRIT MATTER

A key verse: Ephesians 4:32 "Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."

- A. A. The vital things of the spirit are not necessarily those things that consume the most time. We cannot be in church, or even in postures of devotion eight hours a day. We do have to work and prepare meals and go about the everyday tasks of life and living. Still, the things of the spirit permeate the rest of life, and determine what the true quality of that life shall be.

It is legitimate that we make a living. There is no sin in paying attention to things. It is right that we sacrificed to build a church building and maintain it; it is a tool. It is right that we take on the added burden of helping an inner-city ministry center get off the ground. But all these things are not ends in and of themselves; they are means to a more important end.

- B. The vital things of the spirit are not necessarily even the highly visible or spectacular spiritual qualities we have come to honor and value. The "Love Chapter" says it best: everything, even everything GOOD, is worth nothing unless it is dominated, shot through, permeated by genuine love!

It is possible to be accepted as spiritually gifted and still not be like Jesus. It is even possible to be active in spiritual concerns and not be tuned in to what Jesus Christ really wants to do in this world. Selfish ambition and pride and jealousy are not limited to the world outside the church. Thank God for gifts and gifted people. But we need to remember that real spiritual growth is often almost imperceptible.

- C. What really counts? Perhaps only God can persuade us that things like ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY ... and LEARNING TO PRAY ... and BECOMING MORE AND MORE LIKE JESUS... that these mark real achievement.

The things that matter most always have to do with love. Love for the LOST.
Love for the CHURCH. Love for the LORD of the church.

Things of the SPIRIT matter! Also ...

II. THINGS OF THE KINGDOM MATTER

But how can we see "kingdom things?" What gives us discernment to know what is and is not important in the kingdom of God? Another "key verse" might be Romans 14:17: "For the kingdom of God is NOT meat and drink, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost!

- A. Righteousness is an essential! OUR LIVES MUST BE CHANGED! We must live a separated life! Unless we have settled our own sin problem we can never hope to rescue others trapped in guilt and sin. We do not see a world in need and simply plunge in to do good deeds.
- B. Peace is vital! WE HAVE TO BE AT ONE WITH GOD! Peace is perhaps the most attractive thing in the world. We keep the TV on all the time ... we need the constant influence of music. We try to fill all the silences, the 'dead space' in our days, and often it is because we do not know the wonder of PEACE!

But PEACE comes as a result of being right with God, and learning to be at home with Him, in Him.

- C. Joy in the Holy Spirit! THE FORGOTTEN INGREDIENT! Oh, from time to time we have flashes of God's JOY. That is wonderful. But it is Christ's legacy to us— and when we pass from the purely negative into the positive side of the Christ life, He intends for us to experience this JOY as a way of life!

III. THINGS WHICH MATTER CENTER IN JESUS CHRIST

(We've 'arrived' finally at our text:) Colossians 1:9-18

- A. Paul prays that we shall KNOW GOD'S WILL. How do we make certain that we are in God's will? Certainly it IS vital, important!

Tom Nees left Washington, D.C., First Church of the Nazarene ten years ago to pastor in the ghetto of inner city Washington. This in itself is some kind of testimony to the reality of God's leading, for Tom Nees has flourished as a Christian and as a Christian influence in the last ten years.

One observation Pastor Nees has made in his ministry to his 'new parish' is that WHERE LIFE IS REDUCED TO ESSENTIALS, PEOPLE DO NOT HAVE TO BE PERSUADED ABOUT THE THINGS THAT MATTER! In the more affluent suburban church pastors spend much time and energy trying to prove God exists, and that sin is personal and devastating!

Our schedules and our comparative wealth can bring us to a practical complacency about the really IMPORTANT things! We can be INSULATED FROM LIFE ITSELF!

B. PAUL CHALLENGES US: IN EVERYTHING, CHRIST!

A Christian newsletter [National and International Religion Report] stated last week that religious fervor is spreading among U.S. soldiers in the Saudi Arabian desert. A Marine officer told National Public Radio that service personnel were being immersed in a makeshift baptistery made from a plastic tent container. Christian radio broadcasts are being beamed in from Southern Lebanon.

If that is true, and I believe it is, it took a massive interruption of normal schedule to bring spiritual matters to the attention of those who now see what really matters.

What will it take for us to be able to say that in EVERYTHING Jesus Christ shall have undisputed first place?

Prayer:

Not just a nod of the head, O Lord, but a total surrender of all our lives! Help us to put YOU first today, and in all the days and hours of our lives. Amen.

#326 Jesus Calls Us

Hope Thanksgiving for the Future

November 25, 1990 AM, Christ the King Sunday

Revelation 22:1-21

Introduction

Today marks the end of the traditional church year. Next Sunday we start all over again with Advent. In some traditions the church year just "ends." In others the last Sunday is called "Christ the King Sunday." In my own mind it is a good time to peer ahead into the unknown, to the One Great Day in God's calendar that we do not know how to celebrate. [Thus, the scripture 'describing' the Throne, the Presence of God]

A few years ago some Nazarene ministers were discussing the pros and cons of observing the church year, and one said, "It seems like going around in circles to me." But another replied, "It is more like ascending spirals to me." The way that we worship and pray ought to connect with reality. Real life is going somewhere. Faith that works must keep us connected with the realities of two worlds. We cannot afford to let go of either world. The connecting link between this world and the next is called "hope."

WHAT GOOD IS HOPE?

I. HOPE MOTIVATES

The Hope of a Destination

Life is finding ourselves on a voyage upon which none of us asked to embark. But here we are, sailing from a mysterious beginning to an as yet unknown destination.

There is just one power or capability that makes us willing sailors on this fascinating voyage. That thing is the power of hope. Hope in an ultimate destination perhaps, or at least, hope that we shall make some rewarding stops along the way, keeps us going. Only hope overcomes despair.

I have been thinking about two very contrasting journeys at sea:

One was actually taking place 270 years ago right now. A little ship was nearing its destination after a long and very difficult voyage. It could not be called a pleasure trip in any sense of the word. There were deaths, and at least one baby was born during the weeks and months it took to reach the New World from Plymouth, England. The people on board were looking for a place that they could call home, a place to live. In the next four or five months half of them would die. Fifty-one would survive the first year and make a beachhead in the wilderness. Evidently the rigors of the voyage and the extreme hardships of that first winter were, to their mind, worth it all.

The other voyage took place three years ago. Helen and I flew down to Miami, and got on board a luxury ship, *Song of America*, for a seven-day cruise to nowhere, just for the fun of sailing. (And it was fun!)

It is almost obscene to mention the two ocean voyages in the same breath. But somehow in the unpalatable contrast is a mini picture of the extremes with which we can view this matter of life and living. For the Pilgrims, destination was everything. On a Caribbean cruise, rest and relaxation was the whole purpose. [Obviously, I don't believe that is wrong, in its place; actually, the cruise was a tenth anniversary gift from YOU!]

I'm not just sure how to apply this contrast of sea voyages. I am not suggesting that we do have to sail to heaven in cramped, smelly, storm-tossed quarters, and that trying to make the voyage as enjoyable and rewarding in its own right as possible is carnal and worldly.

But genuine HOPE reminds us that life is going somewhere. It tells us that (as Jesus said in Luke 12:15) "life does not consist in the abundance of the things which we possess." Many a wealthy, well-adjusted, self-satisfied sinner, as well as many a miserable, self-righteous church member is headed on a cruise into hopelessness. Only HOPE keeps us headed toward the celestial city at any cost!

WHAT GOOD IS HOPE?

II. HOPE PURIFIES

Hope keeps us clean even as we pursue the goals it inspires.

Being Christian means living in a good and holy tension between life as it is, and as it will be, between what we are now and what one day we shall be.

"We are even NOW children of God, " John tells us (I John 3:2), "but when the King appears we will be made like He is."

Then he says: "Everyone who has this HOPE fixed on (Jesus) purifies himself, even as He (Jesus) is pure."

[Coming back to the Mayflower (was it all that turkey I ate on Thursday?)—] Not everyone on the Mayflower was there because of Christian hope. And hope, or the absence of hope, made quite a difference, indeed.

In the cramped spaces between decks the passengers and crew lived, and sometimes died. Helen was reading aloud to us this week some of the journals of the Mayflower voyagers. The sailors cursed one another as they got sick and died; they selfishly grasped what they could of the dead men's possessions. In contrast, the Pilgrims cared for one another, and reached out in love to the unbelieving crewmen when they could. We have deconstructed and criticized all old Christian journals and writing; we have put our own modern meanings into their long-dead mouths. But the fact remains, that those who had a vision of God's will for their lives had love that manifested itself in the hard times of life.

A vision of heaven; the possibility of being near to God; be HOLY because I AM holy.

WHAT GOOD IS HOPE?

III. HOPE ENTERS THE UNSEEN

Hebrews 6:19 This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil.)

The classic figure for HOPE is ... the ANCHOR. Hope is that which enters into the unseen Holy of Holies, and somehow makes the connection between this world and the next.

Those unfamiliar with boats and ships and sailing may think that an anchor is not important. Almost an afterthought. Every mariner knows that it is a vital piece of equipment, and that many times his very life will depend on the quality of his anchor.

When storms buffet and the waters are treacherous, the standard procedure is to anchor and ride out the gale. If the anchor won't take firm hold there is the danger of being blown onto shoal and being broken into pieces.

But how do we find this reality in HOPE? We find a personal assurance only in knowing JESUS CHRIST! Edward Mote wrote these words: "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness..." "

IV. HOPE CENTERS IN CHRIST THE KING

What good are these words from Revelation 'describing' heaven- this collage of words depicting a city of light and crystal rivers and trees of healing leaves— What good are they, in light of the end of the Church year? What do they say to us of the NATURE OF OUR VISION? How do they go about CLARIFYING THE VISION we have, and SHARPENING OUR HOPE?

The message of Christ's kingdom MUST be eschatological. The whole New Testament is about the coming kingdom of God! But we must always be eschatological without being other-worldly! IT IS PROPER TO SPEAK ABOUT "KINGDOM" (The THRONE!)

CHRIST THE KING MADE IT HIS THEME: Jesus spoke often of the kingdom.

Matthew 4:23 Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom."

Mark 1:14-15 "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.'"

Luke says that preaching "the good news of the kingdom of God" as the very purpose for which Jesus was sent into the world." (Luke 4:43)

BUT WHY "HOPE?" (WHY NOT JUST BETTER LIVING NOW?)

Because the Kingdom is here. And yet the Kingdom is Coming.

I Corinthians 15:24, 28 "Then comes the END, when He delivers up the kingdom to God the Father, after abolishing every kind of domination, authority, and power ... and when all things are thus subjected to Him, then the Son himself will also be made subordinate to God who made all things subject to Himself, and thus God will be all in all."

The biblical message is a mix of PRESENCE and PROMISE! The GOOD NEWS of the kingdom is that the promised future is in some manner, some way at work in the world today.

Some THING decisive has happened. But the consummation of redemption is still in the future as we understand time.

The collage-picture of heaven— a future reality, where we shall prove the reality of God's promises— IS A PROMISE OF HOPE. But REVELATION IS ALSO A PANORAMA OF PRESENT POWERS AT WORK.

So- what good is it to live as citizens of two worlds? What good is "hope?"

Wesley H. Brown told the story at an Evangelical Round Table, about Martin Luther King, SR. Daddy King was visiting the Holy Land. In Jerusalem he was asked to speak to a small group through an Israeli interpreter. Upon finding out there were some Arabs also present, Rev. King insisted that he be interpreted into Arabic as well. There he stood, said Mr. Brown, with one arm around an Israeli, and the other around an Arab. Brown wondered what in the world he would say. For five minutes this little black Christian pastor talked from his heart about the love of God that he had found through His Son, Jesus Christ. His hearers were profoundly moved.

Hope Thanksgiving for the Future

Out of the sorrow and tragedies of his personal voyage, Daddy King spoke of the HOPE that made life make sense for him. And it spoke powerfully in what we view, humanly, as a hopeless situation.

We have come to the end of another church year. Next Sunday we begin again with Advent. But it is the reality of HOPE that keeps life headed somewhere. That HOPE can enable each one of us to let Christ the King speak through US the word of HOPE in this world that needs it so very much!

Prayer: #92 *The Solid Rock*

Make Way for the Coming King

December 2, 1990

Matthew 21:1-11

Introduction:

This scripture, of course, describes the 'Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.' We rightly associate it with Palm Sunday and springtime. But this is also an Advent scripture: it contains the essence of what Advent is all about. The message of Advent is that GOD HIMSELF ENTERS INTO HUMAN AFFAIRS. Beyond all human control or manipulation, and yet also in a way which is somehow revealed by words of prophecy, GOD COMES TO WHERE WE ARE!

Zechariah, the Old Testament prophet wrote the words: "BEHOLD!—'Can You Believe it!'— See, Your King comes to you!" That is the heart of the message of Advent! The KING OF KINGS visits us! And ADVENT is for us, now, just as much it was in the darkness and spiritual silence of Zechariah's age, or as it was before Jesus was born in Bethlehem. It is every bit as true now as it was when the hosts on Mount Olivet shouted "Hosanna!"

I. ADVENT MEANS GOD MOVING ONTO THE SCENE

"Look! Your KING comes to you!"

- A. God's coming means "HOPE." God is headed into LIFE and into JOY and into LOVE, and He wants His people to go along with Him.

"HOPE" is a key part of prophecy! When we think of 'prophecy' we have been conditioned to think of "foretelling" and "prediction." As soon as the Persian Gulf crisis began to escalate the Christian bookstores and the fortune-telling industry began a boom in sales! The Late Great Planet Earth has had new editions printed, and anyone who pretends to see into the future has people who want to listen.

Make Way for the Coming King

But genuine prophecy is not so much foretelling as it is the forth-telling of the fact that God is going somewhere and taking His people along with Him.

B. God's coming means LOVE. The story behind our text is first of all a statement of great kindness, and gentleness, and love. The Son of God borrowed the unbroken colt of a donkey, and riding down Olivet's hill in the utter humility and veiled majesty and compassion that only Jesus could combine, Jesus underscored for all who will see His willingness to enter into life where meek souls will receive Him.

C. God's coming always means MYSTERY. "Hope" enters the UNSEEN! Beware of religious people who know too much! Remember, these are "boom days" for the predictors! But be warned, when it comes to Bible prophecy, anyone who clears away all the mystery is a quack!

Some self-proclaimed "prophets" jump on the latest current events and deal in these mysteries as if they have a special pipeline from God. For 70 years prophecy geniuses have recognized Russia as the great Bear of the North sweeping down to destruction in Armageddon.

Now instead of tearing up their charts in shame, they are simply using "white-out" and inking in "Saddam Hussein" and "Iraq" as the Anti-Christ forces.

God thinks too much of His church to give key messages to a few people to make big bucks with it!

That reminds me of one more thing about God's coming to us: D. God's coming means JUSTICE!

Prophecy is not to satisfy man's curiosity. It is to vindicate a just and holy God. And while prophecy is HOPE and LOVE and all those good things, this is NOT to say that prophecy is all kindness and sweetness! Prophecy is also clear warning! Prophecy always declares: JUSTICE IS GOD'S THING!

Have you thought about JUSTICE very much? Do you know that straight and impartial justice isn't all that exciting if God expects to judge US by HIS holy standards?

It is one thing to think "Give those evil Arabs a taste of JUSTICE, Lord!" But do we really want God to visit all this whole earth with JUSTICE? Do WE want to receive from God what we deserve?

Prophecy never simply says that God is for "US" and against "THEM!" Prophecy says that the KING, when He comes, will deal with EVIL and INJUSTICE!

It would be good not only to highlight Zechariah 9:9, but also to ponder Zechariah 14:4, when this same King comes again to this same Olivet! It isn't the "American Dream" that is coming; it isn't the Roman Catholic OR Protestant OR Great White Spirit that is coming. Advent means that GOD IS MOVING ON THE SCENE! BEHOLD, YOUR KING COMETH UNTO YOU!

Advent means God is coming on the scene. But why is He coming? WHO is God coming to visit?

II. ADVENT MEANS THAT WE ARE VISITED

See, Your King comes to you!

- A. Here is where WONDER breaks in! Wonder is perhaps the most cherished aspect of the Advent-Christmas season. The Story itself is full of wonder: the Star, the Magi, the giving and the bells and the children and all the rest. The Story lends itself to appreciation of the very best qualities of human existence.
- B. WONDER BORDERS ON INCREDULITY! As we grow older, and our perspective lengthens and our horizons expand by light years, the wonder becomes almost unbelievable, unbearable. Why did God choose earth? Let me tantalize you with just a fragment of fantasy from C.S. Lewis:

Once upon a time a very young angel was being shown round the splendors and glories of the universes by a senior and experienced angel. To tell the truth, the little angel was beginning to be tired and a little bored. He had been shown whirling galaxies and blazing suns, infinite distances in the deathly cold of interstellar space, and to his mind there seemed to be an awful lot of it all. Finally he was shown the galaxy of which our planetary

system is but a small part. As the two of them drew near to the star which we call our sun and to its circling planets, the senior angel pointed to a small and rather insignificant sphere turning very slowly on its axis. It looked as dull as a dirty tennis ball to the little angel whose mind was filled with the size and glory of what he had seen.

"I want you to watch that one particularly," said the senior angel, pointing with his finger.

"Well, it looks very small and rather dirty to me," said the little angel.

"What's special about that one?"

"That," replied his senior solemnly, "is the Visited Planet."

"'Visited'?" said the little one. "You don't mean visited by- -"

"Indeed I do. That ball, which I have no doubt looks to you small and insignificant and perhaps not overclean, has been visited by our young Prince of Glory." And at these words he bowed his head reverently.

"But how?" queried the younger one. "Do you mean that our great and glorious Prince, with all these wonders and splendors of His Creation, and millions more that I'm sure I haven't seen yet, went down in Person to this fifth-rate little ball? Why should He do a thing like that?"

"It isn't for us," said his senior, a little stiffly, "to question His 'why's,' except I must point out to you that He is not impressed by size and numbers as you seem to be. But that He really went I know, and all of us in Heaven who know anything know that. As to why He became one of them . . . how else do you suppose could He visit them?"

The little angel's face wrinkled in disgust.

"Do you mean to tell me," he said, "that He stooped so low as to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures of that floating ball?"

"I do, and I don't think He would like you to call them 'creeping crawling creatures' in that tone of voice. For, strange as it may seem to us, He loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them up to become like Him."

The little angel looked blank. Such a thought was almost beyond his comprehension.

"Close your eyes for a moment," said the senior angel, "and we will go back in what they call Time."

While the little angel's eyes were closed and the two of them moved nearer to the spinning ball, it stopped its spinning, spun backward quite fast for a while, and then slowly resumed its usual rotation.

"Now look!" and as the little angel did as he was told, there appeared here and there on the dull surface of the globe little flashes of light, some merely momentary and some persisting for quite a time.

"Well, what am I seeing now?" queries the little angel.

"You are watching this little world as it was some thousands of years ago," returned his companion. 'Every flash and glow of light that you see is something of the Father's knowledge and wisdom breaking into the minds and hearts of people who live upon the earth. Not many people, you see, can hear His voice or understand what He says, even though He is speaking gently and quietly to them all the time.'

"Why are they so blind and deaf and stupid" asked the junior angel rather crossly.

"It is not for us to judge them. We who live in the Splendor have no idea what it is like to live in the dark. We hear the music and the Voice like the sound of many waters every day of our lives, but to them— well, there is much darkness and much noise and much distraction upon the earth. Only a few who are quiet and humble and wise hear His voice. But watch, for in a moment you will see something truly wonderful."

The Earth went on turning and circling round the sun, and then, quite suddenly, in the upper half of the globe there appeared a light, tiny, but so bright in its intensity that both angels hid their eyes.

"I think I can guess," said the little angel in a low voice. "That was the Visit, wasn't it?"

-from New Testament Christianity

If Bethlehem is true then our God does not measure values simply in vastness or duration. If Bethlehem is true then the wonder begins to dawn of just how valuable we are to God, if He would come to us!

- C. One other sobering thought: If Bethlehem is true, then so is Apocalypse! If we let God into our world at all, then God will have His way. If we do NOT let God in, then perhaps He will let us have OUR way!

Advent means God on the scene; and that means AWE and WONDER- - and that means GOD IS HERE!

III. ADVENT MEANS A PRESENCE TO WORSHIP

See, Your KING comes to you!

If the KING truly comes— then what is our response? Well, it isn't always what we would like to have people think we would do for the King of Kings. For—

- A. We debate. Do the loyal subjects of the king call themselves Catholic or Protestant? Are we to follow Calvin or Wesley? Shall we roll our trousers? Do we dare eat a peach?

If the King of Kings truly COMES- how do we react? Well—

- B. We "decide:" The Lord Jesus Christ, King of Kings, Sovereign of the Universe, Babe of Bethlehem and Christ of Calvary, can have 10% of my money; can have a choice corner of our living room; can have two hours or so every Sunday except when we go on vacation— and we will also keep His Book on the coffee table all the time, even when non-Christians come to visit.

But these responses are so inadequate!

No— If the KING comes:

C. We declare: JESUS IS LORD! And then we see where the King wants to take us!

Conclusion:

We have the clear word of the scriptures, which we are free to believe or to reject:
"SEE, YOUR KING COMES TO YOU!"

He CAME to this earth! He declared the Father's glory! He defeated sin and death and hell! He promised eternal life to those who confess Him as Lord!

He IS COMING AGAIN to this earth! You can count on it!

HE IS HERE RIGHT NOW! Your King comes to you, in the Presence of the Holy Spirit, to bring HOPE, and to inspire WONDER- - but also to enable you and me to say
"JESUS IS LORD!"

Prayer:

We affirm, by Your Spirit's grace: 'JESUS IS LORD!' Amen.

EH #21 Sing with Glad Anticipation

Signs of the Coming King

December 9, 1990

Luke 21:34-36; 1-4; 25-28

Introduction:

Beyond the beautiful story of Bethlehem, which we believe and know and love, and permeating all the scriptures, the message of Advent is that GOD HIMSELF ENTERS INTO HUMAN AFFAIRS.

[God created humankind in His own image; God makes covenant with you and me; God in Jesus Christ came in the flesh to live among us; God is with us NOW by His HOLY SPIRIT; God has promised to return and govern us.]

In the last week of His earthly ministry, Jesus and His disciples were in the City of Jerusalem. The (Galilean) disciples were (1) fascinated by the imposing temple complex. They made appropriate (tourist-type) comments to Jesus.

Jesus (2) took the occasion to comment on transient versus eternal matters. "These mighty stones will soon cease to be impressive," He told them. "They will soon be torn down flat to the ground." What He was saying was that the things which we depend on must be more substantial than just granite and marble. Jesus turned the minds of His disciples to "final things." Then came a torrent of questions (3) (questions which we might all want to ask):

"If we can't depend on the Temple, WHAT CAN WE DEPEND ON?"

"If this is going to pass away, WHEN WILL THE END TIMES COME?" "What is important for us to know? We're listening!" And so Jesus began:

I. IT IS IMPORTANT TO KNOW AND TRUST JESUS

- His lesson began with three negatives; three "don'ts."

A. "Don't be deceived!" AVOID THE ESOTERIC

Jesus' first concern seemed to be that the disciples would not be thrown off the central issues of faith. Before He would "predict" anything He said "Watch out that you are not deceived!" When we focus on and begin to ask questions about 'the future' we become very vulnerable to suggestion. Particularly, we are vulnerable to those people with the loudest voices and the biggest wall charts, who know all the details.

B. "Don't be afraid!" DON'T PANIC

The second concern of Jesus was that His disciples should not live in fear of His Coming again. "Don't be deceived" is followed in the same breath with "Do not be frightened!"

C. "Don't make 'special preparation!' - DON'T EVEN WORRY When will we learn that we can't "get ready" for a Parousia— we have to LIVE ready, and BE ready— and be doing what we are supposed to be doing!?!"

It isn't that "hard times" won't come; but hard times will not necessarily signal "the end" of time as we know it. Jesus went on: "My "deliverance" may seem strange to you at first! "There will be opportunities for some of you to die for Me. But not one hair of your heads will perish!" (17 - 18) Then Jesus tried to give some perspective:

II. IT IS IMPORTANT TO KNOW THAT WORLD HOPE OR DESPAIR IS NOT CENTERED IN JERUSALEM

[Translation: We must distinguish between hard times and "end times." Hope and despair center in JESUS.]

A. EVERY GENERATION SEES TRAGEDY AND SORROW

Personal "end times" come to every individual, and every generation. "The Great Tribulation" could not exceed the horror of the Killing Fields for the Cambodians (under Pol Pot) or the Turkish massacre and genocide of the Armenians or the inhumanity of the Holocaust. But Jesus made clear that

even the approaching devastation of the Temple and Jerusalem's sorrow (in 70 A.D.) was not necessarily the indication of the Great Day of the Lord.

B. THE MYSTERY OF JERUSALEM, OF 'THE LAND,' DOES NOT DISPLACE LOVE

There is honest disagreement among great and good scholars on the role of the literal landscape of that portion of the Middle East we call The Holy Land. It may be in time to come that clear signs will emerge regarding Jerusalem and Israel. Certainly we feel a kinship to the Jewish people who revere the same scriptures we do. But a simplistic approach that characterizes millions of human beings, regardless of their faith or lack of it, as sub-humans to be eliminated is not the lesson I have learned from Jesus Christ, who taught "Love your enemy." "Go the second mile."

Any voice that calls for compassion for Arabs can be construed as anti-Semitic, I suppose. We Christians ought to be pro-Semitic, but we ought to be pro-HUMAN!

C. A CALL FOR HUMILITY ON THE PART OF 'PROPHETS'

Thus, the complexity of the so-called signs we can read in the Middle East today calls for at least a bit of humility on the part of would-be prophets. We are certainly right to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. We are certainly right to defend the right for Israel to exist. We also are right in refusing to predict what we do not know. There are strong warnings about prophets who say, "Thus saith the Lord!" when God has not spoken to them at all. But that does not mean that Jesus did not say anything that day about "end times." He did:

III. (25) HIS PROMISE WAS: THERE WILL BE A UNIVERSAL MANIFESTATION

And even in this it is difficult to know what is literal and figurative; whether Jesus means the heavenly bodies we see every day, or whether He means common elements of civilization that all humankind shares. At any rate-

A. THE 'SUN' AND 'MOON' AND 'STARS' ARE VISIBLE OVER ALL THE EARTH

Jesus says there will be signs and then the Son of Man will come in a cloud with power and great glory.

B. TERROR WILL BE WIDESPREAD

Whatever these signs, these universal signals may be, Jesus says (26) that men will faint with terror and apprehension of what is coming on the world.

C. JESUS SAYS: "NOW! LOOK UP!"

But the message is clear: the people who belong to Jesus the King are NOT to consider this bad news. "When these things BEGIN to take place, STAND UP, and LIFT UP YOUR HEADS, because your redemption is drawing near."

It seems like a pretty tall order: "DON'T BE FRIGHTENED! Christians aren't any braver or smarter or stronger than any other group of people. Why should WE be unafraid when all the world seems to be shaken?

FRANKLY, I DON'T HAVE THE ANSWER! But I think I know! It has to do with what we've been talking about— of ASSURANCE— knowing Jesus in a personal way. Of PERSPECTIVE and PROMISE and of the ATTITUDE OF HOPE. God knows who His people are! He will not forget them, and simply let them be overwhelmed and lost.

IV. STRANGE AS IT SEEMS, GIVING IS NOT UNRELATED TO THIS

A. Come back with me to the first paragraph in the chapter. (1-4) Why, DO YOU SUPPOSE, is THAT stuck in HERE?

B. Jesus wasn't worried about the collection for the Temple that Tuesday of Holy Week. He wasn't condemning the rich people who gave large sums. He wasn't worried about temple finances.

But Jesus WAS watching! The poor woman who gave two mites did not escape His notice! And Jesus knows the thoughts and intents of our hearts, too! Not one sacrifice, not one noble thought escapes His attention! This

poor woman who believed, and who gave her all, and who was observed by the Lord Jesus Christ is a pattern for us all! We need to be GIVERS!

Conclusion:

If Bethlehem's story is genuine, so is Apocalypse. If God ever has broken into human affairs, He is still so engaged.

If we let God into our world at all, then God will have His way. If we do NOT let God in, then perhaps He will let us have OUR way! And I could not think of anything more chillingly frightening than seeing a world where selfishness rules unchecked!

But be assured, there shall be a(n Objective) Parousia. The powers of heaven will shake, and God's people, along with all the world, will know what is happening!

Prayer: Thank You, O God, that You come into human lives. We invite You to share in every aspect of our living. We ask You to make us like You are— loving, giving, trusting. Amen

#24 EH I Cannot Tell

Questions for the Coming King

December 16, 1990 - Advent III

Matthew 11:2

Introduction

JOHN THE BAPTIST HAD NEVER HEARD OF CHRISTMAS. But if he had, he wouldn't have had much room for a Christmas tree where he was. It is hard to celebrate Christmas when you are in prison.

But prison wasn't all that was ruining John the Baptist's Christmas spirit. There was also a dreadful line-up of nagging questions that wouldn't go away.

I. CHRISTMAS DOESN'T MEAN 'NO MORE PROBLEMS'

A. John's disciples had come and told him that Jesus of Nazareth, whom John had baptized and pronounced the MESSIAH, was hardly behaving like any King they knew, coming OR going.

1. HE WAS PREACHING KINDNESS AND LOVE, AND NOT ORGANIZING DEMONSTRATIONS AGAINST THE ROMANS OR THE HYPOCRITES IN RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP.
2. HE WAS AWARE THAT JOHN WAS IN PRISON, AND YET HE HAD NOT TAKEN STEPS SUPERNATURALLY OR ANY OTHER WAY TO GET HIM OUT.
3. HE WAS ACTUALLY EATING AND DRINKING WITH PUBLICANS AND SINNERS; HE HAD BEEN SEEN TALKING TO WOMEN AND SAMARITANS.

It was enough to cause a sinking sensation in the pit of John the Baptist's stomach.

B. DOUBTS! [These frightening sorts of thoughts present themselves uninvited from time to time. If it has never happened to you perhaps you are very fortunate. Or perhaps you have never been exposed to darkness and evil.]

1. This will be a Christmas for several hundred thousand young men and women in a far desert land which even just six months ago they could not have dreamed would ever happen.
 2. And every year Christmas for many, many people is nothing like the pictures we mail to each other on our Christmas cards.
 3. Chances are that right here this morning there are those who love the Lord, and are serving Him the best they can- but if they were very honest- they would say they were tempted to say, "Why doesn't the Christ of Christmas spread a little of His cheer around my way?"
- C. What happens When Christmas isn't all Merry and Bright? WHAT HAPPENS WHEN JESUS DOESN'T SEEM TO BE DOING WHAT WE EXPECT?
1. Would that everyone could have a Cameo Christmas, a Hallmark Christmas by the hearth, with all the trimmings! I am thankful that I have had my share of Olde Fashioned Christmases. We listened by the big Philco radio to Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." Nobody could play Scrooge like Lionel Barrymore! And somehow we had to hear Messiah, even though I didn't appreciate it then as I learned to later.

But storybook Christmases don't always happen. And strange as it seems, God comes near sometimes when circumstances get tough.

One of the Christmases I recall as "special" was in the winter of 1937 when my family was really in desperate times in the Great Depression. My father was sick in bed, and had been for months. And yet I remember it as the year I helped make ornaments for the tree of English walnut shells and string and popcorn.

I remember also the love and closeness of aunts and uncles and cousins who made sure that we were not alone.
 2. Does doubt come to good people? I mean, can a person who is really "doing it all" for God still have doubts?

Would you say that John Bunyan, who wrote *Pilgrim's Progress*, was a good man? Would you believe John Bunyan ever wrestled with doubts? Listen to something John Bunyan wrote:

"Of all temptations I ever met with in my life, to question the being of God and the truth of His Gospel is the worst, and the worst to be borne. When this temptation comes it takes my [girdle] from me, and removes the foundation from under me. Though God has visited my soul with never so blessed a discovery of Himself, yet afterwards I have been in my spirit so filled with darkness, that I could not so much as once conceive what God and that comfort were with which I had been refreshed."

II. CHRISTMAS FAITH WILL BE CHALLENGED ['IS JESUS REALLY EMMANUEL?']

A. THERE ARE DIFFERENT KINDS AND SOURCES OF NEGATIVE THOUGHTS:

1. Some SO-CALLED doubts have moral origins. Many "intellectual" questions begin with a difference of opinion with God. Sin clouds the windows of the soul until not only the heart is stained, but no one else is believed, either.]
2. Some doubts have physical causes. Weariness. Circumstances. Never make a vital decision when you are exhausted.
3. Some doubts ARE intellectual. To simply ignore questions will not suffice an honest mind. "I don't know" is not a sign of stupidity. How do we go about facing honest questions in the heart and mind?

B. DOUBT IS NOT SIN! Honest doubt, faced up to much as John the Baptist faced his, is an expression of integrity. John the Baptist looked for a simple, easy answer he could understand without stretching his hurting faith. He got what he needed— but it was an answer that demanded even more faith, but an answer that would satisfy and carry him through life and death.

C. THE EXAMPLE: HOW JOHN DEALT WITH HIS DOUBT. John had that sinking feeling in the pit of the stomach we call by different names; that challenge that tells us that all we

hold sacred is at stake, along with the integrity of our faith.

What did John the Baptist do?

1. First look at WHAT HE DID NOT DO: he did not make a sermon out of his doubting; he did not take sides with it. He was not satisfied just to remain in torment. He did not seek to influence his disciples or infect them.
2. Then John sought to GO TO THE SOURCE OF TRUTH. John did expose his doubt to Jesus himself. "Are you really MESSIAH?"

Be honest with your doubting; but take it to the Lord Himself, even if you are hurting, instead of "feeding" it.

John asked, via his messengers:

Are you the ONE TO COME? There is no question you are good but you are gentle, and we need hell fire! You are so poor, and we need funding! You seem too often wrapped up with individual's needs and we need to strike at the heart of evil, which is corrupt leadership, and hypocrites in the religious community, bad government officials.

Jesus answered, by the same messengers: Tell John that the lame are being healed, and the dumb are speaking— people are getting help— and blessed is the person who doesn't stumble over me!

III. LOOK AT THIS ANSWER: LOOK AT ME AND DON'T STUMBLE!

A. JESUS ANSWERED. He did not criticize John for asking: John could not help how he felt; there is no sin in doubting. And Jesus did not for a moment question John's integrity. If John had been corrupt, or afraid of facing death because he was evil, Jesus would have told him so. Jesus made it clear after the 'messengers' had left that John the Baptist was a great and good man.

B. JESUS ANSWERED "OBLIQUELY" ALMOST CRYPTICALLY

Jesus does not simply say what we expect Him to say. Jesus does not come as we envision He should come. He comes as He says that He will come.

When Jesus speaks there is always the demand for more than an intellectual response. To 'know' the verities of faith is not less than intellectual, but it is somehow more.

The answers Jesus gives to our doubts are not a scientific exercise. The answer we get is true because Jesus is true. To prove by science all that Jesus claims to be makes the proving greater than the proven. We "appeal" some "even higher power" to prove the Word of God.

A great Bible scholar once said:

"Knowing is not the requisition of neutral knowledge about statements, principles or systems. Nor is it the passive contemplation of God. Rather, it is a process that involves the total person: his or her observing, thinking, use of senses, intelligence, will, action and heart." K.Barth (CD, IV/3/p183)

- C. WHAT KIND OF ANSWER IS THIS? "Blessed is the one who keeps from stumbling over Me!" Does SUCH AN ANSWER help?

What does that say to the men and women in the Saudi desert? Does He have anything to say to the person feeling all alone and isolated this Christmas?

I believe with all my heart that Jesus DOES care, and that He DOES have something to say to anyone who really will listen!

We're often too preoccupied with what we think we should hear the LORD say that we sometimes may miss His answer. His word is a challenge; the message is the same He gave to His beloved Baptist: "BLESSED IS THE ONE WHO IS NOT OFFENDED IN ME!"

1. DON'T DECIDE IN ADVANCE WHAT JESUS SHOULD BE AND DO.
2. HEAR WHAT JESUS SAYS WHEN WE LIKE IT, AND LISTEN
ESPECIALLY CAREFULLY TO WHAT HE SAYS WHEN WE DON'T LIKE
IT, OR DON'T UNDERSTAND IT.

3. DON'T LET ANYTHING, NO CIRCUMSTANCE, EVEN PRISON, KEEP
YOU FROM STUMBLING OVER THE FACT THAT JESUS IS LORD!

Blessed is the man or woman that says: "God IS! God is GOOD!
Lord, I believe! I will OBEY You!"

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's Christmas Hymn speaks of hope that strikes through
the gloom of doubt: "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day"

And in despair I bowed my head.

"There is no peace on earth, " I said,

"For hate is strong and mocks the song
of peace on earth, good will to men.

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:

"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;

The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,

With peace on earth, good will to men.

Prayer:

Oh God, Wherever we are this morning, give us this message of Christmas— that You
are KING! You are the King who CAME, and the King Who Is Coming! And You are the
King who COMES! You have said, "I AM with you!" We believe You! And we love You.
Amen.

#169 Worship in Song

The Joy of the Coming King

December 23, 1990

Instead of a traditional sermon with three logical points, on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, I wish that I could simply show you three dramatic scenes, like the three ghosts in (Dickens') A Christmas Carol.

Let me read to you a rather extensive scripture lesson, actually, three lessons; each lesson sets the stage or describes a scene.

1. Scene One: [Luke 1:26-38.]
2. Scene Two: [Luke 1:39-55.] Finally,
3. Scene Three: [Philippians 4:4-9.]

Now- Try hard with me to see the three pictures which these scriptures bring to mind. The first scene has a title. It is called:

I. THE ANNUNCIATION

This is an utterly great moment in the history of all humankind. Some might dispute its factual historicity. If I thought it did not literally take place I would not be celebrating Christmas. We probably can not authentically set the scene in any photographic sense. But some of the elements described for us by the scripture are beyond doubt. I am certain we will see them clearly.

The central figure in Scene One is a beautiful young lady. Mary was a beautiful person, clothed with humility and purity. I am sure she was beautiful in every way, but the beauty I am certain of is her spiritual beauty. In appearance Mary may have been no different from many other teen age girls in Galilee. But there was a purity about her which God highly honored.

The other person in this scene is not human. Gabriel is a magnificent being. His name means "Man of God" which we could probably translate "Being of God" or "Person of God," for the scripture says Gabriel is an angel. We tend to picture angels as sort of gold-and-white winged creatures that blink on and off, in and out, half real, half

imaginary. But we may be sure that Gabriel is a very, very real being. He inhabits a level of reality with which we are only marginally tangent. The sudden impact of that reality startled Mary, as it would startle any one of us. In the scene we are watching Gabriel greets Mary with great respect. He calls her "Blessed!" He is very gentle, but he is a pretty dazzling sort of presence.

Mary is greatly troubled. She cannot imagine what this might be. This is NOT a dream or a vision. It is a visitation from other dimensions of life. God is using the angel to communicate His will.

Gabriel gives Mary assurance that he is not going to hurt her. "Don't be afraid!" But then without a pause the angel goes on to say that Mary is to have a Son, she shall call Him Jesus, and He will rule over the house of Jacob forever." That is almost impossible for Mary to grasp all at once. But Mary does understand: God has chosen her for a special task!

Mary's reaction is total humility. There is shock, even fear. "Why me? How can this be?" Her questions are answered, perhaps not completely, but enough that Mary knows God has really spoken. God asks Mary to be the mother of the Son of God.

Mary's deliberate and immediate reply is: "Behold the handmaiden of the Lord! Be it done to me according to Your Word!"

And the curtain comes down on the First Scene. The next picture we call

II. THE MAGNIFICAT, OR 'MARY'S SONG'

Actually, The Magnificat is the name given to the song or hymn which Luke uses to portray the expression of praise from Mary's heart as it fairly burst with love to God. How Mary came to sing that hymn is what I want us to look at again, to ponder. Simple scenes like this are all too easy for us to overlook.

Mary's hymn of joy was not glibly or superficially sung. Her submission to God's will [in the first 'picture' we saw] brought her inner peace, but also brought challenge to her faith. The angel Gabriel had told Mary that her relative Elizabeth, whom Mary

knew was past normal child-rearing years, was six months pregnant. This was very significant information to Mary.

First of all, it was a help to her own faith, for it would be nothing short of a miracle if Elizabeth really were expecting a child at her advanced age. But also it became a suggestion as to where she might go in perplexity to find help and encouragement. If Elizabeth really was expecting Mary thought that she might be a help to Elizabeth. And it also just might have occurred to her that though she was SURE she had seen the angel, she wanted to see how Elizabeth looked (what SHAPE she was in!) So Mary went into the hill country to visit Elizabeth.

Scene Two begins as Mary steps inside Elizabeth's door. Immediately Mary saw that Elizabeth truly WAS expecting! It was an emotional moment! There was genuine love, and joy, and warmth. Even Elizabeth's unborn baby reacted to the Presence of God as Mary drew near. Once again Mary is called "Blessed!"

Elizabeth acknowledged the joy, and spoke these words: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord." Blessed is the faith of Mary! Blessed because she dared to trust God's WORD!

THEN came the sudden warmth of heart to Mary! THEN she FELT the Divine approval! Then her soul nearly burst within her as she felt a rush of deep emotion, and she uttered the words which Luke has passed down to us as a song:

My soul exalts the Lord!

And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.

And the curtain comes down on Scene Two. The final picture, far removed from the other two, is nonetheless an Advent passage, too. See if you can connect it with the other two. I call this one:

III. A RHAPSODY OF JOY

We are a long, long way from Bethlehem and Galilee. The scene is ancient Rome, in a prison cell. Perhaps, actually, it is a rented house where Paul is permitted to live with a rotating guard schedule. That portion of the stage which we might outline or define

with detail is vague, dark. At best, Paul's "state" as he is writing is far from ideal. He is NOT staying at the Sheraton Tara. We have to almost read between the lines to get the picture. The simple facts are there: Paul is not complaining, but if we look carefully we see [1:7] chains. We realize that Paul has had to face [1:15] envy & strife even while being imprisoned. Paul has lost everything he owned; [3:8] I have suffered the loss of all things. Paul has wept; he has [3:18] shed tears over false brethren. Paul has been neglected, for [4:10] he is now rejoicing that after a long neglect Philippians able to get a care package through. Do you get the setting?

There is not a lot of action in this scene. But Paul is writing- dictating to Timothy and Epaphroditus. And look, listen what he is writing! Paul is radiating pure JOY! He is giving off solid rays of LOVE! THE DRAMA IS THE MIRACLE OF WHAT IS BEING PRODUCED 'HERE!' Here is an epistle that we look to for resources:

REJOICE IN THE LORD! THE PEACE OF GOD WILL KEEP YOU! THE GOD OF PEACE WILL BE WITH YOU! I CAN DO ALL THINGS THROUGH CHRIST! MY GOD WILL SUPPLY ALL YOUR NEEDS!

It isn't that Paul doesn't feel cold or hunger or pain. He is very human, and like Mary, he craves the comfort of other people of faith. But Paul's heart, like Mary's, seeks to MAGNIFY THE LORD!

The curtain comes down on Scene Three.

What is the common thread here? What does Paul in prison, and the blessed mother of Jesus have in common? They believe God's WORD! They believe God has chosen them! And they believe that God is with them!

God breaks into human existence! THE LORD IS AT HAND! THAT is what makes Philippians a lesson for Advent. And that IS the lesson we can try to learn! We have not been chosen like Mary. She is unique. We are not chosen like Paul, thank the Lord for that! But we ARE chosen. And we CAN trust God's Word.

Look at the "summary words" that come to us from these pictures. JOY / SUBMISSION STRENGTH HOPE PEACE / FELLOWSHIP/PRAISE. And once again, the 'common thread' is Immanuel. God is With US!

Prayer: God, We thank You that "The Lord IS near!"

174 O Little Town of Bethlehem

Christmas All Year Through

December 30, 1990 AM

John 1:12

Galatians 4:1-8 What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were children we were in slavery to under the basic principles of the world. But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.

Last year, the day after Christmas, we sat down for dinner. The Advent Candles were lit, and after the meal we started to read and have a word of prayer. The smallest member of the family present was quick to inform us that "Christmas was over!" We didn't need to carry on with the candles any longer.

And Christmas IS over for most people, I suppose. But for us Christians should it be?
?

I. WISTFULLY WE HEAR "WHY CAN'T WE HAVE CHRISTMAS ALL YEAR?"

- A. We couldn't AFFORD to have Christmas all year!
- B. If we DID it wouldn't be special.
- C. But that special "glow" —that would be nice

II. THAT SPECIAL PART OF CHRISTMAS IS LOVE

AND ESPECIALLY THOSE WE LOVE BECAUSE OF ASSOCIATION IN FAMILY OR FAMILY OF GOD

A. Paul sums it up in our lesson: [Lesson:] Gal 4:4 God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption [THE 'FULL RIGHTS'] of sons. God sent his Son ... That we might receive the full rights of sons ... that we might be real FAMILY with God Himself!

B. THIS IS WHERE OUR TEXT COMES IN: This 'continuing Christmas' is for those "who receive Him Who came."

(John 1:12) He came unto his own, and His own received Him not. but as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the children of God, even to as many as believed on His name.

C. ALSO, IF WE HAVE "RECEIVED JESUS", WE ARE ABLE TO KNOW THAT WE ARE GOD'S CHILDREN because:

(Galatians 4:6) God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.

Christmas is never over IF we are daily being renewed by the Holy Spirit!

III. CHRISTIANS CAN AND DO EXPERIENCE "CHRISTMAS" ALL YEAR!

A. We can't "keep Christmas alive" in the sense that many people might understand it. And I'm thankful that Christmas comes only once a year. But we can do something about keeping the spirit of the TRUE Christmas!! [We DON'T HAVE TO BUY this best part of Christmas. It won't ruin the "special times" we all love.]

B. Some people still don't have a clue to what they miss at Christmas! And it may well be that some people will never know unless God chooses to show them through you or me!

C. This continuing spirit of love/Christmas has something to do with the joy of giving as well as receiving. It has to do with maturing out of babyhood and childhood, even, into full maturity in Christ.

As sons and daughters of God: then (heirs) of God through Christ. WE MUST PRESS INTO OUR FULL INHERITANCE. (Galatians 4:6) GOD HAS MADE YOU ALSO AN HEIR.

- D. Our world cries out for sons and daughters of God to come to full maturity, and claim their full inheritance!

THE WORD ON "MATURITY" IS NOT SIMPLY "what are my rights?" It is also "God help me to assume my responsibility!" The full word is "fellowship" or "partnership" — working with Jesus Christ in partnership with God Himself! And this the highest privilege known to men or women.

[The "collect" of the old Book of Common Prayer for this Sunday reads:

Almighty God, who hast given us Thy only-begotten Son to take our nature upon Him, and as at this time to be born of a pure virgin; grant that we being regenerate, and made Thy children through adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by Thy Holy Spirit; through the same our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the same Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.]

This morning we talked about being ambassadors, and we are. But this is even better! We are to be ambassadors who are sons and daughters of the King Himself! The promise of our text still stands! Cooperation with the Father! His help! His love!

CONCLUSION

I mentioned being a messenger—receiving messages as from God this morning. What a joy!

It is amazing how we receive messages from the Lord if we will listen! A week ago I perceived God speaking to me in a prayer a friend of mine prayed in our kitchen.

I remember about a year ago right now during the course of a conversation with a neighbor of ours who loves Jesus. We attend very different churches. This was another case where my friend didn't know how much she helped me, but I told her how much I appreciated it.

She was asking me for help in dealing with a cult or heresy; a friend of hers was somewhat entangled. She believed I would know scriptures— and I believe I did help her. But she said, "I've been asking the Lord to forgive me for trying to play God in

this person's life, (i.e., the person to whom she is witnessing.) I need to just love her AND LET GOD BE GOD!"

That was the word that reached me: LET GOD BE GOD!

If Jesus has really COME, if by His Holy Spirit, He is really here, then in whatever situation I find myself— the real, on-going truth of Christmas is: God is HERE, AND I AM HIS CHILD WITH FULL RIGHTS, and I can LET GOD BE GOD!

In many respects this is an awesome time to be alive! How can we find grace to face the challenges of life? How can a pastor speak about wisdom and grace for so many different needs?

This month a new baby came into our church family. The widow of an old preacher (Mildred Poole) died this week; I'll stand by her grave in Everette in a few days. One person I spoke with yesterday has a brother very ill because of "chemo" fighting lymphoma. One person is wrestling with depression. Another family stands at a crossroad of decision. That's the way life is.

How indeed! The answer is 'the Gift we got for Christmas!' And the LOVE of Christmas never ends! Jesus is really with us! He is Immanuel! He will give us grace, day by day. LET GOD BE GOD WHERE YOU ARE JUST NOW!

EH 86 *Infant Holy, Infant Lowly* "Christ the babe, was born for you."

The Greatest Job in the World

December 30, 1990 PM

Lesson: 2 Corinthians 5:11 - 21

Text 5:20 "We are, therefore, Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us."

I love my work. There are times I don't earn my salary. Then there are times when you couldn't find enough money to pay me to do what I have to do. But as a minister, I believe that I am an ambassador for Jesus Christ.

But wait a minute. This passage is not written to pastors alone, or even primarily to pastors. Verse 17 says if ANY person is in Christ he/she is a new creation, and so called to be an ambassador for Jesus Christ. YOU are just as much in this ambassador business as I am. Maybe even more so! The call of God to preaching or evangelism is a wonderful thing, and I do not trivialize it in the least. It has fallen to me to be a full-time resource person, and a worship leader in the church at times. But WE are ALL God's men and women. We are all called to represent God. God Himself has called us.

You may wonder about that. You may not feel personally "called." [Sometimes I don't feel called, either!] I know how that is, believe me! [Speaking for God can be a heavy responsibility!] But this passage says it clearly- God wants YOU to know that whatever else you may do for a living, you are called to be His representative! But I'm also pretty sure that He wanted me to tell you, too, that you don't have to face this high assignment all by yourself.

CHRISTMAS was when the greatest job in all the world began! God sent His only begotten Son into the world to say "I love you!" And now as His children through Christ and IN Christ, we are to pick up Christ's work, carry on that mission, saying to the world what God tells us to say. We are Ambassadors for God! We are called to the greatest job in the world!

I. WHAT THE GREATEST JOB IN THE WORLD IS NOT

This passage says that we are ambassadors of heaven; and that it is the love of Jesus Christ that makes us go. But I want to back up, and begin describing what this task, of being an ambassador, is NOT. I want to look back at several verses that connect with the thought of our task; actually, they are negative statements that Paul uses, usually with the phrase "We are NOT ..." as an opener:

- A. WE ARE NOT PEDDLERS (2:17 Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.)

Now there is nothing wrong with being a peddler. I remember when I was about Junior High age stopping in the basement of an old 'Five and Dime' and watching a real pro peddler at work. He had a set spiel, and some sort of vegetable peeler. Fascinating! Only the fact that I was broke kept me from buying one for my mother. But what a peddler sells is not a matter of life and death. He sells gadgets, usually. He may make it seem very urgent— like you can't live without his gadget. But he knows that what he is selling is basically so that he can make a living.

[I was a peddler once! I "sold" magazines door to door when I first graduated from high school in the "recession" of 1948-49. I usually began my "pitch" by saying, "You don't want to buy a magazine, do you?"]

But we are ambassadors, not peddlers!

- B. WE ARE NOT ACTORS (3:13, 18 We are not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. (But) we with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, . . . being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.) Moses put on the veil because the people complained of the brightness of his face. Maybe it makes people uncomfortable if we begin to get too close to the Lord. [I don't think it is possible to get too close to the Lord!]

But here Paul said that Moses put the veil on— or maybe KEPT it on— so that the people couldn't see the glory fading away! I'm not sure of what all

that means— and I don't want to take too much time on this emphasis— but ambassadors have more important business to do than trying to pretend they are something they are not to the people to whom they are carrying God's message.

I'm not telling you not to put your best foot forward. I am telling you that you and I need to be real people, honest growing Christians (as verse 18 says.) And people to whom we represent Jesus, for whom our Lord died, deserve to know where we are and where we are headed! Let's be real, let's be genuine as we seek to represent Jesus! Our most powerful evidence may be when we admit that we are struggling, but that we are keeping the faith!

- C. WE ARE NOT 'PROOF TEXT-ERS' (4:2 ... we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God.) (OR "Text-Twisters") Ambassadors do not have the privilege of editing— either watering down or of beefing up— the word that comes down from The Throne. When God declares WAR, we can't sue for peace on our own. And when God says, "I will forgive ALL who come to me" we can't select out those we think are worth saving! God's Word is alive! Texts are funny things!

We get a good idea! We get THREE POINTS TOGETHER. If they all start with the same letter, that is better yet! And THEN WE GO LOOKING FOR A GOOD TEXT! But then something funny happens! That text— if we give it a chance— begins to exert a life and message of its own. And maybe it begins to ruin that beautiful three point masterpiece! Ever have that happen to you? [I have!]

Ambassadors get the message! And then ambassadors carry the message— they translate it into the local language— they apply it to the local culture— they manifest it in truth in their own lives— they become the message— but they don't make the word fit the circumstance, they make the circumstances face the word!

- D. WE ARE NOT EGOTISTS (4:5 For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.) This is not to say that you shouldn't be a "character." You look like a bunch of characters to me! It doesn't mean that we

shouldn't have strong "EGOs" whatever that means. And it doesn't mean that an effective ambassador doesn't let his own personality be expressed in every facet of his representation of the King.

But there is only ONE STAR in every aspect of service for the Lord! There should only be one Star in every worship service! The Bright and Morning Star! And it is impossible for us to lift up Jesus and try to make people think about how smart we are, or how pious we are, or how ANYTHING WE ARE! Probably there is a little 'show-boat' in every one of us. It is more fun to talk than it is to sit and listen— usually.

But we know, and GOD knows, whom we are trying to exalt! Yes. this is the greatest job in the world!

II. WHAT THE GREATEST JOB IS

A. IT IS A JOB WE DIDN'T CHOOSE FOR OURSELVES!

We were selected! Why in the world God ever chose you and me, I'll never know.

[Someone asked Billy Graham why God chose him to be a spokesman before millions when there are hundreds of preachers who can preach as well as Billy can. (I doubt that!) Billy Graham's reply was, "When I get to heaven that's the first thing I'm going to ask the Lord!" He is genuinely humble. But he is NOT falsely modest! He is God's called man. And so are YOU!]

It is NOT AN OPTION whether or not we shall be Ambassadors. Every Christian is already representing Jesus Christ. The question is, shall we do it well, or not? We have already been "drafted!"

B. IT IS A JOB WE DON'T HAVE TO DO IN OUR OWN STRENGTH

1. Paul says (text, verse 20) "(It is) as though God were entreating THROUGH us ..." I know we don't always sense that undergirding, even when we are prayed up. But count on it, it is always there! When you would do good, GOD IS PRESENT WITH YOU! (to counter-point Romans 7:21, which says 'When I

would do GOOD evil is present ...').

2. This thought "connects" with Romans 8:28-32. I would like to close with some thoughts about THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD that go along with this idea of every Christian being AN AMBASSADOR:
 - a. [GOD IS ACTIVE IN ALL OUR LIVES] We are all familiar with 8:28 "God works in all things..."
 - b. [GOD HAS PROMISED ALL WE NEED TO ACCOMPLISH HIS BEST WILL] We also love 8:32 "He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"
 - c. [But what's an ambassador to do? How do we practically apply this provision and power?]

C. IT IS A JOB GOD WILL DO THROUGH EACH ONE OF US!

1. GETTING INTO THE FLOW OF GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY (I Corinthians 3:9 hints at it:) We are laborers together WITH God! All too often we have an "either/or" approach to God's sovereignty. We are either "all works" or "all faith." In our English language we have just the two moods:

Active: "I will do it!" Or,

Passive: "I will have it done to/for me!"

But in the Greek language— and in everyday "Ambassador Language" there is a middle voice:

Middle: "I will enter into what is being done!" We need to get into the flow of God's Sovereign working! God is in the world, reconciling it to Himself! He has called us to be His people!
2. God is still Sovereign! He is still calling! If we will get quiet and listen, He will guide us the next step! He isn't impressed with our strength. But He isn't worried about our weakness, either! What He really wants is men and women who love Him, and who are willing to explore the task to which He has called them.

Conclusion:

The Greatest Job in the World

ARE YOU WILLING TO ASK GOD TO ACTIVATE YOUR HIGH CALLING AS AN
AMBASSADOR? WILL YOU MAKE YOURSELF AVAILABLE TO HIM THIS VERY DAY?

Pray with me!

Thank God for calling us! Thank God that He doesn't leave us alone! Thank God that
He is Sovereign! Thank God that we may enter into the flow of His great WILL! Amen!
[Hear the challenging words— sing them from your heart as a prayer- of a relatively
young Hymn:]

#679 STL *The Servant Song*

The Power of the Lord was Present

A Story of Holy Compromise

January 5, 1991

Luke 5:17-26

Text Mark 2:3 "And they came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men."

The word "compromise" raises a flag of caution among people of principle. And yet in the real world of human relationships, compromise is perhaps the most overlooked source of genuine joy. The facts are that (1) Bringing people to Jesus is just about always a cooperative effort. In fact, doing anything for Jesus means cooperating with His people. And (2) Cooperative effort just about always involves holy compromise. But the strange and wonderful truth that follows is that (3) holy compromise just about always brings about holy fellowship and joy.

No pastor of integrity would ever suggest that anybody should compromise with any form of sin. But by the same token any minister of integrity would have to say in all honesty that more pain and damage has been done than one can imagine by people who not only refuse to compromise on issues of principle, but refuse to bend or adapt or compromise in lesser matters of opinion, custom, or even personal taste.

Here in Luke's Gospel is a brief story about some people who tore the tiles off a flat roof and lowered a paralyzed man down into the interior of the house where Jesus was. In the Gospel of Mark, probably prompted by Peter, we are told that it was four men who brought the helpless man to the Savior.

[Bringing people to Jesus is just about always a cooperative effort.] It goes without saying that here was a cooperative effort that required some compromise. Unless these four men were all the same build and same height and same strength the simple fact of carrying a heavy, inert object requires bending and stretching.

In my mind's eye I have gone into considerable more detail than you can find in your Bible. If some of the personalities of the Wollaston church had been present the line-

up might have looked like this [although any resemblance to people in your church or mine living or dead is purely conjectural!]

AMOS

FIRST THERE IS AMOS. Amos is a seasoned, experienced, grounded (rather old) believer. He had been brought up in the scriptures from a lad. [Cut his teeth on the KJV.] He had waited for years in faith that Messiah was coming. Early on in Jesus' ministry he had been convinced that Jesus was the fulfillment of all the OT prophecies.

Amos is MATURE! He would probably not want to talk about it, but secretly in his heart of hearts he is a little impatient and even irked by immaturity. He detests taped accompaniments! He is not the least impulsive and not too outwardly emotional.

But make no mistake! Amos is the salt of the earth, and he loves Jesus and follows Him with all his heart.

BARTHOLOMEW

THEN THERE IS BARTHOLOMEW. Bartholomew is a young believer, full of energy. He is not a rebel; really he is not! But he has this sensation down deep in his insides that anyone over 30 is "over the hill."

Bartholomew is full of JOY! And Bartholomew is full of LIFE! He has never had a sick day in his life. And frankly he isn't always too patient with people who have aches and pains. He doesn't understand people who don't like LOUD hosannas— preferably with at least 100 watts of amplification behind them. Bart will be at all the Christian concerts within 50 miles radius!

CRISPUS

THE THIRD MEMBER OF THE CAST IS CRISPUS. Crispus is an intellectual, and a dedicated social activist. He wears wire-rimmed glasses that make him look like an intellectual and a dedicated social activist.

Crispus has heard Christ's call to minister to the poor. He has put his life on the line. He has sold all that he possesses, and is personally involved in an inner-city ministry. And quite frankly, Crispus questions other Christians who don't do the same as he has done.

DEMAS

THE LAST OF THE FOUR IS DEMAS. Demas is a died-in-the-wool conservative. Demas wears a Jesus-First pin. He has "Jesus bumper stickers" on his car. He is a real "Mary" type who simply wants to sit at Jesus' feet. He has a secular job only because he has to pay his rent and eat, but he wants to keep unspotted from the world— so he doesn't use dice with board games. (Just 'spinners.') And he doesn't think the church teens ought to go roller skating.

But once again, here is a genuine Christian! Demas really belongs to Jesus and loves Him with all of his heart. Here are four people about as different in temperament as you can imagine. Four people who agree on just about one thing and only one thing— at least at the beginning of this little drama. They knew in their hearts that Jesus IS the answer to the needs of the world.

It doesn't even matter that they saw the needs of the world very differently. They didn't even stop to consider that the world's problems might be more complex or different from the way they understood them. What matters was that they agreed (without knowing it) THAT FINALLY, JESUS IS WHAT THIS SINFUL WORLD NEEDS!

Our four friends had a great deal more that was NOT in common, at least on the surface, than points of agreement. They would have disagreed violently on political candidates. They would have almost come to blows over whether or not one could fall from grace, or just 'from fellowship with God.' Any kind of abstract or theoretical question probably would have started WW I 2,000 years early!

Christians are like that! They disagree in theory— they love to argue minor points of doctrine in various kinds of abstract argument. There (probably) is a place for that, but . . .but what saved them was the fact that these four men faced a very specific problem.

SILAS

They had a mutual friend SILAS, who was dear to them all. SILAS WAS HELPLESS, A PARALYTIC. Perhaps Silas was related to one, and a friend of a friend of another— but at any rate each of these four, Amos, Bartholomew, Crispus, and Demas had said to himself many times: "If I could just get Silas over to Jesus I know that Jesus could touch him and meet his need!"

I'm not sure how they got together. Since I'm telling the story I can imagine it was one of those strange coincidences that God can arrange whenever He wants to. And in my imagination there was a mutual disappointment when the four met.

Amos thought: "A lot of good hallelujahs will do now! We need someone who KNOWS someone, and some money to hire an ambulance." And Crispus was thinking: "That Demas guy will want to have a prayer meeting for this guy— and what he REALLY needs is a new pallet and we need to arrange hot meals for him until we can find a way to get him to the meetings."

But one of them— I don't know which one— says out loud: "If only we could get Silas to Jesus I believe HE could heal him!" And the rest have to agree.

They begin to realize that together they can do what they can't do alone. And they demonstrate that (1) BRINGING PEOPLE TO JESUS IS JUST ABOUT ALWAYS A COOPERATIVE EFFORT! So off they start! What a sight they are! Carrying a helpless man on a stretcher is not an easy or a dignified task. And as they get nearer they see that their task isn't only hard—it is apparently impossible. There is a huge crowd gathered around Peter's house, where the Master is teaching.

They simply cannot get through the crowd. There are too many people! You can't find Christ in a big crowd! You can't really worship! You can't really get near to Jesus, can you?

But by now someone comes up with another suggestion. "We've come this far! Too far to be defeated! We won't take 'No' for an answer!

Let's go up on the roof! Let's take off a few tiles and drop Silas right down on the front row!"

AND THEY DID! And the Word says "Jesus saw THEIR faith!"

Jesus didn't seem to be surprised at all!

First Jesus forgave Silas his sins. And then Jesus healed him, and sent him walking out in the sight of everyone. It was one unforgettable celebration!

How, do you suppose, did Amos and Bartholomew and Crispus and Demas "debrief" after the service was over? What was the "afterglow" like that day? I see them as they put the tiles back and they talk.

"Well, I'll have to admit that I could never have done it alone! And no two of us could have done it, either!"

"Yes, I'll have to admit that we make a pretty good team!"

I see it as the beginning of genuine Christian fellowship—cross-generational, cross-cultural, even cross-intellectual, if there is such a thing. They were still persuaded that Jesus was the answer to the needs of their world. And they still saw those needs from their own perspectives.

But they also began to see that there were other, honest, Christian perspectives beside their own. That is the way Christian faith in obedient action tends to work. It brings people together who seem to have little in common, and makes them love and deeply appreciate one another.

If we wait until we know all the answers- until we have enough loaves and fishes to feed the multitude- we will never get Jesus and needy people together. But if we will be looking for ways to share our faith, we may just find help in bringing people to Christ in the most unlikely ways, help from people who are the same as we are— and from people who are very, very different, too, perhaps!

[He was sitting in the waiting room of a car dealer. He was a professional man- a lawyer, actually. He is very dignified, professionally, but casually he often wears a

sweatshirt that says "Jesus- He's the Real thing!." He pulled out his Bible, and the big, black man next to him said, "Are you a Christian?"

Really, I wish I could let him tell you himself— and may be that some day you will hear him.

But that black man was a Muslim from a Muslim family of generations who had found the Lord in a miraculous way. The lawyer is sitting in the congregation back in my church this morning, brought up in a good Roman Catholic family. Not much in common with a died-in-the-wool black Muslim! Only Jesus! And who knows what will come of that meeting!]

Oh, make no mistake THERE ARE SOME ISSUES THAT DEMAND SOLID, UNIFIED CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE. Our compromise can never be with sin, with the breaking of any of the clear commandments of God. But as amazing as it may seem there are many serious issues, important issues, where good and sincere Christians can and will disagree. Issues that would divide and kill fellowship if we would let them.

There are "outside-the-church issues" about which Christians feel strongly: We all agree that abortion is bad. But how should Christians oppose it? Sincere and committed Christians disagree about the best methods!

We all hate the filth and pornography, and the protection given to obscenity by rulings on First Amendment rights. But what is the best course in rolling back the tide? Again, sincere Christians do not always agree.

Just mentioning these issues may be foolish, but I am trying to show that in so many ways we can agree to disagree— and still agree to love each other, and to love God, and to do our best to bring people to Jesus.

And particularly these days there are always "inside-the-church issues," those matters of policy, of building, of financing, and above all, of ministry and serving Christ here in Bel Air, and on the Washington district. These crucial days in a world with recession and war scare there is the challenge of bringing people to Jesus—of developing and continuing normal ministry to families with both father and mother at

home, as well as reaching broken homes and individuals and people that don't neatly "fit" any categories.

Some church experts tell us that the growing kind of church is the homogenous-unit type of church. But our Nazarene church is potentially about as heterogeneous as a church can get! And in more ways than dear Reuben may have meant in his wonderful little book, WE REALLY DO NEED EACH OTHER!

We, each one, individually, as well as together as a church, have an opportunity to meet and know people who love the Lord and yet are very unlike ourselves.

We will be stimulated, if not offended, by many different ways of looking at the task God has set before us. We will be seeing the curse of sin as the problem— but we will be seeing it in many more than just FOUR ways!

But if we agree that Jesus is LORD; and if we agree that Jesus is what this world needs— then like these four men who brought the paralytic to Jesus WE WILL FIND WAYS OF GETTING AT THE TASK GOD HAS FOR US!

And the best part, perhaps, is that as we learn to work together we'll discover the holy JOY that comes from finding how BIG and how BROAD and how WIDE God's holy family can be! We are in for some dramatic surprises! We'll find that TOGETHER WE CAN BRING PEOPLE TO JESUS! And when Jesus sees OUR FAITH we'll find that holy compromise brings holy JOY!

#57 The Servant Song (Sing for each other, for the ones together we can lift)

The Whole Armor of God

January 12, 1991

Ephesians 6:10-24

The decision to live for Jesus Christ inevitably leads to a spiritual warfare. The decision itself, and every "YES!" to God thereafter will be met with opposition, sometimes passive, sometimes subtle, sometimes active and massive.

I don't like talking about warfare this evening. I trust that we shall have peace in our time on earth. But whatever happens in the Persian Gulf, in these days more than ever before perhaps, we need to recognize that living for God, living by faith in Jesus Christ, is a spiritual warfare. Every impulse for good is opposed. We need God's equipping grace to face life.

And God does have grace with which to equip us!

To recognize the spiritual dimensions in our struggles is a significant part of the battle. It isn't that the devil is responsible for every bad feeling we have; but he will seize upon it and use it unless we refuse to play into his evil schemes.

[This past week in a Prayer Retreat one of the most highly respected men on the district told how he FELT at times like a total failure. There may well be psychological reasons for these and many others of our feelings. But Satan uses such feelings as a launching pad for attacks designed to put us out of the fight; to incapacitate us, and leave us weak and self-centered and out of the battle.]

These words in Galatians Six are much, much more than a quaint description of ancient armor. Paul is speaking to life as we have to live it just now in all its tension—and believe me, the whole world is feeling the strain! Christians need to be equipped! This is not just "spiritual talk." It speaks of very real human struggle!

I. CASUALTIES OF SPIRITUAL WARFARE

Unfortunately we all know sad casualties of the warfare for men and women's souls.

- A. I see a young Christian "all-out for God". Then there is a FLAME OUT! Perhaps disillusion with older Christians (they aren't perfect!) Perhaps "intellectual problems."
- B. I recall a solid, sincere, intelligent Christian at a Christian college. Not a party-er; good testimony. Becomes a high- paid specialist in a high paying profession. The things of the world enamor him— he becomes rich.. and totally useless to the kingdom of God.
- C. I know of not one not two not three or four talented men of God— genuine talent— real call— become ambitious, or greedy, or lustful— and they FALL! They take an untold toll when they fall.
- D. It is hard to compare casualties like this with much more graphic casualties of physical warfare. And it is easy to assume that I am being totally parochial, and exaggerating— easy to assume that I am a Nazarene pastor who cannot see beyond the ministry of my own denomination.

But I AM desperately concerned that the people I serve— the sphere of influence where I can make my voice heard— realize the seriousness and the all-out nature of this spiritual warfare. I am concerned that WE REALIZE THE ETERNAL CONSEQUENCES OF WINNING OR LOSING THIS WARFARE.

II. DIMENSIONS OF PREPAREDNESS FOR SPIRITUAL WARFARE

Make no mistake: REAL danger exists! The old armor is only representative— but there are GUT shots and HEART shots and FOOT shots! Each piece of armor is connected with some aspect of the integrity of obedience. The admonition is: YOU NEED IT ALL!

Some people never get past playing roles! (Jesus spoke of children playing "wedding" or "funeral" and dancing or crying on cue.) 1. LOINS - truth - 6:14

Some people never can quite get themselves to quit the sin business; to own perfect allegiance to King Jesus. 2. BREASTPLATE - break with sin! excusing/rationalizing

Some people never learn to "take care of their feet". They always travel on other people's spiritual insights. We have to do some Bible digging for ourselves! 3. FEET - step-by-step is how we take the Promised Land

Not one of us is perfect! We all have "chinks" in the armor!

SHIELD OF FAITH

Not one of us knows all the answers! [I like how Jesus handled dear Doubting Thomas! He was kind!] 5. HELMET Professor Jesus!

More later— SWORD & PRAYER!

III. THE BATTLE JOINED!

- A. It can never simply be "business as usual!" There is a war on!
- B. The battle somehow centers in the struggle for the personality of men and women! And somehow it is centered in this period of mortal life here in time and space.
- C. Strange as it may seem, I do not think it is necessary to be "experts on the opposition." The enemy IS wise and darkly powerful. But God has defeated him. God is "working both sides of the street" when it comes to spiritual struggle.
- D. We may fill our place in this spiritual warfare: the idea is to "Fight the good fight of faith!" There are TWO VITAL ITEMS which we have not yet discussed:

6:17 The sword of the Spirit! The living Word... connected with the Bible, but living in and through Christ-in-you: "Being used of God!" the cutting edge of the gospel!

6:18 Prayer in the Spirit! Prayer is where we maintain contact! How we receive orders. How we are nourished!

Conclusion:

We're in this war for the duration! For as long as it takes!

We all need the prayers of one another! Soldiers do as they are told! They don't have to survive! They DO have to be faithful!

Let us Pray: Equip us, O Lord, to be Your faithful soldiers. Amen.

[Baptismal Candidates as well as others who wish to stand with them in re-affirming Baptismal Vows invited to come forward to front seat during hymn. Congregation sings:]

The Whole Armor of God

EH #58 - Soldiers of Christ, Arise!

The Quality of Forgiveness

Matthew 18:15-35

January 20, 1991 pm

"Confession," properly done, may be "good for the soul," but genuine confession of guilt or sin is never simple or easy. Have you ever made a restitution? Did you ever feel the need for finding someone's forgiveness? I have!

When I was a teenager, and a Christian, I had a confrontation with Mr. Duerr, a Swiss gentleman who was an old friend of my wife-to-be's family. I was very rude with him, thinking he was being too familiar with my girlfriend; as a matter of fact in my 18-year-old chutzpah I offered to punch him in the nose even though he was old enough to be my father.

Later — six or seven year later— I was a young pastor and had never forgotten the rudeness — I dropped into Mr. Duerr's typewriter store on Main St in downtown Akron. I had business with him; actually bought a portable —no maybe an old upright Underwood or something, I honestly don't remember. But that day I asked him if he remembered the incident years before, and he immediately became very serious, came around the counter— said that yes, he did remember, and had been pretty shocked because I had a reputation as a Christian and that seemed out of character (which it was; although in retrospect I believe I was coming off a fever and a bout with leg infection so was probably less inhibited because of medication; I can't imagine how I would have been rude otherwise— it wasn't the way I was brought up.) I told him I was sorry that it had NOT been a Christian thing to do, and would he forgive me.

He did, and then he began to talk about his own spiritual journey as a "backslider" and we parted with peace and a measure of understanding. I had done a difficult job of "making restitution" that cleared up a spot in my prayer life and helped me to be "void of offense toward God and man"

I. WE ALL FACE THE FACT OF FRICTION IN INTER-PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

- A. We can (1) deny ever hurting others; or, we can (2) claim never to have hurt feelings ourselves. But the fact remains that misunderstandings do come. We need to make certain that our consciences are clear. We may never clear the air to feel "at ease" with everyone— but we can exercise ourselves to keep a conscience void of offense toward God and toward fellow human beings (Acts 26:18).
- B. Where we may keenly feel our need for resolving these problems is when we come to the quiet time— the place of prayer. We cannot pray as we ought if there are unresolved bruises on our conscience (either way— on "us" or on "them.")
- C. When we recognize that there ARE and there WILL BE times when friction and misunderstanding come, then we can seek and find God's help in restoring full communication and re-establishing fellowship.

The abiding Presence of the Holy Spirit will go a long way toward minimizing hurt feelings— avoiding letting them fester. But even God's sanctified people need God's grace to forgive and be forgiven.

II. THE PRINCIPLE OF FORGIVENESS IS GOD'S WAY OF HANDLING FRICTION

- A. Do we realize all the implications of what it means to forgive? [Look at vv 24, 27 a man owes a staggering sum of money- - many \$Millions— and his Lord simply TOOK THE LOSS BECAUSE OF COMPASSION. The Lord did NOT pretend it was not a huge sum, or that it never happened.] Forgiveness is not saying: "Oh, It's all right!"
- B. This is the way that God intends us, asks us, helps us to forgive each other. We are not to fester ill will, but to say, "I forgive!"

III. GOD'S GRACE FLOWS OR IS IMPEDED AS WE EMPLOY THIS PRINCIPLE

- A. Lord's Prayer: We are forgiven AS WE FORGIVE!
- B. There is also a direct connection of having a clear conscience with a prayer life that "prevails." Following verse 18 the power of prayer FOLLOWS on the ATTEMPT to restore full fellowship. (Also Matthew 5:24 "Leave thy gift at the altar and be reconciled to thy brother. . . .")

- C. Making peace, or even seeking to make peace with others may well be the means of opened channels of God's grace to their hearts (as Walter Duerr).

CONCLUSION:

How are you handling the frictions and the dis-harmonies of life and living? I am not an alarmist— but uncertainties of our times dictate to me that I need to keep short accounts— make certain that my conscience is clear!

- A. IS your conscience clear before God? Have you confessed your sins— and your SINFULNESS to HIM? Thank the Lord, that is the beginning!
- B. Is your conscience clear before your brothers and your sisters? This does not mean that it is easy. It does not even mean that you can patch things up, humanly speaking. [I prayed for a policeman every day for years because I did not want to HATE him. And I don't believe I did, and I don't!]
- C. Bertha Munro said two things about forgiveness:
1. CHRISTIANS CAN AFFORD TO FORGIVE! She meant that since we have been forgiven so very much, we can forgive others, too.
 2. CHRISTIANS CANNOT AFFORD NOT TO FORGIVE! In a hundred years— in a hundred days— what will it matter?

WALTER DUERR .. later..sought God's forgiveness; found grace to forgive his enemy.. was restored and lived a number of years in a faithful witness with his life. Paul said: Acts 24:16 Herein do I exercise myself to have always a conscience void of offense toward God and toward man."

#29 (EH) [He Has Surely Borne Our Sorrows](#)

A Promise of Gods Strength

January 27, 1991

Isaiah 40:28-31

Introduction

There is no question but that these are days of stress all over the civilized world. The events in the Middle East are brought into our living rooms and our minds, and they are sobering, to say the least.

Yesterday the Patriot Ledger said that people of faith everywhere are turning to prayer: some for guidance, some for solace, some for God's intervention. I would hope that we would be people of prayer.

The question is: Where do God's people have any advantage over people who profess no faith at all? What difference does faith make?

Faith does indeed make a difference! I am sure that you are already finding this out. Perhaps you don't even need to be told that. But I find that it helps me to be reminded of God's great promises. Times of stress, whatever the reason, are good times to return to favorite treasures, to the passages of scripture that have 'come through' with assurance over and over again.

One such passage that we can claim together is Isaiah 40, and especially that last paragraph which says, in part:

" . . .they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength . . ."

I. ISAIAH IS A PROPHET OF GREAT HOPE

[Isaiah is also a great Messianic prophet, and is sometimes called "the Fifth Evangelist" (along with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), because we Christians can see so much of Jesus in his writings.]

- A. Some "key words" that open Isaiah's message as we read are words like "expectancy" and "hope" and "peace." Isaiah lived in expectancy for a long time, through many difficult

times. But Isaiah was "forward looking." He believed that God was in charge, and that He was in charge of the future. Isaiah is the one who told us that Messiah would be called "Prince of Peace."

- B. The heart of Isaiah's message is the fact that God works not only on a cosmic scale, but personally. God was interested in kings and nations, and Isaiah observed roles and rituals of religious ceremony along with his fellow priests and prophets. But the message came in a PERSONAL way to Isaiah himself. Isaiah felt his own personal uncleanness before the holiness of God as well as that of his people. Isaiah experienced personal cleansing and empowering. The message that God gave him interfaced with his own family situation.

And— Messiah would be a PERSON! Not just the nation of Israel, but a Suffering Servant, a man among men and women!

Majestic and meek. Baptized - and a baptizer with fire! Life-bringer who came to die! This personal Savior would be called by the names of deity: WISDOM POWER IMMANUEL! God with us!

- C. Isaiah tells us in this passage that the reality of God's gifts of HOPE and STRENGTH and PEACE are personally available, held out to those who will 'WAIT UPON THE LORD!'

Wait upon the Lord!

II. WHAT IS THIS 'WAITING UPON THE LORD'??

- A. "Waiting" would seem to imply something like 'killing time;' like reading old magazines in a doctor's waiting room somewhere while the appointments are an hour behind schedule. Or, waiting might seem simply to let the years go by until God's time gets right, and a certain day or hour appears and God says, "Now you've waited long enough!"

But "wait" here has a personal aspect. It doesn't simply mean letting time pass, but means waiting in expectancy, or looking to God in trust as we watch to see how God will answer our prayer.

And no one, in any age, ever really waits on God in vain! No one ever comes in trust and obedience that does not somehow find that God is IN the prayer, that God is BEHIND the prayer— and that, ultimately, God is HEARING the prayer. [I certainly do not minimize the mystery of prayer. I do not dispute the fact of genuine struggle and even travail in prayer. But God does hear and answer prayer!]

B. But what, then, does this waiting mean?

Waiting on God indicates a sense of DEPENDENCY. Being dependent somehow goes against our All-American western culture Protestant work-ethic positive self-image self-confident way of life and living.

[There ARE benefits to a healthy self-image which I do not deny. There is enormous worth in looking at a task and thinking "I CAN!"]

But in matters of eternity and life and death "I CAN!" somehow fades away into the realization that among the spinning galaxies of ultimate reality there are many things which "I CAN NOT!"

[In "skits" of Bible stories which we used at a recent pastors' retreat one mini-drama had to do with the centurion who came and asked Jesus to heal his servant. The man who represented the centurion was deeply moved, even to tears. Later he said, "I realized that in temporal things I had great authority: 'I say to one, "Come!" and he comes, etc.' But in the things which really mattered (i.e., the life and death of the beloved servant) I was totally helpless, dependent on Jesus."]

Waiting on God is saying to God: We can't do it unless and until YOU do it!

C. So waiting on God is not so much TIME as it is ATTITUDE. It is listening for God. It is seeking to give God our attention. It is being ready for communication from the Master. [It is perhaps like a little dog trotting along, always looking back, always looking up to make sure the master or mistress is coming along, and everything is all right.]

And as we wait, we will hear God! As we wait the things will happen that would NOT have happened if we had not waited! Isaiah makes it clear that the benefits of waiting on God are in the HERE AND NOW!

THEY THAT WAIT UPON THE LORD SHALL RENEW THEIR STRENGTH!

[But we are NOT little dogs trotting along, looking up to the Master's face. We are PEOPLE, living in a tremendously complex world situation. We have tremendously complex lives to lead. Is there any practical guidance for waiting on God?

III. GIVING GOD OUR ATTENTION

- A. We can pray DELIBERATELY to be filled with God's Spirit. William Barclay says:

"The only way to receive the Spirit is to silently and prayerfully WAIT upon the Spirit."

A helpful verse to me is Luke 11:13. Jesus says that if we ask the Father He is more anxious to empower us with the Spirit than we are to give things to our own children! But we need to ASK!

Barclay goes on: "In a church life in which the church is increasingly organized, and in which strenuous activity is the key-note, and in which ACTION is valued above all things it is hard to find time for that apparent doing nothing which means everything."

- B. But can we be even more PRACTICAL? More SPECIFIC? How shall we pray in such a way that we can renew our strength? [I have FOUR suggestions:]

1. By praying HONESTLY. God will only receive as much of our lives as we are willing to give freely to Him. This God who could easily overwhelm us never pushes His way in past locked doors! If you need His help in areas of your life make certain that you have made Him welcome in EVERY area. [sin / confession / open-ness]

2. By praying REGULARLY. Prayer life is not so much a series of major repairs and overhauls as it is keeping a schedule of daily maintenance. Fifteen minutes a day is better than two or three hours every other week!
3. By praying CORPORATELY. Worship together with the Body of Christ is an essential part of waiting on the Lord. Worship is much more than just a convenient time for religious people to get together to hear a common word. The CHURCH has power as it joins in prayer together. "Not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together" is the word of God (Hebrews 10:24.)
4. Finally, By praying TOGETHER. Not just in the assembly of the Body, but in the daily traffic of life and living, Christians must learn to pray with each other, and pray for each other.

We need to reach out and ask for help. We need to say, "Let's pray!" If it seems like a weakness, it is only admitting before God that He alone is our strength! There is strength and power in weaving the potency of prayer into the daily conversation of our living.

Conclusion

William Barclay again: "God will 'do it again;' that is, renew and revive, both for us individually, and for the church, if we remember that He asks nothing but our attention, and if we learn to wait INTENSELY upon Him."

Prayer:

Lord, We confess freely our need of Your strength. We believe that You are as good as Your word. Help us to wait in simple faith and trust- to give You our full attention. Help us to hear Your Word of power. Amen

(EH) #65 *Speak, Lord, In the Stillness*

The Man Who Pleased God

January 27, 1991

Hebrews 11:5-6 By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists, and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.

Introduction

One of my "life verses" is Hebrews 11:6. I think of it just about every day I live. But I do not always remember that it is tied with the story of Enoch, a man who walked with God. "Faith" and "believing" is not something we do in the abstract. When faith is real, it has to do with the way we live our every day lives.

Walking is an everyday thing— we all do it— and we don't think that much about it. It is a habit.

We enjoy flying. We see things from a different perspective. We get some place in a hurry. We are an "expert" because we are more than 100 miles from home. But most of life is lived in the everyday— by walking.

And that is the way life with God has to be! There are no short cuts to character. No special deals made for "experts." We have to do more than just grasp ideas, and understand lessons: we have to let truth come and dwell in our souls through everyday living.

Our text says that Enoch walked with God, was God's companion. And we have to learn to walk with God, too.

I. IT IS A CHOICE TO WALK WITH GOD

A. Genuine, everyday, real FAITH must choose between the spectacular and the genuine.

1. GOD Himself has to be the central reason for the kind of God-pleasing faith that Enoch knew. It is not easy or natural to decide to please God over and above our own natural desires. It is natural to want to please ourselves.

God does good things for people; He brings many wonderful benefits. It is easy to think of God in terms of His benefits and to forget the Person of the Giver Himself!

2. R.T. Kendall (in *Believing God*) worries about Christians making a big deal about celebrities becoming Christians: "... one of the sadder moments in the history of Christians evangelism has been the introduction of celebrities into evangelistic campaigns. However sincere the motives may be that lie behind the football player, the movie star or the beauty queen that gives testimony for the Lord, this is but an unconscious conspiracy to de-stigmatize the faith. If I become a Christian because of the feeling: ('If a person of such stature or fame has become a Christian, then perhaps it won't be so bad if I do') then I betray that my ultimate concern is people and not God. Jesus asked, 'How can ye believe, which receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor that comes from God only? (John 5:44)'"

There are greater things in life than being rich, famous, or beautiful and culturally smooth.

B. Everyday, overcoming, genuine faith must even choose between the apparent and the genuine.

1. Appearances are all-important to phony Christians. Appearances ARE important; it IS important what other people see: "Avoid the very appearance of evil."

Genuine 'walkers-with-God' have as their first concern the reality of staying near Him; and secondarily only 'what it will seem to other people.' [Illus: Jim Couchenour goes into the local "bar" to share Jesus— and changes lives there forever!]

2. Success in terms of numbers, approval of others, and the like can often be used interchangeably with "victorious faith."

One recent book studying soul-winning groups in America flat-out states that we have mixed up the "success gospel" with Christian faith. Too often we worship the big, the booming, the shiny. But God-centered faith is willing to be thought a failure so far as on-looking people may be concerned!

Paul was a man who certainly pleased God. But listen to these words he wrote to the Corinthian church (I Co. 4:11): "To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless..." Doesn't sound to me as though Paul was a modern-day success story. He didn't have a stretch limo to carry him from pulpit to pulpit!

3. Until we settle it to please God first we will probably continue to have troubles with prosperous evil people, and with hypocrites in the church, and with do-nothing professing Christians. But Enoch-type people are too busy trying to stay in step with God, trying to make their lives please Jesus, that they won't stay de-railed by people for too long!

There are greater things in life than what PEOPLE think!

II. IT IS FRIENDSHIP TO WALK WITH GOD

A. It IS possible to walk with God in 1991 in the stress of our present tensions. The reason more people do NOT walk with Him is NOT that it is all that difficult, or that it requires that we have super-faith or be super-smart (or super-simple.) ANYBODY can walk with God, BUT...

1. To walk with God we must treat Jesus like a PERSON, and not simply as a list of rules. You or I don't walk with God simply by "Dos" and "Don'ts." How do you get acquainted with anyone?
2. To walk with God we must meet Jesus on HIS terms. He is patient and will discuss matters. He is understanding— He will not chide and berate. Jesus even understands failures. But talk to Him! include Him IN in everything you do! And remember, His Word is final!

3. [Meeting Jesus on HIS terms will mean that we must-]

- a. deal with the sin in our lives. God can never fellowship with willful, out-broken sin.
- b. live in open-ness and confession before Him. God will never fellowship with deliberate deceit.
- c. be HOLY! God is HOLY! He wants us to be like HIM, so that we CAN walk with Him! We are "HOLY" when we give ourselves to Him and He accepts us! He makes us "HOLY" when He lives in us, and fills us with His Holy Spirit.
- d. WALK with Him! To walk-
 - lots of people want the "big moments" only "You should have been at summer camp! You should have seen the Christmas Pageant our church put on! GREAT!
But we can't live by FLYING times only! Our fellowship must go beyond "Spurts!"
 - other people want the BABY CARRIAGE treatment. Did you ever see a little kid getting pushed around the mall in his baby-carriage sound asleep? We want God to push us to heaven in His big baby carriage while we take the bottle and nothing else much...

B. Enoch walked! And we have to walk, too! Walking with God is how we get acquainted with Him in depth.

III. IT IS FULFILLMENT TO WALK WITH GOD

[Another word for "fulfillment" might be VICTORY!]

- A. Enoch "was not!" They looked for Enoch high and low. They looked for him all over— and he was gone!
- B. And WE will leave the scene some day, too. We all have an appointment with God!

- C. It must have been wonderful to just be TRANSPORTED UP! But if I understand my Bible correctly, an entire GENERATION OF ENOCH-TYPE PEOPLE WILL BE TRANSLATED!

Conclusion

Every Christian who truly walks with God turns "death" inside out, and never leaves God's Presence.

One entire generation of Christians will know the same translation Enoch knew!

#43 O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee

God as Teacher

February 3, 1991

Psalm 16:11 *Thou wilt show me the path of life; in Thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.*

Introduction

This past Wednesday in prayer meeting we looked again at the life of Enoch, the man who walked with God. When we think of the great saints, both biblical and ancient, as well as those in our own past, we tend to stand in awe a bit, and think they were or are a breed apart. We think that they were gifted with a special goodness or sweeter nature or something that lifted them above the everyday grit and grime we live in.

But that simply is not the case. We all have the same possibility to walk with God and be taught of him. No one is "born holy!" Genuine holiness is something which we receive and which we see developed as we cooperate with God. It is not something which springs full blown from an all night of prayer or a spellbinding experience in a retreat somewhere, as valid as that may well be.

Here in this closing verse of Psalm 16 we see:

I. THE UNFOLDING PATHWAY OF LIFE.

When we walk with God the journey is important, and not just the destinations and goals.

- A. We tend to think of success in life (in most areas) as arrivals, of goals, of achievement.
[As: I got the job I wanted; I earned the degree, I made the dollar amount— I have the home— NOW I am "living."]

And God does have "milestones" along the way. There are definite experiences of grace: forgiving, cleansing, infilling, that are scriptural and necessary. God does talk in terms of destinations and levels of attainment that He has in mind for His children (even if God's destinations and

attainments are not what His children may think at the time "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath entered into the heart of man the things that God hath prepared for them that love Him.")

- B. But Eternal Life is also an unfolding reality that has already begun! We miss a great deal, perhaps MOST of what LIFE is all about if we don't enjoy the Presence of God as we journey along the way! The journey is fun when you love the company!

[Journeys in little pre-war cars filled with cousins up to Petoskey for the summer . . . six hours at least- - singing, playing "Alphabet"— watching for landmarks and for deer . . . I think of the gentleness of my Aunt Pearl and her patience along the journey.]

But the text also says that when it comes to learning about life we need, and we HAVE a teacher (a Teacher:)

II. THE PUPIL-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

"Thou wilt show me the path of life..."

- A. Holiness, Christian life and living, are not really self- taught. We think we discover new truth. We think we find secrets of God's grace. But really we do not discover this "WAY" by our own adventuresome ingenuity alone; we are always mentored!

Some of us have had human mentor-teachers— and all of us have been helped along the way by preaching and teaching and testimonies and gospel singing and the like from fellow humans who have been God's instruments in teaching.

- B. But ALL of us who grow in grace have GOD for a Teacher. How is God seen as TEACHER? What are the qualities of a master- teacher that we can see in God?

[Some of you Education professors could talk more intelligently about these "teacher qualities" we see in God; but we all know that teaching means facts and lessons and assignments and the like. And yet we know that a real teacher teaches much, much more than just facts!]

There is SELF-REVELATION! Somehow a gifted teacher "connects" the facts with life and living. He or she encourages us to face the facts as he or she has faced them. Unconsciously, perhaps, we find ourselves thinking like our beloved teacher! GOOD TEACHERS TEACH THEMSELVES WHETHER THEY WANT TO OR NOT! (Unfortunately, probably so do bad teachers! I hated algebra when during the war (WW II) I had a teacher who didn't understand it that tried to teach it!)

There is some also some kind of DISCIPLINED LOVE! (We somehow remember the "tough" teachers— the ones who demanded something from us! WHY?) There must have been a higher level of respect there.

And God will never let us "get by" with less than what we CAN be and do!

But our text closes with a thrilling thought:

III. A NEVER-ENDING WALK

"At thy right hand there are pleasures for ever more."

A. Earthly relationships do come to an end; they change. Many of my teachers are no longer here. We move on, we change disciplines; we go beyond the level of what one teacher can tell us. We graduate. Mentors become onlookers and colleagues. Hopefully, they also become fast friends.

B. But this greatest teacher-pupil relationship only grows better and more productive.

We can infer from verses such as this that human beings are destined for unimaginable growth throughout the ages! Whatever this means, your greatest potential, and mine, as human beings, comes from this single fact: We shall be in God's Presence, walking with Him, being shown this pathway of life, throughout eternity.

Here Teacher and pupil not only become fast friends, they have entered into a relationship that literally will never end.

Conclusion

God as Teacher

Which brings us back to Enoch, this man who walked with God (as it says in Genesis 5:24.) When we learn to walk with God wonderful things happen.

We learn to please God by our faith and obedience. The most satisfying thing in all the world, bar none, is to have a witness that God is pleased with you. (I would to God I could have that "feeling" once in a while!) But listen to what Hebrews 11:5,6 says:

By faith Enoch was translated so as not to see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had a testimony that he pleased God. But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a Rewarder of them that diligently seek Him. (Wesley's translation.)

Prayer: Be our Teacher, O Lord! Help us to learn from You the Pathway of Life; and help us to stay near You, in Your Presence forevermore, so that we can come to please You and to BE LIKE YOU.

Amen!

492 *Jesus Loves Even Me*

The Shepherds Table

February 3, 1991

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Psalm 23

Introduction

This beautiful Psalm is one of God's sweetest gifts to all generations. The pure poetry, along with the personal trust in God it exudes, has spoken in countless circumstances and situations, powerfully time and time again. It is at one and the same time a statement of faith and a prayer. We will never exhaust its supply of strength.

Very often when I am thinking about the sacrament of communion, thinking of Christ and His provision of salvation, thinking of the Last Supper and the words Jesus spoke then:

"This is my body, broken for you; this is my blood;" I think of the phrase in the Shepherd Psalm:

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.

Somehow I know it "connects." Jesus, our Good Shepherd, is the One who calls us to His table.

I. GOD'S TABLE IS ABOUT FOOD

Jesus took the common things of life and living and elevated them to the status of sacrament. When purity and love are present then all of life is holy. But in a special way Jesus made food and eating part of His most sacred command:

- A. Food is basic stuff. It is connected with life. That isn't too profound. But somehow just about all cultures and civilizations have understood that bread has to do with the mystery of Life; with the God or "gods" that connect with what we cannot understand of beginnings and destinations.
- B. Idols, man-made "gods" demand to be fed. Again and again in the scriptures idols are described. They have to be carried. They are a burden.
- C. But the living God feeds his children. He carries them. We who have been brought up on the truth of the Christian story don't realize the stark contrast of many of the world religions.
- D. God does have demands regarding food. JHWH demanded "shewbread" on the table, which the priests ate. Our God demands our first fruits, our tithes. But do our tithes "support Almighty God?" God provided manna. Jesus broke loaves and fishes and fed multitudes. Again, Jesus provided breakfast along the seashore for the disciples. No, we don't feed God—we simply put Him absolutely "first" and He provides what we need to be/become what He wants us to be.

II. THIS TABLE IS ALSO ABOUT ENEMIES

- A. "Enemies" is basic stuff, too. Who has "enemies" in this sophisticated time? Certainly not Christians! We are past the confrontational stages of life and living!

Enemies are people you hate! People who hate YOU! Christians don't hate!
"Love your enemies!"

The Psalms seem so simple: David hated God's enemies; we are so much more sophisticated!

We don't like the "war-like" examples of the Bible we don't have any enemies!

WHAT? WHAT DO WE DO WITH THE IDEA OF "ENEMIES?"

B. When we seek to do God's will we are opposed.

1. There are forces seeking to cause your defeat. You had better be alert!
2. There are battles we must fight. Every Christian group or individual has some sort of agenda, even if it is just saving the seals. Some of the most militant of people are people who advocate peace.

C. Christians usually fall into one of two categories: either ACTIVIST, or CONVERSIONIST.

1. Activists create pressure. They seek to enact law. They form a moral majority or a green peace. They protest.
2. Conversionists seek to evangelize. Nothing wrong with that— except that all too often this means "Join MY group the way WE say and then circle the wagons and wait for the cavalry." I do not deny that I believe that people need to be born again, and that unless a person is saved he or she is lost.

But there is a third way. Stanley Hauerwas suggests that this "third way" is not in any way a blending of the other two, but a radically different approach to Christian reality!

3. This third way says: EAT IN FRONT OF YOUR ENEMIES! Don't just try to block them in legislature, or persuade them to become a member of your church— but show them your Shepherd!

Instead of an ACTIVIST APPROACH or a CONVERSIONIST APPROACH, this is A CONFSSIONAL APPROACH to Christian living. . . . saying: "Jesus Christ is MY Shepherd! He is MY Lord and MY Master. I will seek to do everything I do in a way to please Him and reveal Him to the world!

III. THE LORD'S TABLE IS ABOUT SANCTUARY

A. This Psalm is highly personal. That is hardly news. We all know it by heart, and yet somehow it has the power to make each one of us feel "special" before God. THAT is deeply satisfying. There are a lot of Christians. Millions, even. But you can relate to God one-on-

The Shepherds Table

One!

- B. Never forget, though, that though it is personal, the star of the Psalm, the focus of the confidence, the object of trust is the Shepherd! "The LORD is my shepherd!" That is confessional. And it is the Lord that

maketh and

leadeth and

restoreth and

leadeth (again, for His name's sake) and

Thou art with me

Thy rod and Thy staff comfort me and

THOU preparest and

THOU anointest!

- C. It is NOT a table for two! Yes, it IS personal! But there is fellowship around the Shepherd's table. Actually the fellowship is not the primary thing— even though sometimes it becomes the focus. But the fellowship is incidental to the MEAL.

Conclusion:

I would challenge you this morning to be a confessional Christian!

To "eat in front of your enemies" does not mean you will DO LESS than those who call themselves "activist."

To be "confessional" does not mean that you will TALK LESS ABOUT JESUS than the "conversionists." Probably you will both do and say more than ever before for your Master.

But my challenge to you is that as we eat together this morning you and I will be telling the Shepherd, the Master, our Lord Jesus Christ, that He can make us, He can lead us, He can restore us, He can "rod and staff us" with whatever discipline He sees fit!

Prayer: Meet with us at Your table this morning, O Lord. (Crimond)

Prayer Texts

February 6, 1991

Prayer Meeting

FOCUS Psalm 122

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord."

Invocation:

Help us to be very conscious that we are in Your presence, O Lord. Amen.

I heard Reuben Welch via video: speaking from the book of Philippians, and in a nutshell his outline was that Philippians was about

1. Ch 1=LIFE OF CHRIST
2. Ch 2=MIND OF CHRIST
3. Ch 3=GOALS OF CHRIST
4. Ch 4=STRENGTH OF CHRIST

and Reuben Welch said that in each case in order to receive that which is Christ's we had to relinquish claim on that which is our own. I like that; and by God's grace, I DO!

The LIFE of Christ in Chapter One

Intro:

Some "take home" verses: (6) For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. (21) For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

A. PRIMACY OF PRAYER FOR [the church] FAMILY

3-5 I thank my God in every remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in every remembrance of you. God's church is family. Lifting the family in prayer is always in order; always our first order of business.

B. PURPOSE OF PRAYER FOR THE FAMILY

9-11 And this I pray (1) that your love may abound still more and more [i.e. for compassion] (2) in real knowledge and all discernment [i.e. for discernment, mature and grounded faith], (3) so that you may approve the things that are excellent, etc. [i.e. for effectiveness; for being able to major on the majors and minor on the minors.]

C. THE POWER BEHIND PAUL'S PRAYER FOR THE FAMILY

21 For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Reuben Welch said that in order to receive that which is Christ's we have to relinquish claim on that which is our own! Paul had deliberately chosen God's will and way over his own. (Galatians 2:20) It is a choice that God will help us to make, too. And to keep on making.

D. THE PATTERN OF LIFE THIS PRAYER PRODUCES

27-30 Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ . . .

1. standing firm in one spirit [i.e. love, concern for lost]...
2. with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel [i.e. jealous for the Lordship of Jesus Christ; no "pushover" for sweet talk and pantheism]
3. in no way alarmed by your opponents [i.e. we will be opposed; it is a good sign]
4. For to you it has been granted . . . to suffer for (Christ's) sake. [i.e. we can turn our "hardships" into opportunity to really be alive in God.]

January 22, 1992

GEORGE MÜLLER'S PRAYER LEGACY

In 1836 in Bristol, England, opened an Orphanage with, I believe, 42 children who had neither father or mother. Later Mr. Müller was able to open several other homes for orphans, and greatly expand the numbers of children he served, the last house holding 700 orphans.

What was unique about these orphanages, however, was the way they were funded and supplied. Mr. Müller stated that his third aim was the bodily welfare of the children, but higher than that, he sought their spiritual welfare, that they should know Jesus Christ as Savior. But he declared that his chief aim was the glory of God. He wrote:

"I ... particularly longed to be used by God in getting the dear orphans trained up in the fear of God; - but still, the first and primary object of the work was (and still is:) that God might be magnified by the fact, that the orphans under my care are provided with all they need, only by prayer and faith without anyone being asked by me or my fellow-laborers whereby it may be seen, that God is FAITHFUL STILL, and HEARS PRAYER STILL."

[Read one or two instances of answered prayer:] Read Pages 33-37, starting with the last sentence on page 32: How to be effective in prayer. Conclude with George Müller's

How to Ascertain the Will of God:

"I seek at the beginning to get my heart into such a state that it has no will of its own in regard to a given matter. Nine-tenths of the trouble with people is just here. Nine-tenths of the difficulties are overcome when our hearts are ready to do the Lord's will, whatever it may be. When one is truly in this state, it is usually but a little way to the knowledge of what His will is.

Having done this, I do not leave the result to feeling or simple impression. If so, I make myself liable to great delusions.

I seek the Will of the Spirit of God through, or in connection with, the Word of God. The Spirit and the Word must be combined. If I look to the Spirit alone without the Word, I lay myself open to great delusions also. If the Holy Ghost guides us at all, He will do it according to the Scriptures and never contrary to them.

Next I take into account providential circumstances. These often plainly indicate God's Will in connection with His Word and Spirit.

I ask God in prayer to reveal His Will to me aright.

Prayer Texts

Thus, through prayer to God, the study of the Word, and reflection, I come to a deliberate judgment according to the best of my ability and knowledge, and if my mind is thus at peace, and continues so after two or three more petitions, I proceed accordingly. In trivial matters, and in transactions involving the most important issues, I have found this method always effective."

Focus: Psalm

469 I Must Tell Jesus

123 What a Friend we have in Jesus

441 For God so loved this sinful world

209 He is Able to Deliver Thee

EH 33 Behold the Throne of Grace

44 Whate'er I Ask, I Surely know

10 Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God

Prayer Requests:

Lessons from a Man of God

Lenten Series 1991

February 17, 1991

Psalm 90:13 *So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.*

What are your greatest aspirations and dreams? I hope that they are built around the desire to be a man or woman of God. But if they are, you are not typical! You will not find "godliness" on the "Ten Top" lists for ambitions anywhere that I know. A "godly one," according to Psalm 50:4, is one who has made covenant by sacrifice with God. If you have trusted in the blood of the everlasting covenant, then you are one of God's people— and potentially a godly man or woman!

The world says "Give me goals that I can measure and display! Give me goals that say to the world, 'Here is a success!'" But we will do well to learn to aspire to higher goals than those we can set for ourselves! God's plans for you are better than your own! And God wants you to be a woman of God, a man of God!

Moses was called "a man of God." He wrote the words of our morning's Psalm. It is distilled wisdom. In it Moses tells us:

I. THE PSALM OF MOSES

- A. "Lord, YOU have been our dwelling place in all generations." God is HOME to the godly man or woman. Moses would teach us to think of God Himself as our HOME.

Of course this doesn't sound "practical." God may help us with our ethics or our personal peace, or our problems. But centering our whole life in God? Really?

Moses learned through years of living that the Presence of God Himself is the secret to wisdom. God does provide, work miracles, fight our battles;

but the man or woman that simply lives with God, and does not just seek to use Him is the man or woman of God.

But living with God is not automatic. Moses says:

- B. "Teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom." The godly man or woman is a teachable person, and seeks to have God Himself for the Teacher. We look at this verse and think of time management, and disciplines of business administration; and these are excellent. Moses specifically asks GOD Himself to teach him whatever skills he needs.
- C. Finally in this Psalm Moses prays "Establish our works, O Lord! Don't let us live our lives in vain!" There is that cry for immortality and for meaning. And Moses was able to get some important things done in his lifetime!

II. THE LIFE OF MOSES

Moses went through three distinct stages or periods in his life:

- A. First Moses had an ACTIVIST STAGE. For the first forty years or so of his life, Moses was a prince in the richest country of the world. In this stage Moses no doubt saw himself as a key player in any social revolution that needed to take place. His faith was chiefly in himself. And when he struck out, he struck out! He killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave— and ended up being hunted like a common murderer.
- B. Then Moses went through an ISOLATIONIST PERIOD. He dropped out, and he probably intended to stay unspotted from the world. But on the back side of an Arabian desert Moses encountered a God who wouldn't leave him alone; a God who called him by his name: "Moses!"
- C. So finally Moses came to a CONFSSIONAL FAITH IN THIS GOD: and the "man of God" era in Moses' life began in earnest. With nothing but the rod in his hand and his brother, Aaron for company, Moses went back to Egypt at God's command, and the rest is history:
 - 1. He led perhaps 1,000,000 Hebrew men, women and children out of the hands of the Pharaoh of Egypt.

2. He met with God on the mountain we call Sinai, and delivered to the world the Ten Commandments.
3. He formed the nation of Israel from this band of slaves, and delivered them to the borders of the Promised Land. Quite a life's accomplishment!
4. Then Moses died! But before he died, Moses called all the people together. Most of them had not been around when the slaves had left Egypt. Moses gave them the Law a second time. And then Moses sang them a song. God gave this 120-year-old man a song of praise. There it is in the 31st chapter of Deuteronomy. We usually skip through it hurriedly on our way to the Book of Joshua, if we read the Old Testament at all.

But that isn't quite the end of the story of Moses, the man of God:

III. THE SONG OF MOSES

The song of Moses, curiously, is also a part of the final book of the Bible, the book we call "Apocalypse" or The Revelation. Over in one corner of the vast mural of epic struggle which is the Apocalypse is a mysterious inscription of blessing. (14:13) John writes:

And I heard a voice out of heaven saying, Write, From henceforth happy are the dead who die in the Lord: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors. Their works follow them.

And nearby, in this same corner of the gallery is a living portrayal of victorious saints -(perhaps even you and me?)- who have fought the good fight. They are standing by a sea of glass that looks as if is mixed with fire, and they have musical instruments in their hands, harps that God Himself has given them. They are singing a song. What do you suppose the song they are singing is called? It is called The Song of Moses, and of the Lamb! Do you want to hear it? Frankly, I don't know the tune! But I do have the words! It comes right out of the song Moses sang in Deuteronomy 31!

Great and marvelous are your deeds Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways King of the ages. Who will not fear you, O Lord, And bring glory to your name? For

you alone are holy. All nations will come And worship before you, For your righteous acts have been revealed.

Conclusion:

Moses writes: "Lord, teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom!"

Just how realistic is it to have a life-goal of being a man or woman of God? Why does that somehow sound like "preacher talk," borderline fanaticism?

No, we aren't timid about other kinds of goals. We say, "Give me goals I can measure and display. Give me achievements that say to all the world: Here is a success!"

But we will do well to learn to aspire to higher goals than those we can set for ourselves!

Moses knew the people (he spoke to just before his death) would say that being men and women of God was beyond them, too. But listen to his words (from Deuteronomy 30:11):

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, 'Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it so we can obey it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, 'Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?' No. the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.'

If the Bible is true then we had better be serious about letting God help us with our life's goals! And if the Bible is true, then one day we may all be taking part in a song the Apocalypse calls The Song of Moses and of the Lamb! If God is our dwelling place, when the time comes, the words and music will come along, too!

Prayer: Lord, You ARE our dwelling place! Teach us how to number OUR days that we may apply OUR hearts to wisdom. Amen.

#47 (EH) *God of Grace and God of Glory*

Dress for Dinner

February 24, 1991

Introduction

There is one recurring nightmare that is common to many people in one form or another. I confess that I have had this nightmare in several different forms. Maybe you know the story: you are scheduled to appear in public- perhaps make a speech or presentation- and at the last minute you aren't properly dressed. Perhaps you are in your underwear or worse. At any rate real panic sets in when you think of how you are going to face the expectations of the people when you know that you are unprepared.

I. TWO INSTANCES IN SCRIPTURE OF THIS "RECURRING NIGHTMARE"

A. The man and woman in the Garden. (Genesis 3)

The idea of clothing as covering goes back a long, long way. Eve said to Adam, "I think the Lord Himself is coming to dinner, and I don't have a thing to wear!" There in Genesis Chapter Three the man and the woman in the Garden had a command performance when they suddenly discovered they weren't properly dressed. A lot of sermons have been preached about fig leaves and coats of skins provided by a gracious God. But from the first book of the Bible to the last, it seems to be important what we are wearing when.

After they had disobeyed God's clear commandment Adam and Eve seemed to know they were naked, and they were ashamed of their nakedness. Here was loss of innocence; here was the beginning of genuine guilt. The result for Adam and Eve was a loss of the joy and peace of the beautiful Garden, and exile from God's Presence.

B. The dinner guest at the wedding feast (text passage.)

Something of this same theme is carried in a parable or story that Jesus told. He told it as a parable of what the kingdom of heaven is like.

In this story a king is giving a wedding party for his son. When his first invited guests don't show up, the king practically shanghai's a host of people come to the great celebration. They are urged, cajoled, commanded to come— to a banquet, a feast— the high point in the social calendar of a lifetime, perhaps.

But when the king walks through the banquet hall and sees a poor fellow there experiencing a real-life episode of the recurring nightmare, he has him put in handcuffs and shackles and sends him off to the deepest, darkest, dankest dungeon in the realm.

Somehow, in our modern mind-set it hardly seems fair. We don't know just how to take it. Then, as if to make the application even more difficult Jesus tacks on the proverb:

For many are called, but few are chosen.

WHAT CAN THESE TWO STORIES ABOUT 'CLOTHES' HAVE TO SAY TO US?

II. CLOTHING AS A RESPONSE TO LIFE

A. Have you ever thought about THE MEANING OF CLOTHES?

Actually, dress is one way in which we respond to reality. How many times have you said, "I'll listen to the weather person today to see what I should wear"? A reasonable approach to clothes, certainly.

But warmth or protection from the elements are only one reason, and perhaps not even the most basic or primary reason we wear clothes. Perhaps you haven't thought much about it, but we wear clothes because of modesty; we wear clothes as ornaments or fashion statements; there are occasions when the wearing of clothing expresses meaningful symbolism; think of a long white gown of lace with a sheer veil; think of a khaki uniform

with four stars on each shoulder; think of a shirt with black and white stripes (which way do the stripes run?); you see, we wear clothes for much more reasons than simply protection from the elements.

- B. Consciously or unconsciously, the way we dress makes a statement. We try to learn to interpret; to look beyond superficialities. We try to know the woman or the man and we say, "How he or she dresses doesn't really matter."

I recall when holiness people wore uniforms, sure as can be. I remember when sermons told people— and mostly women— how to and not to dress. (Thank the Lord, those days are past.)

But like it or not we process appearance into what we think of people.

- C. In the scriptures, clothing often symbolizes or represents the way we respond to life! Clothing ultimately becomes our character! Our spiritual clothing is how we protect ourselves from the spiritual realities; how we deal with our failures; how we act and react in our relationships.

Listen to these words (in Isaiah 59) describing Messiah at least in part in terms of what He is wearing, or 'puts on:'

Now the Lord saw that there was no justice and He saw that there was no man . . . then His own arm brought salvation to Him and His righteousness upheld Him; And He put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on His head; and He put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped Himself with zeal as a mantle (etc.)

We ourselves are commanded to "put on the whole armor of God" and to clothe ourselves in Christ garments of grace, garments of glory. And in the message of Jesus to the church at Laodocia he says:

I advise you to buy from Me . . . white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed . . (etc.)

To be found undressed, or dressed improperly is not just embarrassing in this spiritual sense, it means coming up short in character. It means being incomplete in personal preparation for our relationship with God Himself!

III. WHAT IS BEING CLOTHED PROPERLY IN CONTEXT OF REVELATION 16:15

[Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his garments, lest he walk about naked and they see his shame. Revelation 16:15]

- A. It means being clothed in righteousness. The great hymn says in part that we may be "Dressed in His righteousness alone, Faultless to stand before the throne." When we are saved we are justified ("Just-as-if-I'd"-never-sinned!) We are then clothed in Christ's righteousness. HIS perfect life is IMPUTED to our account!
- B. But these garments may be soiled. Jesus warns the church at Sardis. Evidently the many have soiled their garments. What does this mean?

Their works have not been completed; they have not followed through. Like the wedding guest without the wedding garment, they have not taken seriously the need for further preparation.

What does it mean to keep the garments of the spirit unsoiled?

- C. A degree of alertness is required. (Text) Stay awake! Keeping one's garments unsoiled means exercising the cleansing grace of God. It doesn't mean perfection in the sense of performance. It does imply utter seriousness about watching for the will of God; of watching for the wiles of the enemy as well.

The blessing (beatitude) is for those who stay awake and for those who keep their garments. It is NOT necessary to be embarrassed when the king comes! We CAN be clothed in the righteousness of God's grace!

CONCLUSION

There are TWO garments mentioned in the passage directed to Sardis: There is the garment of GRACE which we may keep unsoiled; this is the imputed righteousness that is sanctification begun, and sanctification through and through, and sanctification up-to-date. But there is another garment: the promise is that they who

have not soiled their garments SHALL WALK WITH ME (with Jesus!) IN WHITE! The final clothes we shall wear will be like the glistening robes that Jesus Himself wears! When we shall see Him, we shall be like Him! Paul fairly sings to the Corinthians,

For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! I Corinthians 15

We have all be called to dinner! We are all invited! But Jesus said, Many are called, BUT FEW ARE CHOSEN! There is still time for us to GET dressed and to STAY DRESSED for this greatest of all invitations!

78(EH) *When He Shall Come*

Scripture

And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars, says this:

I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Wake up and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of God. Remember therefore what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. If you therefore will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you. But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with me in white; for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Revelation 3: 1 - 6

Then the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin

coverings . . . And the LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them. Genesis 3: 7, 21

Then (the king) said to his slaves, The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. God therefore to the main highway, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast. And those slaves went out into the streets, and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests. But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw there a man not dressed in wedding clothes, and he said to him, Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes? And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen. Matthew 22: 8 - 14

Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his garments, lest he walk about naked and they see his shame. Revelation 16:15

Faith for Resurrection

March 17, 1991

Jesus said, I AM the resurrection and the life! - John 11:25

Revelation 20:4-6

". . . And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years was completed. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.

11-15 " And I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

INTRODUCTION

Come Easter, we celebrate the victory of the Lord Jesus Christ over sin and death and the grave, and particularly, His resurrection in power and glory. The theme of life and death is central to our understanding of salvation. For some light on "resurrection" I have turned to this seemingly esoteric passage in Revelation 20.

I. A DIFFICULT PASSAGE, REVELATION 20

A. The entire prophetic statement of the Book of Revelation is difficult to understand, and this passage is no exception. You can be sure that there are plenty of willing interpreters around, but the only problem is that very few of them agree with each other. The only thing of which we may be certain is that there is genuine mystery involved here.

B. MYSTERY

Whenever we have the meeting of a holy, infinite God with the history of sinful and finite mortal men and women, we have more than we can fully comprehend or understand. It is foolish to outline and predict the exact order of events of end times. The element of "prediction" is not necessary to salvation, and should never become a major concern when reading the scripture.

But just because there is a strong component of mystery here does not mean that we cannot say that God does not speak through such passages. By the Holy Spirit we may receive and understand a clear, factual message.

C. FACT

In this sobering passage that one day we shall all understand much more clearly, first-hand, there are some lessons that are not up for interpretation, at least not to my understanding.

1. There is the fact of human accountability before God. John said, "I saw (all) the dead, the great along with the small, standing before God. And the books were opened, and another book which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged every one of them according to their deeds."
2. This makes it plain that death as we know it is NOT the end of human existence. There is something for every man, woman, boy and girl that lies beyond the grave.
3. But another fact this passage from Revelation tells us is that immortality is not the same as eternal life. Just being raised from the dead to judgment is not the same as being free from what the scriptures term "the second death."

[TRANSITION TO II. - This raises two pointed questions:

1. What IS eternal life?
2. How may I be sure to take part in the resurrection of the holy?

For answers we leave the Book of the Revelation and turn to the One Who came to interpret God to us, to the Living Word Himself. (In the 11th Chapter of the Gospel of John:)]

II. A COMPANION PASSAGE, JOHN 11: THE SIGN OF LAZARUS

In the Gospel of John (11: 1 - 44) is the CLIMACTIC MIRACLE of the Gospels, the account of the raising from the dead of one of Jesus' friends, Lazarus.

- A. The simple story is one we all know, or certainly ought to know: Jesus loved (agapeo) Martha, Mary and Lazarus. They had made their home His home. He and they were friends. They cared for each other.
- B. Then while Jesus was away across the Jordan Lazarus took sick. Evidently right from the start the sisters knew it was a serious illness. They sent word to their great Friend. Jesus got the message. And as far as they were concerned He did nothing about it until it was too late.
- C. But then what took place became a galvanizing DEMONSTRATION OF THE MASTERY OF JESUS OVER DEATH. It was not something Jesus merely did to "play games" with his friends' lives. No one simply "uses" Jesus, and I believe that we can trust Him not to simply use our friendship callously. This is a complicated story. John doesn't try to hide it. Jesus wept. He cared. He sorrowed. He shared in suffering. He wasn't a showman, playing games with people's life-drama; using Lazarus like some laboratory experiment.
- D. But what did transpire there has served across the centuries as a witness of Christ's mastery over life and death. He stepped to the tomb, and with a loud voice called Lazarus back from the realm of the dead into the land of the living.
- E. This miracle of miracles in John's gospel, the resurrection of Lazarus, crystallized the opposition that had been growing against the person and the mission of Jesus. Lazarus became a celebrity (John 12:9) as multitudes came to see this man who had been dead

four days and then brought back to life. The Pharisees were disheartened; "the world is gone after Him!" was their complaint (John 12:19.)

- F. You might think they would have admitted their error and worshiped Jesus, too. But they decided to make on last-ditch effort against Him. The human machinery for the crucifixion was set in motion.

[BUT HOW DOES THIS 'SHED LIGHT' ON THE PASSAGE? Coming back to the questions "What is LIFE?" and "How can I take part in the resurrection of the holy?"]

III. OUR WORD FOR TODAY - OUR ASSURANCE IN LIFE AND DEATH

- A. The key of this story, and the place where the two passages connect, are the words of Jesus just before He speaks the words of power that brought the dead back to life.

JESUS SAID, "I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE!"

1. These words were spoken as He responded to practical Martha. Later when Mary says the same words, Jesus doesn't repeat Himself, He weeps! Martha said: "Lord, if You had been here You could have DONE SOMETHING!"
2. Jesus said, in effect, "There is something more than being able to DO something! You haven't yet realized who I AM! I AM SOMETHING!" "I AM LIFE!" "I AM RESURRECTION!"

- B. Inset:

1. What IS life? Being able to relate, to correspond to the environment. Physical life is being able to breathe air, to eat food, to smell odors, to hear sounds, to reach out and touch and feel.
2. But what, then, is ETERNAL LIFE? Eternal LIFE is being able to relate, to correspond with God Himself! Being able to relate, to correspond with the Source of Life! Jesus is the touch-stone, the connection, the eternal Word, the Expression of God.
3. Physical life is "threshold life" where, if we stand on tiptoe, we can look into eternity. Physical life is discovering that we are made in God's image and yet that the image is broken and empty and needs the touch of the Creator God to make it whole again. Physical life as we know it now is Paradise Lost, it is God-

hunger. St. Augustine said it perhaps more beautifully than any other: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless 'til they find their rest in Thee."

- C. Jesus, Himself, IS ETERNAL LIFE! When we know Jesus and are IN HIM we begin to share His LIFE, and we are even now alive unto God. Eternal life is not just something which will happen in the future after this "real world" ends; eternal life is the real world dawning into our consciousness even now.

So this is what we understand that Jesus meant when He said: He that is now alive, and believes in Me, shall never die! If we know Jesus, and are alive IN HIM, we will have no need to fear in the unfolding of the apocalyptic mystery.

CONCLUSION

A. THE PROMISE OF BLESSING

1. The beatitude "Blessed and holy is the one who has part in the first resurrection." Of whom is John speaking?
2. How may I be sure that John is including ME in this beatitude?
3. To answer that satisfactorily we need to answer the question Jesus asked at the grave of Lazarus: Do YOU believe that I AM the resurrection and the Life?

B. THE ASSURANCE WE MAY RECEIVE:

1. The assurance is divinely revealed. It is dangerous to "assume" or "presume" or to be humanly "persuaded."
2. But you can be sure! Jesus responds to the whosoever! (John 3:16) But you MUST respond!
3. Our response is simply "Living FOR Jesus!"

[Do I have to live at a certain intensity? How about the strong feelings I felt last week during revival? I called Stephen Manley, and he spoke to us all— including me! I know that I do not have the same intensity in my approach to living. Can I be a true believer and still be "me?" The all-important thing, as Dr. Manley said again and again, is WHO is at the center!]

Faith for Resurrection

#335 *Living for Jesus*

Baptismal Service

EH #58 - *Soldiers of Christ, Arise!*

March 24, 1991

If we have not done so before, the congregation stands to repeat The Apostles' Creed (513 WS): [Be seated]

Mini-Homily:

Our last baptismal service was January 12, before the air war began in Iraq, before the counter-war began. We are sensitive to the horror of war, and perhaps for that reason were (and are) somewhat reluctant to use the terminology of warfare to describe the Christian way at that time for obvious reasons.

The fact remains, warfare is what the Christian way really is! The entire Universe is engaged in a contest of good and evil, and somehow the human personality is in the middle of the conflict.

Sometimes we try to clean up the stories of the Old Testament, and we worry about a primitive concept of God, or a God of war and vengeance. We get side-tracked in questions of history or sociology when we haven't faced up to our own personal struggles of theology. We need to read the Old Testament first of all in the light of what we know and who we are today— and certainly God is not directing any of us to be primarily warriors or literally taking up physical weapons. But there is nevertheless a life-and-death struggle for your soul, for the souls of your loved ones, for the soul of our generation.

The powers of good and evil are strong, and our human resources of themselves are weak. But God never intended that we should fight the battle against evil in our own strength, or using merely human wisdom and power. The history of grace and salvation is a story of God's intervening, stepping into the battle on behalf of human beings who look to Him for help.

Baptismal Service

The sacrament of baptism is a statement to three worlds watching that you are siding with Almighty God in this warfare. You are turning your back on the sinful, selfish way of life. You are leaving the land of slavery and bondage. You are crossing the Red Sea of obedience and following the Pillar of Fire of the Holy Spirit and the Bible and the Body of Christ, the Church.

You are casting your lot in with God, and with Jesus you are dying to that which opposes God and good and Life; you are dying and being buried to sin, and to all claims of the devil, and you are raised to newness of life with Jesus Christ in His resurrection victory over sin and death and hell.

Why we use water in this ceremony— even as we use real bread and drink in the sacrament of communion— is because the sacrament is a token to us of how the real world of God and Life and the Infinite somehow makes contact and intermingles and transfigures the real world of broken life and imperfect love and anguish where we live now. You will be covered with real water, and get wet— and that immersion will say to us all:

I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life that I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me, and gave Himself for me. Galatians 2:20

The words of ritual in the Church of Jesus Christ across the years have referred to the significance of water in the ceremony of baptism:

NOAH AND THE ARK were saved by water

ISRAEL THROUGH RED SEA in a covenant relationship, led by the hand of Moses, then later

THROUGH THE JORDAN RIVER at flood-tide, into the Promised Land, where the Israelites did not need to fight for themselves so much as they needed to follow God and obey Him (a la Jericho)

We are baptized with real water as we remember

JESUS BAPTISM WITH SINNERS, when He identified with us, against the protest of John the Baptist.

We are baptized with water

SIGNIFYING THE WASHING AWAY OF SINS THROUGH SPIRITUAL BIRTH as well as the significance of

BEING "BURIED WITH CHRIST AND arising with Him in newness of life.

We mention also such scriptures as

Mark 16:16 "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be damned."

Acts 2 where Peter says

[Peter]: "Repent and be baptized every one of you for the remission of sins and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

You are obeying your Master, Jesus Christ in presenting yourselves for baptism here this day.

(Shall we pray)

Prayer: O Father, Give the assurance of Your Holy Spirit's Presence to these persons who confess Your name and declare their faith in the sacrament of Baptism today! In Jesus' Name. Amen.

[Will the congregation please stand; will the Baptismal Candidates stand here at the altar; and those wishing to re- affirm their vows publicly stand with them. May we ALL hear the questions, and answer them before God as an affirmation of our belonging to the Body of Christ:]

Beloved:

Desiring to receive holy Baptism, the Lord Jesus Himself has promised in His Word the things we have prayed for; the Church of Jesus Christ stands ready to receive

Baptismal Service

you, and you may count on His faithfulness, as well as the steadfastness of the true Church until He comes.

Your part is to promise by God's grace to renounce the devil and all his works, to constantly believe God's holy Word, and to obediently keep Christ's commandments.

Please give public testimony by answering the following questions appropriately:

Do you renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same, and the carnal desires of the flesh, so that thou wilt not follow, nor be led by them?

Answer: I renounce them all.

Do you believe in the truth as stated in the Apostle's Creed?

Answer: All this I steadfastly believe.

Will you be baptized in this faith?

Answer: It is my desire.

Will you then obediently seek to do God's holy will and in love keep His commandments, and walk with Jesus as your Savior and Lord all the days of your life?

Answer: God being my helper, I will endeavor so to do.

Prayer:

Grant, O Lord, that these persons may truly be buried with Christ as dead indeed unto sin and evil affections, and that they may be raised to newness of life in Christ.

Grant that this baptism may be a true means of grace that they may know that they have power and strength to triumph over the world, the flesh and the devil, sharing in Your victory all the days of their lives.

Grant that they may live forever in unity with You, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in the fellowship of Your Body, the Church. Through Jesus Christ, Amen.

[To the candidates;]

In just a few moments, as we baptize each one of you, we affirm that you are full members, not necessarily of this organization we call the Church of the Nazarene, but full members of the Church of Jesus Christ, and living participants in the Body of Christ.

[Those of you have re-affirmed your Christian Baptism of other years, we pray that God indeed does witness to your hearts that you, too, are called to be a vital part in the Church of Jesus Christ, living members in the Body of Christ, the Church.]

The Baptismal Candidates may leave to prepare for the Sacrament. Those who have re-affirmed their vows may return to your seats; you all may be seated.

(Congregational Song - Sacrament - Benediction and/or as appropriate, led by Pastor Nielson)

Pastor Nielson close the service and give benediction.

Faith to Greet the Coming King

Palm Sunday 1991

March 24, 1991

Revelation 22:7 Behold, I come quickly: blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book.

John 12:12-15; Matthew 21: 4 - 9; Luke 19: 35 - 38; Mark 11: 7 - 10; Philippians 2: 1 - 11

This text from the last chapter of the Bible has two distinct parts. (1) It declares that the risen Lord, the Alpha and Omega, is coming, and coming suddenly. (2) It also pronounces a beatitude, a blessing, on those who are prepared for this coming (parousia) by keeping the words of the prophecy. What can this mean? First, a look at Christ's unexpected coming.

Just about every time Jesus came on the scene of action He did it in an unexpected way. His coming was never out of character, nor was it ever contrived, or designed merely to impress or surprise. But it seems that an essential part of His character is that He is beyond our predictions!

I. OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH IS ALL ABOUT GOD COMING WHERE WE ARE

A. In Jesus Christ, God enters into our world and into our lives- and always in a way we cannot quite anticipate:

1. In His Initial Appearance on earth, His Nativity, Jesus surprised the Universe! Jesus was born, the Son of God, the King of kings, the long-awaited Messiah, in a cattle shed.
2. When he was a lad of twelve He was lost by his parents because of their presumption, and found again in the company of doctors and learned men, where he said, "Don't you understand that I must be about my Father's business?"

3. He began His ministry as a despised citizen of the town of Nazareth, (a Nazarene!) when the saying among the Jews of the time was, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"
 4. One time He missed the last boat to Capernaum, and startled the disciples by appearing out of the gloom of night walking on the water to catch up.
 5. He was too late to attend the funeral of Lazarus, but you know what He did when He went with the mourners to the grave.
- B. Jesus is still in the business of coming into people's lives! By His Spirit, Jesus still enters lives, and makes His Presence known and felt, and convinces men and women of sin, and righteousness and judgment, and of His love and forgiveness.
- Every Christian is a unique story. Every one of us who has met Jesus has met Him along the way of everyday living, and yet in a miracle of grace He had made Himself known! Jesus comes to YOU!
- C. But this is not all the text means. There is another appearance of Christ, what we call The Second Coming, that is spoken of all through the New Testament.
1. In these final chapters of Revelation the smoke of battle has cleared away, leaving a wondrous vision of a new heaven and new earth, and of a splendid and majestic holy city descending from heaven.
- In the midst of this glorious description, at the heart of the message of Revelation, is the message from the risen Lord: I am coming, and I am coming quickly.
2. You may be sure that Jesus will surprise us all in the way that He appears when He comes again. The text says: "Behold, I come quickly!" It is the closing theme of the entire Bible.
- D. How much should this "Second Coming" dominate our everyday living? How much should we be thinking about that coming?
1. What part does eschatology, the doctrine of "last things," play in our everyday Christian faith? [Eschatology is that part of our scriptural understanding that tells us that with God we are going somewhere, and not aimlessly lost in time and space. It is an important part of every true Christian's faith or creed.]

2. To make the Second Coming a part of our faith does NOT mean that we live in an unnatural, panic-stricken, white-robed- waiting-on-the-mountaintop attitude. Rather we must build the concept of looking for the coming of the Christ into our attitude for everyday living.
3. (Transition:) The Palm Sunday story is another one of Christ's "unexpected comings." Perhaps it can shed light on the text:

II. JESUS MADE AN UNEXPECTED APPEARANCE THAT FIRST PALM SUNDAY

- A. Jesus came on His own terms (as outlined in that passage from Philippians 2): He did NOT come to meet anyone's expectations:
 1. The people had different ideas of who He was and why He was coming— they came for many different reasons to see Him— but that did not change what was taking place:
 - a. Why the people came
 - John 12:17: multitudes came because Jesus had raised Lazarus;
 - Luke 19:37 a multitude of disciples were praising God for the miracles they had seen;
 - Mark doesn't really describe the crowd except to say that some were going ahead and some were following behind.
 - b. What the people thought:
 - The religious leaders thought they had a rebellion on their hands that they could no longer control: (John 12:19) "The whole world is gone after Him."
 - Most only partly understood or understood not at all: Matthew says (21:10-11) that when they got into the city itself all the city was stirred and asking, WHO IS THIS? And the answer the disciples gave was partial: This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee."

c. Jesus was, as always, "in character." He incarnated that passage from Philippians 2, (that passage which James Heyward read for us, THE "KENOSIS" PASSAGE), in which Jesus' full character is revealed:

- Not grasping for His rights
- Servant (doulos)
- Obedient unto death
- Shame

and yet somehow regal, kingly, on His way to the Cross not as a martyr, but as a Warrior to conquer hell and sin and death, so that somehow we understand the rest of the passage that says the He shall be

Highly exalted.

Who could have predicted that the lowly Nazarene, gentle Jesus would come into Jerusalem like this, stopping to weep over the city, then permitting the parade to go on? Who could have thought that having come through that Eastern Gate which is now walled shut, He would dare to enter into the Temple and turn over the money changers' tables? Who could have looked ahead to Friday, and beyond that to Sunday?

B. No doubt He will not come in humiliation like that again. Then He was on His way to become "sin" for us to open a way for us to enter into His righteousness, that we might become "holy" and be with Him forever— beginning NOW!

But He will come! And He will surprise us! He said so! He will be coming again!

[Transition:] The second part of the text is a promise to those "who keep the words of the prophecy of this book":

III. ' WE CAN'T GET READY, WE HAVE TO BE READY! '

A. And what does all this have to do with Palm Sunday, and the "kenosis passage"??

Blessed are those who keep the words of the prophecy of this book!" How in the world do we: "Keep the words of this prophecy?"

1. We understandably love Easter, and want to identify with Jesus in victory over death and sin and the grave. We want to know Jesus in power- which is culminating in His Return: "I come quickly!"

Here we stand on Palm Sunday amid the miracles and the palm branches and want to jump right over from here to there. Yes, we know the story of Christ and the Cross. But what does that have to do with you and me?

2. But remember, the Book of Revelation is about struggle. It is about warfare, and the battle of Good and Evil. Christian faith is taking a stand for God and good. Jesus could not simply jump from Palm Sunday to Easter— he had to march through Gethsemane and a Mock Trial and Calvary and the Tomb as a Warrior- - as our Champion— before He could stand on the mountain top of Easter. "He was made in fashion as a man . . . and humbled Himself . . . and took the form of a servant and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross; wherefore God hath highly exalted Him and given Him a name that is above every name ..."
3. Do you begin to see what "keeping the words of this prophecy" means in relation to being ready to meet Jesus in His victorious coming? It isn't understanding all the trumpets and vials and visions of the Apocalypse. Most of Revelation is undecipherable to most people. But the "simple part" of Revelation (Chapters 2 & 3) is about (1) keeping a fresh love to Christ, and (2) avoiding immorality and outright heresy, and (3) being faithful even when we feel small and (4) staying dependent on Christ for Life itself.

4. Or, keeping the prophecy is simply seeking to stay in tune with the Jesus of Palm Sunday, our Christ who is coming soon. Paul puts it this way: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus!"

Anticipating Christ's coming is not a matter of keeping rules, or doing this or not doing that. Watching for Jesus means loving Him, and living to please Him, and seeking to be like Him.

- B. Hear again the words of the text, this Beatitude of Revelation: (Revelation 22:7) Behold, I come quickly: blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book. That promise, along with every other blessing of the church, is OURS if we will receive it!

Prayer: Lord Jesus, We know now how the battle will turn out. We know that You have already won! But help us to be faithful each day, that we might keep the words of love You gave us, and be worthy to meet You when You come. In Your name we pray. Amen.

47 EH *God of Grace and God of Glory*

Dawning of the Eternal Day

Easter Sunday Morning

March 31, 1991

Revelation 22: 14 - 17 Jesus: "I AM the bright and morning star."

Introduction

Our text is the final beatitude of the Revelation: Revelation 22:14 "*Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.*"

With this promise the Bible has come full circle, back to where the human race began, in the Garden of Eden. Through His victory on Calvary and by the power of His Resurrection, Jesus has restored all that was lost when our first parents sinned.

I. THE LAST BLESSING IN THE BIBLE

A. This final Beatitude of the entire Bible is expressed in three phrases: Blessed are . . .

1. ... those who have washed their robes
2. ... for they have the right to the tree of life, and they
3. ... have access to the gates of the city, New Jerusalem.

What does that have to do with Adam and Eve and Eden? And what does it have to do with Calvary and Resurrection?

B. Perhaps it is too difficult to thoroughly treat in just one Easter Sunday sermon, but

1. When our first parents sinned they lost their innocence. They knew that they were naked; they were ashamed. They sought to cover their shame with aprons of leaves, and a gracious God made them coats of skin.

Here in the closing verses of Scripture we read of those who are not naked, they are not ashamed, but they have robes, robes of righteousness, washed and made white in the blood of Calvary's Lamb.

Not only is innocence restored, but innocence becomes holiness; a deliberate choice, made possible by grace.

2. When our first parents sinned they were quickly banned from eating of the tree of life in the center of the garden. Part of their curse was physical and spiritual death.

But here in this final beatitude we are told that God's people will have access to the tree of life that grows by the throne of God. Because of His victory over sin and death and the grave, the separation of sin is being overcome once and for all, and we shall live with Jesus, in His Presence, forever.

3. When our first parents sinned they were put out of the Garden, banned from the Paradise that had been their home, where in the cool of the day they had walked and talked with God Himself. All that that entailed, all that was involved we cannot fully understand. But we call that tragedy of sin "The Fall," and every one of us has become a sinner by choice as well as by birth, and we have known separation from God.

But the promise is: We shall have the right to go in and out of the gates of the New Jerusalem. And it will be "home."

- C. Do you begin to see the "Full Circle?" The PLAN of God and His love began in Genesis and is seen being COMPLETED in Revelation; what began in INNOCENCE now finds fulfillment in HOLINESS; where human attempts at COVERING SIN and shame failed, and where the Law and the Prophets looked forward to a more perfect way, Jesus purchased a cleansing and Covering and the saints wear ROBES OF WHITE which partake of His righteousness itself.

Where Genesis records the BROKEN DREAMS and shame of disobedience and failure, Revelation shows how our Champion opened ACCESS TO ETERNAL LIFE; where Adam knew EXILE from the Garden of Paradise, the Second Adam has won for us PASSAGE THROUGH THE GATES of the City

called New Jerusalem, where there is no need of the sun or the moon, for the Lamb Himself is the Light!

[Aren't you glad that we came to this promise on Easter Sunday?]

II. THE GOD OF BLESSING

What authority do we have for these fantastic-sounding promises? How can we know we are not simply reading science fiction?

If that question has crossed your mind, I'm glad it has: for a promise is only as good as the integrity of the One who makes it. And here we have One who is speaking with great authority and integrity.

- A. "I Jesus!" Though the messenger to John is an angel, the message is clear. It is from the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. The word is, "I JESUS!"

If the Bible is God's Word at all, then this text is of all portions to be trusted! It has the personal stamp of Jesus!

- B. Jesus identifies with humanity, with you and me:

I am the root and the offspring of David. Here in the closing words of the Bible, Jesus declares that He fulfills all scripture. All prophecy is complete. No loose ends remain to be explained.

Reaching back into history, identifying even in His glory with the human race, Jesus tells the ones who have washed their robes that they will live forever and that they will eternally be with Him. Jesus incarnates the integrity and the authority of the Holy Bible.

- C. Jesus announces a new and glorious day for mankind.

I am the bright and morning star. HE SHINES TO HERALD THE DAWNING OF ETERNAL DAY!

This final beatitude does not just look back, but it promises that we can know a limitless growing relationship with God and with God's people. When God comes and calls our names, we do not need to hide in the bushes! We can be at home with Him!

III. THE GOD WHO COMES TO DINNER

- A. The very best thing about Easter is that this promise is literally valid for each one of us, right now. The power of Christ's Resurrection makes it possible for you and me to have these clean robes, and to eat of the tree of life, and to enter the New Jerusalem.

And all this centers around what we are here celebrating this morning: the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead!

I know that I am talking a sort of "shorthand," but I believe that you can understand this scriptural language.

1. The "clean robes" are the knowledge of sins forgiven; they are the certitude that we are justified, and regenerated, and adopted into God's great family forever.
 2. The tree of LIFE, whatever it will mean when we see Jesus face to face, means that already we can begin eternity with Jesus, and come alive in Him. "He that liveth and believeth in Me," said Jesus, "Will never die!"
 3. The access to the gates of the city means that we can go home again! We are not going to spend eternity as lost souls, wandering around the galaxies (unless we want to wander around the galaxies!) with no place to go! We are no longer kicked out of Paradise!
- B. All this because "(Jesus) . . . took our sins and our sorrows, He made them His very own, He bore the burden to Calvary and suffered and died alone . . ." no wonder we sing, "How marvelous, How wonderful!" FORGIVENESS and CLEANSING and LIFE and ENTRANCE are possible because of the Resurrection that validates and manifests the Integrity of the One who has made the promise of blessing!

If Jesus had remained in the grave we would never have heard of Him. If He had not risen we would have no Christian faith, and no certain hope of eternal life.

But Jesus rose again. He ascended into heaven, where He became our High Priest at the Holy of Holies. He is now our Friend at the Throne, our Intercessor in prayer to the Father.

C. **(Conclusion)** But the Promise is valid only to those who will receive it! Whether or not we wash our robes is, because of grace, our choice!

1. Have YOU come to Jesus for the forgiveness of sins? Have you trusted in His righteousness, and do you know that you are justified, and adopted into His family?
2. Do you know the stirrings of spiritual LIFE in your being? Is there spiritual appetite? Do you desire the Bread and Drink of the heavenly kingdom?
3. Are you on Your way HOME? Home to the New Jerusalem, where Christ is preparing you a place?
4. Through the shadowy word-pictures of the ancient text we understand that God came in the cool of the day to fellowship with Adam and Eve. He called them by name. And somehow their disobedience spoiled the party, the fellowship was over.

But in the clearer light of the Revelation we read that this same great God, now having drawn much closer, much more understandable in the Babe of Bethlehem and the Savior of Galilee, now is pictured outside the door of your heart and mine. He knocks! He says, "If YOU will open the door, I will come in, and I will have dinner with you— I will live with you— I will be closer to you than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet."

We have a God who, because He lives eternally, has opened eternal life for us all. Amen.

Prayer: O Christ ! Thank You for Your great victory for us ! Come into our hearts, share Your life with us ! Amen.

Choir

Benediction THE LORD IS RISEN ! HE IS RISEN INDEED ! HALLELUJAH ! Revelation 3:20 . . .

All Things Become New

April 7, 1991

John 20:19 When therefore it was evening, on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst, and said to them, "Peace be with you."

And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples therefore rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus therefore said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you."

And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

"If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained."

2 Corinthians 5:17

Introduction

The appearances of Jesus in the forty days after His resurrection, recorded in all four Gospels, are very important indeed. They are important for what Jesus said, and He said a lot! But these post-resurrection appearances are perhaps even more important for what they tell us about how we can come to know God in a new and living way through the risen Savior. Every appearance speaks of:

I. A NEW ORDER OF ACCESS

- A. From the dawn of time every tribe and every race has wanted to make contact with the Eternal. Men and women have reached out to God as best they could. The history of mankind is a history of religions.

Just this last Thursday (4/4/91) in the Boston GLOBE was an item from the Associated Press stating that a recent poll of adult Americans indicated that the Number One concern for them was finding and maintaining a relationship to God! And that in spite of decades of anti-spiritual blitzkrieg on the part of most of the entertainment and information media.

Christians and Jews believe that almost 4,000 years ago in a special way God reached out to call a special people to follow Him and witness to His goodness. He called a man named Abram. He made covenant with him and his descendants. He spoke through a man called Moses. He spoke through prophets and Psalmists and a sacred Scripture of Covenant came into being. And we believe this revelation was superior to anything before.

God revealed that He cared about this world. He could be contacted, even though that contact was usually through priests and rituals. But somehow all creation waited for a better way, a fuller understanding of God. The world awaited MESSIAH!

The writer of Hebrews, in perfect harmony with all the revelation that has gone before, likens this search for communication to a narrowing focus that finally centers in the Christ:

God, Who at sundry times and in divers manners has in the past spoken through the prophets has in these latter days finally spoken through His Son.

Jesus came to bring a new and better way to the Father. For thirty-three years the Son of God lived among us. For three years and more He taught, and by His very life and death and resurrection revealed His Father God. This was a quantum leap in the God-man connection! Nothing could ever be quite the same again for those who encountered the Christ.

But access was still very limited. It was limited physically, both in terms of how many might see and hear Him, and how He might come and go to those

seeking Life. It was limited in human capacity to understand the scriptures. But all that began to change the day Jesus rose again from the dead!

- B. The risen Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, comes where He is loved; where people gather in His name; where He is sought. Here behind barred doors, meeting in fear and yet in rising hope, Jesus is suddenly amongst them! he is there! Not a wishful dream, but a real, living Person! [Just as He is here just now!]
- C. This access is now a two-way street! We can come to God at any time! We have access to God by the crucified, risen Savior (Romans 5:1,2)
- D. This ACCESS is to be the NORM! Far from occasional and mystic, God intends for His people to love Him and live in His Presence! Mystery? Yes! Magic? No way! Jesus, the crucified, risen Savior, reveals Himself to you and me! This new access does not lower the place of scripture in the life of faith. Access to God through Christ is linked to scripture; each new appearance gave:

II. A NEW LIGHT ON SACRED SCRIPTURE

- A. Jesus had said it before (John 5:39): the scriptures are the means of knowing Him. He came to fulfill the scripture (Matthew 5.)
- B. But NOW Jesus reveals HIMSELF as the KEY to the Bible. Luke is more explicit. In Luke 24 the two disciples on the Emmaus Road were treated to an exposition: "Beginning with Moses and in all the scriptures (Jesus) expounded to them the things concerning Himself" Then later in that 24th chapter Luke records this appearance (that John speaks of in John 21) and Luke says that Jesus (Luke 24:45) "...opened their minds that they might understand the scriptures."
- C. It is out of fashion, perhaps, [in these days of deconstruction] to believe in a Bible that is divine as well as human. It is even more incredible to the natural mind to look to a Man who lived 2,000 years ago for help in understanding the Bible. And if Jesus lived and died, and that is all, then it is naive.

But if Jesus is the risen One, and the One who comes, who breaks in where we are, then we dare say:

Come to Jesus! Learn of Him!

Ask Jesus to help you understand the scriptures!

That same Emmaus-Upper Room lesson is going on still! But there is still more! It gets better! Knowing the risen Savior puts a new dimension on LIFE itself!

III. A NEW JOY IN LIVING

A. PEACE

The Risen Lord appeared with a benediction of peace! It was the last thing Jesus had promised before His death— it is the first thing He says as conquering Savior— more than a casual "Shalom!" this PEACE MEANS THE END TO A DIVIDED HEART!

B. PURPOSE

Peace does NOT exclude work; it encompasses significant labor. Jesus had a new and wonderful assignment for His people. It is OUR assignment as well:

As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending YOU.. and YOU... and YOU!

C. PRESENCE

Jesus BREATHED on them and said:

Receive YE the Holy Spirit!

A new kind of contact with God! A new kind of LIFE! In the Creation story, we are told that God breathed into the nostrils of Adam the breath of life, and man became a living soul! Here Jesus breathes upon His church— and a new kind of life is born!

D. POWER

There is mystery involved in the statement:

The sins you forgive will be forgiven and the sins you don't will not... but suffice it for now to say that Jesus was committing to the CHURCH His own

assignment of telling the world that they can draw near to God, and that God loves them, and that their sins can be forgiven!

... all these blessings of knowing the risen Savior are in the context of a Unity, a divine-human mystery we call the CHURCH.

Conclusion

Thomas, bless his heart, wasn't there. Neither was I! Later Jesus reassured Thomas. But then Jesus said words that (I believe) John intended as the fitting climax of his masterpiece portrait of the Savior:

Thomas— you believe now because you have seen. But even more blessed are those who will believe even though they have not seen— but simply because they know they have met Me!

Prayer:

#303 Breathe on Me, Breath of God

The Marks of the Church Introduction

The Marks of the Church Series 1 of 5

Five sermons introducing the universally held theological truth that the church of Jesus Christ is one, holy, catholic and apostolic, with application for a church at the end of the twentieth century.

- **The Marks of the Church Introduction**
- The Church is One
- The Church is Catholic
- The Church is Apostolic
- The Church is Holy

April 7, 1991

INTRODUCTION

Christian is a church word. A Christian is a person who wants to follow Jesus. "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." (John 6:37) A Christian is a person who has LIFE in God (II Corinthians 5:17. "If any (one) is in Christ (they) are a new creation; old things have passed away; behold all things have become new."

A Christian is also a member of Christ's Body, the Church. (Acts 2:47) " And the Lord added to their number daily such as were being saved." Every Christian in the New Testament after Pentecost was a baptized member of the Body of Christ.

The relationship between the individual Christian and the Church of Jesus Christ is basic and vital. To best understand this relationship it is essential to ask "Just what IS the Church?"

How? Since total objectivity is impossible, I would state where I am coming from in this look at the church. I believe in a Christo-centric study of scripture; that is, reading to find out how to draw closer to Jesus; how to be more like Him; how to get to know Jesus better. My desire to know more about the church is a quest from faith to faith: I believe that we here (in Wollaston) are even now a true church, and part of

the one true church of Jesus Christ. This coincides with a growing conviction that ultimately the local church is the basic unit of the Church.

Without apology, our look at the church stems from an honest quest for growth: I believe that we are/are to be a part of a larger whole. This larger church is not limited to our denomination or even to our particular tradition (or that branch of Christendom with which we are most familiar and comfortable); our spiritual pedigree is Wesleyan/Anglican/Reformed/Arminian. But I want to see this church be all it can be!

Wesleyans Are Not Fundamentalists.

Given our Wesleyan viewpoint, still I want to be as honest as I can. And any study of the church fosters controversy over definitions. When we look for an authoritative word, on the church or about any other spiritual term, we probably feel pushed into an either-or battle between the liberals and the fundamentalists, based squarely on the nature of the scriptures. This struggle has monopolized the attention of many theologians and most of the pastor-theologians for more years than we would care to admit.

What neither liberals or fundamentalists would care to admit is that there seems to be a common thread in their approach to the scripture. Both wish to speak with an authoritative voice about what the scripture is or is not, what it says, what its purpose is. In short, both sides seek to have control of the holy writ.

When we talk about God and the holy things it is all too easy to fall into saying very profound and very stupid pronouncements.

Fundamentalists have a reputation for denying obvious scientific facts. Grudgingly and slowly the ultra-conservative religious positions have accepted some new ideas. The human side of the God-human connections have been down-played; i.e., the humanity of Jesus, and the human authorship of the books of the Bible. Sometimes this has been carried into a rejection or downplay of the human part of the God-human relationship we call salvation. God does everything, even to the selection of who shall-shall not be saved. Liberals have a reputation for denying or "scientifically

explaining away" the unseen or spiritual realities described in the Bible. The divine side of the God-human connections have been reduced to natural phenomena. Jesus was the highest expression of humanity, but that is all. The Bible is inspired exactly as other great literature is inspired. Prayer and religious exercise are subjectively true and useful if the individual so deems them.

Is there a way to break the hold of this controversy? Can we come to the Bible to seek and find God's mind about the church without either throwing away our living faith in God OR being so closed-minded that we know exactly where we should end up even before we begin?

Wesley's Authority Checks

In a Christo-centric approach to scripture, where shall we look for identification of who the church is, and what the church should be/become? As a Wesleyan, I suggest that we let John Wesley help us define what the church is.

Wesley had four sources of authority.

1. Above all the other authorities was the scripture as accepted in our Canon, the 66 books of the Bible.
2. Wesley also looked to what he called tradition; the accumulated wisdom of the centuries of people calling themselves Christian, including the Creeds and the writings of the early fathers.
3. Wesley also appealed to reason. He understood that the keenest reflections of the wisest persons thinking about God and holy things reason could not penetrate mystery; but he also understood that God's truth would not ultimately contradict itself. God is not capable of lying.
4. Finally Wesley believed that religious truth should be proved in the crucible of everyday living, by experience.

THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH

Lesson Ephesians 4:4 - 13

The Marks of the Church Introduction

Ephesians 4:13 ". . .until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

The Orthodox Statements about the Church

To get a fresh look at the church we jump back over the years of liberal-fundamental debate, and look at what the church has said about itself, historically. I would give scriptural and prayerful consideration to these words which perhaps can help us have a better living relationship with the Church of Jesus Christ.

The "Reformation definition" of the church, ascribed to various Reformation figures (Luther, Calvin, even Wesley): The Church is where the Word is preached and the sacraments administered. The verbs are usually modified: faithfully preached, duly administered. Let us pray that here in our "basic unit of the Church" those two basic fundamental components will happen with faithful regularity.

The other definition of the church is one I would like to spend a great deal more time with; the simple statement contained in every orthodox church's beliefs: The Church is One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic. Theologians call these the "marks" or "notes" of the church. These essential parts of the church have deep and practical impact on the Christian and the local church.

Ephesians, Chapter Four, gives something of an overview of the universally accepted marks of the church. Later we will look at each mark separately. In this first, introductory sermon, just a brief word about each of the four:

THE CHURCH IS ONE The scripture fragment "until we all reach unity in the faith.." as well as " Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit- just as you are called to one hope when you were called- one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in (you) all." from our text chapter are not isolated proof texts, but rather reflect the great concern of the Lord of the Church that His church be united.

The Church of Jesus Christ is ONE CHURCH! This is both a statement of fact and a goal to which we will be striving until Jesus returns. We have to accept this statement by faith when we observe the fragmentation that is so obvious. There is a need for Christians to come together.

THE CHURCH IS HOLY

Here the text challenges Christians to "attaining to the whole measure of the stature of Christ." The church is to be like its Lord.

How can we ever say that the church is HOLY? What does it mean "to be holy?" Is holiness an unattainable goal, or is it the normative way of life for Christians, or is it somehow a combination of the two?

Holiness, for the Church, has all to do with Christlikeness! Doctrines and textbook theology are important as we shall see; but totally, completely, unreservedly belonging to Jesus Christ, and reflecting His spirit and doing His will are ALL-important in this great "mark of the church."

THE CHURCH IS CATHOLIC

"From (Jesus) the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." (16)

The word "catholic" means world-wide. The church is ONE, it is also for the WHOLE WIDE WORLD! Which simply means that the one church is to be cross-cultural and not only the way WE think it should be!

We exist to build up the church where we worship. The church where we worship exists to support and build up the larger whole of which it is a part. That larger whole may often, perhaps usually, be the denomination or network of similar churches—culturally tied together. But it will inevitably reach across culture barriers, inevitably bring health or weakness to the whole,

No doubt we are all guilty of saying, "So let them come to US! After all WE are the right ones!" In Jerusalem just now, three competing Christian groups hold portions of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, each one sure the other two are in error.

There are many tribes and nations; many different ways of praising the Lord. We may not always be sensitive to each other, but there is a universal LIFE that undergirds the true church wherever it meets.

THE CHURCH IS APOSTOLIC

Again we look at Ephesians (4:x) "until we reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God"

I will not spend any time on this this morning, except to say that our Word, our Truth, our Scripture is and must be the same that was once delivered to the apostles. Times change, methods change, cultures evolve, but the Gospel of God's love in the Life and Death and Life of Jesus remains forever the same, to all eternity!

The church is US! We hold the plumb-lines of the scripture and the marks of the church against the reality of this church where we worship and prepare and seek to serve our Lord. The abstractions "one" and "holy" and "catholic" and "apostolic" want to leap off the pages of the theological textbooks, and challenge us to fuller, deeper service of our Master. They want to stretch our perceptions, and broaden our horizons, and energize our efforts.

The church is not my church! It isn't yours, either. It is HIS church. We belong to the church because we belong to Him!

When you speak, or even think of His one, holy, catholic, apostolic church, never think "they!" Think "US!"

The Church is One

The Marks of the Church Series 2 of 5

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- [The Church is Apostolic](#)
- [The Church is Holy](#)

April 14, 1991

Ephesians 4:1-6

We have begun to look at what theologians and church fathers across the centuries have called the "marks" or the "notes" of the church. Coming without apology from an evangelical and scriptural perspective, still we are seeking to avoid the unproductive tension between fundamental-liberal extremists, and perhaps get a fresh look at God's words about the church.

One of the four characteristics that belong to the church universal is the mark or note of UNITY. The Church of Jesus Christ is ONE.

Any study of the church begins with the scriptural concept of faith as corporate, or that which is held in common among all the spiritual fellowship of God's people.

THE IDEA OF CORPORATE FAITH

We are so attuned to think of faith as a purely subjective, individual matter that it is almost startling to find, when we are looking for it, just how "corporate" the concept of faith as expressed in the New Testament really is. Actually, the "corporate nature of faith" shines in both divisions of the Bible:

The Church is One

In the OLD TESTAMENT "salvation" was equivalent to being or becoming a member of the people of God; "damnation" was the equivalent of being cast out or excommunicated from the rest of this group.

The NEW TESTAMENT carries this group identity idea forward; with emphasis on "belonging" to the ekklesia: Jesus called the disciples one by one, and they joined a group (which was the church anticipated during Jesus' ministry;)

The church-in-the-making waited in one accord for the initial Baptism of the Spirit. They carried this UNITY forward throughout the pages of Acts and the New Testament (Galatians 2, etc.) The word "saint" is used in the singular only twice in the New Testament, both times in relationship to the church; all other appearances of the word is in the plural, "saints!"

Speaking of the use of the word "church" to mean the common faith, in his sermon "Of the Church" (vi:392) John Wesley made the statement, "A more ambiguous word than this, the Church, is scarce to be found in the English language. It is sometimes taken for a building, set apart for public worship; sometimes for a congregation, or body of people, united together in the service of God. Wesley goes on to say that when he speaks of the church he means the latter, the "body of people UNITED together in the service of God."

H. Ray Dunning says: The place to begin a study of the church is in the corporate character of biblical faith.

This corporate nature of faith has been an essential part of the church from the beginning. The faith has not been something to "JOIN" like a club or an army or a work force; it has been something to be BAPTIZED INTO, to be BORN AGAIN INTO, to become part of as we change direction, and begin a new way of living.

This corporate nature of faith is still valid; it is still something we need to recapture and re-emphasize. Our individual walk with God is to follow this pattern. The church in other days and other cultures understood this better than we do, perhaps.

It is easy for us to make church a matter of convenience in our weddings and burials and christenings, as well as in our worship. But especially these sacrament-like occasions are set in the context of the strength of the corporate faith.

As Christians we are members of each other! We exist to lift one another up and bless each other. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers!

Our burials should be as often as possible from the church, by the church, in the church; our marriages should be solemnized as sacred services of worship, and reflect the corporate faith, and the fact that the church is the greater family. Our christenings are powerful statements to three worlds that our children belong to Christ's Body, and all others may keep "hands off!"

It is this CORPORATE faith that underlies all we say about the church. The marks of the church have their reality and existence in this shared LIFE.

THE CHURCH IS ONE

We have already recognized that all Christendom has agreed that the Church of Jesus is One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic. The church is:

ONE (and yet it is diverse;)

HOLY (and yet it is very human and imperfect!) The true church is holy because it belongs to a holy God; yet it is imperfect because it has ME (and you) in it! But we are washed in the blood, and are being made in the image of Christ!)

CATHOLIC (world-wide, and yet very local and provincial) The Gospel fits the whole world; and yet there are cultural adaptations; differences, applications.

APOSTOLIC (true to the ancient Word; yet up-to-date and experiential, what we term "confessional!") The true church lives by every word that proceeds from the Father; it abides in the True Vine, the Son.

Just now particularly look at the statement: THE CHURCH IS ONE .

The Church is One

The unity of the church in the love of God was the heart of Jesus' great prayer (in John 17.) All who own allegiance to the One Great Lord of the church are part of a unity for which Jesus prayed.

Painful as it is, we have to live with some unanswered questions about why it is so difficult for all God's children to get together; and why genuine allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ does not more quickly break down barriers of misunderstanding within the family of God. But at the same time, we need to be available to God as His instruments of healing and love within the Body.

There are three outstanding scriptural figures of this unity: these figures are filial and conjugal and organic. The

FILIAL figure is seen in such passages as John 1:12 "As many as received Him, to them gave He the right to become the children of God." Or Romans 8:15 "We have received the Spirit of adoption as children whereby we cry, "Abba! Father!" and Romans 8:29 says the church is "conformed to the image of (God's) Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren."

The church is God's FAMILY. But there is another striking figure of the unity of the church with Jesus Christ, the figure of

CONJUGAL unity, or the marriage of Christ and the Church. In that passage we usually are thinking of earthly family relationships. But if we turn the passage over on its other base like an hourglass, we see the UNITY of the church in relationship to Christ: (Ephesians 5:25)

Husbands love your wives just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless.

As husband and wife become one, so the church is ONE with her Bridegroom, the Lord Jesus Christ. But there is an even closer figure of the unity of the church; that of:

ORGANIC unity. In Ephesians 4:15 we are charged to "Grow up in all aspects into Christ, who is the HEAD (of the Body)." And in Ephesians 5:30 is the startling translation, at least in the KJV,

"We are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones!"

The church is to be/to become the very BODY of Jesus Christ here on earth. This is an INCARNATIONAL concept— that as the life of Jesus is breathed into each member of the Body, together we become ONE, and become CHRIST INCARNATE TO THIS WORLD! ["So what?"]

BRINGING THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH HOME WHERE WE ARE

Any sincere study of the church is a useful thing in order to get the inclusive picture; the ideal of what God intends we shall be world-wide; but theology should/must find application in every day living. The great concepts and ideas of theology finally are not simply to inform and educate us, but to become food to eat and sustain and grow us, and make us healthy.

So these "marks of the church" - ONE HOLY CATHOLIC APOSTOLIC -must be reflected in each local congregation: HOW CAN "THE CHURCH IS ONE" TOUCH YOUR LIFE AND MINE?

I would suggest four ways: (The first is NEGATIVE) DON'T BE SUPERFICIAL; this UNITY is always in the Lordship of Jesus Christ. I Corinthians 12: No (one) can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit. So-called ecumenical services may or may not be helpful; all too often they have an agenda of legitimizing non- Christian "churches."

The second: DO AFFIRM YOUR PERSONAL UNITY with Jesus; as God's children; as being TRUE to God in a personal sense; as being part of the Body of Christ.

Third: DO PRAY FOR AND LOVE CHRISTIANS everywhere. Look for Jesus in people other than our own Wesleyan family. One of the greatest evils in God's sight is being unwilling to maintain the UNITY of the true church. In New Testament vision, there is no greater sin than schism. Listen to John Wesley again:

The Church is One

"I dare not exclude from the Church catholic all those congregations in which any unscriptural doctrines, which cannot be affirmed by "the pure word of God," are sometimes, yea, frequently preached; neither all those congregations, in which the sacraments are not "duly administered." . (and here Wesley specifically mentions the Church of Rome with which he disagreed in many ways). . . "Whoever they are that have 'one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one God and Father of all,' I can easily bear with their holding wrong opinions, yea, and superstitious modes of worship: Nor would I, on these accounts, scruple still to include them within the pale of the catholic Church [small "c"]; neither would I have any objection to receive them, if they desired it, as members of the Church of England." (op cit next page)

Fourth and finally: DO IDENTIFY WITH THE CHURCH RIGHT WHERE YOU WORSHIP EVERY SUNDAY ! In your heart, with your mouth think and say "WE" and never "THEY!"

There is no doubt that it is easier to love the "perfect church" of theory, or to think of some greater, more "together" fellowship in some far city. But here and now, where you and I worship together, imperfect as we are, we are Christ's Body— we are part of His ONE GREAT CHURCH!

Am I saying that we ought to quit being denominational Nazarenes? Not at all! I am saying that we already belong to one great Church which we had better love and appreciate and work and pray toward its health and success in showing a needy world the love of its Lord. We have the opportunity where we are of reflecting God's will that the Church be one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Amen.

The Community of Faith

Stories from Exodus

April 14, 1991 PM

Exodus 32: 1 - 35 (narrative)

Introduction

Exodus is a very important book! It records the beginning of faith as a community beyond a family or tribal level; of God moving with a covenant people.

Complex, with divisions and subdivisions, yet with common faith keeping alive the sense of being a great Family, the People of God. This is an ideal we can never quite let go of.

Perhaps the best way to study Exodus is to read it as a narrative tale; a book of fascinating stories, first about Moses, then about the young nation of Israel.

[Maybe we ought to begin at the beginning, and maybe sometime we will go through Exodus that way. But just now we'll break into the middle, or sort of the beginning of the middle.]

The Story:

As the story begins- or at least this episode- Pharaoh and his army are history. The former slaves are free, free, free! But they are finding that freedom has its drawbacks.

There was misery in taking orders, but also there was something there to eat. Doing the bidding of Egyptian masters was galling, but it did put food on the table. Now they were on their own— and sometimes food and water were very scarce indeed.

Strangely, these people kept thinking like Egyptians even after they had long left Egypt. Even though they had been set free by God in a totally miraculous way, they still continued to revert back to reasoning the way they had been brought up. It seems sometimes as though it is almost impossible to change habits of childhood

and youth— although by God's grace it can be done. But this whole generation seemed to love to complain and murmur and whine.

They needed water: God provided water.

They needed food: God provided food. But it seems they never were quite satisfied.

They needed protection and direction: God led them and covered them by a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud. It is hard to imagine how these people could ever doubt that God was with them. But doubt they did.

One of the first dramatic climaxes of the entire Book was when they came to Horeb, to Mount Sinai, where Moses was to receive the Law from God.

Sometimes as we picture it in our mind's eyes we have Moses waltzing up the mountain path, receiving the stone tablets from God and skipping back down in a matter of hours. But that is not what the ancient scriptures tell us. That narrative says the process was much, much longer and more involved.

First, there was a preparatory time. Moses was summoned by God, who told him (19:4) "I have carried you on eagles' wing to this hour— have brought you to Myself. If you obey me and keep My covenant you will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

When Moses told them that, they were pretty excited. Their answer was (19:8) "We will do everything that the Lord has said!"

Moses then prepared the people: Prepare yourselves! Wash your clothes! Don't come near the holy mountain! Stop normal activities! Prepare the way of the Lord! And then Moses disappeared up the mountain, and after a time with the elders, when there was an exciting revelation to them (see chapter 24) Moses remained on the mountain with God, while things were pretty much on hold in the camp. Moses stayed there for 40 days and nights!

What were the people to do?

I. WHEN GOD'S PEOPLE INVENTED THEIR OWN CHURCH

There is always tension between God's way, which always demands faith, and the way of Israel's neighbors, which seems to fit the need of the hour.

They said "Nothing seems to be going on with God and the worship of God according to the Commandments we have heard; so let's make things happen! Hey Aaron! Let's have some excitement!"

And Aaron, to his everlasting discredit, accommodates the urge to help God make His way more palatable!

[Waiting on God is never easy or simple! The way of faith always requires exactly that: faith in the integrity of God! God has brought us this far! He will not abandon us now!]

Aaron says: Religion requires sacrifice! So let's sacrifice. They DO sacrifice; they have to give GOLD (actually they take off their ear rings, which isn't a bad idea.)

Aaron says "The neighbor nations worship forms like animals: let's make sure we keep up with the latest fads in worship. We can worship this awesome God AND be like other religions, too.

They form a golden calf, and Aaron says, or lets them say: HERE is what the God who delivered you from slavery really looks like! [I haven't been able to figure that one out, myself!]

Pseudo-worship involves making God as we think He ought to be— in a convenient way for us.

What happens when we run up against a scripture that we have real trouble with? Are we willing to submit to the authority of God's Word?

Take the matter of man-woman roles in marriage and in the church? Are we willing to come under the authority of the scripture? — of the will of Almighty God?— even when it becomes inconvenient for us? When it contradicts the morés of our culture, but it is clearly God's Word what do we do?

Clearly, these Israelites were impatient with God's methods- - and the Bible says (I Corinthians 10) the people sat down to eat and drink, and then they rose up to play—and they became a lost generation in the history of God's people!

II. THE RESULTS OF PSEUDO-WORSHIP

- A. DISGUSTING TO GOD
- B. FRUSTRATING TO MOSES
- C. DISASTROUS TO ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS
- D. POTENTIALLY DEADLY TO THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY

III. HOW GOD'S CHURCH WAS ESTABLISHED

- A. GOD'S GRACE ACTS IN CONCERT WITH HOLY LAW

Sinai corresponds to Pentecost, except now the Ten Commandments are written by the Spirit in the desires of every Christian heart: "I delight to do Thy will, O God"

- B. MOSES' INTERCESSION

Abraham prayed for Lot; here Moses prays for his people: there is great power in intercession! Don't give up when you pray for the church—for the kingdom of God to come. Jesus Himself taught us so to pray.

- C. JUDGMENT IS NOT AVERTED TO REBELS

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31)

- D. THOSE BEING FORMED INTO COMMUNITY OF COVENANT

RETURN TO THE 'SIMPLICITY OF COVENANT'

Conclusion/application:

We are also on a Pilgrim's journey. We, too, are being formed into a holy people to carry the name of Jesus.

- A. We need to be people under authority! We need to make sure that our wills are broken—broken in—tamed—submissive—whatever—sold on the integrity of God, the goodness

of God, the trustworthiness of God.

- B. Those people in the wilderness were on the spot! They weren't going to get out alive without God! They needed a miracle every day! AND WE ARE JUST AS MUCH ON THE SPOT!
- C. The elements of worship— the ingredients— giving and prayer and fellowship and excitement— all are not in and of themselves what constitute the true Church. We can put them all together to please ourselves— but unless God is present— and unless we are met at HIS behest— we are an abomination to God and a danger to ourselves!

#68 WP - O to be Like Thee!

The Church is Catholic

The Marks of the Church Series 3 of 5

Five sermons introducing the universally held theological truth that the church of Jesus Christ is one, holy, catholic and apostolic, with application for a church at the end of the twentieth century.

- [The Marks of the Church Introduction](#)
- [The Church is One](#)
- **The Church is Catholic**
- [The Church is Apostolic](#)
- [The Church is Holy](#)

April 21, 1991

Romans 11:33 - 12:8

Introduction

We have said that every orthodox church regards the marks of the church to be four: The church is One, Holy, Apostolic, Catholic. When we speak of Catholicity, we speak of that which the One church [Where the WORD is preached, and where the sacraments are administered] has in common world-wide. The WORD to be preached, of course, is the Living Word, Jesus Christ.

It will not do to begin by making sweeping statements. We begin, rather, with a statement of awe and mystery:

THE CHURCH ISSUES IN THE UNFATHOMABLE GLORY OF GOD

11:33 - Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How UNSEARCHABLE are His judgments and UNFATHOMABLE His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen

Before we make any pronouncements on what the church world wide is, or what we believe it ought to be, we need to begin with the mercies of God! We are all created in God's image, and are the objects of His love. We are made to love and adore and fellowship with Him. If our worship, and if the church are connected with Him, they carry with them truth and beauty and life beyond the narrow scope of our understanding. Romans 12:1,2 is very practical and straightforward. It is familiar territory to evangelical Christians. We like to jump in right here, at the practical side, and go for the decision. "Just do it!" And any way we can get people to meet God is great!

But remember, Romans 12:1 has a "therefore" in it. And the "therefore" points back to the doxology of praise in Romans 11:33-36. Paul comes to the end of a doctrinal passage, a great treatise on grace and salvation and he breaks into this hymn of praise, and THEN he says, "Because of all this great love of a great God, give yourself to HIM; become part of His Body, the Church!"

One of the most important, if not the most important quality of the true catholic church is humility before the wonder God's love, the wonder of being invited into God's inner circle, into God's very Presence. The WONDER! The WONDER of it all! What the text calls our "spiritual service of worship" all springs out of the mercies of God! This is beautiful truth beyond our comprehension!

The preaching of the Word and the Sacraments represent two places where the Living Word makes contact with us, two sides of the same great truth. Preaching is logical and presses for decision. Sacraments are visual or representative, and speak of the unspeakable and mysterious. Across the centuries churches have tended to emphasize one aspect over the other.

Sons and daughters of the church who have been exposed only to narrowly held segments of God's truth (on either side) may tend to rebel when they begin to see the truth of the wider whole. Then, unless they are careful, they re-act humanly, and swing far over to other emphases. We do not know and certainly do not own the whole orb of truth. "(Don't) think more highly of (yourselves) than you ought" (12:3) This can be applied to churches, too! The fact is that we CANNOT own it all, and we

do not NEED to own it all. But Catholic is that which the One church has in common; that which is common to all churches that are true churches. How does the Reformation formula apply to the whole church (including our own)?

THE ENTIRE CHURCH IS CALLED TO SPIRITUAL WORSHIP

(12:1-3)

I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your SPIRITUAL SERVICE OF WORSHIP. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is. that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

We do not have a monopoly on worship; and neither does any other segment of the church! The entire church catholic worships. The call to "spiritual service" is not limited to evangelical young people at a youth camp; it is not a call just to Mother Teresa in Calcutta— it is a call to the entire church of Jesus Christ everywhere.

But there seem to be so many different ways of worship! Some seem so emotional! Some seem so dead and dry and formal! What is genuine "spiritual service?" What constitutes the church? Before we look at the forms we have to consider the content. Jesus Himself said, in Matthew 18:20: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in the midst!" Whatever our definitions, Jesus is the Living Word!

[Bishop Michael Baughan spoke here several years ago. He told of 300 churches in the See of Chester, England, which are under his care, that use the same form or liturgy. But Bishop Baughan said that as he went from one church to the next, on church would "worship" and another would simply go through a form. The difference was the evident Presence of the Living Word among those worshipping.

We come back to the Reformation definitions: Where the Word is proclaimed and the Sacraments administered, there is the church! Can we summarize "catholic elements of worship" in the context of this definition? What should we expect to be a part of the church universal at worship?: (As we have said:)

THE PRESENCE OF JESUS IS A UNIVERSAL

"JESUS CHRIST is the Word of God. Where Jesus Christ is Present by His Holy Spirit, there is the church!" If the differences of language and culture could be overcome, any Christian OUGHT to feel "at home" in any other Christian service of worship. Granted, sometimes these culture barriers are formidable; and sometimes Jesus takes second place to the forms which have sprung up; but where Jesus is present, there is the church!

THE BIBLE IS A UNIVERSAL

THE BIBLE proclaims the Word of God. The church of Jesus Christ will always give a central allegiance to the written Word of God. It is impossible to think of a Church without the Bible.

The Bible is God's revelation given in human language. The Bible itself is a mystery of incarnation. It is possible to err into bibliolatry, to "go off" on worship of the Bible; to make one interpretation of infallibility a by-word of true catholicity. But it is impossible to have a church without the authority of scripture. The authentic role of scripture is to proclaim Jesus Christ. (John 5:39)

PREACHING IS A UNIVERSAL

PREACHING makes the Word of God contemporary. The church of Jesus Christ will always have men and women called to proclaim Jesus Christ in the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Preaching is a central catholic function of the Body of Christ. The scripture says,

"For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God . . . For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of preaching to save those who believe." (1 Co 1:18,21)

The end of preaching is not sermons. Don't misunderstand me, I think I understand something of the art and craft of sermon building. I know a good one when I hear it; I

know a bad one when I preach it. But the end of preaching is to make Jesus available; to proclaim that He is here, now, today!

Sermon-crafting is a respectable profession, I suppose. Yet it is possible to be so involved in perfect sermons that Jesus gets lost along the way. But preaching is God's method for making His Word come alive in the church. It always will be. So be it!

SACRAMENTS ARE A UNIVERSAL

SACRAMENTS somehow communicate the Word of God. When I say "sacrament" I would include the whole concept of liturgy, or how we worship, and what we DO when we get together to worship.

Just as some Protestant communions can let the sacred scriptures almost take the place of God Himself, and substitute a literal, legalistic interpretation of the Bible as spiritual fact, even so some Liturgical communions can come to elevate the Sacrament and the Exercise of Worship to a place where it is an end in and of itself, when properly understood it is meant to be a vehicle of communicating God's Presence.

The sacraments are not meant to convey a false sense of security that excuses Christians from obeying the Word and walking humbly before God. And doing everything just as it is "written down in the proper book" is no indication of an authentic sacrament. Daniel Jenkins (in his book *The Nature of Catholicity*) says, "a passionate devotion to the Sacrament (MAY) mask a spiritual laziness which destroys the meaning of the Sacrament(!)"

Probably most Christian services would include: (1) Prayer recognizing God's Presence and seeking to adore and worship Him; and (2) Reading of scripture; (3) Proclamation of the Word, or preaching in the Spirit's anointing (4) Call for response of some kind; including an offering, but certainly not limited to that; sometimes the 'sacrifice of praise' in testimony;

And all orthodox churches also periodically observe (5) The actual Sacraments themselves (Baptism and Communion) as well as Sacrament-like services, as Ordination, Christening, Marriage, Burials, and the like.

In addition, most Christian churches have some form of confession and absolution. Wesleyans have lived with Wesley's definition of sin as "a willful transgression of a known law of God" so long that often we have trouble realizing that even Wesleyans are to pray the Lord's Prayer all the way through, too!

Finally, the proclamation of the Word is not limited to preaching and the sacraments for...

SOME FORM OF DISCIPLINE IS A UNIVERSAL

DISCIPLINE reveals the Word of God. The true catholic church of Jesus Christ will have discipline. By "discipline" I mean the living OUT of the LIFE which Christ has placed within us; unless the Church manifests its life there is no life there!

CALLED TO BE OURSELVES; CALLED TO BELONG TO THE CHURCH

No corner of the church has perfect fullness. But it is possible to rejoice in the extent where Christ has made us strong, and also rejoice for the Presence of Jesus Christ in others. We can seek to make Jesus the center and the reason for our worship! His manifest Presence is the true "catholic" manifestation, the one true universal element of worship.

We can pray for the entire Church catholic without being unfaithful in any wise to our own family, the Church of the Nazarene. In fact we will be better Nazarenes if we seek to be first of all better Christians! The Holy Spirit would inspire within us a genuine prayer for His coming in power throughout His whole church.

I talked with Nancy Powers yesterday; she shared with me some of the concerns of a priest in our area who genuinely cares about the needs of people, and who seeks to meet those needs in Jesus' name. [Bill McCarthy, St. John the Baptist, 7,000 families. Will you join with me in praying for Fr. Bill McCarthy and his ministry in our city?]

The Lost Tribes of Israel

April 21, 1991 PM

Psalm 106:24-27 Then they despised the pleasant land; they did not believe His promise. They grumbled in their tents and did not obey the Lord. So He swore to them with uplifted hand that He would make them fall in the desert, make their descendants fall among the nations and scatter them throughout the lands.

Numbers 13, 14

The story of the Exodus is not limited to the book of that name. The idolatry at Sinai with the golden calf was one crisis which the Israelites experienced on 40-year saga to the Promised Land. Another crisis, the one that made the 40-year sojourn necessary, was the failure to press into the Promised Land at Kadesh-Barnea, and is told in Numbers 13 and 14.

I. A STORY OF LOST OPPORTUNITY

A. A MOVEMENT (ALMOST ALWAYS) BECOMES AN INSTITUTION

After a miracle beginning, God gave the Law in a convincing way. Then the thousands were organized by tribes around the Tent of Covenant into a fledgling nation.

1. THE ORGANIZATION of their camp is interesting to me (as found in Numbers 2):

On the EAST were Judah 74,600, with Issachar 54,400 and Zebulun 57,400 (EAST = 186,400);

On the SOUTH were Reuben 46,500, Simeon 59,300 and Gad 45,650 (SOUTH = 151,450);

In the middle was the Tent of Meeting with the Levites...

On the WEST was Ephraim 40,500 with Manassah 32,200 and Benjamin 35,400 (WEST = 108,100),

On the NORTH and bringing up the rear in march were Dan 62,700 and Asher 41,500 and Naphtali 53,400 (NORTH = 157,600)

GRAND TOTAL 603,550 plus Levites plus women and children!
(Numbers 2)

2. THE ORDER OF MARCH (Numbers 10:33) How they journeyed: When the Shekinah would lift the ark would follow three days journey ahead of the host to seek out a resting place for the rest.

When one trumpet was blown the EAST set out; and right behind them the Gershonites and Merarites carried the Tabernacle; THEN At the second trumpet the SOUTH; and after them came the Koathites carrying the holy objects that went IN the Tabernacle, so that when THEY arrived the Tabernacle would be all set up;

THEN came the WEST and the NORTH as a rear guard.

3. What does this matter?

B. A FAILURE OF VISION

1. This "army" marched to the southern borders of the Promised Land and halted while Moses sent spies to see what was ahead. (Number 13:(could read 26 - 33)

These men were leaders of each tribe, and were "eyes and ears" for the rest.

For 40 days they went through what we now call The Holy Land from south to north and east to west. They took notes, in modern idiom, on the agriculture and the sociology and the forestry and the architecture and the road systems and the like.

There were twelve spies: Shammua, Shaphat, Caleb (Judah) Igal, Joshua (Ephraim) Palti, Gaddiel, Gaddi, Ammiel, Sethur, Nahbi, Geuel.

2. THEY BROUGHT BACK A UNANIMOUS REPORT:

This is a wonderful place! Why, the fruit is so big that we brought back this ONE bunch of grapes between two of us! [Which, by the way, is a symbol quite common in Israel today; one taxi company has a logo of two men carrying grapes on the sides of all its cabs!] This is a beautiful and fruitful land.

3. BUT THEY ALSO BROUGHT BACK A VERY DIVIDED RECOMMENDATION:

Ten of the spies saw ONLY with eyes of human understanding; and they said: The task is impossible! The opposition is too powerful! We cannot do it!

And they were right!

Two of the spies— the only ones whose names we remember, even though all twelve are in the Bible— Caleb and Joshua said:

We should by all means go up and take possession of (the land) for we shall surely overcome it! (AV) "We are well able to overcome!" And you know what? They were right, too!

C. A LOST GENERATION "LOST TRIBES OF ISRAEL"

1. All who looked only with human vision fulfilled their own prophecy! God was angered with them: "You shall not enter in!" And they all died in the wilderness! Forty years!
2. Those who saw with heavenly vision were more than conquerors! Caleb's courage is another whole sermon! They and their children were blessed because of their faith!

II. A QUESTION OF DISCERNMENT: VISION OR HALLUCINATION

A. TAKING THE 'SAFE SIDE' . . . WHEN SPEAKING OUT IS UNPOPULAR

How important is vision? How can we know when to use human vision and when to be Caleb and Joshua?

How are generations lost in the wilderness?

Consider the courage of Caleb and Joshua in speaking out against the majority opinion. It isn't always the Godly thing to be "safe" ... somehow I have the thought that sometimes we Nazarenes lost ground by taking the safe side of arguments on "externals" when the tough side was spiritual vision. Like being "politically correct" opposition wasn't voiced.

B. GOD ALWAYS HAS A PROMISED LAND IN MIND FOR US!

It is nothing less than "the mind of Christ" or the JOY which Jesus promised to leave us, joy in His Holy Spirit. The Spirit-filled life is our Promised Land! "Let THIS mind be IN YOU which was also in Christ Jesus."

C. SOMETIMES THIS MESSAGE GETS LOST IN EXCUSE AND HUMAN REASONING

"Of course we can't have the mind that was in Christ!" "No one can be like Jesus!"

And we give up the battle without a shot being fired. What does this imperative mean, "Let this mind be in you!"??

The essence of the mind of Christ that we can understand was that Jesus did not insist on HIS rights; that he did not GRASP at His own benefit— but that he gave Himself.

Is it possible for Christians to love like that today?

YES! THE LIFE OF FAITH BY DEFINITION MEANS DOING WHAT OTHERWISE WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE!

This UNBELIEF is not something new.

As we have seen in Numbers, and the story of the spies, Moses' people thought it was impossible to stay "in tune" with God.

Conclusion:

I have to bring this story-ramble to a close. What lesson can we learn from these people who were afraid to go forward on God's word?

Many years after the tragedy of the failure of the spies Moses faced another generation and said:

DON'T LOSE YOUR VISION! DON'T LOSE YOUR FAITH!

It was a different day, and in a different setting, to a new generation that Moses was speaking, but I think he was remembering when a generation was lost because it despised the pleasant land of promise:

Deuteronomy 30:11-14 "For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it."

(vv 19-20) "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days, that you may live in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them."

Way back in the Old Testament, God wanted it understood that His commandments are also His promises!

HAVE YOU MADE THAT LIFE-CHANGING COMMITMENT TO BE ALL-OUT FOR GOD?
Have YOU presented YOUR body a living sacrifice to God for time and eternity? Are YOU satisfied with the level of spiritual victory in your experience?

The Lost Tribes of Israel

What we call "holiness;" the Spirit-filled, Spirit-led life- - the life overflowing with milk and honey and blessing and joy— is God's challenge to our faith, but it is also full of giants and problems and super-human needs. We can be overcoming Christians!

This is what Wesley called: the circumcision of the heart. The dedication for life of the entire person to God.

#243 I'll Live for Him

A Song of Ascents

THE JOY OF KNOWING AND SHARING GOD

Annual Meeting Sermon

April 28, 1991

A Song of Ascents Psalm 126

When the Lord brought back again the captive ones of Zion, we were like those who dream. The our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with joyful shouting; then they said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."

The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.

Restore our captivity, O Lord, as the streams in the South.

Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting. He who goes to and fro weeping, carrying his bag of seed, shall indeed come again with a shout of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

This is A Song of Ascents, to be sung on the way to worship in Jerusalem. I'm not sure how many of you sing on your way to Sunday morning worship, but it might not be a bad idea.

This is one song to get you ready to come into God's Presence; it tells of

I. WHAT THE LORD HAS DONE

— The Lord has done great things for us...

- A. No doubt this has been a mixed year for the church, for you, for me as individuals. But along with the pain, there has been a Presence! It is GOOD to remember that God is with us.
- B. God is with us as a people:
 - 1. A growing missions awareness: Nielsens/ Stephanie Brank taken from our "cozy family" bring us closer to Manila; Restricks were "ours" for a year— now

we are "with them" in Portugal. Todd Wanner in Honduras.

The Scotts (Jon, Margaret, Andrea, David, JOEL, Nathan) have helped us see real live missionaries with a passion for God's work; W&W to Azores. God HAS done great things!

2. An opening door in Codman Square; this is not the time to go into great detail, but suffice it to say that the possibilities are great if every person will care and pray and obey! Dennis Scott, Merritt Nielson, (Neale McLain)
- C. God did a great thing for us in the trauma of the Persian Gulf last winter; how soon we forget the trauma! Armageddon loomed large! SCUDS fell in Israel. Saddam Hussain was an unknown quantity. The euphoria of "unification" in Europe evaporated. We dare not forget! God answered our prayer; there is a respite!

The Psalm of Ascents also speaks of what God would have His people to do:

II. WHAT THE LORD WOULD HAVE HIS PEOPLE DO

" . . . go forth weeping, bearing precious SEED . . . "

- A. It is important that we GO FORTH. There is a semi-popular gospel song that says "My house is FULL, but my fields are EMPTY!" The command of Jesus was that we are to: "Pray the Lord of the harvest to send forth laborers!"

"Going forth" speaks of the TASKS of the church. No less— no more! They all need to be done!
- B. But going forth is not quite enough; we are to go forth WEEPING. The tasks of the church are never to be done "coldly" or in JUST a professional manner. We are dealing with persons, made in God's image.

"Weeping" speaks of finding God's compassion to make the tasks more than "jobs" but missions of love.

But GOING and WEEPING are necessary-but-not- sufficient! There is a final, vital ingredient!
- C. THERE IS THE MATTER OF SEED! The SEED is the LIFE! The SEED is the Gospel! Not simply the written Word, but that is vital! Not simply Good News in human words of

wisdom— but LIFE!

SEED = LIFE LIFE = KNOWING GOD

KNOWING GOD = (God INHABITS His Word; as we read Christocentrically we come to know Jesus!) Jesus Christ living within us! The INCARNATIONAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD! THAT IS THE SEED!

CAN GOD REALLY LIVE WITHIN US?

There really is no substitute for INCARNATION! There is no short cut to knowing God as personally resident! INCARNATION is not a lesson which gifted people can by-pass. The knowledge of God is itself the basis of wisdom.

If we think because God has gifted us with large dimensions of thought we are qualified to KNOW (UNDERSTAND) GOD then we are exactly reversed!

God does not consist of our ideas of infinity and immensity and omnipresence! Rather, we inform those ideas by coming to KNOW God, and God INHABITS His written Word, and illuminates it by His Holy Spirit.

[There are a lot of Abe Lincoln stories, and it is impossible to know how many if not most are apocryphal. But Lincoln doted on his children; he loved his son Tad. Tad took a Private in the Army through the sentries into Lincoln's office, because Tad KNEW Abraham Lincoln in a way no scholar ever has known him!]

There is just a little more in this Song of Ascents- beside PRAISE for what God has done, and an OUTLINE OF THE TASKS at hand, there is

III. ASSURANCE THAT GOD WILL GRANT HIS PEOPLE SUCCESS

"...shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing sheaves"

- A. Many churches — all churches one would presume— want success in their endeavors. But as long as they (we) define success on our terms it will be elusive.

Many churches think that seminars and studies and techniques are where we begin for success. These things have their place. But we begin with the

basics: success is finding and doing God's will here and now! And if we (1) have SEED and (2) will GO and CARE, then we shall succeed! The word is DOUBTLESS!

B. Remember: INCARNATIONAL! We have to know God! He has to get on the inside of us! We can win if we have the good SEED!

C. Then think: RELATIONAL! You and I don't have to go to Manila! (At least I don't think YOU do!) But where we GO we can CARE! And if we Go and if we CARE and if we have the good SEED, then the word is DOUBTLESS! Prayer: Thank You, Father, for what YOU have done for us this year! Forgive us for where we may have limited You— where we have tried to make YOU in OUR image!

Live in US! Inhabit our CHURCH! And somehow make US in YOUR image we pray! We pray in Jesus' name. Amen

#3 To God Be the Glory (Great Things He Hath Done)

The Church is Apostolic

The Marks of the Church Series 4 of 5

Five sermons introducing the universally held theological truth that the church of Jesus Christ is one, holy, catholic and apostolic, with application for a church at the end of the twentieth century.

- [The Marks of the Church Introduction](#)
- [The Church is One](#)
- [The Church is Catholic](#)
- **The Church is Apostolic**
- [The Church is Holy](#)

April 28, 1991

[Lesson Ephesians 2:14-22]

The entire Christian church agrees that the church is, or is supposed to be "apostolic" in nature. And yet as you might expect, there are several different explanations of just what it means to be a part of the apostolic church.

THE APOSTOLIC POSITION

Some people say the apostolic power lies in the church itself. They think first of all of the Apostles themselves, and say that the church is apostolic because there is an unbroken line of authority handed down from St. Peter to the present time.

This view says that Jesus gave authority to these men, particularly to Peter; these men then passed that authority along in an unbroken line of bishops to the present. The Church that has this unbroken line of authority (meaning the RC church) is the sole repository of grace and thus of salvation.

This represents the old Augustinian/ Catholic view of the church as "apostolic" [which has moderated a great deal, particularly since Vatican II.]

The Church is Apostolic

This is an historical impossibility to prove. The church HAS come down across the centuries. It IS an unbroken witness, but not because of the unbroken line of bishops.

Other people say apostolic authority is the authority of the scriptures. This view looks at the pure Gospel that was preached by the Apostles, and says the church is apostolic when there is faithful adherence to this message. This view says the "ROCK" on which Jesus was to build His church was the confession, "Thou art the Christ!" and not Peter himself.

We believe that the witness of these men HAS been handed down to us in the Scriptures. Their testimony, which most of the apostles sealed with their own blood, has been passed along unbroken, and is with us in the Bible today.

This represents the Lutheran/Reformation view of the church, or more broadly, the classical position of all Protestantism.

Once again, however, caution is needed. It is possible to be militant in defending what we believe to be the "true infallibility" of the Bible, and be out of touch with the Spirit of Jesus. British theologian Daniel Jenkins warns:

"The crude appeal to the letter of the Scriptures, with no attention to the experience of the Spirit-guided Church, means not only a woeful impoverishment of the Church's life and worship; it frequently means also a crabbed and narrow interpretation of the Scriptures." (44)

No church can be apostolic without faithfulness to the scriptures, there is no question about that. But it takes more than the letter of the Word to make a church an apostolic church.

A third view sees the apostolic foundation of the church in the righteous living of the saints. This view claims that somehow an apostolic church has to recapture the EXPERIENCE AND THE MIRACLES OF THE APOSTLES, which, of course, the people who take this position are sure they have re-discovered.

In this view apostolic succession is totally discounted; and theological preaching and the sacraments diminished in comparison to individual experience and rigid interpretation of bible discipline. What matters is personal experience, how the individual "feels" about his or her relationship to God. But this is always dangerous: Emil Brunner once wrote (Philosophy of Religion)

"When once the main interest is fastened on subjective experience, the objective element, the Word, dwindles to a mere means of stimulus— for what matters is the "inward working." (41) (cited by Jenkins)

Again at the risk of over-simplification, this is an extreme Anabaptist position, that of an independent church; the role of the apostle is taken by the sect or the strong personality. The Church becomes a mere association of Christians gathering for mutual edification.

In summary, some people think the apostolic authority is in the institution of the church, in its bishops; some think it lies solely in the Bible and correct theological understanding; and some believe it belongs in the individual experience "rightly" interpreted.

If I had to choose between an unbroken line of authority; an undiluted Gospel of the apostles; or finding the experience and lifestyle of the apostles, my choice would be closer to the second, or Reformation position than any other.

But before we obligate ourselves to any one position, think with me about the function or role or calling of an apostle.

THE APOSTOLIC OFFICE

The text says that Jesus Christ Himself is the cornerstone of the church which is being built on the apostolic foundation. Any view of what it means to be apostolic is only valid as it rests firmly and squarely on a relationship with Jesus Christ. Look with me at the calling of the original apostles:

There are some things that an apostle was not!

The Church is Apostolic

To be an apostle definitely was NOT a matter of obvious greatness or brilliance or intellect. No doubt all these men became truly great men; but it was a greatness that developed out of their dedication to their Master. It was a greatness that even then was not apparent to the world; a greatness that I believe is available to you and me even today.

The apostles were not great innovators or keen publicity agents. To be an apostle was NOT to develop schemes with which to turn their culture around. As a rule these men seemed rather reluctant to leave Jerusalem, and discovered their opportunities only when they were thrust out into the harsh realities of an alien culture. (See Acts 8:1)

The men whom became such great leaders were weak, often prejudiced, had painful and severe quarrels and misunderstandings— and yet somehow the church is supposed to be like them!

So, just WHO AND WHAT WERE the apostles? Simply stated, the apostles were men who were CALLED by Jesus, and they had just three things, basically, to do:

An apostle had to be someone who knew Jesus. Personally and intimately. They had to be called by Jesus to be with Him. Not everyone He called followed. Not everyone who wanted to tag along was permitted. Apostles knew how Jesus lived. They knew how He died. Most of all, apostles knew Jesus after the resurrection. They knew Jesus was still very much alive.

Apostles were committed to serve Jesus. They were not called to give Jesus advice, they were His servants! Apostles had surrendered their rights to themselves. They were NOT to be "big shots" or innovators. Some of them early on did get delusions of grandeur. But they were severely chastised for it, too! Ultimately they came to love God's will more than they loved their own lives!

Most of all, the apostles were commissioned to tell to the world what they knew. More than one scholar says something like this: (Jenkins)

"It (was) not their faith or their zeal or their religious genius or any special charismata they possessed, like the gift of the Spirit by the laying on of hands, and

certainly not any accident of historical association, but their testimony which constitute(d) them Apostles." (25)

Some of them developed into profound theologians and scholars, as Paul and John did; some of them no doubt were tremendous leaders, heading up the organization of a regional church as Peter did. But whatever else they were, first and foremost they were witnesses to tell what they knew in the power of the indwelling Presence of God in their lives! Not what they speculated, or what they heard each other say, but they were to tell only what they KNEW! It was a convincing testimony!

The Church of Jesus Christ exists today to carry out the apostolic task. It is this witness, and not the men themselves, or even the verbatim words of the Gospel, or the emotional or pietistic experience of these men that makes the church truly "apostolic."

THE APOSTOLIC COMMISSION

The entire CHURCH is called to the Great Commission. IN THE GREAT COMMISSION THE ENTIRE CHURCH IS CALLED TO THE APOSTOLIC TASK! There is an interesting paragraph in the next (3rd) chapter (7-13). Paul says the apostle's task that fell to him is now to be manifested through the church. And Paul does not limit this witness to evangelism- he says the church will witness to all creation.

Jesus Himself (and not the church) must be the center of our witness. A person who is promoting the Church first can have a religion which is really "Glory be to ME!" "We're Number One!" To reject the servant role is to lose the apostolic commission.

The ONLY reason for existence of the Church is to carry forward this apostolic function of lifting up the risen Savior. Our relationship with Jesus must underlie everything we do.

Our public worship should call people away from the spirit of our godless world; it should even turn people away from preoccupation with themselves, and from any worship of mere outward forms to see God's LOVE in the FACE of the risen Savior.

The Church is Apostolic

Our personal commitment to Jesus will reflect a willing submission to His Lordship. We will take seriously the Bible's claim that eternal life is ONLY in knowing God.

It is a humbling thing to be called to follow the apostolic tradition. It is a sobering thing to know that Jesus has said to YOU, personally, "FOLLOW ME!"

That is the reason many of you are here today!

But if Jesus has called you, there is no other way except to submit to His authority, and follow HIM! Or else, to count the cost, as did the Rich Young Ruler, and go sadly away. There is no middle ground.

In a community where intellectual keenness is highly valued, submission of the intellect may be seen as anti-intellectual. Nothing could be farther from the truth! Obscurantism and rationalism and other forms of self-delusion are forms of dishonesty, and Jesus Christ never tolerates dishonesty for a moment! But if we determine instead, from a place outside of submission by faith to the integrity of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, to decide for ourselves what is right and wrong, or what is true and what is nonsense,, we misunderstand the whole purpose of theology. We are elevating the our own thoughts and the discoveries of science, of philosophy or psychology or anthropology or sociology by an act of our own sovereign will to equality with Revealed truth.

We can come to the inner assurance that all of life must relate to the Presence of Jesus Christ. Our highest witness then will be a consistency of life and living.

You don't have to be a great talker to be a great apostolic witness! [The greatest testimonies to the Reality of God are testimonies of people going through the fire!

Prayer: Lord, If you are calling us, we are following! Help us know You better! Help us serve You! And let our ordered lives confess the beauty of Thy Peace! Amen.

Communion Meditation

May 5, 1991 pm

COMMUNION MEDITATION

23rd Psalm

Thou preparest a table before me...

Introduction

This evening we come again as brothers and sisters to the table of the Lord, the Sacrament that communicates in a special way to us the fact that Jesus IS WITH US.

What assurance do we have that this is indeed a fact?

I. WE HAVE A CONFESSION

A. Paul has written (Romans 10:9,10) that if we confess with our mouth the Lord Jesus, and if we in fact believe in our hearts that God has raised Him from the dead, we shall be saved.

Thus the confession: "JESUS IS LORD" THE FOUNDATION OF OUR FAITH

B. "Jesus and..." or "Jesus, except..." is the root of all heresy

C. The authority and accountability of the corporate Body is/must be balanced by the inner witness of our own spirit.

[John Wesley's "heart warming" experience, May 24, 1738]

This experience will not contradict the "catholic" church; the Spirit of Jesus is uncompromising and yet sweet and Shepherd- like. He leads. He loves. Never make a pressure confounded decision in life!

II. WE HAVE A HOPE

"OCCUPY UNTIL I COME" THE HOPE OF OUR ETERNAL SALVATION

Communion Meditation

A. Our faith is "eschatological;" it is "going somewhere. We are not merely cycling aimlessly through the centuries'

B. Jesus is coming again Every time we share in His Table we are testifying to the fact that we believe that "He shall come (again) to judge the living and the dead." as the Creed states.

III. WE HAVE A PRESENCE

"THIS IS MY BODY" THE CONTINUATION OF OUR LIFE

A. But our faith is not just in the past or in the future. Our faith is, and must be, in the NOW!

B. This Presence is:

1. ADEQUACY

a. By adequacy I do not mean that all we need as humans and as Christians is religion. [Dr. Bill McCumber said "Some people say 'All I need is Jesus!' But I need Doris, too!"]

b. But adequacy means with Jesus I am of great personal worth! I am God's child; I have been adopted into God's family. I need the deep inner persuasion that what Jesus has done in and of itself is ALL I NEED IN ORDER TO HAVE ETERNAL LIFE.

c. The adequacy of the atonement does not negate the inequities of this life. It doesn't mean that we don't "really need each other!" But it does mean that we are AT-ONE with God!

This Presence is also:

2. REALITY

a. I don't mean that we know all the mysteries; I do mean there are some things we KNOW! (2 Corinthians 5:17 "A new creation!")

b. That is what the great Anglican priest John Wesley rediscovered and spread all over Britain and Ireland.

c. There are many things we CAN'T know; but we can know
IMMANUEL: GOD WITH US! That is reality

This Presence is also:

3. MISSION

a. We cannot know Jesus-- really know Him-- and stay the same regarding other people! If we have found Someone to walk through life with us, can't we begin to tell others about Him, too?

b. This world is crying out for adequacy and for spiritual reality and assurance.

c. So-- what should we do? WE begin thinking BIG! How shall we set Dorchester on fire for God! But God thinks small. He wants to save a world so He starts off with a Baby. Maybe God wanted Gladys and Charlie to climb that iron fence and meet those people from the neighborhood last week in Dorchester! Maybe God wants you and me to be friends with our neighbors and show them our Friend!

Conclusion

All my life I've been hearing all sorts of reasons why I ought to be doing this or that for God . . . or why I should follow this or that program. And maybe I should have! But if you are like I am, we have had mixed feelings for doing what we have done. I wonder if we can ever really say THE LOVE OF CHRIST COMPELS ME!

The question Jesus asks us is the question He asked Peter when He restored Peter to the leadership of His disciples: DO YOU LOVE ME??
!!

If we have accomplished anything this year - if Jesus has led us into Codman Square - if we have seen any good things at all-- can it be for any other reason than that Jesus has been with us-- and that He is with us NOW?

Communion Meditation

[In Copley Square, right beside Trinity Church, is a statue of that Church's most illustrious pastor, Phillips Brooks. The church erected it in honor of the man who wrote, among other things:

How silently, How silently,
The wonderous Gift is given
So God imparts to human hearts
the belssings of His heaven

But there is another figure in the statuary-- a Hooded figure of the Christ, standing behind Phillips Brooks with His hand on the shoulder of the man in the pulpit. That statuary tells the story. In the dark, in the cold, in the sun, in the rain-- He is always there. Christ stands behind the pastor with His hand on his shoulder. And He will always be there!

This is what it means to be "in Christ!" It is HIS Presence!
And His Presence is ADEQUACY!!

Prayer:

Communion:

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The Church is Holy

Five sermons introducing the universally held theological truth that the church of Jesus Christ is one, holy, catholic and apostolic, with application for a church at the end of the twentieth century.

- [The Marks of the Church Introduction](#)
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- **The Church is Holy**

May 5, 1991

Ephesians 5:25 "... Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for it, that he might make it holy with His own blood, and present it to Himself pure and radiant, without any spot or wrinkle, holy and blameless."

In the Bible account of Gideon you may recall that Israel was being menaced by enemies (Midian) and the nation was in terror. Gideon, the hero of the story was himself hiding as he threshed out his harvest when an angel appeared to him and said, "Hail, mighty man of valor! The LORD is with thee!"

Gideon didn't know if the angel was making fun of him, or was just very near-sighted! He did not know either his own potential or God's design for his life!

By the same terms, if a letter came to your house addressed to "the saints" at your residence, how would you respond? Or, when you read or hear read the challenge anywhere in the Bible: "Be ye holy for I the Lord your God Am Holy!" how do you receive it?

The very idea of "holy" or "holiness" invokes strong reactions. In general there are two:

One response to holiness says, "Who me?" Then with a great show of humility the heavy responsibility of sainthood or holiness is ever so lightly pushed aside.

The other response says, "I will be holy!" But then it proceeds to define the beginning and ending of the call to holiness strictly in the individual, in the "me."

THERE IS A PERSONAL CALL TO HOLINESS

...which cannot be ignored. YES, GOD CALLS US PERSONALLY: (re: Romans 12:1,2)

God calls EACH of us, deals with us, convicts and convinces us, so that we might be enabled to fellowship with Him. God calls EACH OF US TO HIMSELF. To be "holy" means we are in a special relationship to God.

Our "holiness" is not a "LOAD OF GOODNESS" that makes US "holy" in all we do or say. ONLY GOD IS HOLY in any underived way. All holiness comes from HIM.

But God cannot fellowship with the unholy. He wants us to fellowship with Him. So we have this dilemma: you have to be holy to come near to God, and you can't come near to God unless you are holy. It is sort of like you can't get a job without experience, and you can't get experience without a job.

So— what can be done? The thing to realize is what HOLY is, what it means. "Holy" means "set apart." My parking space is "set apart" to me; this church building is "holy" in a sense in that it is "set apart" for the worship of God. TO BE GOD'S IS TO BE HOLY:

But things don't have any say in whom they shall belong to; people do. Still, what is God's IS holy! So, the struggle is not to make ourselves holy so that we can approach God; WE CANNOT DO THAT OURSELVES!

Somehow the struggle is not to be HOLY— but to give ourselves wholly away to God, and to know that He has accepted our gift. What is HIS— He makes holy!

And strange as it may seem, part of the "giving away," the consecration, involves identifying with God's holy church!

TO BE HOLY INVOLVES BEING PART OF GOD'S HOLY CHURCH

Our passion for personal holiness must flow into a holy love for Christ's church if it reflects Christ's own kind of love.

"Holy" has been preached almost exclusively from a personal, experiential approach. We have measured our holiness by the inner, emotional response ("I feel sweet, or peace, or feel love"), by what we sense personally, enabling: ("I am not ashamed to testify" "I find that I can forgive.") And while this personal side is absolutely valid and necessary, yet it can be extremely centered in self!

The corrective for self-centered holiness, an oxymoron if there ever was one, is remembering that we are to be sanctified in relationship to Christ's church, which is to be HOLY!

GOD'S CALL "BE HOLY!" IS ALWAYS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CHURCH

THE CHURCH IS THE FOCUS OF CHRIST'S LOVE. Look again at the scripture which declares: "... Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for it, that he might make it holy with His own blood, and present it to Himself pure and radiant, without any spot or wrinkle, holy and blameless." (Ephesians 5:25)

THE CHURCH CAME TO LIFE ON THE DAY OF PENTECOST

Peter preached: "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel!" THE CHURCH'S CALL TO HOLINESS INCORPORATES THE INDIVIDUAL 'PERSONAL CALL TO HOLINESS' AND MORE:

The CHURCH is to be united with God by the sanctifying grace: Jesus prayed (John 17:17) Sanctify them: "That they may be one with us." The CHURCH is promised the empowering Spirit: Acts 1:8 - The CHURCH received admonition and challenge from the glorified Savior in Revelation 2,3

HOLINESS IN THIS CORPORATE SENSE BECOMES A SUBMITTING AND SURRENDERING TO MAKE THE CHURCH MUCH MORE THAN OUR INDIVIDUAL TESTIMONY CAN BE. This is a risky, scary thing: to submit one's individual rights into a sense of community.

In the 1960s Hippies tried it— and they were disillusioned every single time! James Jones persuaded hundreds to experiment with submission; the results were disastrous.

The Church is Holy

Still, there it is: the disciples had all things in common; they relinquished their own rights.

What principle is this?

THE HOLY CHURCH WILL MANIFEST GOD'S LIFE IN THIS WORLD

The LOVE of God - The COMPASSION OF HOLINESS must be manifested in the context of the corporate faith. The Apostle John said the greatest "selling point" the church has is: BEHOLD HOW THEY LOVE ONE ANOTHER!

The COMMUNION of God - THE COMMUNITY OF HOLINESS must also be manifested in the corporate faith. The church described in Acts 2 was manifestly unselfish! They gave whatever they had in order to make the kingdom go forward. "THEY HAD ALL THINGS COMMON!"

We can re-capture some of that "belonging"! The nursery needs to be staffed. Little children need to be cared for. People need to be loved and prayed for. It isn't a matter of communism, or giving, although in my mind tithing is a "floor."

The LIFE of God - THE VIBRANT REALITY OF HOLINESS will also be made manifest in the corporate faith! [I am not speaking of synthetic excitement.] When God meets with His HOLY CHURCH it is always an enormously important occasion!

Some time ago in some church promotional literature one "managerial-type" pastor likened his church to a filling station. HE SAID: "The 'real world' is out 'on the road.' "

I take exception.

The church is like a home. THIS sanctuary is a dining room. The meal is fuel for the tasks to be done. But it is also a sacrament of love.

Physically, in our individual homes, too much of our eating is 'fast food' filling station mentality. HAPPY is the family that several times a week sits down together in love to eat, talk, laugh, think, remember, enjoy each other.

Spiritually, it IS true that what the church does 'out on the road' IS vital; WE are the only way that Jesus gets "out of the Bible, out of the four walls of the church."

But what we do IN the church is much more than a smelly, selfish gas station. It is more than "tanking up."

We are family- God's HOLY family! We LOVE each other! When we eat, Paul said, wait for each other!

SO, HOW IS THE CHURCH 'HOLY?'

You [PERSONALLY] are called to holiness as a child of God.

The church is holy because YOU are holy! Like Gideon, the angel is saying to you, "HAIL, YOU SAINT! YOU ARE A MIGHTY CHILD OF GOD!" And you are already sanctified, if you are a Christian at all- - for you are dedicated, given, baptized into the Body of Christ. You are being sanctified God wants to sanctify you through and through, with His cleansing reaching every deliberately surrendered part until in a crisis of consecration you will know you have said an everlasting "YES!" to His love. And one day we shall be sanctified completely! In a way we cannot imagine, "When we shall see Him we shall be like Him!"

The church is HOLY if it is God's church! We [AS GOD'S CHURCH!] are called to holiness as a unit. We can have the baptism of the Holy Spirit that fosters compassion.

I get tired of seminars, and of super-stars, and of methods and techniques.

But we must avoid any false humility that says, "I'm no saint! We're no super-church! Holiness? Holiness is for the day of the kerosene lamp and the button-down shoes. We can't have that kind of powerful fellowship!"

Can't we?

I'm going to ask you to join with me in the closing prayer today, A JOINT AFFIRMATION that we belong to God as a church!

Prayer:

WE, THE WOLLASTON CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE, AFFIRM THAT WE BELONG TO YOU, O GOD. WE BELIEVE THAT WHAT BELONGS TO YOU IS TRULY HOLY. WE ASK

The Church is Holy

THAT YOU WILL MAKE US WHOLLY YOURS THAT WE MIGHT WALK WITH YOU AND FELLOWSHIP WITH YOU AND OBEY YOU IN ALL THAT WE SAY AND DO, THAT YOU MAY HAVE YOUR PERFECT WILL IN OUR CONGREGATIONAL LIFE. AMEN.

Thou Preparest a Table

May 5, 1991 pm

23rd Psalm *Thou preparest a table before me...*

Introduction

This evening we come again as brothers and sisters to the table of the Lord, the Sacrament that communicates in a special way to us the fact that Jesus IS WITH US.

What assurance do we have that this is indeed a fact?

I. WE HAVE A CONFESSION

- A. Paul has written (Romans 10:9,10) that if we confess with our mouth the Lord Jesus, and if we in fact believe in our hearts that God has raised Him from the dead, we shall be saved.

Thus the confession: "JESUS IS LORD" THE FOUNDATION OF OUR FAITH

- B. "Jesus and..." or "Jesus, except..." is the root of all heresy
- C. The authority and accountability of the corporate Body is/must be balanced by the inner witness of our own spirit.

[John Wesley's "heart warming" experience, May 24, 1738]

This experience will not contradict the "catholic" church; the Spirit of Jesus is uncompromising and yet sweet and Shepherd- like. He leads. He loves.

Never make a pressure confounded decision in life!

II. WE HAVE A HOPE

"OCCUPY UNTIL I COME" THE HOPE OF OUR ETERNAL SALVATION

- A. Our faith is "eschatological;" it is "going somewhere. We are not merely cycling aimlessly through the centuries'

Thou Preparest a Table

- B. Jesus is coming again Every time we share in His Table we are testifying to the fact that we believe that "He shall come (again) to judge the living and the dead." as the Creed states.

III. WE HAVE A PRESENCE

"THIS IS MY BODY" THE CONTINUATION OF OUR LIFE

- A. But our faith is not just in the past or in the future. Our faith is, and must be, in the NOW!

- B. This Presence is:

1. ADEQUACY

- a. By adequacy I do not mean that all we need as humans and as Christians is religion. [Dr. Bill McCumber said "Some people say 'All I need is Jesus!' But I need Doris, too!"]
- b. But adequacy means with Jesus I am of great personal worth! I am God's child; I have been adopted into God's family. I need the deep inner persuasion that what Jesus has done in and of itself is ALL I NEED IN ORDER TO HAVE ETERNAL LIFE.
- c. The adequacy of the atonement does not negate the inequities of this life. It doesn't mean that we don't "really need each other!" But it does mean that we are AT-ONE with God!

This Presence is also:

2. REALITY

- a. I don't mean that we know all the mysteries; I do mean there are some things we KNOW! (2 Corinthians 5:17 "A new creation!")
- b. That is what the great Anglican priest John Wesley rediscovered and spread all over Britain and Ireland.
- c. There are many things we CAN'T know; but we can know IMMANUEL: GOD WITH US! That is reality

This Presence is also:

3. MISSION

- a. We cannot know Jesus— really know Him— and stay the same regarding other people! If we have found Someone to walk through life with us, can't we begin to tell others about Him, too?
- b. This world is crying out for adequacy and for spiritual reality and assurance.
- c. So— what should we do? WE begin thinking BIG! How shall we set Dorchester on fire for God! But God thinks small. He wants to save a world so He starts off with a Baby. Maybe God wanted Gladys and Charlie to climb that iron fence and meet those people from the neighborhood last week in Dorchester! Maybe God wants you and me to be friends with our neighbors and show them our Friend!

Conclusion

All my life I've been hearing all sorts of reasons why I ought to be doing this or that for God . . . or why I should follow this or that program. And maybe I should have! But if you are like I am, we have had mixed feelings for doing what we have done. I wonder if we can ever really say THE LOVE OF CHRIST COMPELS ME!

The question Jesus asks us is the question He asked Peter when He restored Peter to the leadership of His disciples: DO YOU LOVE ME?? !!

If we have accomplished anything this year - if Jesus has led us into Codman Square - if we have seen any good things at all— can it be for any other reason than that Jesus has been with us— and that He is with us NOW?

[In Copley Square, right beside Trinity Church, is a statue of that Church's most illustrious pastor, Phillips Brooks. The church erected it in honor of the man who wrote, among other things:

*How silently, How silently, The wondrous Gift is given
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven*

Thou Preparest a Table

But there is another figure in the statuary— a Hooded figure of the Christ, standing behind Phillips Brooks with His hand on the shoulder of the man in the pulpit. That statuary tells the story. In the dark, in the cold, in the sun, in the rain— He is always there. Christ stands behind the pastor with His hand on his shoulder. And He will always be there!

This is what it means to be "in Christ!" It is HIS Presence! And His Presence is ADEQUACY!!

Prayer:

Communion:

God Is Great God is Near

May 26, 1991

Psalm 145:3,4;17-19

Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom.

One generation will commend your works to another; they will tell of your mighty acts.

*The Lord is righteous in all his ways and loving toward all he has made.
The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them.*

Introduction

[Today is Trinity Sunday, when it is customary to think about the mystery of God.] IT IS A DIFFICULT THING TO THINK ABOUT GOD. Usually we find it more comfortable to think about God-things; and the God-things we like to think about are commonly things that have to do with what God is doing for US. OUR needs. OUR desires.

To think about God Himself means that we will ask impertinent questions like: IS THERE A GOD? and, WHAT IS GOD LIKE? To think about God requires that we ask ourselves, WHAT IS GOD TO ME?

I. IS THERE A GOD?

[To ask "IS THERE A GOD?" in a Nazarene church seems almost somehow sacrilegious, doesn't it! But Hebrews 11:6 indicates that faith in God is not "automatic."

- A. "IS THERE A GOD?" If we had to answer this question, not with our WORDS, and not with (mere) intellectual assent, but with the way we LIVE— ah, that might be a different situation!

If faith in God is more than an intellectual assent, and if we are supposed to witness with our life-styles, [to BE men and women who act as if God really IS!], then we face a challenge! Many Christian churches are populated with practical agnostics.

But that is another sermon, sometime.

- B. "IS THERE A GOD?" The reality of God is a "revelation matter." Faith is a gift! Faith is a gift of spiritual insight; we peer into the mystery of Life and somehow we know that we are not alone. God the Father is declared in His handiwork, and He has spoken in Revelation. (Psalm 19)

In the Creation story God is seen as coming to where Adam and Eve are and walking with them in the cool of the day. God is still coming where we are. God speaks from faith to faith!

Illustration: Cosmonauts ("I didn't see God!") versus Astronauts ("In the beginning...!") Faith to faith!

[But ...]

II. WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

There are plenty of people who are willing to help us. Some of them may actually be helpful!

- A. We have our 'official' definitions of God; the writings of the ancients; the creeds. We even have the Manual of the Church of the Nazarene, which states:

"We believe in one eternally existent, infinite God, Sovereign of the universe; that He only is God, creative and administrative, holy in nature, attributes, and purpose; that He, as God, is Triune in essential being, revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

Official definitions are necessary. But they don't always leave us with a very warm feeling.

- B. The Bible, read as a textbook, BEGINS to unfold the mystery of God, in terms that relate to us. The names of God as found in the Old and New Testaments are a good place to begin.

The first name God used of Himself is the name Elohim, which comes from a word relating to "power." It would suggest that God is the Source of all energy and power.

The second name God uses of Himself is the 'unspeakable name' which the ancient Hebrews would not speak, the name we call Jehovah, and scholars usually call Yahweh. THIS NAME IS A PROPER NOUN THAT MOSES HEARD AS I AM THAT I AM.

The Jews used compound names: Jehovah-Jireh "the Lord will provide"; Jehovah-Nissi, "The Lord my banner"; Jehovah-Shalom "the Lord send peace"; Jehovah-Shammah, "the Lord is there"; Jehovah-tsidkenu, "the Lord our righteousness."

Another Hebrew name for God is "El Shaddai," our "God our Nourisher" or "Strength-giver." "Adonai" which means Lord or Master was often spoken when the 'unspeakable name' of Jehovah was read with the eye. These are some of the names or concepts of God we see in the Old Testament.

- C. The New Testament story of Jesus opens the door of revelation wider, and shows us that God is LIGHT, that He is LIFE, that He is LOVE. As we search the scriptures, and let them speak to us of the nature and attributes of God, we come to say that God is SPIRIT, that God is HOLY, that God is ETERNAL. We say that God is OMNIPRESENT, and there is no place hidden from His immediate knowledge. He is OMNISCIENT, and there is nothing He does not know or understand. God is OMNIPOTENT, with the only things impossible to Him being those things which contradict His own nature. He is good, so He cannot be evil. He is holy, so He cannot love uncleanness.
- D. But the highest insight into this question 'WHAT IS GOD LIKE?' is found in WHO JESUS IS, and WHAT JESUS HAS DONE AND IS DOING. He is called "The WORD" because He is sent from the Father. He said, (John 14:9) "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father." And Paul tells us (2 Corinthians 4:6) that: "In the face of Jesus is the light of God's

glory!"

HOW CAN JESUS TEACH US MORE THAN THE LETTER OF THE WORD? [John 5:39] Jesus WILL NEVER CONTRADICT THE WORD; but Jesus is somehow always more than the sum total of the "letter." We do not need some esoteric scholar to sift out the "real Jesus" behind the written word on a pseudo-intellectual basis. Jesus IS the Eternal Contemporary!

THIS, TOO, IS A "REVELATION MATTER!" It is a miracle of God's grace that enables us to believe that Jesus truly is the Son of God, and that He makes God "come alive to us."

What is God like? E. Stanley Jones said, "We have a Christ-like God!" Simply put, inasmuch as we can understand Him, God is like Jesus!

[But there is a THIRD question . . .]

III. WHAT IS THIS GOD TO ME?

- A. The two questions merge into a third; This God who IS . . . who IS LIKE JESUS . . .
WHAT IS THIS GOD TO ME?

It is possible to be persuaded about God, even in a correct way, and still not KNOW Him!

- B. HOW DO WE COME TO KNOW GOD IN THIS PERSONAL WAY?

She was doing a routine task, so her mind could freely wander. She was thinking serious thoughts as she moved along. Thoughts about life and death, about God and worship were all mixed in with thoughts of her present situation.

She had really made a mess of her life. It wasn't all her fault. Everybody thinks about serious things sometimes.

As she arrived at the well her thoughts were interrupted by a Jewish gentleman sitting right on the low wall that surrounded the well itself. He startled her by asking her for a drink.

And it was simply amazing! One good word led to another, and soon she was engaged in the most thrilling conversation of her life. She expressed some of the questions she had just been pondering.

She thought that maybe that her deepest need was for religion. "Are the Jews correct in saying we have to go to Jerusalem to worship? Or can we Samaritans get along by worshiping right here on this mountain?"

Her heart and mind were open. She longed to know what God was really like, what He demanded of her.

This Stranger began to give her a disturbing but yet deeply satisfying answer!! He told her "You don't need more religion! You've got too much already! What you need is contact with GOD!"

"What is God like?" That day the woman at the well received one of the greatest discourses ever spoken on the nature of God.

"GOD IS SPIRIT! THEY THAT WORSHIP HIM MUST WORSHIP IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH!" The place and the method may vary. God is interested in the heart condition.

She saw the pieces of scriptural revelation begin to fit together and make sense. She said to the Jewish gentleman: "I know that when Messiah comes He will explain everything to us!"

Her longing and her mixed-up life and her whole heart together said within her: "Couldn't this great God SOME DAY do something wonderful for me?"

And THEN came the EARTHQUAKE! The Jewish gentleman said: You don't HAVE to wait any longer! "Messiah is here! NOW! I AM Messiah!"

All of a sudden this very REAL God, the very GREAT God, was also VERY NEAR!

- C. HOW DO WE DRAW NEAR TO ALMIGHTY GOD? How do we find Jesus as Savior and Lord? The answer is: WE DON'T! I know the Word says: "Draw near to God, and He will

draw near to you!" But in every case, our drawing near to God is a response to the invitation He gives us! We may draw near, we can draw near, BECAUSE GOD ALREADY IS NEAR!

Conclusion:

1. It is easier to think about God-things than it is to think about God Himself. But when we DO put God at the very center, we discover that all we have been seeking for all along is found in God Himself! The things we think will satisfy elude us. Then we discover Jesus Christ is very near, making Himself known, and we discover that "well of water springing up within us."
2. When we are (1) in our daily routine (God is NEAR!). When we are (2) mixed up, messed up (God is NEAR!). When we are thinking of how we can do better, draw closer (God is NEARER THAN YOU KNOW!).

Two-hundred-fifty-three (253) years ago last Friday evening, about 9:15 London time, marked the anniversary of one man's discovery that God is Great and God is NEAR! He had been a priest for 13 years! He had served God and His kingdom in sacrificial ways. HE KNEW THERE WAS A GOD; AND HE KNEW BETTER THAN MOST OF US WILL EVER KNOW WHAT GOD WAS LIKE. BUT THAT EVENING JOHN WESLEY CAME TO KNOW GOD IN A PERSONAL, HEART-WARMING ASSURANCE!

Prayer: Help us to think about You today! Amen.

(EH) #14 Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven

The Church is a Witness

June 2, 1991

2 Corinthians 2

Introduction

PREACHING / PROCLAMATION

Preaching is a high and holy task. I have a high regard for preaching. Preaching can be sacramental. The word "preach" gets a bad press. Whatever the secular meaning of the word, to preach is God's way of proclaiming His Gospel.

Proclamation is the task of the whole church. Preaching is not the sum total of proclamation. Actually, preaching is not usually the earliest source of evangelistic awakening! For the task of proclamation is the task of the entire church of Jesus Christ.

Words that I live by in preaching. I would share with you words that I live by, that to me are part of my sacred assignment as a preacher. I have come to the conclusion that these words are not just for ordained people. Together we all are the church apostolic, called to know Jesus and to witness to the world of what we know. HERE ARE THE PRECIOUS WORDS:

I. I AM AN AMBASSADOR, NOT A PEDDLER

"We do not peddle the word of God for profit"

- A. Peddlers are honorable, but they (1) are in their work to make a living; and (2) they usually sell gadgets.
- B. We are ambassadors. We earn our livings in order to support our true work. What we handle is a matter of life and death. We are people who are sent.
- C. As ambassadors we are honor bound to learn our craft; to know our calling well; to become experts in the matter of scriptural truth. We must know the message in order not to garble it.

II. I AM CALLED TO BE REAL, NOT A PLAY-ACTOR

"We do not cover our face, as Moses, to hide the fading glory"

- A. The incident cited: Moses had a crisis time of glory when his face shone. He was frightening to the people then, but it was an honorable sort of excitement. After all, he had been with God.

When the glory faded, Moses kept the veil on so the people wouldn't see his apparent weakness or mere humanity.

- B. Religious hokus-pocus is a temptation. People think more highly or less highly of us than we deserve. But we must strive to be honest before God!

[Not just "be ourselves!" But be ourselves as God is working with us!]

It is vital that we share our high moments as well as be vulnerable in our low times. I am not suggesting that people want to hear the details of your hospital experiences; but I am saying that we need to share the fact that God meets with human beings where they live.

III. I MUST SPEAK THE TRUTH, NOT PROPAGANDIZE

"We do not distort the Word of God"

- A. Let the Word itself speak. All too often when we apply the word to a situation we know where we want to end up before we even start. We are sure how we want to see the result turn out. That is all very well, so long as we are totally under the authority of the living Word.
- B. The Word will speak! The Word of God reflects the Living Word, the Son of God. It has a mind, a life, a will all its own that supersedes our limited perspective.
But that is the rub; the word will not be used! It must be obeyed!
- C. The critical factor: AM I LIVING BY THE WORD?

IV. I MUST BE CHRIST-CENTERED, NOT SELF-PROMOTING

"We do not preach ourselves, but Christ"

- A. This is not to say that God cannot and will not use "characters." Thank God, He loves you the way you are— and He wants you to be yourself! Your sanctified self, that is!
- B. It comes down to a matter of LOVE: we seek the glory of God ahead of our own!

Conclusion

I have a dream of seeing our church become very effective in reaching people who do not know Jesus as Savior. I believe that we can have a great new break-through in proclamation.

Such a dream would usually be immediately followed up by challenge to learning and doing. And I believe there is a place for all that.

But I believe that there are two things that will happen and that if they happen the dream will come:

1. We must really want to proclaim; must see proclamation as the total task of the total church, and as the one single thing that will bring us the most joy. WE MUST WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW THE CHRIST WE LOVE.
2. We must believe in each other as we catch the vision: love and encourage and boost one another in every thing that we do. WE MUST HAVE A BAPTISM OF TRUST AND LOVE AND COMMUNITY.

And, so, we do not lose heart.

SCRIPTURE TEXTS

2 Corinthians

2:17 FOR WE ARE NOT AS MANY, WHICH CORRUPT THE WORD OF GOD: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ.

3:13 AND NOT AS MOSES, [WHICH] PUT A VAIL OVER HIS FACE, that the children of Israel could not steadfastly look to the end of that which is abolished:

4:2 But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, NOT WALKING IN CRAFTINESS, NOR HANDLING THE WORD OF GOD DECEITFULLY; but by

The Church is a Witness

manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

4:5 FOR WE PREACH NOT OURSELVES, BUT CHRIST JESUS THE LORD; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake.

The Qualities of Family

June 23, 1991 AM

1 Thessalonians 2

Introduction

[Family advice from Paul?]

Paul was tough. He had to be to survive in his world. He did not tolerate failure lightly. He drove himself harder than anyone else.

But Paul was also tender.

Paul responded to the tenderness of Stephen the martyr, when perhaps nothing else could have reached him, the radical persecutor of the Way.

After his remarkable conversion, he was taken under the personal care of one of the kindest men in all the Bible, Barnabus, the son of consolation. Barnabus didn't change Paul's gritty spunky aggressive nature entirely, but he did make an indelible mark. Paul was not only tough, Paul knew the value of being tender.

[The Holy Spirit (not just crusty St. Paul) inspired these words!:]

Here in I Thessalonians 2 are some "side comments" by Paul on the way parents ideally relate to their children. He tells the people in Thessalonica what he thinks of them, and how he has sought to treat them. Paul's comments are an outline of family characteristics we might look at and cultivate.

I. PARALLELS: GROWING A CHURCH AND RAISING A FAMILY

- A. I may be an idealist, but I really believe that A CHURCH IS A FAMILY. Some families are closer than others; some are more "fun;" but every local unit of Christ's church is family!
- B. THE IDEAL CHURCH/FAMILY IS GOD-CENTERED, RATHER THAN PERSON-CENTERED. (2:4) "we speak, not as pleasing (people) but God, who examines our hearts."

1. This formula works for everything Christian. [Actually, I learned it at a CCI "Fireside" more than 20 years ago in Green Lake, Wisconsin. It has worked at Camp Taconic all these long years since! We do not run a camp, even a "Boys' Camp" or "Girls' Camp," for people— not even the boys or girls, although that is the reason for the camp. The camp is run for the glory of God! Every person does what he/she does as unto the Lord! The end result: the boys and girls are served even better than if we ran the camp for them!]
 - a. It works in a church
 - b. and it even works in a family
 2. The church is NOT to be simply a place where perceived needs are met, or where the gospel is "marketed." The "bottom line" is NOT church growth, or even good reports. The "bottom line" is pleasing God! He is the One who builds His church!
- C. "Pleasing God" has a way of combining worth-while goals, and "straining out" lesser ones.

[The current Reader's Digest carries an article I barely skimmed, by a rabbi. His testimony was the same as mine: it has been a great life BUT there is one regret: I was too ambitious about my career at first!]

II. GROWING A CHURCH OR A FAMILY CANNOT BE DONE IN A DETACHED AND IMPERSONAL WAY

- A. The single most important thing that families need is "LOVE." But 'love' has to be more than a word. "Love" is so broad a term that it has to be broken into pieces we can handle and recognize and work on. Paul put it this way: (2:8) "Having thus a fond affection for you we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God BUT OUR OWN LIVES ALSO, BECAUSE YOU HAD BECOME VERY DEAR TO US."
- "Lessons" are important. ABCs, "times tables" and the disciplines must be mastered. But the greatest lesson of all is what kind of person the teacher is, or what kind of person the father or mother is. Character is more "caught" than taught.

We've all had them: teachers who had to get the lesson across, whatever the cost; teachers who went altogether by the text. But we've also had them: teachers who were tough, perhaps— but who demanded our best because they believed in us and loved us!

[I remember Mrs. Crouch, a history teacher at Akron North High School. "Wake up, Russell," she said. "You're going to be dead a long time!" But I knew she cared about me!]

- B. The first quality of this investment of self, this quality that makes for "family" health is LOVE EXPRESSED AS...

1. GENTLENESS

Paul says, (2:7) "I have been like a mother to you!" Tough Paul, hard on John Mark when he got homesick, not whimpering when he is beaten, standing up to more than one Roman centurion or magistrate— tough Paul says, "I have been like a mother to you!"

So, "how is a mother?" In a word, "gentle." Love that almost hurts! Love that seeks to lift and bless. Love that is on the alert for ways to be a help.

[Practical: Yes, young mothers have the toughest job! They do FEEL like they don't want to even SEE their kids sometimes. But just let those same kids whimper off in the corner somewhere, and the family reunion is going strong, and there is all kinds of noise and confusion, and Mother hears HER little child's voice when no one else in the room does! Why?]

GENTLE LOVE CAN ALSO BE 'STRONG' ["TOUGH LOVE!"]

- a. Paul also speaks of being 'like a father.' (2:11 "... we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children ...")

[Remember, now, this is not YOUR father, nor is it mine.

Some of you have sad stories to tell about family relationships. Don't let them influence you in your concept of the term "father" or "mother" as it is used in the scriptures.

I happened to have as a father a man who totally gave himself to God before I was born. I am eternally grateful for that. But at the same time I hasten to say that my father was not perfect, and he made a number of mistakes in dealing with me as his son.

In turn, I have been a sincere and committed Christian since before my children were born, but I must confess that I have not been the perfect or ideal father.]

Paul is speaking of an "ideal." We all have to rise above the mistakes and sins of our parents.

- b. So, what sort of strong characteristics does Paul describe as helpful for the church/family?

The first quality Paul associates with the ideal father, and the second in our family list is LOVE EXPRESSED AS:

2. ENCOURAGEMENT

A good TEACHER OR PARENT is an encourager! He/she makes you feel like you CAN! He/she doesn't beat you down, but builds you up!

[Illustration: R.C.Sproul told us of a teacher who wrote "You can write!" on his paper and put it up on the bulletin board for all to see! Alice Spangenberg wrote the same words on one of my freshman papers, and it greatly encouraged me!]

The next thing Paul mentions- and perhaps the order is important- is LOVE EXPRESSED AS:

3. COMFORTING

We've discovered the importance of touching! Parents need to hug their children often and sincerely, and not just when they deserve it or are good, but when they feel most naughty we need to encourage them to be better human beings.

[Illus: The little boy who went past many churches to get to D.L. Moody's Sunday School because "They love me!"]

The next thing on Paul's list is the one we usually place first. It is LOVE EXPRESSED BY:

4. URGING

This "urging" aspect of parenthood carries over into most relationships and uses words like "ought" and "should" and questions like "Did you?" and reactions like "I told you so.."

All these are (probably) legitimate. After all, URGING is on the list! And some of us wouldn't have got out of bed this morning if someone hadn't used this fatherly technique!

But urging is like salt. It must be used properly!

Urging used to be extended even to corporal punishment. I speak of judicious use of spanking. Now even to mention the idea of swatting a child is to incur accusation and suspicion. Still, if the other aspects of love (i.e., Gentleness and Encouragement, etc,) are really present, URGING HAS ITS PLACE! [ILLUS. The URGING must fit the child and situation, however! I recall how I was disciplined as a child of five or six; I tried the same thing on John when he was five or six with very different results!]

There is one more important item on the list of qualities. it is LOVE EXPRESSED THROUGH GENUINE:

5. PRAISE!

(2:20) "For you are our glory and joy." (And 3:8) "For now we really live if you stand fast in the lord!" Passion, affection, vicarious living, family tightness— a wonderful thing.

Conclusion:

I covet these things for this church we call our spiritual home and family. I want to see us live to please God with all our hearts, whatever our individual gifts and assignments may be.

And I also covet this for the people you call "family." You have the greatest influence by far on your inner circle.

1. Gentleness ... global, universal care for the welfare of others
2. Encouragement ...
3. Comforting ... we all need it!
4. Urging ... use with care; but don't let anyone settle for being less than her/his best!
5. APPRECIATION/PRAISE! ... joy in others' success is a sign of genuine LOVE!

Prayer

Exalt Him #57 - *The Servant Song*

Words to the Family

June 30, 1991

Ephesians 5:15-21

Thesis statement:

When we find peace in subjection to God, we can begin to find peace in subjection to one another. There is a proper place for doing what other people ask us to do. There is a proper place for asking other people to do things. There are times to obey and times to refuse to obey.

Attitude toward authority: "No one is going to tell me what to do!" Spoiled children need to learn who is boss; the difference between breaking the will and breaking the spirit— is there such a thing?

The home in which "ego" is not the center, but the genuine love, fear, respect, and authority of God— where we submit to one another.

INTRODUCTION

Ephesians 4 is a great "church chapter." It speaks of the unity of the faith, and of the diversity of gifts in the church. It ends with a blending of doctrine and Christ-likeness. It is a marvelous passage.

But then Ephesians 5 sets up a passage on inter-personal relationships, and particularly those of the family: husbands, wives, children, even household servants and masters. Frankly, a great deal of cultural adaptation has been preached around the last two chapters of Ephesians: slavery justified, and subjugation of married women among them.

So, what is to be made of such specific passages?

1. Can we come with open hearts to read what God demands of His people, and perhaps to sort out what Paul recommends, or our own culture determines?

2. Can we seek a humility that says we will accept what is clearly God's will, and not be our own God?
3. Can we start with the imperatives of this "personal relationship" passage, and go from there? [I see four (4) imperatives:

BE IMITATORS OF GOD AS DEAR CHILDREN (1, flowing out of 4:32)

BE CAREFUL HOW YOU WALK (15, in light of 10)

BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT (18)

BE SUBJECT TO ONE ANOTHER IN THE FEAR OF CHRIST (21)

I. THE GRACE GOD GIVES US FORGIVENESS

We are imperfect people all; we get the idea that life is ideal— and we expect others to live up to the perfect standards of love. Of course WE don't always quite make it— but then WE are special. We want others to love us more than they love themselves— and we will show them how!

But that is not the way grace operates!

Forgiveness is the soil in which the flowers of relationship can grow! Of course it is a two-way street! But love doesn't keep score!

II. THE CHOICES GOD AFFORDS US CHOICE

Life goes better when

1. We appreciate its limited quality; preciousness.
2. We have deliberate goals, set by prayer and openness before God; and
3. These goals are held lightly: "trying to find out what the will of the Lord is"

III. THE PRESENCE GOD PROMISES US PASSION

Here is a contrast with drinking to excess, with drunkenness. Why, do you suppose, do people drink to excess?

It is only a conjecture with me at this time; I have never drunk alcohol, but I believe people drink to cushion the hard facts of a life that comes in on them— to overcome, to forget.

What if there were a drug or substance that would not only cushion the pain but leave no bitter after-effects— would pay dividends to those who used it— and while indeed cushioning the harsh facts of life it would work in objective reality to change those facts? What do you suppose people would say to a drug like that?

Our God can turn water into wine; and He can turn beer into furniture, too!

What we need is more people who are addicted to God — Who are turned on by seeking and finding the passion of being God-soaked, God-intoxicated, God-filled— God-blessed!

IV. THE KEY GOD ENTRUSTS US [HUMILITY]

Here is the most difficult part of the passage!

Humility— the most delicate of the graces of the Spirit

We all seek our own!

We all are interested in the recognition that should be coming to us!

Conclusion:

When we have mastered the imperatives— or, as we seek to enfold them into our lives— then we can go on and deal with the individual roles within the family:

Wives— be subject to your own husbands. Don't be pulling against the flow of the family; seeking your separate way.

Husbands- (in the light of verse 21— being subject to one another) love your wives as Christ loves the church— laying down His very life to make its life possible.

Parents- don't "use" your children selfishly; don't provoke them to anger; model for them the grace and giving of God Himself; and model for them also the demands, urging, characteristics (from I Thes 2) we spoke of last Sunday.

Words to the Family

Children - reverence your parents! Respect them!

Slaves- hourly wage earners? Laborers?

Owners- Those hiring work done— we ALL fill these various roles from time to time.

Paul was NOT condoning a social system of people owning other people. He WAS saying that where we find ourselves there are principles that will lift us above.

The First Step in Worship

Reconciliation

July 7, 1991

Matthew 5

You have heard that the ancients were told, YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.'

But I say unto you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, 'Raca,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.

If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering,

Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, in order that your opponent may not deliver you to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you shall not come out of there, until you have paid up the last cent.—Matthew 5:21-26

Introduction:

The Sermon on the Mount is familiar territory for people who have been Christians for any length of time. In this segment of the great sermon, commenting on the commandment, "THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT MURDER," Jesus underscores several important facts for us here:

1. Being 'right with God' is very much inter-connected with 'being right' with each other;
2. Relationships with both God and fellow human beings must be maintained; they some-

times require reconciliation; and

3. It is important to settle these "debts of spirit" before they have time to sour and fester.

Relationships are dynamic. They never stay put, never hold still, never stay quite the same. They need to be worked at, maintained! And it is not just human relationships that need to be maintained because they are dynamic and changing.

Our relationship to God is a growing, dynamic thing. Our walk with Him stretches us, challenges us. It must be kept fresh and sweet. It is not automatic. One reason for worship is making sure that we are in touch with God.

I. WORSHIP AS RECONCILING THE RECONCILED

A. AS A CHRISTIAN:

1. You ARE reconciled to God. He loves you. You love Him.

When we are saved by the grace of God, we are reconciled to God by Christ's sacrifice.

Worship is an exercise of love. When genuine worship takes place it is the highest fulfillment and satisfaction humans can know.

Worship is usually reserved for those who are in harmony with God. There is mystery involved in this intercourse with the Almighty, but it probably is a safe statement to say: It is necessary to be at one with God in order truly to worship.

2. God is NOT looking to cut you off from Himself! Hear these words of scripture:

And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now RECONCILED you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him, holy and blameless and beyond reproach- if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister. (Colossians 1:21- 23)

B. CHRISTIANS NEED TO "CONTINUE STEADFAST"

1. Those who truly worship find it is of utmost importance to stay in harmony, in step, with Jesus. [Re-quote, from above: "... if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard ..."]
2. Worship is a reconciling, re-tuning, course-correction in love that keeps us on course.

C. This reconciliation is really necessary! It has to be done, or vital contact with God will be lost! Our worship must go beyond just "living in our heads!" It must come into the arena of relationships where we live our lives!

1. So often we are content to "think" instead of do. We think that faith is the same as knowledge; that acknowledging the truth or the facts somehow is the same as faith. Faith is a mystery, but on our part it is very close to simple obedience: doing what we KNOW GOD wants us to do!

Sometimes we think that when we have agreed that a course is right; or have agreed that we are probably wrong that the admission plus grace makes it all right. We take "thinking" for "doing."

2. "Informed" or "reminded?" In our worship— our sermons— the sermons we demand— we want to be informed: what is God LIKE! But there is only one authority on that subject: God must speak for Himself. And God does speak! Instead of being informed, probably very often we need to be reminded!
3. Thus one part of worship is confession, absolution, washing. We do NOT live under the yoke and dominion of sin; we are NOT aliens from grace. But, paradoxically, we DO pray the Lord's prayer; we DO confess that we fall short, and we DO leave worship renewed and assured.

[Transition: But here is a "sticky wicket!" - Jesus links worship to a clear conscience to human beings. To be right with God involves a conscious effort to be right with each other. Just as it is necessary to be "reconciled" to God, according to Jesus it is also vitally necessary to be reconciled to our brother/sister.

SO: How does this segment of the Sermon connect with your family and mine?:]

II. BEING RECONCILED TO GOD MEANS RECONCILING WITH FAMILY

A. Our relationship with loved ones is a lot like our relationship to God:

1. We ARE reconciled- we HAVE made commitments; we LOVE and we ARE LOVED. But at the same time
2. We must work at the task of MAINTAINING OUR RECONCILIATION.
3. We need to KEEP sweet and fresh and forgiven!

Family friction: harboring secret grudges is worse than hidden cancer, physically. (Is it possible to even hide these frictions from ourselves?) When we cover over resentment and feelings of frustration that fester and become a denial of our basic commitment of love we are inviting disaster!

B. Few people set out to be hateful and unforgiving and hard to communicate with and spiteful. Perhaps that is the very reason why Jesus connects WORSHIP and RELATIONSHIPS with each other.

[Do you know that] It is at the place of prayer our relationships are examined in the pure light of God's love. [?] And it is just here where we need to be very sure we do not just "live in our heads." We have to make the effort to be reconciled. We have to reach out to the offended dear one.

We can deny our feelings. We can try to pray over top of bad attitudes. But worship and honesty and obedience and transparency before God are all bound up together.

C. But doesn't being filled with the Spirit take away all negative feelings? [Where do you find that bit about "feelings" in the Bible?] Claiming unrealistic levels of purity ("I am sanctified; therefore I do NOT feel what I feel!") is asking for emotional bankruptcy, if not spiritual disaster.

D. We need gentleness and wisdom in seeking reconciliation. Honesty with our loved ones is not just "letting it all hang out!" The way we approach the offended must reflect God's

patience and grace with us! (Ephesians 4:32!) Kindness plus honesty is the basis for beautiful family relationship.

(Conclusion:)

III. DON'T INSIST ON COLD, HARD, LITERAL JUSTICE!

- A. At the end of this passage, Jesus throws in what seems to be an irrelevancy about the courts or civil law.
1. Why, do you suppose, does Jesus talk about settling disputes out of court when he has been speaking about murder and hatred and worship and friendship and reconciliation relationships?
 2. Can it be that Jesus is telling us that we all need mercy before the impartial bar of God's justice? And is He telling us that if we insist on going through the courts, as it were, we shall find that we are more involved in liability than we thought?
- B. Jesus expects us to "Forgive one another, even as God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven us!" Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us, as we forgive one another!" We need to keep the channels clear between us and God! And we need to keep the channels clear between our hearts and those we love as well!
- Jesus urges us to find peace "on the way." Not glossing over family disagreements, not excusing wrongs— but forgiving and being forgiven!

Prayer: Lord, Life is too short for us to let clouds come between loved ones! Give us the grace to be reconciled, and maintain that one-ness with You, and with those we love. In the name of our Elder Brother and Friend and Savior and Lord, Amen.

The Presence

July 26, 1991

Hebrews 11:6

Introduction:

I have not always been a good Christian. I have been an utterly sincere Christian. One thing that I did, shortly after I made a 're-commitment' at age seventeen, has become a symbol in my own mind of my entire relationship with God across the years.

I ran, physically, after God, trying to reach Him, to find Him, to come near to Him.

Maybe I had an over-simplified, even arrogant idea about being a Christian. I had the idea that now that I am a Christian, I will give it everything I have, and I'll be a pretty good one! I'll be spiritual! I'll get my prayers through, and I'll do everything I know and be a credit to God and the church.

What's wrong with that? Probably nothing— but there are a lot of "I's" in that thought, aren't there?

Anyway, I ran after God, literally. Maybe more than once— but I remember one time vividly— it was in a bit of woods, no one else around to see or hear. I prayed, I called, finally I got up and simply ran, hoping that the energy would bring me closer to God.

Maybe I am still running after God! Maybe sometimes I need to run. But I have been discovering these past 40+ years that God is near when I realize that He is near— and that God is near even when I do NOT realize that He is near.

It isn't bad to run to God. James tells us, "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you!" Perhaps it is even all right to go running after Him. But I'm not sure that it is necessary, or that a physical nearness is what James means at all.

I. DISCOVERING ISAIAH 41:10

I discovered Isaiah 41:10 on the way to Eastern Nazarene College in early September, 1949, in the Durkee's new Plymouth. The occasion was evening bible reading. I didn't know where I was, but God not only knew, He let me know that He knew.

A few weeks later in the jail in Wareham (my two room mates and I had been dropped off in the middle of the night, a college prank on freshman, and actually a kindly police sergeant offered us the use of his brand-new jail cells- 1949) it stood me in good stead.

II. THE WALK TO THE HAMBURGER STAND

Did you ever have God slip up beside you, like the Emmaus story tells? One night three college boys decided about 10 p.m. to go for a hamburger in the only place (then) in North Quincy that was open— a diner across from Sacred Heart Church. We talked of anything and everything, but somehow on the walk home the conversation turned to God, and to the desire we had to know Him.

When we turned off Hancock Street onto Elm Avenue we fell silent. We walked maybe a block, and then we said to one another, "Did you feel that, too?" Each of us in the deepest parts of our hearts had sensed that God Himself had walked along with us. I cannot tell you any significance for you. But I have never gotten over the thrill of knowing that one time as we talked about God He joined in the conversation with indescribable love.

III. I KNOW I AM SAVED!

(EDISON STUDY, 1970 OR SO)

The occasion was a seemingly totally unprovoked, simply going about my God-called task. There have been many times when I have "felt" close to God, or have been moved to a deep sense of gratitude for His blessings. But this day as I sat at my desk it "dawned on me" with sheer and deep persuasion of joy that I knew I was accepted, that I was saved. That is the only way I can describe the assurance. I do not try to

catalog the experience as being "saved" or "sanctified," for I am sure I had been saved a long time before.

I would give a lot to have that experience repeated over and over— and there certainly are times when I "feel" anything but right with God. But that afternoon I **knew** and the memory of that certitude is precious indeed.

Experience is not the be-all and end-all of faith. Experience is not to be trusted apart from scripture and from covenant-making faith. But experience is a powerful witness in the journey with God.

IV. THE ROAD TO EMMAUS, THEN AND NOW

THE OCCASION: SEE LUKE 24

They were sad They were discouraged They were sinfully behind in their faith . . . but understandably so—no different from what I would have been, I'm sure

Jesus was: A companion in their walk He was an explainer of Himself in the scriptures He revealed Himself in the breaking of bread This experience brought: New joy, great assurance A desire to share The seeds of the church that continue to this day

Conclusion:

Many times I think that I am that new Christian, that teenager, running to Jesus—seeing if I can find Him and use Him to make me a super Christian.

And other times I think— yes, I am still running! I still don't know a great deal about being near. But then I quiet my mind and think:

Where, do you suppose, is Jesus right this very minute?

There is a beautiful church in a central city square, Copley Square, in Boston— Trinity Church, Episcopal. On one side of the church, facing a little park, is a statue of Trinity Church's most famous pastor, Phillips Brooks. Phillips Brooks was a noted preacher, a silver-tongued orator that held hundreds spellbound each Sunday. But he is best

known for a Christmas carol that you have probably sung many times, "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

The statue of the pastor is notable because there are actually two figures in the statuary, and the pastor is the smaller of the two. He is standing in his pulpit, this figure of Phillips Brooks, with his hand on the Bible, but the larger figure, a hooded figure of the Christ, is standing just behind Phillips Brooks, and Christ has his hand on the shoulder of the man in the pulpit. There is a message I get every time I see this statue, and even every time I think about it. For I know that whenever I think about it, the Presence is there! In the dark, in the sunshine, in the cold of winter, in the heat, the Presence is there backing up that pastor!

I suppose I'm still running to Jesus! Not, now, to see if He will make me super-Christian, so that I can do great things. But because I need Him! And He has promised never to leave me, and that if I need Him, He'll come where I am.

Let us pray.

Open Book Open Road

Communion Meditation

September 1, 1991

I Corinthians 15:3-11 "I delivered ... what I also received."

Introduction

At Falmouth this summer Ben, my 5-year-old grandson, began going to check the mailbox all by himself. It is 150 yards down the street, just out of sight around some bushes, and I confess I peek around them to make sure he is all right down near the main street.

Ben was fascinated by the fact that there is a metal flag on the box that tells the mailman to pick up outgoing mail. So one day he decided to put the flag up and send some mail on his own. And so he did. But the mailman didn't take Ben's picture post card.

When he brought it back, disappointed, we discovered why. Ben hadn't addressed his message to anyone in particular, or in fact to anyone at all. And he hadn't put a stamp on the card. And as a matter of fact, there wasn't any message on the card at all; just a post card with a pretty picture of Falmouth.

It certainly isn't wrong for a 5-year-old to want to send mail, and he'll soon learn how. But somehow it made me think about some of my own efforts to communicate the good news about Jesus.

I'm not a communications expert, but there must be some elementary facts about ANY kind of communication. Surely you must have (1) Something to say; and (2) an effective way to say it; as well as (3) someone to say it to.

Paul says: "I am sending on to you a message that I know, because I have first received it myself!

I. CHRISTIANS HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY

"I delivered . . . WHAT I FIRST RECEIVED"

- A. When Paul became a Christian, he definitely received something! There was no question but that he had had an encounter with the divine, with God Almighty!
 - 1. Not many conversions are that dramatic. But every true conversion must have that touch of God, that element of the divine.
 - 2. Do you recall when you met with God in a confrontational way? Conviction? Conversion? [Testimony: My own personal dealing with a sense of being "wrong" or "away from God" on January 17, 1948.]
- B. YOU may have this personal encounter with God! It is the most important knowledge that you will ever know! You dare not stop short of the personal certitude.
But once we KNOW, we will want, somehow, to TELL:

II. CHRISTIANS NEED TO SAY WHAT THEY KNOW

"I DELIVERED ... what I received!"

- A. THE JOY OF KNOWING DEMANDS THE JOY OF SHARING
In another passage Paul tells King Agrippa "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision." From the first day Paul wanted to tell others about his newfound life in Christ.
 - 1. On the Road to Emmaus the sad, discouraged disciples met Jesus. He changed their gloom and doubt to faith and joy: and they immediately walked the seven-plus miles back to Jerusalem. WHY? To deliver what they had also received!
- B. EVERY CHRISTIAN IS CALLED TO REPRESENT HER/HIS LORD
We are AMBASSADORS. Ambassadors do not invent their own messages; they do not set policy. They say what they have been told to say; they represent the home office. There is plenty of room for creativity and individualism in this world. But when it comes to the true faith, we do not

invent or develop or even discover our own salvation: it must be handed to us directly from God Himself!

C. WE MUST STICK TO WHAT WE KNOW FOR OURSELVES

What WE have received we may be fairly sure is what our brothers and sisters could use. They don't need ADVICE; they need LIFE WITH A CAPITAL "L."

When we begin to preach second-hand sermons— when we tell others what we are not sure of ourselves— our witness is hollow! It is really impossible to share a Christ who we do not personally know for ourselves. Can you see the importance of that 'inner assurance' that we do, in fact, know Jesus, and that our lives are hid in Him?

- D. In the scripture that we most often use before communion, from I Corinthians 11, Paul uses this same phrase: "I give to you what first of all I received myself."

III. GOD'S LOVE GIVES US PEOPLE WE WANT TO TELL! LOVE MAKES US CARE ENOUGH TO SHARE

- A. The desire to share is GOOD! It speaks of the genuine-ness of faith. And the way to say it is simply to keep at it: talk of God's goodness to God's people; there will be opportunity to talk of God's goodness to others who need to know it. We MAY deliver to others what we have ourselves received!
- B. God's Word is OPEN before us: it is a never-ending source of life, and of promises that meet us at the point of need. We freely receive; we take, and partake, and rightly so.
- C. But so is God's WILL open before us! In the same measure we RECEIVE of God's promises, we are willing to SHARE. With Paul we say, "That which I received . . . I also delivered!" And it is the highest joy and privilege there is, to realize that we are ambassadors for Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

I think it was commendable that Ben wanted to tell someone else about Falmouth; that he went to the mailbox. But as Christians, we can do better than a general,

commendable desire to tell "someone;" we can obey Jesus Christ, and be sent; we can remember the elementary facts of communication: Something to say; an effective way to say it; someone to say it to - -

And we can receive and deliver the Good News of the Gospel: We can say to the world: "Jesus loves ME, this I know! And because I know it myself, I can say to YOU: Jesus loves YOU, too !"

Preparation for Communion:

I Corinthians 11:23 - 30

The table of the Lord is for all who will come; It is an observance of God's grace.

Wherever you are, if you want to draw near to God, you are invited: Celebrate prevenient grace - God is seeking your salvation Celebrate saving grace - God has received you unto Himself in forgiveness Celebrate sanctifying grace - God is making you in the image of His Son, by His Spirit

It is an celebration of God's Presence Not only DID Jesus die for you Not only WILL Jesus come again and receive you to Himself- But Jesus IS PRESENT with those who meet in His name; He is Present in Communion is a special way, and it truly is a means of grace to those who come expectantly.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION OF ELEMENTS PRAYER OF HEART-SEARCHING, OF
DEDICATION OF SELF INVITATION TO PARTAKE

#53 (EH) Sent Forth by God's Blessing

In Step with King Jesus

September 8, 1991 AM

Lesson John 21:15-25

Text: Mark 1:16-18

Introduction

If you follow some people around you'll get rich; if you hang with others you'll get into trouble. One thing is sure, the people that you are in step with are going to make a big difference in your life.

Peter decided to hang around with Jesus and that decision took him into all sorts of situations! Including one time of walking on water! People have talked about it ever since, but no one, so far as I know, has ever done it in the summer time!

It all began for Peter one day by the sea-side. Several boats were pulled up on the beach, and Peter and his brother and others were going about their business. Some were washing their nets; some were looking to their boats.

Peter thought he saw the ripple of fish feeding along the shore and he walked over and threw his round casting net over the place. It was just then he saw Him. The Man called Christ, the Man who was like no other man.

Something inside Peter was stirred deeply. And then he heard Jesus say, "Follow me..."

And that is just what Peter did. He put aside everything, and began to follow Jesus. He could not know then where they might go. But Peter decided he would forsake all else and trust Jesus.

I. A CALL TO FOLLOW JESUS IS A CALL TO ABANDONMENT

- A. A call "Follow Me" means leaving nets and all and a definite change of life. A "turning." It may not be as dramatic a leaving as Peter and Andrew, James and John, but make no mistake- if you follow Jesus, really follow Him, then NOTHING else comes ahead of Him!

- B. A call means willingness to take orders. Training is part of serving. Rough edges need to be knocked off in any smooth-running relationship. [Marriage's first 365 days!]

Peter was of the "Let's just DO it!" "Shoot from the LIP" variety of people! GOOD people— but do they ever need to learn to FOLLOW and TAKE ORDERS!

- C. Later Peter came near complaining: "Lord, we have left ALL and followed Thee!" Implying, perhaps, the question: Is it worth it, this total abandonment? Jesus did not hesitate to assure him: "Yes! It is the ONLY way!"

[BACK TO PETER'S ADVENTURES:] Do you remember two key incidents in Peter's life?

One was a real high point, when Peter was inspired to say to Jesus: "Thou art the Christ! the Son of the living God!"

And in reply Jesus said: "Blessed are you, Peter! I will build my church on this Rock! I'm giving you the keys to the kingdom!"

The other time was one Peter would liked to have forgotten. It was a really low place. Trusting in his own strength, Peter said: "Though every other follower abandons You, I won't!" And this time Jesus gently said, "You will deny me three times before morning!"

II. A CALL TO FOLLOW JESUS IS A CALL TO RESPONSIBILITY

- A. It is inescapable: God's people are groomed for growth. This is certainly true in the Cosmic Scheme; Jesus said that when the faithful face Him in heaven they will hear Him say: "Well done! You have been faithful over few things, I will make you ruler over MANY! Enter into the JOY of thy Lord!"

But don't be mistaken: It is also true right here in the arena of mortal existence!!

- B. Imperfect, controversial, biased and sometimes a bit two-faced because of his fears (see Galatians 2), still Peter was challenged by Jesus with the charge of great responsibility: "I will give you the keys to the kingdom..."

- C. God challenges every one of His children to follow Jesus into matters that count for eternity. He does not want us to settle for trivia.

Someone has scrambled all the price tags of our world; we pay too much for money, and we value life-changing love so little! But Jesus gives the keys to the kingdom to those who will follow Him, and only to those.

[BACK TO THE PETER SAGA] - One last incident in Peter's following of Jesus:

It the first Easter evening. Jesus left a message: "Tell the disciples, and especially Peter, I'll meet them by the lake."

It was a 90-mile journey back to Galilee, and the disciples must have made it back to Galilee in record time. And less than a week later, back by the beautiful lake where they had once earned their living, Jesus met them on the very same shore where He had first called them.

Jesus took the big fisherman aside, and He tenderly renewed the relationship.

"Do you still love Me?" He asked.

Peter was grieved that He had to ask. But the relationship was restored.

Then Jesus said those very same words again! He said, "Whatever the others do, Peter, you FOLLOW ME! "You will follow Me now, Peter, even to the death."

III. A CALL TO FOLLOW JESUS IS A CALL TO LOVE AND TRUST EVEN TO THE DEATH

- A. It isn't that we will be tortured to death. Things aren't always as simple and clear-cut as that. "How sweet would be their children's fate if they, like them, could die for Thee."

Anyway, in this world, [which until recently was divided into what we call "Free" and "Communist" or "Totalitarian"] where, do you suppose, is the Christian Faith "healthiest?" Where it costs the most!

- B. The most important aspect of faith to superficial Christians is that we save our souls from hell, and save our skins here from as much discomfort here and now as possible.

This is what spawns such half-truth doctrines such as "Give to get!" "Tithe the income you WISH you had!" Even "Seek first the kingdom— do the necessary religious exercises— AND ALL THESE THINGS WILL BE ADDED!" People go where they hear what they want to hear! But all these Bible-half-truths are perversions of deeper truth about true riches!

- C. In matter of fact, Life (as we see it with the natural eye) is NOT fair! Jesus was crucified at 33 years of age! Every one of his followers since, up to the present generation, of course, has died, too.

Does it pay to follow Jesus, even to the death? I WISH WE COULD ASK PETER IN PERSON, RIGHT NOW! (Where, do you suppose Peter is?)

Conclusion:

The common caricature of Peter is the gate keeper of heaven. There he stands with the keys, saying who shall and who shall not enter. But of course that is just a caricature.

Peter, just now, is near where Jesus is! He is still following! Peter, just like you and me, needed to come to God by grace through faith. [Am I saying all people are equal before God? In love, I am sure we are all loved equally. But in stature and accomplishment? No way! When we see Peter we shall be duly impressed.]

I imagine the reunion that took place when Peter died! How, do you suppose, did Jesus greeted Peter when Peter's great spirit left his martyred body, and was escorted by the angels to the Presence?

[FINAL 'PETER SAGA'] Whether or not it was said in words, or how it was expressed, can only be imagined. But in the greeting [of "Well done, faithful servant! Enter thou into the JOYS of thy Lord!"] there had to be a flashback in both their minds to that day along the lake shore when a number of boats were pulled up on the sand and a stranger came by with the holy light of God in His face, and he said to Peter and his brother, Andrew, "Follow Me!"

Jesus is still stopping by where we are, going about our daily routines, and saying:
"Follow Me!"

You don't know what you are getting into, or where you may end up if you hear that voice and obey. But you do know Who you will be walking with!

Prayer: Thank You for the privilege of being near You! Amen.

Hymn *Where He Leads Me, I Will Follow*

Hearing Gods Voice

Prayer Meeting Meditation

September 11, 1991

Hebrews 3:7-8; 14-15 also Hebrews 4:7

Exodus 17:1-7 "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Focus: Psalm (7-8)

As I get older my hearing gets less trustworthy. Is that possible in spiritual sense? Not necessarily; however we can take God's voice for granted.

It is not just possible that heart-hardening could be imperceptible and slow? Could my "spiritual hearing" possibly be affected by a hardening of the heart?

FOUR WAYS MY SPIRITUAL HEARING MIGHT BE BLOCKED OR IMPAIRED:

A FAILURE TO PRAISE THE LORD FOR WHAT HE HAS DONE!

(1) Hebrews 3:12

This is the incident of referred to in Psalm 95 and three times here in Hebrews (Exodus 17) where the people GRUMBLED even though God had done so very much for them . . . LEST there be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God.

THINKING THAT GOD'S SIMPLE, HOLY, RIGHTEOUS 'RULES OF SIN' DO NOT APPLY TO YOU

(2) Hebrews 3:13

The children of Israel were called OUT of Egypt, INTO a special relationship with God. They were to be HOLY so they could be LIKE God, and be NEAR Him! God's laws are for OUR benefit; and they have not changed! Honesty/Purity/Mercy/Humility LEST any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

SETTLING DOWN' ... BY THINKING "NOW I HAVE ARRIVED!"

... AT ANY STAGE OF THE JOURNEY!

(3) Hebrews 4:1

Caleb and Joshua never "got used" to wandering around; they knew there was yet a GOAL to attain. They didn't "just settle." (Genesis 15:6!!) LEST while a promise remains . . . any of you should seem to have come short of it.

NEGLECTING THE LIVING QUALITY OF THE WORD OF GOD

... EITHER BY NOT HEEDING BIBLE PREACHING, OR MORE IMPORTANT, BY NOT READING TO OBEY!

(4) Hebrews 4:11,12

It is never a light thing to have access to God's Word; to God's will for YOU! LEST anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience. Light is for walking in!

Conclusion:

God is speaking every day! He has a plan for YOU! You can hear Him! You can know Him! God IS speaking! He WILL give us "REST" as we pursue "REST!" Heaven's JOY as we go toward heaven and home!

So— (stated positively):

1. PRAISE the Lord . . . don't grumble!
2. Stay away from sin (temptation!) . . . sin is deceitful!
3. Never think you have (fully) arrived!
4. Keep digging in into God's Holy Word!

Jesus is our great High Priest!

[vvs 14-15-16 Let us therefore draw near with CONFIDENCE!]

EH #66 May the Mind of Christ, My Savior

Confidence in Prayer

September 15, 1991 pm

Luke 18:9-17 "*Two men went up to the temple to pray ...*"

Confidence is a great thing; but clearly in the matter of prayer it is important where we place our confidence. Jesus told a story to warn us not to place our confidence in our own righteousness while we look down on others.

I. A VERY SIMPLE STORY

Instead of giving long abstract lists of rules, Jesus often clothed the truth in stories. Here in just a few words Jesus gives a picture of two men going up the place of prayer, the temple.

- A. One key thought of this story is that we do not always know what is going on in someone else's prayer life. We cannot see other people as God sees them. One thing we can be sure of, people are probably not what we think they are. An Old Testament scripture tells us that man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart! (I Samuel 16.)
- B. Here were two very different men. One was a man obviously accustomed to the temple and its surroundings. The other was in a line of work that the average Jew of his day despised; he collected taxes from the Jews for the occupying Roman government to make a living for himself.

One man was used to prayer; he was at home in the temple; he lived for the established religion. The other was not the kind we might think of as religious. But there they are. Both of these men have climbed the Hill of Zion to the beautiful temple in order to pray.

Jesus described first the Pharisee:

II. THE PIOUS MAN AND HIS PRAYER

A. It isn't wrong to be pious

1. If you read the story carefully, it does NOT say that all Pharisees are bad; not all religious people are suspect. As a matter of fact, the thing that makes the story striking is the fact that here was a religious man who is not all that he would seem to be on the outside.
2. A popular negative reaction to piety today- to religion- would seize this story, as it does every failure of every prominent Christian, and use it as proof that there is nothing at all to supernatural faith. That is not what Jesus intended.
3. Pharisee means something negative to us now, but Pharisee was not the dirty word then that it has become. Paul was a Pharisee! This greatest Christian, perhaps, that ever followed Jesus claimed to be a Pharisee; he was raised a Pharisee, and told a throng in Jerusalem that he WAS a Pharisee.

Pharisees were people who loved God's word; who strove to live by God's Word; who believed in eternal life— who would make wonderful church members if they were also people after God's own heart.

Pharisees— people who "live by the book"— make good Christians if they ever really get thoroughly converted! They TITHE! They APPLY THE BIBLE TO THEIR EVERYDAY LIVING! They go beyond what they were taught of the letter of the law, and live out the JOY that comes from serving whole-heartedly!

B. True piety is inherently humble

1. Where this Pharisee's faith went wrong was in a misplaced confidence. It is one thing to have poise and self-confidence in the normal sense of the word; it is quite another thing to come to the place of prayer and face Almighty God like this man in Jesus' parable did.
2. How was that? How did the Pharisee pray?
 - a. The Pharisee prayed with Thanksgiving! Isn't that good? Thanksgiving is good— except that this man thanked God for being so

fortunate as to know him! I know that doesn't "make sense" but there it is!

- b. The Pharisee prayed with an awareness of sin It is necessary for us to see that humans are sinful, and God is holy, or we cannot appreciate the need for salvation. This man had a well-developed sense of sin—— except the only sins he saw were the sins of other people! He saw every sin except his own!
- c. The Pharisee also was aware of others as he prayed. When we pray, we are made conscious of the fact that we do not, we cannot live in a vacuum.

Real prayer makes us aware of others,. and of their needs.

But this dear religious pious Pharisee compared himself with others— to his own advantage. "I thank you that I am NOT like to others— especially that wretched tax gatherer over there!"

In summary, here was the Pharisee's prayer:

Thanksgiving ... for what he had to give to God! Litany of self-righteousness (good things!) Awareness of sin ... of everyone but himself! Comparison ... not with Jesus but with weak and obvious.

- 3. And what was the result? The RESULT of this great utterance was exactly ... nothing! ZERO. Dead air.

When souls go away from the place of prayer— from worship— dry and empty— it could be that there was no spiritual food and drink available; it could be that there was spiritual food and drink in abundance, but no means of receiving the supply.

[Transition:] It is probably hardly worth our time to listen in on the prayer of the other person in the story Jesus told. He isn't a seasoned, initiated spiritual giant just as yet. He isn't quite "at home" in this beautiful temple. All the same, here he is:

III. THE SINNER AND HIS PRAYER

A. A sense of distance

One thing that strikes us as we look at the word-picture Jesus has given us of these two men at prayer is that this other man, this not-so-attractive, not-so-religious man is standing a distance apart from the others; perhaps a distance from the altar itself.

What is this "sense of distance"? What is this feeling of separation? Do you think you ever know what I am talking about?

Does God ever seem far away, ever?

Do you seem somehow set apart from others who seem to be "in" and you are "out"?

Is it hard to draw near to God? Does it seem so, sometimes? Drawing near to a great God— is not small stuff. Beware of the person who has God all figured out; who never stands in awe of the holiness and power and justice of God.

Yes, God has taught us to call Him "Father!" And yes, God is love. God is also Other.

Am I saying we ought to stand at a distance? Or that we should recognize the distance that is already there?

What this tells me is that this unlikely pray-er— this publican— had a healthier concept of God than the Pharisee had. He sees God as HOLY! He sees himself as unworthy to draw near!

B. Awareness of need

The next thing that strikes us about Jesus' description of this publican is that he is NOT telling God how GOOD he is! As a matter of fact, he is having trouble looking up into the face of God! There is a keen awareness of unworthiness manifest here.

Can you identify with that at all?

C. There is somehow boldness to ask for grace

Somehow the holiness of God has drawn him to the place of prayer; somehow the gift of faith is being imparted. In spite of the OTHER-ness of God, this poor sinner is emboldened to ask for forgiveness!

Courage to ask is a step of faith; a gift of God to those who come to Him.

D. Sorrow for sin

We don't have much to go on; but Jesus said this man 'smote his breast,' with his head bowed. I believe this is evidence of sorrow for sin. It was enough for a loving Father God!

Not much of a prayer, you'll have to admit. But what was the result?

E. A prayer that reached the Throne of God

RESULT: This man, not the pious, religious one, went back down the hill to his home justified !! On the basis of Christ's provision— on the basis of the love of God forever identifying with sinful men of all ages— even though he didn't understand— even though this is just an illustration, remember it is a parable of truth told by Jesus— and Jesus said this man's prayer hit the center of the bull's eye.

Did he KNOW he was justified?

Well, remember it WAS just a story. But it is a story that has happened over and over again across the millennia— and the answer is:

I like to think he KNEW he was justified, too!

Conclusion:

There you have it: a contrast of ways to come to God— of ways to seek God's face— of approaches to the need for God and salvation.

But wait a minute— there is a little story at the end of this story. It isn't a parable, this time. It really happens.

IV. THE 'OTHER STORY' — "COMING LIKE A CHILD"

- A. It may have been just a coincidence. But I think it perfectly fits. The other story is that just then some mothers came by with their children, and they wanted Jesus to touch them, to bless them.
- B. You know how the disciples reacted: "This isn't kid stuff— beat it! Don't bother the Master!" Jesus seems to say: "This is exactly what I have been talking about! No "important people" understand! Only the true in heart may come!"
- C. What do the tax-gatherer and little children have in common? The stories are really NOT so unrelated: Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child does not enter at all!"

What do the tax-gatherer and a little child have in common?

Honesty? A certain humility? Children may be self-centered (aren't we all underneath?) but they know that they aren't "big folks" either!

- D. Our confidence is to be placed in the willingness of God to meet us, cleanse and save us, and accept us by grace into His family. When our confidence is in our own spiritual wealth we are in grave danger!

In the last book of the Bible are messages for every church, of every age. But the most serious warning is to a church which acted very much like this Pharisee in Jesus' story, The Church at Laodocia. The Church at Laodocia had everything! Except it had lost the simple, straightforward, humble, life-changing love of God!

- E. How can we pray with confidence? The place for our confidence in prayer is in the holiness and the love of God! In Him we can know that we are justified freely!

Prayer

Hymn #60 (Exalt Him) *Give Me a Holy Life*

Contrasts in Giving

September 29, 1991 am

Acts 2:43 - 47 And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from, house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Acts 3:36 - 4:2 And Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means, Son of Encouragement), and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

But a certain man named Ananias, with his wife, Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet.

Introduction:

We look to the scriptures for salvation truth, doctrines to believe unto salvation. We also look to the scriptures for pictures of faith, examples to follow into profitable service of our Lord. These examples, these pictures, are to be discerned and followed in spirit, not necessarily literally.

I. PICTURES OF GIVING IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

Early in the Book of Acts are key passages that bear on how some of the early Christians gave. At least, here are some observations:

1. Acts 2: The disciples had all things common; It seems as though there was A REAL "TEAM SPIRIT" throughout the whole church, even in the matter of giving:
2. Acts 4: Barnabas had a field that he sold and donated the money to the church; Then, as now, there were people who seemed to delight in giving— the gift of giving; there were INDIVIDUALS THAT PUT THE CONGREGATION ABOVE SELF
3. Acts 5: Ananias lied about his giving. But also then, as now, there were INDIVIDUALS THAT TRIED TO 'USE' THE TEAM TO MAKE THEMSELVES 'LOOK GOOD'

II. BRINGING THESE PICTURES UP-TO-DATE IN TODAY'S CHURCH

THE TEAM EFFORT IN TODAY'S WORLD - Is such a thing possible?

1. HOW MUCH LOYALTY SHOULD A CHURCH EXPECT?

A very recent book [The Social Dimension of Sectarianism, by Bryan R. Wilson, Oxford Press, 1990] expresses what many academics probably believe:

If a man is an Anglican or a Methodist, this is but one among many of his attributes— he is also a lathe-turner, a pigeon-fancier, a trade-unionist, a harmonica-player, and so on. But if a man is {a member of a sect- my words} ... his religious commitment is supposed by him, by his co-religionists, and even by his workmates, kinsfolk, and acquaintances, to influence in very high degree, not only his attitudes but the choice and quality of performance of all his social roles ... his religious motivation .. super-ordinates all other motivation .." 178-179. Wilson goes on to say that such behavior is deviant from the wider society in both kind and degree.

In other words, if church and religion are kept "IN," and don't have any impact on life in general, [Wilson is saying] we are "NORMAL." Religion is a PRIVATE matter. Churches are commodities, like Super Stop 'n Shop. The church is supposed to be there to provide services and meet needs, not to make any demands!

(I agree that) Any church that seeks to make any exclusive claim on God or salvation is by that very claim a SECT. Any church that expects its members to lock-step their way to heaven all on the same method is extremely dangerous, and should be avoided.

But any Church that preaches Christ crucified, risen, and coming again is derelict if it does not demand a first loyalty to HIM! And yet any church that expects all-out loyalty to Christ, and expects that loyalty to be expressed mainly through the local fellowship is suspect in this pluralistic society. Every Christian can and must be centered in God through a local church fellowship. If you don't feel comfortable in one church, there are others. But if you are seeking a place where you don't have to make any kind of personal investment in your self, your time, and your means, you are mistaken about the nature of the Christian faith.

If a church does not apply Christ's demands to put Him first, and then at least try to offer ways and means of giving to God through its ministries, it is not worthy the name.

2. THIS SOUNDS HIGHLY IDEALISTIC, I KNOW. What are some practical applications of giving of means through the church? I've asked two members of our church board to express some personal ideas this morning. A couple of weeks ago our board prayerfully discussed the matter of stewardship. I listened to the discussion- - and afterward I asked Donna Mowen and Michael Roberts to say a few words today:

[You'll just have to imagine good testimonies to a commitment in stewardship of time, talent, and finances here . . . 3 - 5 (?) minutes.]

III. CONTRASTS IN GIVING

THIS SCRIPTURE IN TODAY'S LIVING

1. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE ALL THINGS IN COMMON?

Is this happening anywhere in the world today? It would be hard to recognize one method of giving or organization among the Christian

churches around the world that are making an impact on their communities for Christ. But they do have this one thing in common: they live their lives for God centered in Christ, and they live those lives for God through their church!

The center of our life is Christ. The life of Christ is expressed in His church. The basic unit of the church is the local congregation.

I pray that God will give us a new sense of mission and unity and one-ness.

We are NOT forced into some narrow interpretation of life, or some weird personal/corporate interpretation of rules. But we must be willing to be thought SECT-LIKE, for being a Christian and a follower of Jesus will become the most important thing in all of being.

2. WHAT IS THE LESSON OF BARNABAS? ARE THERE MODERN-DAY BARNABASES?

Verlin Long lived in order to give! He had the gift of giving!

3. THERE IS ALSO A LESSON IN THE STORY OF ANANIAS: MODERN-DAY ANANIASSES:

Those who seek to use the church— who give from selfish motives— who are interested only in themselves. Some of these are still around in 1991.

Ananias gave because he wanted the reward of being thought good like Barnabas. His sin was in pretending to be God-centered when he was not.

It is a deadly business to seek to use God, to seek to use God's church, to seek to advance selfishly. People with a critical spirit, or an attitude of selfishness regarding the church effectively cut off the most effective tool God has to supply grace to their own lives, and those of their family.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO REACH BACK INTO THE BOOK OF ACTS AND TRANSLATE THE LESSONS WE FIND THERE INTO LIVING, GROWING SPIRITUAL LIFE? I believe that it is!

Prayer:

Lord, Help us to LOVE- love YOU and Your CHURCH- and pour our lives into Your KINGDOM as You give us grace. Make us SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF CONSOLATION, like Barnabas, I pray, in Jesus' Name.

291 All for Jesus

Bring an Offering

September 22, 1991

Psalm 96:8

Introduction:

According to our Lord, we are supposed to worship God in spirit and in truth. But in one part of our worship services we often say, "Let us worship the Lord with tithes and offerings." Money is the essence of material reality. What part does money have in worship? What do you think about the offering? The time in our service when we collect money?

Have you ever stopped to think about this time when men and women lay hard-earned cash on shiny brass plates that are actually part of the church furnishings? Do you wonder why we take an offering when we come together in worship?

'Is there any question? God needs money to run His church.'

There is no question that the money we give in our offerings is the life-blood of the work of the church. There is no question that from time to time we give, perhaps a little extra, because we perceive that the church needs the money at that particular time.

But is the need for money the basic drive behind the offering? Or is there another need? Perhaps we bring tithes and offerings because we have a deep need to express something important to God?

There are many questions we could raise about the offering: Does it matter how much money I give? ... isn't it the spirit behind the giving that counts? ... why talk about giving in relationship to worship, anyway? I probably will bring up more questions than I answer. All the same, I ask you just now to take a look at sacrifice and giving as part of worship:

I. THE IDEA OF GIVING IN WORSHIP

(Psalm 96:8) "Ascribe to the Lord the glory of His name; bring an offering, and come into His courts."

- A. The very earliest activities of man as recorded in the Bible had to do with the offering of a sacrifice to God by the first brothers, Cain and Abel.

It is significant that the first discussion about offering to God ended in a tragic clash, and people have been disagreeing about such matters ever since. Still, somehow from the beginning of human history, it has been important to pray, and to come to God with some token of sacrifice in hand.

- B. To trace the history of sacrifice as part of prayer and in known human cultures and religions would make an interesting study for a lifetime. The part that sacrifice and offering have had in worship in the Judeo-Christian scriptures runs straight through from Genesis to Revelation. Part of the worship of Jehovah God is dedicating to God that which is precious to the worshiper. And some form or other of offering seems to be a common thread of most if not all the religions of the world.

- 1. But in pagan religions this universal idea of sacrifice in worship is corrupted, and is centered, not on the goodness and love and holiness of a God of grace, but on man instead.

Pagan sacrifices are for good luck, or for the appeasement of angry gods, or for the buying of favor. [It is a matter of record that many world religions have featured human sacrifice to insure harvests, or to make sure summer would return, or whatever. Cite: Aztec, Mayan pyramid discoveries; human sacrifices, etc.]

- 2. Sad to say, many so-called Christians bring offerings for the very same reasons: to appease an angry God, or to bring good luck, or for fear of what will happen if they don't.

Certainly this is not the kind of sacrifice our Bible teaches; certainly NOT the kind of offering that God demands of His children.

So- why DO we have offerings as part of worship— and how OUGHT we to give to God?

II. OUR GOD MAKES IT CLEAR OUR SACRIFICES ARE NOT FOR HIS UPKEEP

(Psalm 50:12) "If I were hungry, would I tell you? The cattle on a thousand hills are mine ... you cannot enrich Me!"

- A. Make no mistake, our offerings are designated for the upkeep of God's anointed church. And that kind of upkeep is God-ordained, and not at all wrong.

In the Old Testament, the system of tithes- actually begun long before the Law- maintained the orders of priests and the Tabernacle.

In the New Testament the early believers at first had "all things in common" and gave liberally of their money and goods as well as their very lives to see the church go forward. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9: (11)

"If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we should reap material things from you? If others share the right over you, do we not more? . . . Do you not know that those who perform sacred services eat the food of the temple, and those who attend regularly to the altar have their share with the altar? So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel ..."

So it is not wrong that the tithes and offerings support the visible church. It is right and proper that we give to God through the church; or, that we give to the church as unto God.

But our giving does not enrich God, nor if we withhold our sacrifice does it diminish God. We may by withholding our gifts impoverish some local work, and in so doing impoverish ourselves; but make no mistake, we shall not bankrupt God Almighty.

- B. Giving is a response of love and obedience and thanksgiving to God by His people. (Psalm 50:14) "Offer to God a sacrifice ... of thanksgiving!! And pay your vows, etc."

- C. The fact that "it pays" to put God first, or that "You can't outgive God" or "Tithing makes us partners with God" may be very true. But these motives for giving are still based on a reward and punishment, serve-God-for-profit concept of giving. There are higher motives. True giving involves love.

III. GIVING: GOD CENTERED, GOD-INITIATED SACRIFICE

- A. Love involves sacrifice. There has to be a giving up of something of self in the favor of the one loved. God is the Initiator of love. Perhaps that is at the heart of giving in worship; the expression of the other-centeredness.
- B. God has taken the initiative in this self-giving. God could not change His holiness, nor would we ever wish Him so to do. But God could and has stooped in love to give of Himself because He loved us. Our giving needs reflect that self-giving. In Hebrews is a passage that tells what love and sacrifice really are all about:

(Hebrews 9:11-14) "When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves, but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God?" ... (26b) "But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face the judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him."

- C. This great LOVE is at the heart of who and what God IS. It is not 'just by Jesus Christ, who loves us and placates the Father who is angry with us,' but this great sacrifice of love

expressed at Calvary is by the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who share heaven's life with us in the Incarnation.

- D. The Cross of Calvary, mystery of God's love, makes the idea of our paying for our own salvation by the value of our money or by the filthy rags of our own righteousness not only absurd but actually an insult to the Father and the Son. When the perfect sacrifice has been made, how can we ever say, "And now, in addition to your life which is poured out for me, I will give You five dollars? Or fifty-million dollars?"
- E. But how do offerings and sacrifices translate into what we do with MONEY in our church services? Is there any connection? Doesn't Romans 12:1,2 speak of a different KIND of offering?

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE WIDOW'S OFFERING (Luke 20:1-4)

- A. The story of the widow's mites is important. It is told in the context of Jesus' final days of ministry. Jesus used the widow as an example of how properly to give.

He watched rich and poor give to the temple treasury that day, and he commented only on this one woman's way of giving. He indicated that the way this poor widow gave was the right way to make offering a part of worship. How?

She had three things going for her:

1. SHE HAD POVERTY TO BRING HER FACE TO FACE WITH LIFE AT ELEMENTAL, IMPORTANT LEVELS. It isn't hard to face up to what is really important in life WHEN LIFE IS REDUCED TO ESSENTIALS.

I have been poor, materially; and while I am not now rich by any means, I have more than enough to eat. I am not espousing material poverty as good in any way. Yet Jesus told us, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Poverty, being poor in spirit, is the realization that all of us are dependent on God for our very existence. This woman's poverty was apparent. We are "affluent." Look at all the things we have! What is hard for us who live very near to Laodocia to grasp is that we are in abject

poverty as well! Our bargaining, our self-righteousness cannot buy life when the time comes for us to face the Judgment. This woman had no false security built on temporal, material substance.

2. THIS POOR WOMAN HAD A HEALTHY FAITH AND TRUST, ENOUGH SO THAT SHE COULD FREELY GIVE to a temple run by imperfect humans in the name of God.

It was not difficult for her to understand that she was not enriching God. Yet she gave; her money was needed. She would not say, "The people who run this Temple are not to be trusted— I'll send my money to the true ministry on the TV"; or, "I need this money, and the rich people can give my share." No, she had faith and trust to bring what she could, not what she thought she could afford, but all that she had, to God.

3. One other thing this woman had— that every true giver has. SHE HAD DIVINE APPROVAL. It wasn't just that Jesus was there watching. She couldn't know that He was going to make her an object lesson. But she knew that God saw, that He knew— and she was living in partnership with Him. His approval was all she needed!

B. OUR GIVING CAN BE GOD-CENTERED. It can exalt God's name. It can go beyond a legal decimal point. It can go beyond the expectation of return. It can be an expression of our expression of love for the sacrifice God has made for us. Much of our giving has been stuck on lower motivation: [Cite illustration: Father asked son who was working when he was going to buy a car. Son said he was waiting for the hundredfold return on the \$50 he had given to God. Father, who was wiser in the faith, said, "You already have your return— it is called a job!"]

C. ALL OF LIFE CAN HONOR GOD. God wants to be partners with us in the details of our workday world. Our giving must reflect a love for Him that exalts His name.

Conclusion:

I was brought up believing in storehouse tithing. I came through the Great Depression in a house where my parents tithed, and where God supplied. Their tithing was not in order to demand of God, but it certainly made it easier for their faith to reach out in times of need. I KNOW BY EXPERIENCE THAT STOREHOUSE TITHING WORKS!

But I was also saved because I didn't want to go to hell. I was taught that sin separates me from God, and if I persisted in sin, I would be permanently separated. I BELIEVED THAT! (AND I STILL DO!)

BUT I HOPE I GIVE NOW FOR HIGHER REASONS... AND I HOPE I SERVE GOD FOR LOVE, AND NOT JUST AS A FIRE ESCAPE!

I am not preaching "Give to get!" this morning. I do believe that no one is a fool who accepts God's offer of partnership. But I am preaching that giving, and that sacrificing, giving what costs, giving our all literally in submission, and giving our tithes and whatever else God requests through the church, is part of the worship of God. And I BELIEVE THAT THE HIGHEST KIND OF GIVING DURING WORSHIP, AS WELL AS IN ALL OF LIFE— IS A TOTAL SURRENDER IN LOVE OF ALL OUR LOVES BECAUSE WE LOVE!

Prayer

#405 I'd Rather Have Jesus

A Message from God to My Heart

September 29, 1991 PM

Psalm 147

Praise Ye the Lord: for it is good to sing praises unto our God; for it is pleasant, and praise of comely. [2] The Lord doth build up Jerusalem: he gathereth together the outcasts of Israel. [3] He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds. He telleth the number of stars; he calleth them all by their names. [5] Great is our Lord, and of great power; his understanding is infinite. The Lord lifteth up the meek: he casteth the wicked down to the ground.

Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; sing praise upon the harp unto our God: Who covereth the heaven with clouds, who prepareth rain for the earth, who maketh grass grow upon the mountains. He giveth the beast his food, and to the young ravens which cry. He delighteth not in the strength of the horse: he taketh not pleasure in the legs of man.

[11] The Lord taketh pleasure in them that fear him, in those that hope in his mercy. Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem; praise thy God, O Zion. For He hath strengthened the bars of thy gates; he hath blessed thy children within thee. He maketh peace in thy borders, and filleth thee with the finest of wheat. He sendeth forth his commandment upon earth; his word runneth very swiftly. He giveth snow like wool: he scattereth the hoarfrost like ashes. He casteth forth his ice like morsels: who can stand before his cold? He sendeth out his word and melteth them: he causeth his wind to blow, and the waters flow. He showeth his word unto Jacob, his statutes and his judgments unto Israel. He has not dealt so with any nation: and as for his judgments, they have not known them. Praise ye the Lord.

Introduction:

WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

- God is NOT like anyone or anything else. He must reveal Himself.
- God is not even UN-like other things!
- Nothing is "the opposite of God!" The opposite of "good" is "evil," but the opposite of God" is not "the devil." GOD REVEALS HIMSELF:

I. 147:2 GOD IS IN THE BUILDING-UP BUSINESS

A. GOD WILL BUILD HIS CHURCH

1. An encouragement when we were building this church (from idea to paper to financing and construction;) God built this church, even if He used YOU to do it!
2. An encouragement TODAY! Inasmuch as it is GOD's CHURCH, HE WILL BUILD IT! God still will build His church!
3. Second Church in Dorchester!

B. GOD WILL BUILD YOUR CHARACTER

1. The human personality is the crowning creation of God! No other creature has been made in His own image! When God takes a willful sinner and works with him or her and makes a character like unto His Son, Jesus Christ, that is truly wonderful!
2. God isn't done with me yet! I want to let Him build me! When we "make God in OUR image" we think He is mostly interested in what WE think is important: BIG MONEY— or FAMOUS PERSONALITY — or whatever. Actually God is in the important business of building PEOPLE!

II. 147:3 GOD IS IN THE HEART-HEALING BUSINESS

- A. God cares about how we feel! He will take your scarred and torn emotions and heal them.
- B. God's healing is from a different perspective from ours. But if we will trust Him, He will heal us!

III. 147:5 GOD UNDERSTANDS

- A. We think our lives, each one, are unique (and they are) and beyond the understanding of God (they are NOT!.) Whatever the complexities of your situation, your life just now, be sure of this: GOD UNDERSTANDS IT PERFECTLY!
- B. We don't pray to INFORM God of the facts. We pray in order to align our wills with His loving will for us; we pray to inform Gods and ourselves that we want to be HIS!

IV. 147:11 GOD TAKES PLEASURE IN MY TRUST

- A. God loves YOU just now, whoever and wherever you are in your spiritual journey.

But there is a difference in God LOVING you, and God TAKING PLEASURE in you! Any parent knows there is a vast difference between LOVING a child, and being thoroughly PLEASED with a child!

Does God TAKE PLEASURE IN YOU? God takes pleasure when we trust in Him, in His goodness!
- B. All trust is a response to God's GRACE! Wherever you are, if you look to Him in trust, God will respond to you!
- C. Such TRUST begins for us, at the CROSS! When we are convinced that Jesus died for the sins of the world— and then when we make the choice to trust Him completely for our salvation this mighty PLEASURE OF THE ALMIGHTY comes into focus! All heaven rejoices when we truly TRUST God!

Conclusion:

What is God "LIKE?"

God has revealed Himself in Jesus as One who loves us more than we can understand! He wants to BUILD you up— and HEAL you- - and DELIGHT IN YOU!

247 Only Trust Him

Basic Concepts of Faith

What it means to confess Jesus Christ as Savior.

October 6, 1991 pm

Romans 10:9,10 *With the MOUTH we confess . . . with the HEART we believe that God has raised Him from the dead we shall be saved.*

John 12:44-50; then 35-36; then 37-43:

Introduction:

TWO THINGS stand out in this passage:

1. FAITH IS PERSONAL CONTACT WITH GOD!

It is getting to know Jesus and walking with Him. It isn't so much a matter of being "right" or "wrong" as it is being in His Presence. Jesus IS Light!

2. FAITH IS A MOVING TARGET!

It moves toward God, and toward LIFE. We cannot sit in the light; we cannot merely bask in the light; we must walk in the light!

We say of saving faith: 'Faith is believing! We are believers!' But here (42-3) were men who believed, but were not believers!

- a. They did not want to risk losing a situation that was in some (human) measure secure; and
- b. They would rather be liked by people than be approved by God. How could they "believe" and not be believers?

I. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BELIEVE?

Are there two kinds of believing? Can I truly BELIEVE and still be lost?

WHAT IS SAVING FAITH?

Look at Romans 10:9,10:

[It is important that our concept of salvation come directly from the Word, and not second-hand from proof-texting or cliché. It is very easy to hear what we want to hear.]

- A. One element of FAITH is to come to a crisis of persuasion. Many people do not know who Jesus really IS! It is the Holy Spirit that takes Christ's Words and His witness, and convinces the world that God has spoken the Final Word in His Son, Jesus Christ!

This persuasion involves the simple facts of the Gospel: I have sinned, and deserve death. Jesus died on the cross for my life. Jesus rose again as MY champion over sin, death, hell.

It is only by the revelation of the Holy Spirit that I can believe that in my heart!

- B. But very evidently there ARE two levels of faith. It is one thing to know who Jesus IS, and quite another to KNOW JESUS AS PERSONAL LORD AND SAVIOR!

One level OF BELIEVING is at the point of accepting a thing as true, or being convinced. A second level OF BELIEVING is a willingness to line up the life in accordance with the truth.

- C. Here in this passage were men of leadership who had come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. But they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God, so they did not confess their faith openly. Perhaps they rationalized, and said: "If He IS Messiah— as we believe Him to be, He doesn't NEED our help! He will do all right by Himself, and when He is established, then we'll get on the winning side." These men never went all the way and confessed Jesus as Messiah, Lord, and Savior!

- D. We must conclude: FAITH IS NOT COMPLETE UNTIL IT IS CONFESSED! or, scripturally, FAITH IS NOT SAVING FAITH UNTIL IT IS CONFESSED So—:

II. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CONFESS JESUS CHRIST AS SAVIOR?

Confession is the other side of true faith; it is not the same as works . . . but involves a deliberate willingness to be available to God; to make our life HIS . . .

- A. Confession means baptism. The normal sequence of events includes baptism. It was Christ's clear command: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved..."(Mark 16) A washing, a burial, a symbol of birth to a new way, and in all an open confession before the public.
- B. Confession means an acknowledgment of Jesus before others. Testimony has this sacramental aspect; it is like water baptism. Every time we acknowledge Jesus publicly we strengthen our faith.
- C. Confession also has the aspect of acknowledging our NEED of Jesus: the sinful acts and nature that brought us condemnation. Only sinners can be saved! Only confessing sinners. {Someone said this is the difference between Jesus and Uncle Sam: When Uncle Sam wants people for his army, he says: Only able-bodied people can apply; but when Jesus wants people to serve Him He says: "Only the broken can come! Come unto Me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest!"
- D. We need to keep on confessing! throughout our walk with Jesus: being OPEN with Him about our shortcomings . . . finding the 'middle ground' between extremes: (sin every day in word, thought, deed: no different from pre-conversion AND no need whatsoever to pray: "Forgive us our debts!") But this is not the main thrust of "confess" in this passage.
- E. This "confession" or unashamed acknowledging of Jesus as Lord—this confessing HIM before people we know—becomes the cutting edge of WITNESS.

Conclusion:

Too much of the church has been like John 12:42-43. Somehow people have come to think that if they BELIEVE with their minds That Jesus is the Christ they are true followers of Jesus.

But this is not really what it means to be "Christian!" There must also be that abandoning of "security" and deliberate choosing rather to please GOD than care what people think! There must be the confession: JESUS IS LORD! LORD OF MY LIFE! And that is saving faith!

Make connection with JESUS! Throw caution to the winds, and CONFESS JESUS AS LORD! Walk in the Light . . . and keep on walking!

Basic Concepts of Faith

#7 (EH) *JESUS IS LORD*

#75 *Jesus, My Strength, My Hope*

A Call for Prophets

October 13, 1991

Numbers 11:25-29

Introduction:

The Exodus is under way. Hundreds of thousands of people are camped out all over hundreds of acres of desert real estate. They need to eat. Every day. They are not bashful about telling their leader what they want on the menu.

A Daunting Prospect

Moses is challenged by the sheer scope of his task. He didn't ask for this job in the first place. He complains to God:

"Where am I going to get the resources to carry through on this Exodus Project? If we slaughtered all the cattle today to eat we would be back to a starvation diet by the middle of next week!"

Divine Direction

God answers Moses. He is not silent. But God does not simply respond to Moses' question or answer in kind. Instead God says:

"Is my arm suddenly too short to reach where you are? Do you remember how you got here in the first place?" God's question stops Moses dead in his tracks. But it is only the beginning of God's answer. Still, it is enough to get Moses started forward again in obedience.

The Principle of Anointed Vision Shared

In obedience to God, Moses calls the high-level leaders together. There are 70 of them. He tells them that God has heard their prayer. He repeats the cryptic message he has received from God: "Is MY arm too short?" Even as Moses speaks God shines just a little of the light of His glory into those gathered leaders. He puts His Spirit on all of those who were gathered together.

It was an optimistic meeting, to say the least! It was like a preview of Pentecost, only 1,500 years early. The burden AND the blessing Moses had been carrying was shared. It is always a great thing when God's people hear directly from God!

But the record says that TWO of the 70 leaders, Eldad and Medad, were especially moved upon by the Spirit. They began to act like prophets. A prophet has the ability to see and to declare that God's way is best!

Now Moses was the accepted prophet in the camp; everyone knew that Moses was the called leader. Still, in what seemed to be a genuine way, here were two other leaders prophesying. Joshua- good, loyal, soon-to-be leader of the entire Exodus Joshua- was concerned for his beloved leader, Moses. He was understandably worried about insurrection, or a division of authority. But Moses sensed that this was of God. [There had been cases where people not called had taken on themselves the holy orders, with disastrous results. This was different.] So Moses said:

"Are you jealous for MY sake? Don't be! I would that all God's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put His Spirit on them!" He knew that when God's Spirit is involved, and the blessing is genuine, then God's work will go forward.

I. AN OLD TESTAMENT DREAM IS TO BE A NEW TESTAMENT REALITY

- A. It is an abrupt transition from the Exodus and this Old Testament story to the modern church scene. But there are some cogent parallels. If Moses was overwhelmed with his DAUNTING PROSPECT, so are we! And if God's people ever needed DIVINE DIRECTION, it is now! But what of Moses' "dream:" WOULD THAT ALL GOD'S PEOPLE WERE PROPHETS, AND THAT THE LORD WOULD PUT HIS SPIRIT ON ALL OF THEM?

1. LEAVE THE CONTEXT OF THE EXODUS FOR NOW:

The Exodus has always been a paradigm for salvation; for leaving sin's bondage, and being saved in a Passover-Red Sea crisis. Another time I might want to come back and use the specifics of Moses' wish and prayer for examples in our own spiritual pilgrimage.

2. FOCUS ON THE CHALLENGE OF THE DAY:

Just now I lift out the challenge of the scope of our task as Christians. Like Moses, we look at the challenge of living by faith, and we say: "Lord, where will we get resources to see Your church go forward in a wicked day?"

3. GOD'S ARM IS NOT TOO SHORT TO REACH US!:

The answer has to be the same one that Moses got! "Is MY arm short? I AM THAT I AM!" And God must put His Spirit on US, too—so that WE can prophecy! Joel 2:28 says that after Messiah comes, God will pour out His Spirit on all flesh! WE ARE CALLED TO BE PROPHETS!

B. WE NEED TO HEAR FROM GOD, AND KNOW HIS WORD FOR TODAY!

1. Moses thought he needed food. And he did! But God said, "First of all you need ME! You need MY Spirit on you and your people!"
2. We think we need power, or mobilization in this or that area. And we do. BUT GOD SAYS: "FIRST OF ALL YOU MUST BE MY WITNESSES!" The CHURCH must fill a role as Prophet.

Jesus Christ, our Head, is Prophet, Priest, and King. The CHURCH must fulfill all three of His roles, as His will unfolds. We understand the Priest role a little bit. We understand the King role even less; but we are called to faithfulness in stewardship over the gifts and graces God has parceled to us now, with the understanding that God intends for all His children to reign with Him: "Thou hast been faithful over a few things; I will make you ruler over many things ..." But we understand the role of Prophet least of all.

When we think of prophets, we think of beards and sandals, and clothes made out of gunny sacks. We think of holding up signs saying "The End is Near!"]

- C. Not every individual is a prophet, although as Christians we may be called to be prophetic at times. But The CHURCH itself is to be a PROPHET!

II. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF PROPHET?

A. A PROPHET MUST FORTH-TELL GOD'S TRUTH

1. We think of FORE-telling as the basic role of the prophet. We look into the prophets all too often ONLY to see what is going to happen at the end of the world. In so doing we miss the primary role of the Prophet!
2. Prophets "connected" with their day and their age. They did not usually agree with the status quo, but their message was not simply saying what was going to happen some time in the future. Their message was a declaration of what God was saying THEN! It was usually a call to get right with God!

B. A PROPHET IS NEVER SELF-APPOINTED. HE/SHE IS ONE WHO IS SENT

1. Every child of God is called to do the work of a prophet as the opportunity and challenge arise. We do not have to wait; if God's Spirit is within, we will feel the challenge to tell others.
2. There are those who are specially called prophets: individuals with the gift of evangelism or challenging the church to righteousness. Billy Graham comes to mind.
3. A host of just-as-effective men and women in their own places.
4. But one thing we overlook, perhaps, is that God calls the whole Body, the Church to a Prophetic role; and I believe that He also expects individual churches to pursue the same roles within their communities.

III. GOD'S CHALLENGE IS TO HIS CHURCH: BE CHRIST'S BODY!

A. The Prophetic Call is THROUGH/FOR THE CHURCH!

1. Christ's body is one! Christ LOVES the Church! The prophetic role is sometimes seen as opposing the other roles of the religious community:
2. In our own knowledge and wisdom we will fragment the roles, and pull the body apart. Traditionally prophets and priests did not see eye to eye; few men combined the two roles. David came close to being both King and Prophet— at

times he certainly fulfilled the prophetic role; Isaiah was both a priest and a prophet.

3. Jesus fills all three roles, and is the Reality of which all the others are shadow. When His Spirit fills the church all three roles will function to complement each the other. All three aspects will/should be manifest in every complete church!

B. HOW should we carry out the role of PROPHET?

1. BY A WILLINGNESS TO OBEY GOD! We have to be WILLING to do whatever we believe God calls us to do.

I am NOT now suggesting the church be involved POLITICALLY! At least not in any partisan sense.

2. BUT THE CHURCH, THE PEOPLE WHO MAKE UP CHRIST'S BODY CANNOT SIMPLY BE STAND ASIDE AND BE PASSIVE!

There are some respects in which we can liken ourselves in the American community of faith to the Christian church in early Nazi Germany. We may well have to separate in our thinking the idea of a beloved nation and an intruding government that does not represent the ideals of the Old and New Testaments on which our nation was founded (along with some Transcendental stuff.)

I am not calling for a conservative knee-jerk reaction to every crisis. But by the same token, I am not giving in to thinking that the answer for every challenge is a political solution from the left, either. It is all right to be a Christian and be politically conservative and Republican. It is all right to be Christian and be politically liberal and Democrat. BUT IT IS NOT ALL RIGHT TO BE CHRISTIAN AND LET OTHER PEOPLE INTERPRET WHAT IS AND WHAT IS NOT GOD'S WILL FOR US.

It is NOT Christian to let the government eviscerate the Bible and tell the CHURCH what is and what is not moral and right.

3. WE MUST SEEK TO BE AWARE! TO BE ANGRY!

- a. Immediately many will think about places in the world where injustice seems flagrant. But I cannot with good conscience speak about the issues in Northern Ireland or South Africa. I simply do not know the facts. I do not understand all the issues. But for us Christians here just NOW these world issues can be a smoke-screen for what is happening right here in day-by-day existence.
- b. Some facts of life:
 - 1. Federal appeals court ruled that Georgetown Univ. MUST financially support a group on campus that is in opposition to their doctrines.
 - 2. Recent episodes of prime-time so-called entertainment drama have featured unmarried, teen-age sex as 'responsible' and 'the norm.' [It is neither! Sex is God's GIFT— but it is still wrong any place outside of heterosexual marriage, according to the Bible I read and understand!]
 - 3. I'll stand with Cardinal Law in his right to speak for what he interprets as God's will! People want to have it both ways— be Catholic and be their own Bibles. It is the same for Christians everywhere: I am not a Roman Catholic, and not bound by what Cardinal Law says. But I AM a Christian, and under the authority of God's WORD! Every Church should have some areas for which they stand and will not back down!

YOU CANNOT BE A CHRISTIAN AND INVENT YOUR OWN TEN COMMANDMENTS! PART OF BEING A CHRISTIAN IS ACCEPTING THE AUTHORITY OF GOD, AND THAT AUTHORITY IS EXPRESSED IN GOD'S WORD! IT IS BIGGER THAN THE INDIVIDUAL!

4. We must learn anew to PRAY! We must have concerted prayer! Private prayer is the foundation of personal experience, and there is no substitute. But we must also pray together, and ask God for mercy on our land!
5. Then- and only then- there will be God's clear direction on speaking out. Then, when the church has prayed, as in Acts 4, there can be deliberate action—always in the name of the Lord; always in accordance with the Word of God.

Conclusion:

A. Our text was taken from a scene in the Exodus. Moses cried out with the wish that all God's people were prophets, that the Lord would give them all His Spirit. Moses felt the desperate need of God's help if the people were to move ahead. How does that intersect with our times?

B. Joel 2:28 "And it shall come to pass afterward, saith the Lord, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophecy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams ..." In the days after Messiah comes, this cry of Moses was to become reality throughout the called people of God. In other words, THE CHURCH IS CALLED TO THE PROPHETIC ROLE.

Moses, along with Jeremiah and Hosea and Amos and John the Baptist are dead. They died in various and sometimes unpleasant ways.

And guess who has been called to walk with God, and call the world to hear the PROMISE and the WARNING and the LIGHT and the SEPARATION of the Gospel of God's SON?

WE have! THE CHURCH MUST ANSWER GOD'S CALL IN THESE CRUCIAL DAYS!

C. GOD IS CALLING SOME OF YOU TO A PROPHETIC MINISTRY IN A SPECIAL WAY!

It used to be in the days when the Parson was the Person, and people looked up to the clergy, that the finest young men and women didn't have too much trouble answering God's call to ministry. Now, increasingly, the pastoral and evangelistic PREACHING MINISTRY is thought of with less

secular, worldly respect. But God is still calling the finest and best young people into His prophetic tasks!

Moses said, "Would God that ALL the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put His Spirit on ALL of them!" May WE be worthy vessels for God to fill with a fresh anointing of His Spirit, to do with us as HE will!

Prayer:

O God of the prophets! Help us to know Your Son, our Risen Lord! Help us to walk with Him! Help us not to run ahead, nor to lag behind.

Illuminate us in our hearts by the hope of Your great promise, and help us to shine like lanterns in a dark night where people need Your Light.

In Jesus' Name.

63 (EH) *Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me*

(ex) I think of you teens in your high schools as "prophets!" Not that I expect you to carry signs. But you need to be aware of the anti-God stance of our official school systems! You need to affirm that God IS; that God made the heavens and the earth! You need to get better and better acquainted with Jesus! That's what it means to be a prophet as a teen! HE will show you what to do!

ABCs of Christian Faith

October 13, 1991 PM

1 John 3:19 *"This is how we know that we belong ..."*

Introduction:

Last Sunday night I spoke at some length about the threat to the church of an unchallenged faith. I asked the question:

"Are you saved?"

and followed that first question up with another:

"Who says so?"

It is essential that we have the certainty of God's personal revelation by the Word, and by the Spirit within, and by the witness of a changed life. I said that a person who claims to be a Christian but does not have Christ at the center of his/her life is a greater threat to the church than all the evils outside the structure of the church.

How do you know that you are saved? What finally gives assurance? I spoke last week about (1) confessing Jesus as Lord, and (2) believing in the heart that God has raised Him from the dead. Romans 10:9.10.

But tonight I want to talk a little more about the "knowing" aspect; I want to zero in on assurance. It is wonderful to KNOW that we are really children of God.

Maybe my own testimony will ring bells with you; maybe not.

A CHILD'S FAITH REAL, PRECIOUS, FRAGILE?

As a small child I recall asking Jesus into my heart. I knew my parents were 'right.' I knew that when the preachers said something, it was true.

A TEENAGER'S FAITH HONEST, SINCERE, DOUBTING

But after straying a bit, and losing my assurance, as a teenager I remember coming to the altar as a seeker, and I wanted to KNOW that I was really saved. I heard the

older people testify, and had no real reason to doubt they were experiencing something as a backslidden teenager that I didn't know.

So when I came to the altar I wanted to KNOW!! I prayed, I looked around— I saw other people crying or laughing. I wanted to feel something new or electric going up and down my spine. I wanted to be a new creature in Christ.

THE ADVICE OF OTHERS BASED ON THEIR KNOWLEDGE

People were there at the altar with me, and they gave me the benefit of their wisdom. I respected them. I listened. How could I know I am saved?

The Bible says thus and so.

I know— and I believe the Bible. But I am not so sure that I am meeting all the requirements— and if I am, how come I am not changing in a way I can feel?

Well, my pastor told me. Now I don't doubt my pastor, but what's good for HIM may not quite reach to where I am. Is my pastor infallible?

SOMEHOW EACH SUCCESSIVE STEP IN FAITH IS NOT EASIER- IT REQUIRES SOMETHING MORE

As a small child I recall inviting Jesus "into my heart, come into my heart, Lord Jesus, Come in today, come in to stay..."

"Where is He?" "In my heart!"

As a wayward teen I recall earnestly listening at the altar as someone explained the logic and the reason of it all.

But I longed for a vehicle of change, something under the hood, an experience, a reality, a something!

The question then (and often now) was/is: "WHAT HAS GOD DONE FOR YOU?"

A PARTIAL FAITH IS BETTER THAN NONE; A 'FORMULA' CAN BE USED TO CHANGE LIVES BUT THERE REMAINS A NAGGING WISH FOR CERTAINTY

I knew the expected answer and I gave it hopefully. I really HAD confessed my sins! I really DID believe that Jesus died for me. And I really believe this day that he "took me back" then— because my life was changed! I had a new hunger for the Word. I experienced a renewed "call," or "vocation," as Catholics would call it.

TODAY I AM SATISFIED THAT I BELONG TO JESUS I HAVE AN INNER ASSURANCE I'M NOT EXACTLY SURE HOW THIS CERTAINTY HAS DEVELOPED TO BE HONEST

But I THINK it was when I began to get OUT OF EXPERIENCE SEEKING INTO RELATIONSHIP BUILDING.

Remember the question that was asked at the altar? A legitimate question, too: WHAT HAS GOD/JESUS DONE FOR YOU? TELL US WHAT GOD HAS DONE!

Perhaps there is a better question we could ask ourselves every day. And that question is:

WHO IS GOD TO ME?

For the final end of our salvation is to bring us near to God, and to love Him and let Him love us!

GOD WANTS TO MOVE, IN LOVE, INTO THE CENTER OF OUR LIVES!

He is pleased when we treat Him like the Person that He is, instead of thinking of Him simply as a Great Natural Resource.

WHO IS GOD TO YOU?

In all honesty, if people think of who God is at all, many think of Him

1. As a distant Observer and Threat to Happiness. The idea that He can be a Friend and a daily Companion never enters their mind!
2. Others see God as Good and Right and Holy but Unapproachable, a sort of modern "deist" position.
3. Still others see God as Angry or Grieved with my sins; and if He is distant and hard to reach that is not good news!

But God wants to reveal Himself to all who will come to know Him. I believe there are "relational steps to salvation!"

The steps to salvation along this relationship way of thinking may well be exactly the same as along the experience ladder. The relationship is the other side of the coin of experience. But it is the HEAD side!

A. AWARENESS

THE FORMULA WAY, "experience" says: I am lost, I am doomed, I am on my way to eternity without hope.

"Relationship" says: Jesus Christ is my HOPE, my only hope!

B. CONVICTION

"Experience" says: I feel so guilty for my sins!"

"Relationship" says: "God is my displeased with sin! God is my CONVICTER! He is drawing me to pray.

C. DECISION

"Experience" says: "I want Jesus to save me!"

"Relationship" says: "Jesus Christ is my LORD, if he will have me!" And He will! Subtle difference: "I am saved!" and "Jesus is LORD!"

D. FAITH

"Experience" says "I am saved! I receive salvation and sanctification!"

"Relationship" says "Jesus is my Savior!" "Jesus is My Sanctifier by giving me His Spirit!"

E. KEEPING GRACE

"Experience says: "I have walked with God lo these many years!"

"Relationship" says: "Jesus has become my dearest Friend! I never want to leave Him! He has promised never to leave me!"

Conclusion

This passage — which was used at the altar January 18, 1948, when as a 17-year-old backslider I was at an altar seeking certainty — worked then in the experience-formula way. I believed the logic; I was at the altar because I was drawn by the Spirit.

"If your heart does not condemn you!" I knew I was sincere. But I didn't FEEL anything! I confessed Jesus as my Lord, publicly. My private life changed. The experiential way "worked."

But this passage is about LOVE!

The proof is in the LOVE! Here it speaks of the love within the church, the love of God abiding in the Presence God's Spirit within.

And across the years I have tried at least to balance the experience with the relationship. Not just what has god done for me... BUT WHO IS GOD JUST NOW TO ME!

And THAT is where the assurance has come! I don't KNOW if I am as good a Christian as someone else. I don't KNOW if my experience matches yours, and I don't really care! But I do know that Jesus means EVERYTHING to me! He IS my Friend, my Master, my Savior, my Lord! I belong to Him!

WHO IS JESUS TO YOU?

WS # - Jesus Is All the World to Me

ABCs of Salvation

Learning to Pray

October 20, 1991 PM

Luke 11:1-13 (read 5 - 8 first)

Introduction:

We've been going over basics this fall— for two weeks we've talked about how we know we're saved. Assurance. Growing from child's faith to youth's faith to adult faith to on-going heuristic faith, ever staying in relationship to God in Christ.

Today I ask you to give attention to a key factor in your life which makes or breaks you as a growing Christian: your prayer life. I CANNOT "TEACH YOU TO PRAY."

In the first place, I am not qualified, for that is the task of the Lord Himself and the Holy Spirit whom He sends. "He will guide you into all truth."

In the second place, prayer is something which must be learned 'on the job.' Like any serious discipline, the people who know the most about prayer are the ones who realize that what they don't know about their discipline is greater than what they do. With that caveat...

WE LOOK AT HOW THE MASTER TEACHER BEGAN THE LESSONS OF PRAYER WITH HIS BELOVED DISCIPLES:

I. TEACHING BY EXAMPLE

(v 1) "Jesus was praying"

If Jesus needed to pray . . .

A. Jesus first LIVED what He taught

Jesus never said: "Do as I say but don't do as I do!" He did say: "Love as I have loved!" He did say: "As I have washed your feet, so you ought to be servants one to another and wash one another's feet." He did say: "As the

Father has sent Me into the world with the Good News, so I am sending you into the world!" He did say: "As the Father and I are one in family love, I want my disciples to be one with us!"

B. Jesus lived by prayer

Jesus apparently prayed for human wisdom and strength; He also seemed to want to spend time in the Presence of the Father. Jesus sought times of solitude and retreat so He could pray. And if Jesus needed that, his disciples deduced, properly, that they needed it also. One of them got up nerve to ask Jesus to teach me to pray— and this passage records the 'lesson.'

II. THE LESSON PROPER

(v 2 - 4) "The Lord's Prayer"

Jesus did give them a model prayer to use and study.

A. A Lesson Jesus Probably Repeated Many Times

Luke's version is different from Matthew's, even though early manuscripts sought to harmonize them. This indicates to me that this pattern was a lesson that Jesus repeated more than once. The exact words are not as important as the impact of the whole lesson.

B. The Lesson is an Exercise in Priorities

Lesson One: God first! God at the center! His name hallowed. His kingdom; His will. His interests should be ahead of our own.

C. Prayer is Loving Dependency and Trust

Lesson Two: Dependency and trust. We ask in the way that children ask their parents: Give us! Forgive us! Show us how! Keep us in good graces!

D. So just "saying prayer" is not praying

Lesson Three: Persistence!

III. A WORD PICTURE TO ILLUSTRATE HIS MAIN POINT

(v 5-)

A. Many cogent lessons can begin with the Model Prayer

1. We assume that the Model Prayer is the whole lesson. It was the heart of the lesson. But then came various applications.
2. In Matthew's Sermon on the Mount the Model Prayer is immediately followed by expanded attention to that part of the lesson dealing with forgiveness. ("If you don't find grace to forgive, you won't be able to find grace to be forgiven!".)
3. Here in Luke Jesus wants to emphasize something else; just as basic, perhaps even more basic than forgiveness. Jesus wants to underscore persistence in praying. He does it with a story. (And He has several similar stories through the Gospels.)

B. Here the lesson is persistence

1. Jesus paints a word-picture:

A reluctant friend is contrasted to the loving heavenly Father. It is sort of humorous: It is late at night when a second cousin arrives from Emmaus or Sychar or somewhere. He is hungry- been on the road all day. There isn't a thing in the breadbox; you've been meaning to go to the market first thing in the morning. But Cousin Phil can't wait. So— I think I'll just go next door and borrow three loaves of bread from Paul Trout the Baker.

But Paul is in bed. The Bible says he is in bed with all twelve of his children. I always pictured a real wide bed with all their little heads sticking out the top— like the seven dwarfs or something. He doesn't want to be disturbed, and I don't blame him. It isn't hard for me to imagine the disciples laughing a little.

But they get the message! As I keep hollering and throwing stones at Paul's window, he finally says: "If I get him the bread maybe I can shut him up and get to sleep!" My shameless persistence pays off! I'm glad Paul doesn't have a phone to call the Temple Guards on me! If he did have a phone there wouldn't be any AT&T service because it hadn't been invented yet.

2. So you see that the moral or the one thought in this lesson story is that somehow we are to keep on praying. It is NOT that God is reluctant to hear us, or that He doesn't want to grant us what we need. God is NOT like the Baker who doesn't want to get out of bed.

C. The story is followed by direct instruction: ASK, SEEK, KNOCK.

1. These verbs are all in the present imperative:

"Ask and keep asking" "Seek and keep seeking." "Knock and keep knocking"

In the mystery of prayer Jesus is saying there is a dimension, a factor, an element, a side of prayer that relates to power and effectiveness that is tied up with no quitting! Dogged persistence! Not persisting in having MY way, now. No- we've already prayed "THY name ... THY kingdom ... THY will!!!" Now as we ask for bread and forgiveness and guidance we simply hang in there and won't take "no" for an answer!

2. Jesus slips back into his story teller, word picture mode when He contrasts again: You don't surprise your children with less and worse than they ask! And you are tainted with selfishness and sin. If you ask the heavenly Father, He may surprise you— but it will be with something far better than you can ask or think!

IV. THE CLIMAX OF THIS LESSON ON PRAYER

(v 13) THE HOLY SPIRIT

We pray in order to be filled.

When we are filled we can pray.

- A. The Spirit within: an end in itself!

Being filled is in itself an end; we are beloved of God. Unless and until we grasp this, we are forever seeking to use the Presence to get on to the "important stuff."

B. The Spirit within: TO DO AS WELL AS BE!

Whatever the Holy Spirit wants to do with us is important stuff! And when we are filled, our praying goes beyond the lesson stage, and gets into the reality of spiritual happening.

- C. (CONCLUSION:) I say with the disciple who was bold enough to step forward and ask:
Lord, Teach me to pray!

Prayer

Hymn *O to Be Like Thee*

The Christian in the World

October 27, 1991 PM

John 17:15-18

Introduction

1. There is a glory of this world. And it is good. "The heavens declare the glory of God!" This is a beautiful world! God created it! The hills of Vermont in Autumn call the faithful to praise their Creator.
2. But there is also an eternal glory. And while the eternal glory may be reflected in earth's glory, and even somewhat revealed in the faces of people who belong to Jesus, it is a mysterious, wonderful thing, this eternal glory!
3. This great Prayer of Jesus for us (John 17) looks back into the eternal glory that the Son of God knew before there ever was a world. It speaks to us of eternity.

I. LIVING IN THE LIGHT OF GLORY

- A. Eternity is our destination. Christians have nothing more important than to prepare to meet God face to face. But we are also called to live here and now with the light of eternal glory touching every facet of our lives.
- B. Christians are to look to the eternal glory. Christians do not JUST live in the "now." There is wisdom in saying (so profoundly) 'The past is gone, the future is uncertain- all I am sure of is the PRESENT!' The Psalmist teaches "time management:" "So teach us to number our days that we may present to Thee an heart of wisdom." Christians do have both a past, a present, and a future. But the greatest assignment we have is to prepare to meet God!
- C. Jesus is heaven's glory manifested. (2 Corinthians 4:6) This prayer makes it clear: The glory of heaven has been manifested on earth. (17:4 "I have manifested Thee on earth...") In the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ, eternity has invaded the earth. The true glory of earth reflects the greater glory of eternity; the glory of eternity far outweighs passing glories.

II. LIVING IN HOLY TENSION

- A. We are citizens of two world systems. This prayer also makes clear that Christians are in both systems at one and the same time. Christians are supposed to be involved to the full in both time and eternity!

The word is: "We are IN the world but not OF the world." But however we describe it, the fact is that Christians will experience TENSION in being involved in two worlds.

In this prayer (17:14) Jesus says: "The world has hated them," and before He prayed, (in John 16:33) Jesus said, "In the world ye shall have sorrow." Coming to understand "who we are" will not eliminate this tension. We need to see that it is not a "Nazarene tension," not brought on by certain standards and rules. It is rather a radical tension that Jesus Himself faced: we are called to confront the world with God's love!

- B. True faith means TENSION between the two worlds. We look again at the saying, 'IN the world but not OF the world.'

Superficial logic usually takes a position here on one of two extremes: either we are to be extremely heavenly minded, which means isolation ("We'll build a sweet little nest/ Somewhere out in the west/ And let the rest of the world go by ...") OR extremely up-to-date and "relevant" which is interpreted as simply adopting whatever pagan customs are current and in style.

Actually "fuzzy logic," is in order here: a wisdom that realizes a higher wisdom, for:

III. CHRISTIANS ARE EARTHLINGS, FULLY HUMAN

- A. Like Jesus, WE MUST TRULY PARTICIPATE IN THIS PRESENT WORLD. Look at this business of spiritual isolationism. Some Christians seek to escape the tension by becoming "other worldly." We somehow become "different" when we enter the church; our "testimonies" sound like we have speech writers. Or worse, we carry this sterile, wooden idea of "church" with us when we try to tell others about our faith. But if the Son of

God became fully human, then we ought to seek to be wholly human, too.

1. Being "fully human" does not mean keeping up with fad and fashion. Someone said last week at minister's retreat: "The one thing teens think about more than anything else is 'What will THEY say?'"

This heavy burden of conformity, ("What will THEY think?,") carries over long after teens! We are so worried about our 'image' that we neglect the real integrity of character! But we do NOT have to 'keep up' to some artificial standard to be fully human.

2. Being "fully human" does not mean that we have to know everything about everything. We must NOT be neophiliacs. [Hear a quote from a modern-day prophet, Richard John Neuhaus]

"We are neophiliacs, lovers of the new who are titillated by the news. It gives us an illusory sense of involvement in our times. We fear being left out of what is happening. The imperative of participation, carried to excess, becomes frenetic and compulsive. Oscar Wilde somewhere said that the trouble with socialism is that it leaves one with no free evenings. Failing to participate fully in our own lives, we seek participation in realities constructed by others. To the extent a person has a life of her own, it is a life defined by limits. With respect to innumerable things that are happening we are 'out of it,' thank God!" - Richard John Neuhaus, in *The Naked Public Square*.

- B. Being involved with this world DOES mean caring about people! Christians cannot get off by professing to love God while at the same time rejecting their brothers and sisters.

TV offers us the option of being pseudo-involved with "this world," but the people in the 21-inch tube don't really know us, and we don't know them. We think we know the anchor man, or Willard Scott. We know the latest TV crime victim, and perhaps rightly we shed tears over a Dave Dravecky. But at the same time our next door neighbor may be dying with cancer, or may

even be dying of loneliness, and would give anything to have someone to talk to or pray with.

- C. Being involved with this world DOES mean a proper attitude toward material reality. Things ARE important. MONEY is NOT immoral. We are to use things, and to use money, and love people, and to love God. Not the other way 'round.
- D. Being involved in this world means seeking a God-given sense of MISSION. "Mission statement" is almost a style-fad or mania now. Every organization, every institution needs a clear mission statement. I agree. But what about a personal mission statement? One that is tailored just for you?

Every one of us has an assignment, even if it is to stand and wait. On this REFORMATION SUNDAY think of the assignment that God gave to Martin Luther. What would have happened if he had not heard and obeyed? Perhaps- speculation- God would have raised up someone else. But Martin Luther did obey!

We think of men and women like John and Charles and Susannah Wesley, and Dwight L. Moody, and Billy Graham. They wouldn't have known to call it a mission statement, but they followed their assignment.

And Jesus makes it abundantly clear: As the Father has sent HIM, Jesus, into the world, to let the world know He loves them, even so Jesus is sending us— YOU and me!

[Christians are citizens of Planet Earth. But there is TENSION! Remember?]

IV. CHRISTIANS ARE CITIZENS OF HEAVEN

[Transition:] The other side of the coin is equally true Like Jesus, we are not OF this world! While some Christians seek to escape the tension by "being so heavenly minded they are of no earthly good," and fail to "connect" with real people and real needs, other Christians seek to escape the tension by simply adopting the world-view and the culture uncritically.

Jesus has claims on us: Jesus has standards, OBJECTIVE, FACTUAL TRUTH, to which he calls His church:

- A. Christians are called to be HOLY! To be in the world but not OF the world means OBEYING THE COMMAND TO BE HOLY! (17:17 "Sanctify them! Make them holy!")
 - 1. Holiness is AGREEING WITH GOD! It is NOT agreeing with the world, and relaxing in apathy in the face of greed and lust and selfishness.
 - 2. Holiness is WALKING WITH GOD wherever He is going! Whatever the cost may be, to be HOLY means that God's opinion means more than everyone else's opinions put together!
 - 3. Holiness is NOT abandoning the righteous LAWS of the Old Testament, but rather it is having the heart of those laws written in OUR hearts! ("Ye have heard it said ... but I say unto you!")
- B. Christians are members of Christ's BODY.
 - 1. To be in the world but not OF the world means WORKING THROUGH THE CHURCH THAT JESUS HIMSELF HAS BROUGHT INTO EXISTENCE. Jesus loves the church as He loves His own life!
 - 2. There is no Christianity outside the context of the Body of Christ! This is what I understand Jesus to mean when He prays- for us— in verse 21, 23: "That they may be one . . . perfected in unity ..."
 - 3. The Christian really comes to a sense of identity— comes to know who he or she really IS— as she or he is ONE with a body of believers— with THE Body of believers, as that Body is One with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit! I speak of the wonderful mystery of the Church! May WE truly be a part of the church!

Conclusion:

- 1. This prayer begins with "eternal glory." It also ends with reference to eternal glory. But there is a significant difference between the beginning and the ending of this great High Priestly prayer! The difference is not only significant, it is wonderful and beautiful!

2. At the beginning Jesus speaks of "the glory that He had with the Father before the world began." And now at the end, Jesus again looks forward into the eternal glory which He will share forever with God the Father.

But now Jesus prays (24): that those whom the Father has given Him may BE WITH HIM, NOW, IN THAT GLORY WHICH HE KNEW BEFORE THE WORLD WAS! Jesus is opening up the circle of eternity and of the love of God, and bringing in all who are truly HIS!

3. As we identify with Jesus in His humility, and in His assignment— being SENT, Jesus makes it clear that He identifies with US in being glorified! If we share now in His mission, He will share His glory with us throughout all eternity.

We are Christians (ONLY) as we identify with Jesus Christ! Jesus prays for us that we might both be in the world, participating AND be one with Him and the Father!

And Jesus' prayer is powerful! Jesus will enable us to really and truly live in the creative TENSION of being IN this world but not OF this world! And He has promised we shall share in His Presence and glory both in time, now, and for all eternity!

Prayer

Hymn

The Just Shall Live By Faith

Reformation Sunday

October 27, 1991

Romans 1:14-16

Four-hundred-seventy-four years ago this week a Roman Catholic clergyman nailed a long list of religious statements to the door of the cathedral in Wittenberg, Germany. Martin Luther was that clergyman. He is a giant figure in Church history.

Martin Luther was the child of a rigid legalistic system. He was a brilliant scholar and teacher. He was a seeker after the assurance of salvation. In his searching and Bible study, Martin Luther "re-discovered" the phrase, "The just shall live by faith," (in Romans and Galatians,) and as it became more and more clear to him, he came to stake his very life, here and hereafter on the truth of that one phrase.

The defiant act of nailing the list of "95 Theses" to the cathedral door is now the 'nominal beginning' of what we call The Reformation.

Reformation Sunday is seen by many in our pluralistic society today as underscoring a time of separation and rejection. And perhaps it is; and there may be times when conscience causes rejection and separation. But Reformation Sunday commemorates a protest of sincere love and concern for the true church in the face of practices and teachings that failed to bring life and assurance. True reformers are NOT usually interested in destroying their church; they are men of LOVE, and not hate.

[Transition:] But Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11 are not the only places in the Bible where we see the phrase: The just shall live by faith. In both places, Paul is quoting from the Old Testament. In fact there are four separate places this statement appears, and each time it has a slightly different setting or emphasis. Taken together these four statements give an insight into saving faith.

The four references, and their settings are these: In Habakkuk 2:4 the setting is faith in God's WORD; in Romans 1:17 we see faith in God's grace; in Galatians 3:11 (even though the emphasis there is also grace,) we see faith in God's justice; and in Hebrews 10:38 the emphasis is faith in God's faithfulness.

I. GOD'S INTEGRITY, HIS WORD IS THE FOUNDATION OF SAVING FAITH

Habakkuk 2:4

- A. Habakkuk's prophecy: A complaint that there is wickedness in Judah; a charge that the people in large part have simply forgotten their God.
- B. But Habakkuk is prophet and not just a reporter. He is concerned with the way GOD sees the situation, the view from the Throne, and not just the band-aid proposals the human mind can conceive. Habakkuk says, "If we can get quiet and listen, God will, speak to us!" (2:20 "The LORD is in His holy Temple: let all the earth keep silence before Him.")
- C. And this is where this great text "fits." God will not help solve the problems of those who refuse His Word. The pride and the arrogance of unbelief effectively block God's love and grace. (2:4 "Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by HIS faith (-or God's FAITHFULNESS!))
- D. GOD WILL NOT DISAPPOINT THOSE WHO LOOK TO HIM IN OBEDIENT TRUST (and there isn't any other kind of trust when God is involved!)

The prophet declares that the only possibility of our righteousness is based on the foundation of God's Word. And in spite of terrible circumstances, Habakkuk closes the words of his prophecy on this truly powerful note (3:16-19 "I heard and my inward parts trembled, at the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I tremble. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, for the people to arise who will invade us. Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olive should fail, and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my

salvation. The LORD God is my strength, and He makes my feet like hinds feet, and makes me walk on my high places.")

- E. If Habakkuk were to visit New England we might see that he is a prophet and not just a reporter! It doesn't take too much wisdom to see something is seriously wrong when millions of unborn babies are killed in our country each year, and politicians make decisions based on what gets them re-elected rather than on what is right or wrong. It isn't hard to see the bankrupt moral fiber of our nation when illicit drugs are such big business that "all the king's horses and all the king's men" can't seem to shut down the supply, and public morality is too weak to shut down the demand.

Habakkuk might tell us that men like Bruce Wahl and Michael Haynes and John Borders are worth hundreds of policemen in Roxbury and Dorchester—not that we don't need the policemen, too, just now. I wonder how Habakkuk would view our efforts at Second Church there in Codman Square?

We get totally involved in peripheral matters. It is important to save a species of owl, or to preserve our natural treasures. But we only get one chance at each generation of HUMAN BEINGS! And only God Almighty can deliver us from the chaos in which our sins have entrapped us as a nation and a race.

[Transition:] But we have already said that Martin Luther "discovered" this text from Paul, as he quoted Habakkuk in the Book of Romans. And there it shows us the wonder of God's great love extended:]

II. GOD'S LOVE REVEALS AN OPEN DOOR TO SAVING FAITH

Romans 1:16-17

- A. Saving faith is based on the fact of God's integrity: what He says, He means! But faith is more than just a mental acceptance of that fact. Paul's use of the phrase: THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH is in the context of THE GOSPEL.

"GOSPEL" AS USED HERE IS A NARROW TERM. It doesn't just mean 'good news' or 'truth,' as we often use it. It doesn't mean the general use of scripture principles and precepts in order to give is 'the good life.' But the Gospel means the Good News about what God has done for us in the victory of His Son, Jesus Christ, by His death and resurrection and Session! The gospel in one verse is John 3:16. The gospel is for the "WHOSOEVER" that believes in God's only begotten Son!

It is in the context of response to God's grace- God's LOVE in Christ, that Paul declares that we live by faith. [Romans 1:16-17 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For in it (the Gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."]

- B. The important word, so far as you and I are concerned, is "whosoever!" The great grace and power of the Gospel of which Paul declares he is not ashamed is available to you and me just now!

[Transition: But God's word/integrity and his love/free grace do not exhaust the meaning of salvation by faith. A third time this phrase appears, in Galatians 3:11, and there the context is God's justice:]

III. GOD'S JUSTICE, RECONCILED, MAKES SAVING FAITH POSSIBLE

Galatians 3:11

- A. The "HOW" of obtaining salvation was where Martin Luther was particularly offended. He had followed the teachings of the church of his day on penitence, and he had found no assurance whatsoever that his sins were in fact and deed forgiven. He had observed excesses, such as the sale of indulgences that permitted wealthy people to buy absolution while poor people had to suffer purgatory or hell. And so it was that when the truth dawned on him that all sins were already provisionally 'paid for' it was certainly good news that broke in on his soul!

B. But Galatians makes it clear that salvation is not God merely 'excusing' sin.! God cannot merely ignore sin as if it never had happened. The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel tells us (twice) The soul that sinneth shall die! (Ez 18) and Romans 6:23 says, the wages of sin is DEATH!

C. A just God has had to deal with sin in justice! God cannot simply look the other way. But the context of this text in Galatians says God's love can be extended to us because in the cross of Calvary Jesus has redeemed us from the curse of breaking God's law.

It is in the CROSS that God's MERCY and God's JUSTICE meet. [Galatians 3:11 "Now that no one is justified by the law before God is evident, for: THE RIGHTEOUS MAN (THE JUST) SHALL LIVE BY FAITH!]

D. So, while it is true that God's LOVE is extended to us; and it is true that we are authorized to say (AT THIS TIME) "Whosoever will may come!;" it is also true that we dare not presume on that great love! God is not able to offer us saving faith on the basis of our own goodness, or our sincerity, or any other merit of our own. It is in Christ that God's justice is satisfied, and we trust in Jesus Christ, and we trust "TODAY!" (Now is the accepted time!)

[Transition: But there is one more place where this text is found, in Hebrews 10:38.]

IV. GOD'S FAITHFULNESS ESTABLISHES THE SAVING RELATIONSHIP

Hebrews 10:38

A. We are not only saved by faith as a one-time crisis, but we have the privilege of walking day-by-day with Christ in faith. By its very nature walking "by faith" means that we are NOT walking "by sight." It means that this relationship, with God will be severely tested.

Saving faith is NOT a mental theory. It is not "an ideal" to which we aspire along predictable, textbook lines and formulae.

B. And so this last great word (Hebrews 10:38) is in the context of real life, of battles, of perseverance! This is not now the language of revival, and getting saved, going to the altar; not about Bible study and understanding the atonement as the pastor "explains it." This is the language of Jesus in the laundry room, in the high school classroom, of Jesus on-the-job with you and me! (Hebrews 10:23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful!)

And also Hebrews 10:35-39 Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of patience, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what was promised. For yet in a very little while He who is coming will come, and will not delay. But MY RIGHTEOUS ONE SHALL LIVE BY FAITH; and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.

C. This is "a whole seminar" on perseverance! We are to be:

1. (22) be drawing near to God;
2. (23) be holding fast the confession of HOPE without wavering— what God promises, He carries through!
3. (24) be considering one another! LOVE THE CHURCH! Walking by faith is ALWAYS in the context of FELLOWSHIP OF THE SAINTS!
4. (25) not forsaking coming together! Using all the means of grace.
5. (35) Summarizing: DON'T THROW AWAY YOUR CONFIDENCE IN GOD'S FAITHFULNESS!
6. (36) "Ye have need of endurance!" God is not capricious! I am not playing games with Him! I can, I will depend on Him to bring me through

Conclusion: So— the "text of the Reformation" is THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH! What a powerful truth this is, that triggered a great Reformation throughout the entire Church of Jesus Christ.

1. Perhaps we need to return to the spirit of reform again. Not along lines of power, or too-easily-understood slogans and doctrine. Reform isn't that simple!

Reform begins in the heart of those who would be pure in heart, as they ask themselves the question: AM I LIVING BY HIS FAITH? Or am I the kind of Christian that is selective, and chooses the benefits of grace, or the kind of Christian that swallows unchallenged assumptions of fundamental doctrine, or lives by selfish withdrawal from the battle?

2. We need a love and loyalty for Christ's church that will not serve blindly, BUT THAT WILL CONSTANTLY CALL THE CHURCH TO DEEPER, PURER OBEDIENCE! What we say will not speak as loudly as our own personal life-style, and the integrity and love of our relationships, and our own obedience to scripture and the Holy Spirit!
3. God is NOT exhausted! God is not "burned out!" What God did with Luther and Wesley ... He can do with people today who dare to take His Word seriously! THE JUST STILL LIVE BY FAITH!

Prayer: Spirit of God, Come breathe God's life in us; Blow through Your Church, a cleansing, mighty Power for Righteousness. Lift up the Lord Jesus Christ for all the world to see Until every knee shall bow And every tongue confess that He is LORD! To the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Hymn

Running for the Joy

November 3, 1991

Hebrews 11:39-12:1-3

Introduction

Halloween is a corruption of All Hallow's Eve, and comes on the eve of a special day in the church calendar, a day that is a good time to get a perspective on where we fit in the list of those who follow our God. set aside to think about those who have run the race of faith before us.

There is mystery involved, of course, whenever we think of the hereafter. Not too many places does the scripture draw back the curtain and give us any hint of what is going on with the Church Triumphant. Personally, I can live with a certain amount of mystery. There is a mind-set that views all mystery, even Holy mystery, as merely "problems to be solved." But I have the abiding conviction that God will reveal to us all that we need to know; we don't need some super-prophet explaining esoteric portions of scripture in order to have all that God has for us.

I. THERE IS A "MYSTIC SWEET COMMUNION WITH THOSE WHOSE REST IS WON"

- A. Hebrews 11:39-40 *"And all these, having gained (God's) approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they should not be made perfect."*

The saints, even the saints of the Bible, are depending on US to complete the task of being God's people. [Dr. Paul Bassett said just this week, "Abraham needs us!"] The saints of Hebrews 11 have an interest in how the church does its task; we, in turn, are expected to join the list of Hebrews 11, the list of those who live by faith!

- B. These great saints inspire us with their witness. That is at least some of what the "cloud of witnesses" implies.

And not just the saints in Hebrews 11, proper, either. The witnesses who have been added to the roll of heroes is long! Witnesses who have "made it!" I have watched a number of God's people in the travail of dying. I think of them now and then with great respect and love. They seem to say to me from beyond, "We made it! We were true! You can be true where you are, too!"

- C. But it is not just those who have "gone on" who may be in this cloud of witnesses.
 - 1. There are other saints, contemporary saints, our brothers and sisters, who may be encouraged or disheartened by the way we run the race.
 - 2. And there are other saints— or saints-to-be, people who may be watching us, seeing how we live, not just what we say!

[But so much for the "cloud of witnesses— at least for now. The emphasis here is running— running this race to win.]

II. RUNNING THIS RACE FOR LIFE IS NOT EASY, BUT IT IS SIMPLE

There are just a few things we need to keep in mind.

- A. It is a LONG race. A marathon. The word is PATIENCE! The word is ENDURANCE! The word is DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT GIVING UP!

Take time to prepare. Take time to put on the whole armor of God. Take time to pray through on the big decisions of life. Take time to BE before you try to DO.

- B. Don't carry unnecessary weight. "Lay aside every encumbrance." [Remember David refusing to let someone else equip him to follow his dream in armor that wouldn't come close to fitting.]
 - 1. Don't carry the heavy weight of living up to other people convictions or expectations. There are people in the ministry today because Pastor Jones or Pastor Smith or mom or dad thought that's where Mary or John ought to be— and by the same token, there are people in other professions today that God might well have called if some significant other person had not discouraged it. DON'T LET ANYONE BUT GOD MAKE YOUR BIG DECISIONS FOR YOU! IT IS TOO

HEAVY TO CARRY!

2. Don't carry the heavy weight of bitterness of spirit. (VERSE 15 "See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; THAT NO ROOT OF BITTERNESS SPRINGING UP CAUSES TROUBLE and by it many be defiled."

God has grace to help even the victims of cruel things to forgive; and the forgiver loses the heavy weight of bitterness, even though the forgiven person may not even appreciate it!

C. Have an absolute INTOLERANCE FOR ALL SIN.

1. I know this speaks of "a besetting sin," or "a sin that entangles." It might be construed as a character flaw or disposition that we have to live with and overcome. [I am a congenital worrier. It does not bless God when I worry. I seek by God's grace to lay it aside.]
2. But it also may speak of a tendency to rationalize, to excuse cutting corners in situations where clear-cut issues are at stake.

Dishonesty is always sin. Cheating in any form is always sin. Academic sins, or white collar sins are just as wrong and just as defeating as out-and-out stealing, car theft, or robbery.

Immorality is always sin. Let me put it a little plainer: sexual intimacy outside of marriage is always sin. We can rationalize, we can plead that "everyone is doing it," but God's holy people lay aside all sin!

III. WE HAVE A WINNING COACH TO HELP US RUN A WINNING RACE

We are aware of the grandstand, and the "cloud of witnesses" can cheer us on and inspire us. But we do not look to the "cloud of witnesses" for our winning strategy. WE LOOK ONLY TO JESUS.

On the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter, James and John were dumbfounded, awestruck, to see their Lord glorified, shining, and they were impressed when they realized that He was talking with MOSES and ELIJAH! They were about as impressed

with finding out who those two great giants of the faith were as they were with the revelation of Christ's glory. Peter had the suggestion: "Let's build THREE booths here, one each for Jesus, Moses and Elijah." He was quickly and kindly rebuffed by none other than the voice of God the Father: "THIS IS MY BELOVED SON! HEAR HIM!"

1. "Consider Him!" It helps! Jesus endured! He bore the cross because He loved YOU! When you're tempted to quit, think about those who love you, think about those who may be hurt if you quit—yes— BUT MOST OF ALL THINK OF JESUS, WHO WOULDN'T QUIT UNTIL HE HAD DEFEATED SIN, DEATH, AND HELL FOR YOU! HE WOULDN'T QUIT!
2. And Jesus is right with us in this race!

Communion is just such a time— a time to lift our eyes to Jesus. As we prepare now to partake together let us ask God the Holy Spirit to help us to "CONSIDER HIM!"

This is a life-and-death race. The winners get to see the Lord. The ones who drop out, or run other paths don't. The course is set before us. It starts right here, where we are tonight. It continues, according to 11:14 along the pathway of peace and holiness. "Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord."

Holiness is not something exotic, for a distant glory, or by great spectacular sacrifices. The race is right here, day-by-day, set before us!

Jesus is the Life of the Church. He is with the Church Triumphant, and they enjoy His Presence in a way that we cannot yet know. But He is also with the Church Militant even though we walk by faith.

Prayer of Consecration Distribution of Elements

The Big Little Word

November 3, 1991 PM

1 John 1:1-10

[Leading into Holy Communion]

Introduction

Salvation is God's work. It is all of grace, and there is nothing of our own works or merit that we can do to save ourselves. That is a truism in modern evangelical Christian faith. I agree.

But in the grace of God, somehow God has made it possible for us to respond to His grace. Do you remember the prayer attributed to St. Augustine: Our will is ours, we know not how; our will is ours to make it Thine. (Augustine ?)

Our choices in the matter of salvation are underscored here in the opening paragraphs of I John, underscored by the use of the little word "if." He writes IF WE SAY, and IF WE CONFESS, and IF WE WALK, as well as others (IF WE SIN, IF WE ABIDE.)

I. IF WE SAY

There is always some danger in talking when we are around God. The biggest danger is that while we are talking we can't be listening. We need to hear what God has to say about us.

- A. One possibility of choice in salvation is to say that we know more about ourselves than anyone, even God.

If we say we have not sinned— or,

If we say that we have no sin— and here John is talking about people who are into MAKING CLAIMS, and being defensive, instead of HEARING WHAT GOD SAYS about their condition.

Everyone has sinned. Everyone is born with a bent to sin. Even Christians need daily grace for coming short. (Hamartia)

- B. But just saying doesn't make it so:

If we say we have fellowship with God we had better be sure that the will of God is precious to us! There is no fellowship with God outside the revealed will of God.

II. IF WE CONFESS

- A. One possibility of choice in salvation is to agree with whatever God has to say about us in our sin and shortcoming.

Confession is more than signing a statement when you are arrested and caught red-handed. Confession is living in absolute openness before God.

- B. THERE IS GREAT CLEANSING POWER IN A LIFE OF CONFESSION and openness before God. God does not wring confession out of us in order to gloat over our inferior position. But He asks us to open our hearts and lives to His cleansing. God does not violate our personality, and will not perform an unwanted forgiveness and cleansing.

- C. Confession brings forgiveness and cleansing! It brings healing! It is truly GOOD for the soul! Jesus said on several occasions: "I came NOT to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Even as a small child growing up Nazarene I had problems with this one. We need to be very careful and clear in our definitions of sin. We dare not excuse what God never excuses. God never excuses any sin. But at the same time, we dare not make claims that the Bible does not support.

Both sides of the Calvinist-Arminian debate are right: We can and must live every day above sin in this present world (Luke 1:75-76) while at the same time, we can and must pray the Lord's Prayer every day, "Forgive us our debts ... "

- D. If we do NOT confess . . .

III. IF WE WALK IN THE LIGHT

- A. Another aspect of choice is acting on what we believe to be God's will.

God is very patient. But He is also true to His Word. If we walk in the light, we have fellowship (Enoch.) If we do not walk in the light, the light moves on and we are again in darkness.

Obedience is essential to faith. - THE LIBERATING POWER OF ONE STEP

- B. Pilgrim's Progress is the best illustration I know:

"Do you see that light?" " "I think I do!" "Follow it! Don't swerve to right or left!"

[Perhaps a short quote here would be more effective]

[Transition:] This is all the "ifs" in chapter one. But wait a minute. There are more, very much connected with grace and salvation:

IV. IF WE SIN

And so they were saved, and lived happily ever after! No problems could sway them. No defeats. No ... no way! Our faith has to be lived out in the real world.

- A. God's grace is for the real world. Do we ever come short of God's Grace? And John has use of the big little word beyond an initial entering in or crisis.

- B. 'If we SIN, are we "out"? Must we begin all over? Are we no longer children of God?

1. Not so! Look at some different scenarios:

If we are enticed into sin suddenly If we have a besetting sin If we rationalize a sin and confess when we do NOT intend to quit

2. If we sin, we have AN ADVOCATE. A representative. Jesus Christ cares. Jesus Christ is powerful. Jesus Christ is God Almighty! We only hurt ourselves if we refuse to bring our sin to Him. Sin persisted in will bring separation from the relationship!

V. IF WE LET GOD'S WORD LIVE IN US: ABIDE

2:24 "If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, YOU WILL ALSO ABIDE IN THE FATHER AND IN THE SON."

Coming to be "at home" with God and the things of God.

1. Making the Word of God "at home" in our hearts. The ABIDING WORD. The "bottom line" of our faith is not simply a Word as we know it, but The Word of God, Jesus Christ, a PERSON! Friendship. This is so deeply profound! (excuse the redundancy!) The way to keep the Word resident is to treat Jesus with great reverence as the Person He is, but to seek to share life with Him.

2. Practice the Presence.

Thomas Kelly's "A Testament of Devotion": The heart of that book— seek to live in the Presence! If Jesus abides we will not lose the glow of our spiritual reality! When we trust other, lesser witnesses they will not only fail us, they will crush out the light in which we must walk to have fellowship with Christ. Faith is a dynamic reality, not a static point of arrival.

Conclusion

It seems so simple! Just walking in the light; just agreeing with Jesus. And it is really simple! Jesus is on your side, not against you!

For us this evening walking in the light means meeting with Jesus in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. This is a message that is real, not less than spoken words, but more.

Hymn #213 *Grace Greater than Our Sin*

Prayer of Consecration and Distribution of the Elements

Everyone is contaminated with sin, and everyone has sinned.

We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners. There is that within our humanity that does not want to be subject to anyone, even to God. There

is that which is inherent in our humanity that wants to be god to ourselves. That is the essence of sin.

People do not go to hell because of this "bent," at least not directly. God does not simply condemn us for being the way we were born. But when we agree with the sin within, and choose our way over God's way, and say these egregious things, then we not only have sin as a condition or state, but we have sin as rebellion against God, and sin as transgression of what we perceive God's will to be. The clear choice of self ahead of God is worthy of eternal damnation.

John's clear message here is: Don't be a fool! Agree with God! Don't make claims of sinlessness that will only separate you from hope of salvation!

The God Who is Near

November 10, 1991

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; and his greatness is unsearchable. One generation shall praise thy works to another, and shall declare thy mighty acts. The Lord is righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works. The Lord is nigh unto all that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth. He will fulfill the desire of them that fear him: he will also hear their cry, and will save them. Psalm 145:3,4,17-19

(Jesus:) "I who speak to you am he." John 4:26

Introduction

Whether or not we believe it, whether or not we even know or care, everything in life begins and ends with God. And whether or not we believe it, our thoughts about God, conscious or not, have everything to do with making us and shaping us into what we are and what we do.

This is true of an individual. It is true of a church or a denomination. It is also true of entire nations and cultures.

In order to think about God we need to ask at least three questions:

1. IS THERE A GOD?
2. WHAT IS GOD LIKE?
3. WHAT IS GOD TO ME?

I will tell you at the beginning that all the questions about God and life and faith have their answers in Jesus. These answers are not necessarily to be found in studying Jesus as we might an historical figure or a textbook, (as in, 'What did Jesus really say?',) but rather in looking to Jesus as the divine Word of God who is Present, sent from God to reveal Himself to those who diligently seek Him.

I. QUESTION ONE: IS THERE A GOD?

It seems almost sacrilegious to ask such a question from a Christian pulpit. As a church we are certainly not neutral in this matter. It is not something that we intend to leave for our children to decide for themselves while we act for eighteen years of their lives as if there were no God. We ourselves have been brought up on the assumption that there is, indeed, a living God.

Is there a God? YES! And yet each person "has to discover God" for himself or herself. For THIS IS A "REVELATION QUESTION!" It is a question that cannot be answered by cold logic and facts, even though a loving God has given us plenty of circumstantial evidence.

We have the evidence of Creation, of what scholars call general revelation. The Psalmist says: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the starry expanse shows forth His handiwork." To those who will look with an eye of faith, and to those who will see, there is abundant evidence of a God of Creation who must be magnificent in His being.

We also have the marvelous evidence of Scripture, or special revelation. The Bible is itself a miracle, and people of faith believe that in the Bible God has spoken by His Spirit through the inspired writing of men of God. All that is necessary for coming to know God in a personal way is outlined for us in the Holy Scriptures.

But finally, God Himself must reveal Himself to you and me! IS THERE A GOD? As He speaks to each listening heart, God unmistakably answers that question. But remember, God only speaks to faith!

God is not put off by honest doubt, and God is not daunted by human weakness or incapacity. God is infinitely patient. But we must never confuse doubt with unbelief. Doubt and unbelief may look very similar; certainly at times they are related. One may pass into another, perhaps.

But doubt, in essence, says, "I can't!" Unbelief says, "I WON'T!" Doubt says, "This seems so fantastic, so unreal! Why should a great God love me?" Unbelief says, "If this is true, then I will have to change the way I live! I don't WANT to change the way

I live! I won't be the center of the Universe any more!" And to unbelief God remains all too silent!

IS THERE A GOD? My answer to you is, "Of course there is!" And yet I remind you that in your personal quest for eternal life this is a question that only GOD can answer to your satisfaction. GOD WILL ANSWER YOUR QUESTION! But God only talks to faith. Your faith does not have to be very big or strong— it doesn't have to be perfect faith. But it must be willing faith. Try saying in your heart to God just now, "God, if You are there— take charge of my life!" I dare you! See what happens then!

II. QUESTION TWO: WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

Most people, if we can believe the polls, are open enough and intelligent enough to believe in a "higher power." But to believe in "a" God is still far from Christian faith, far from being saved. To believe in the existence of God is one thing. There is another question to be asked, a question that must be answered to our satisfaction for saving faith to take hold: What is God LIKE?

[In the twist of our English language this may not be a proper question, for God is Unique. He is not LIKE anything else. But He can be known in relation to His creation.]

There are always people who are willing to help us, and who will try to explain God to us; scholarly people and otherwise.

We have our doctrines of God. The Manual of the Church of the Nazarene states:

We believe in one eternally existent, infinite God, Sovereign of the Universe; that He only is God, creative and administrative, holy in nature, attributes, and purpose; that He as God is Triune in essential being, revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Such definitions are both necessary and helpful. But they certainly are not comprehensive. And they are not very personal. They don't leave us with a very warm feeling.

The God Who is Near

It is in the Bible, the special revelation of Scripture, that we begin to get insight into the mystery of what God IS (like.) The names of God as found in the Old and New Testaments are a good place to begin.

The first name God used of Himself is Elohim, which comes from a word relating to power. It would suggest that God is the Source of all energy and power.

The second name God uses of Himself is "the unspeakable name," the name which ancient Hebrews would not speak, the name we call Jehovah, and which scholars usually call Yahweh. This name is the proper noun that Moses by the burning bush heard as I AM THAT I AM.

The Jews then used compound names for God: Jehovah-Jireh "the Lord will provide"; Jehovah-Nissi, "the Lord my banner"; Jehovah-Shalom "the Lord send peace"; Jehovah-Shammah "the Lord is there"; Jehovah-Tsikenu "the Lord our righteousness."

Another Hebrew name for God is El Shaddai, or "God our Nourisher," or "Strength Giver." Adonai, which simply means "lord" or "master" was often spoken when the "unspeakable name" was read with the eye. These are some of the names and associated characteristics of God that we see in the Old Testament.

In the New Testament the teachings of Jesus opened the door of revelation still wider, and showed us that God is LIGHT and that He is LIFE, and that God is LOVE.

Then as we search the scriptures, and let them speak to us of the nature and attributes of God we come to say that God is Spirit; that God is HOLY; that God is ETERNAL. We say that God is OMNIPRESENT, that there is nothing hidden from Him; that God is OMNISCIENT, that there is nothing He does not know or understand. God is OMNIPOTENT, and the only thing that God cannot do is contradict His own nature. God is GOOD, so He cannot also be EVIL. God is HOLY, so He cannot also love uncleanness.

But the highest and best answer to the question What is God LIKE? is found in the Person and Word of Jesus Himself. Jesus said, "He that hath seen Me hath seen the

Father. (John 14:9.) Paul writes "In the face of Jesus Christ shines the glory of God the Father. (2 Corinthians 4:6.)

If we come to the Bible with an open heart, we can begin to know the answer to the vital question, "WHAT IS GOD LIKE?" We will be convinced that "Jesus loves me, This I know, for the Bible tells me so!"

But we still face the most important and vital question of all:

III. QUESTION THREE: WHAT IS THIS GOD TO ME?

What you or I believe about God's existence or His nature will not change the fact of God one little bit. GOD IS! God does not change from person to person, He is not a subjective figment of human imagination.

But saving faith is more, far more even, that knowing and believing what is true and right about God. Saving faith is a miracle of God's grace. THIS, TOO, IS A 'REVELATION QUESTION!' Only God Himself can bring us into personal knowledge and certainty that Jesus Christ is our personal Lord and Savior.

The Bible tells us that it is possible to have answered the first two questions and still not be saved. "The devils also believe— and tremble!" (James 2:9.)

How is it possible to know God in this personal way? How can we draw near to this great EL SHADDAI?

She was doing a routine task, one she had done hundreds of times before, so her mind could freely wander. She was thinking serious thoughts as she moved along. Thoughts about life and death, about God and worship, and the meaning of all these things were mixed in with thoughts of her present situation. She had really made a mess of her life. It wasn't all her fault. And yet...

Her thoughts were interrupted as she arrived at the well. She saw this Jewish gentleman sitting right on the cover of the well. He startled her by asking for a drink of water.

The God Who is Near

One good word led to another. Soon she was engaged in the most thrilling conversation of her entire life. She began to express some of the questions she had been pondering.

"Are the Jews correct in saying we have to go to Jerusalem to worship?" she asked. "Or can we Samaritans worship right here on this mountain?" She gestured to the twin peaks towering above the well.

Her heart was open. She longed to know what God was really like. She wanted to know what God demanded of her.

What a tremendous, satisfying answer this Stranger began to give her! He told her, "You don't need more RELIGION! You have too much of that already! What you need is contact with God!"

"What is God LIKE?"

And that day at the well of Jacob one Samaritan woman received the greatest discourse ever spoken on the nature of God and worship. Jesus told her, "God is Spirit. They that worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." He went on to say that the place and even the method may vary. God is interested in what goes on in the heart.

As Jesus spoke this woman saw the pieces of truth she had already known begin to fit together and make sense with her own situation. She spoke out loud: "I know that when Messiah comes He will explain everything to our satisfaction!" Inside her longing heart was crying out "Could not the great God this man is describing do something wonderful for me SAME DAY?"

And THEN came the EARTHQUAKE! The Jewish gentleman said: YOU DON'T HAVE TO WAIT ONE MINUTE LONGER! MESSIAH IS HERE NOW! "I that speak to you am HE!" All of a sudden this very REAL God, and this very GREAT God was also very NEAR!

A lovely story! But Jesus doesn't usually approach people today like He did the woman at the well. How do WE draw near to EL SHADDAI?

The answer is: We don't! Oh, I know the Bible says "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you!" But in every case, we can come near to God because God has already given us an invitation! WE CAN DRAW NEAR TO GOD, BECAUSE GOD IS ALREADY NEAR!

We envy the woman at the well because she could see and talk with Jesus the Messiah. But by His Spirit out-poured, Jesus is nearer to us, now, day by day, than He was to the woman at the well of Sychar. Conclusion

When we are (1) in our daily routine, GOD IS NEAR! When we are (2) mixed up, messed up, GOD IS NEAR! When we are thinking how we can worship better, or do better, or be more spiritual, GOD IS ALREADY NEARER THAN YOU KNOW! He waits for us to recognize His Presence, and to let Him love us and fill us.

God is so great that He fills the Universe. But He is also so NEAR that He knows what you are thinking, and knows what you need. He knows all about you! And He loves you just the same!

Prayer:

The Love that Wins

November 10, 1991

Ruth 1:19 *So they two went until they came to Bethlehem.*

There is some question in some scholars' minds why the Book of Ruth ever came to be. Certainly it is a contrast to the "hero stories" of the Judges which go before—stories like Sisera's murder (by a tent peg) and Jephthah's terrible vow and Ehud and Eglon (which was my four sons' personal favorite) and Samson and all the rest; and it is also quite a contrast to the tales of the kings which follow.

Some believe it was not written down until the time of the greatest king of Israel, or his highly intelligent son—possibly by the Prophet Nathan, as a reminder that the greatest people can come from common roots, as well as the fact that nobility can be seen in humble places as well as where we might expect to look for it.

Be that as it may, this is not a big drama, not a Cecil B. DeMille production. No parting of the seas here. But a beautiful story, and just as wonderful.

I. IT IS THE STORY OF A WOMAN WITH A PROBLEM

- A. She was bound to the fortunes of her husband in a way that modern men and women can hardly understand. She may or may not have had influence in the decision which her husband made.

You know the story: times got hard in Israel.

The book starts out talking about a man named Elimilech. The name means "My God is KING." Wonderful name!

But this story is not about Elimilech. The heroine's name is Naomi. Well, there are two heroines, and a hero. They are Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz- don't forget Boaz. And the real hero is God, and the reality of the love and faithfulness of God.

Some people think that Elimilech was a shepherd, and couldn't find pasture to sustain his flocks. He thought that Moab might afford better grazing. No one really knows all the details or reasons, but it was Elimilech's decision:

We're making the journey to Moab!

- B. As if living in a foreign land were not bad enough, this woman, Naomi, had no sooner gotten her young sons married— to non-Jewish wives!- which was a violation of strict Mosaic code— when Elimilech had the nerve to die and leave her to fend for herself.

Poor Maholn and Chilion may have made a stab at keeping the business going. But Maholn was "weakly" and Chilion was "pining": and literally they both soon died as well, and as the scripture says, NAOMI WAS BEREFT.

II. IT IS ALSO THE STORY OF A WOMAN FOLLOWING A PROMISE

- A. Naomi did not hesitate too long. She determined to go back to her roots, to her culture, but also to the land of Promise.
- B. The pull of her promise attracted both her daughters-in-law. Naomi was obviously a KIND person, or her daughters-in-law would have jumped at the chance to be back in their home.

She was a person of INTEGRITY, as Ruth's famous speech indicates: She had an obvious faith in Jehovah God.

- C. She was a daughter of the House of Bread, and somehow she felt she would not starve if she could make her way back there again. It is just a little bit like the story of the Prodigal, even though none of this was Naomi's fault.

III. THERE IS PERIL INVOLVED

(Which peril is seen most clearly in the "Separation Scene:)

- A. Naomi's risk is calculated. She has traversed these miles before. She has some idea of what is waiting.

B. Ruth and Orpah have a different kind of risk.

1. For Orpah the risk is understandably too great to take. She cannot venture into the unknown.
2. For Ruth the risks are the same, but the perspective, perhaps, is a little different. Instead of just seeing the global change, and challenge of the unknown, Ruth sees Naomi's faith. Ruth makes a momentous choice. It is a beautiful passage of prose. We have made it into music, we sing it at weddings. It was actually a FIVE-FOLD CHOICE:
 - a. The choice of a GOD.
 - b. The choice of a PATH, or WAY. "The way you go, I go!"
 - c. The choice of a HOME. "Where you lodge, I will lodge."
 - d. The choice of a PEOPLE "Thy people shall be my people!"
 - e. The choice of how she would DIE and be BURIED! People who know the true God have confidence that overcomes the final enemy!

There is genuine LOVE here. It is mutual. Ruth had been a kind wife as well as daughter-in-law; so had Orpah.

IV. THE PROOF

THE CONFIRMATION, THAT NAOMI AND RUTH DID THE RIGHT THING MAY WELL STILL BE GOING ON!

- A. Probably Elimelech made a mistake by running to Moab. For when Naomi returned 10 years later, the same people she knew before had survived; they were engaged in the barley harvest.

What Naomi's husband did wrong (1) affected her, but (2) could not keep her from ultimate victory.
- B. The two women survived. And much, much more. Ruth became co-owner of the vast fields of Boaz. A lowly Gentile single woman soon was hiring and firing and making decisions at the heart of the Jewish culture. Homiletical theologians like to make a lot of that as some kind of pre-cursor of the way God looks at the nations—with love for all, not just the Jews.

C. But far, far beyond what they ever knew— this pastoral, homely little story has encouraged people of God to exercise faith. Long before Romans 8:28 had ever been thought about,

1. Naomi demonstrated an eternal law of God: that even in the worst and darkest times God knows and cares for His own.

Long before John 15 had been spoken, about the Vine and the Branches,

2. Naomi showed the world that God's people can ABIDE UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE ALMIGHTY, and the result will be MUCH FRUIT!

In the case of Naomi, the real blessings began with the birth, to Boaz and Ruth, of little Obed. Actually, by Jewish law the little boy was not only the heir to Boaz, but to Mahlon, carrying on the family which had been extinguished. Naomi shared in the joy in an official way; she was literally this baby's grandmother! What wonderful JOY is almost hidden there in the simple words, (4:19) that say Naomi took the baby in her own arms.

Maybe, it was thought then, maybe something will come of this family after all!

For Ruth, well, she never did know the extent of her blessing! This history was written, no doubt about it, to underscore the lineage of the greatest king of Israel up until that time!

But we know even better! Ruth was part of the royal line of ancestors to the Messiah!

Conclusion:

It is probably wrong to try to make too much of an application on such an intensely personal story. But maybe because God wanted to remind us that wherever we are, whether it is our fault or not, we are not beyond the bound of His love. We can go home again!

Prayer: Make us faithful where we are! Let us know You know, too, and You care!
Amen.

God Will Take Care of You

Our King of Kings

Christ the King Sunday

November 24, 1991

Romans 8:31-39 (34)

Introduction

The sheer victory of Romans 8 is breathtaking. It is the promise to every child of God of the fullness of life through our Lord Jesus Christ.

From a running start way back in the epistle, Paul traces the steps of salvation by faith in the believer's heart as (1) freedom from guilt, and (2) freedom from sin's dominion and (3) freedom from legalism until, as this great chapter begins, he begins a victory march of the positive, (4) freedom IN and TO the Spirit; from "no condemnation" through assurance of our acceptance into God's family as His dear children, and on through empowerment in our human weakness to a sure and certain triumph in inseparable union with the love of God.

This triumph, and every victory in the Christian way of life, is entirely through the authority and power of Jesus Christ, our LORD!

I. THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS IS KEY TO ALL SPIRITUAL VICTORY

- A. We see in Jesus the humble servant, we extoll His great humility in kenosis to the extent that we sometimes forget that He is mighty God, everlasting Father.

We see in Jesus the answer to every longing of our hearts, the healing of every real heartache. We see love extended to where we are— and rightly so. But do we also see that we must extend to this God-man a loyalty that is deserved by none other? Do we see that to follow Him is to relinquish our rights to ourselves? Can we trust such love, such wondrous love?

- B. We only really come to know Jesus as we make Him Lord. Our primary task is to follow Jesus, to come to know Him, as He really IS. Etymologists and deconstructionists and

archaeologists sincerely go looking for the "real Christ of history." I can confidently say that they will never really know who He WAS, because He IS the eternal Contemporary.

The task of the church at large is not to make Jesus over into something that fits and conforms to the needs of the world of today. The task of your Bible study and prayer is NOT to discover that about Jesus which will reinforce your lifestyle and help you achieve your goals. The task of this church is not to underscore the servant role of Jesus Christ.

For Jesus IS. He is the I AM THAT I AM. Our task is to lift Him up, and introduce Him. We are the servants of the great King of Kings.

When we are seeking to use Jesus to enforce our aspirations we may find principles that will help us succeed in some temporal areas. But ultimately we shall be diminished and we shall fail at the task of the Christian faith.

But when we are seeking to be used of Jesus in the work of His kingdom; when our lives proclaim "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done!", then we shall find that all hell itself cannot keep us from living in God's love.

II. CELEBRATING THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS

(Romans 8:34)

- A. Incarnate Lord : the King as it were veiled
- B. Dying Lord : the King as it were exposed for all to see
- C. Risen Lord : the King vindicated
- D. Reigning Lord : the King n Session

III. OBEYING THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS

- A. A king is to be obeyed. The kings and queens we honor today are really symbols, not sovereigns. But God is absolute Monarch. To be His implies much, much more than hanging around for the benefits.
- B. What does the Sovereignty of Christ the King imply? "All authority is given to me in heaven and on earth!" I AM the Lord God Almighty! "Go ye therefore . . ."

To make Jesus LORD means to get the focus off "receiving" and "rights" and on to "giving" and "obeying."

Conclusion

In a most practical application: The homage of obedience: "Here am I, send me!"

"Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace!" "Reporting for duty, Sir! Please, whatever else happens today, make me a channel of Your grace!"

To be a channel of God's love does NOT diminish us; there are human aspects of spending and being spent that tire us— but to sense the having been used of God is the greatest "high" in the world!

The Gift of Peace

Gifts of Advent—1 of 4

- **The Gift of Peace**
- The Gift of Faith
- The Gift of Love
- The Gift of Grace

December 1, 1991

John 16:33

(Children's Sermon:)

The best stories are the old stories! The ones we have heard over and over. And the very best of these old stories are Bible stories. I'm thinking of one I learned when I was very small— younger than most of you...

"Please help me remember.. help me tell the story of Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego."

There was a powerful king. There was a golden statue. There was a command: Do not pray to any God except the King (who thinks he is a god!) There was a "burning, fiery furnace!"

The king did not understand Shadrach, Meshach, and Abdenego. The king thought that God and prayer and things like that were not important. The king thought that he was more important than God! But we know that God and prayer and love and truth are the most important things in the world, don't we! We know that God loves us.

That is what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abdego knew! They were sure God was good. They were sure that if they loved God, and did the right, God would be with them! And He was!)

So— what happened?

And what does that tell us about praying and burning fiery furnaces and kings and the like? Do you think any of this has anything to do with peace?

(Introduction, Sermon, proper:)

Our text this first Sunday in Advent is John 16:33

These things have I spoken unto you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.

Peace was one of the main themes of the final words of Jesus, the Last Supper discourse. In Advent the hope of genuine peace and faith and love all mingle together in the anticipation of the coming of Messiah.

I. PEACE IN THE FUTURE

Advent is about anticipation. It is keeping alive the hope that Messiah will indeed come. Of course, we know that He has already come. He is coming again. But also in reality we know that there are many areas where there is a lack of peace— in the world, and in our individual situations. Wherever there are human beings, there is a need for peace.

"We do not yet see all thing put under (Messiah's) feet! But we see Jesus!" That is where hope comes in. Hope is believing, having faith in God's integrity, as we look into the unknown. Advent— anticipation. People in darkness, seeing a Light.

The hope of Messiah is alive in Judaism as perhaps never before! It should be alive in all people of faith. Jesus promised a future peace.

II. A PRESENT PEACE

But peace is not just "in the future" for those who follow Jesus. If genuine peace were only in the future it would be worth whatever it costs to live so as to finally receive it. But there is real, genuine, heart-healing peace right here and now! Jesus said, on that night before He was crucified, "Peace I leave with you; MY peace I give to you!"

- A. This present peace is a MYSTERY of our faith. Philippians 4:7 "The peace of God which passes all comprehension— passes all understanding— that is mysterious but real—

shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

YES- I can see the many things that are wrong! God's prophets are crying out against the evil of our day! Father Heery in Sacred Heart pulpit; my son Russell's pastor, Steve Perry in the Duxbury Nazarene pulpit— you don't need to travel to hear Chuck Coleson (although that is not a bad idea)— you just have to be alive to God to be shocked and saddened by the intensity of the evil in our world today— evils that I find difficult to even talk about in a public meeting where tender ears are present!

YES- I do not know what the next step is! I have no lack of advice: write this legislator; block that entrance; get busy— DO something! Now! Don't waste time! It's already too late!

NO! I am NOT overwhelmed! I know that I am in my Savior's care! The FIRST thing I must do is make sure that my roots go down deep into HIM! My PEACE is only in HIM!

- B. Present peace begins with a reconciliation with God. The call of the prophet is "Be reconciled with God!" The world in great part does not even understand that it is alienated from God. Our society today has no concept of sin. On the one hand violence and sex are glorified; on the other hand random killing and rape and incest are epidemic, and social experts cannot make the connection. Our society is out of touch with spiritual reality! We as a civilization are being showered with anti-God propaganda.

But when individuals wake up— or are shocked awake by some sense of need, and the Holy Spirit of God brings conviction for sin, and a strong faith that Jesus can and will forgive sin, there comes a glorious sense of peace with God, and a justification— a forgiveness of guilt that brings real, not false peace.

This is the peace of PARDON.

Present peace continues with a settled-ness regarding who I am, and what I do. I do not claim more for "peace" than the Bible; the way of faith is very

much a battle. But God's people come not only to know peace with God, but they come to know the peace OF God.

This is a peace of PURPOSE.

The best part of present peace— peace during the storms and battles of life— is that the God of peace is with His people!

This is the peace of God's PRESENCE.

- C. This present peace is an ABIDING PEACE! 1. As we abide in Him! 2. This peace comes to ABIDE in us!
- D. When the disciples finally DID turn their world upside down it was NOT through frantic endeavor. It was not through massive political demonstration. There were cases of civil disobedience, perhaps. But only when clearly the law told them not to speak of the power of the Gospel. And then, frightened, they repaired to the BODY, where they poured out their fears, and they prayed together! Their prayer was for abiding peace:

"Lord, behold now their threatenings! Grant that with boldness (i.e., lack of intimidation; i.e., peace) we may proclaim You as Lord!" (Acts 4)

III. A SIGN OF THIS PEACE: COMMUNION

Jesus said: "As often as you do this, You proclaim all that I am and all that I have done and all that I am going to do!" (Paraphrase from I Corinthians 11)

Invitation:

Jesus would invite us to share in His peace today!

Jesus would remind us of our HOPE today!

Our peace is in the future— He is coming again, just as surely as He came in Bethlehem. We are no different from the faithful who sat in darkness, waiting, watching— like Simeon and Anna and all the prophets before them. The wrongs of earth will be made right! Every knee shall bow! Messiah will come!

Jesus would also reinforce our PEACE today! Our peace is here, now, with us, present! What a wonderful GIFT! What a powerful assurance!

What a sinful thing to hide such a GIFT! How we need to seek ways to share it!

Jesus would also challenge us to be instruments of PEACE:

Our peace is not a denial of struggle; not an "answer" to dilemma, nor a forceful action. Our peace is a still small voice saying: "This is the way! Walk ye in it!" Our peace is the quiet nudge to speak to a neighbor with concern about her problems; our peace is a call to be and then to do.

The Gift of Faith

Gifts of Advent—2 of 4

- The Gift of Peace
- **The Gift of Faith**
- The Gift of Love
- The Gift of Grace

December 8, 1991

Ephesians 2:8

Introduction

Last week the children and I reviewed the Old Testament story of the Three Hebrew Children. It may never be reviewed in quite the same way ever again!

To our modern ears, that story seems far removed from Advent and Christmas. Still, I would like to return to it this morning. How, do you suppose, is there any correlation between Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and the coming of our Lord as a Babe in Bethlehem?

Advent is anticipation, Advent is hope. Advent is facing darkness with faith. Advent is living in a world that tries to pressure you to conform, in the confidence that God knows, and that God cares, and that God somehow is coming into that world, into that darkness.

[Writing to the Christians in Ephesus, Paul reminds them of the darkness in the world, and also of the fact that before God broke into their lives they were very much engulfed in that darkness.]

I. A DARKNESS INTO WHICH GOD'S GRACE SHINES

- A. THE NATURE OF SPIRITUAL DARKNESS has not changed, from the time of Nebuchadnezzar, to St. Paul, until the present:

In Ephesians 2:1-3 Paul calls it "THE FORMER STATE" - the way you used to be.

Here is how Paul describes it. It is spiritual death - it is an existence without the light of revelation. No word from God, heavens of brass, which is the essence of darkness.

It is a life of pressure to conform; lock-step conformity to opinion of 'them' - devilish - poverty - inheriting God's wrath

- B. DARKNESS IS AGGRESSIVE; it threatens to engulf; it squeezes into conformity: That is why in another place Paul warned Romans 12:2) "Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold; but rather, be transformed by the renewing of your mind."
- C. [STORY] The challenge of SPIRITUAL DARKNESS to the faith of the Three Hebrew Children seemed pretty bold and clear-cut. Our challenges somehow seldom appear that way.

They were asked to violate the First, or at least the Second Commandment. If that were to happen today how many people would even know the First or Second Commandment?

They were asked to put something ahead of their Jehovah God, at least for a little while; they were asked to publicly give respect to a pagan idol. Just a little thing? Shadrach, Meshach and Abdenego were willing to die for what they believed!

They were DEFIANT IN THE FACE OF KNOWN TEMPTATION TO EVIL!

What was it that enabled Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to stand firm in the face of certain punishment and death?

What was it that gave them courage to stand against the great majority? Do we ever face pressure to compromise?

I think immediately of

- (High school/ peer pressure/ slick media hype/ but they are not the only ones that feel the pressure: at every age there is the threat: "Get out of line and you will be shunned! Don't be the odd-ball!
- Mothers are criticized for NOT working— or, they may be criticized FOR having a career;
- people feel squeezed into social classes, as though it is a "second class" thing to be a carpenter or a laborer;
- academics have the pressure of the fear of being thought behind the times, academically)

WHAT GAVE THE THREE HEBREW CHILDREN MORAL COURAGE TO SAY, "WE DON'T CARE WHAT YOU THINK: HERE WE STAND! BY GOD'S GRACE WE CAN DO NO OTHER!"???

The answer is: they could SEE what, seemingly, others could not. They had a vision that went beyond the moment.

- D. It is vital, in times of spiritual darkness, to have some means of vision, of finding one's way. This VISION, or SIGHT is what Paul calls "a gift of God." It is a key, an enabling, that God gives to those who are saved, that enables them to grasp the truth.

II. FAITH, THE VISION THAT SEES THE INVISIBLE, OF THE GOD-LIFE SHARED

(Hebrews 11, 'Moses persevered because he saw the invisible')

- A. We know how the story turned out: Someone like unto the Son of God came into the heat and the pressure with the men who would not compromise their faith. It was a miracle that convinced even the pagan king himself!
- B. And it is no less a miracle when God Himself comes into the darkness and pressure where we live, in 1991, where people do not usually physically martyr Christians, but a time in which it probably is as difficult to live a godly life as at any time in human history!
- Paul says to the Ephesians Christians: GOD WALKS IN THE FIRE WITH YOU! He calls it, in verses 4 - 7 "THE PRESENT STATE." He describes it like this:

(You were dead to spiritual things;) NOW you are alive unto God!

Not only that, but (You were condemned, worthy of death;) NOW you are made one with Jesus, and by that identification you are exalted with Christ Jesus to heavenly realms.

I know this sounds too good to be true. But there it is! We are members of God's family! We have the incomparable riches of grace. We have the eternal prospect of all that Adam and Eve lost in the fall from grace, and more!

- C. All this salvation, all this grace, all these promises are because Jesus, Messiah, came to us in our darkness— and bled and died on a cross for the sins of the world. All this miracle is available because God still comes near to those who see the light, and follow that light. We call that ability to see, to believe, to follow FAITH!

III. THE VISION MADE POSSIBLE, SPIRITUAL SIGHT (Ephesians 2:8 - 10)

- A. God's GRACE is available to all. But Paul makes it clear that GRACE IS SOMEHOW CONNECTED WITH FAITH. Grace can never, ever be taken for granted. Grace is connected with FAITH, or the ability to "believe." (Text: For by grace are you saved, THROUGH FAITH, which is the gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast.) FAITH IS A GIFT OF GOD WHICH MUST BE USED TO RECEIVE GOD'S GRACE!
- B. WHAT IS THIS 'FAITH' THAT IS GOD'S GIFT?
1. FAITH IS A MYSTERY. Like sight itself, most of us know precious little about how it works; but we know how precious it is! The gift of spiritual sight is even more precious.
 2. FAITH IS LIKE A SEED. Jesus spoke of faith as being like a grain of mustard seed.
 3. FAITH IS, IN AND OF ITSELF DYNAMIC AND POWERFUL. It is a power which may be subverted at times to selfish ends. But it is NOT FAITH THAT SAVES! Faith ultimately cannot rise above its object. (Power of positive thinking)

4. FAITH CONNECTS US TO THE LOVE OF CHRIST! Ultimately, faith is God-given ability to SEE spiritual truth (passing mere explanation). Faith is the ability to BELIEVE, to RELY, to see God's INTEGRITY and act upon it to everlasting gain.

IV. COME TO BETHLEHEM AND SEE

- A. Why didn't everybody find Jesus when He was born in the manger? Why were just "certain shepherds" able to find the Christ Child? How come more Wise Men didn't follow the Star?

How about Simeon and Anna in the Temple?

Could it be that the people then were just like now? That they lived in a darkness that kept them blinded to spiritual reality all around them?

- B. WHY DON'T MORE PEOPLE TODAY LOVE JESUS CHRIST? Can it be that they are spiritually blind? Or have they neglected the gift of spiritual sight?

- C. You have this gift! You can begin to use your gift— with it you may see the Christ! You may find God's life.

But it will take almost as much courage as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had when they would not conform to their evil world. YOU WILL HAVE TO FOLLOW THE LIGHT UNTIL YOU COME TO KNOW THE CHRIST!

Conclusion:

In our world good is called evil, and evil is called good. The commandments of God have been replaced by our own "human values." We are taught "QUESTION AUTHORITY!" And the credo of our age is "WHAT IS GOOD FOR ME IS RIGHT!"

So we even ask "What good will come to me if I have no gods before Jehovah God? " What will it profit me if I worship products made with human hands, whether they be idols that look like idols, or idols that amuse us, or that pander to our pride?"

Instead of standing under the judgment and authority of God's Word, our society, and all too often even we who claim to be in the church itself, (we) stand in judgment

The Gift of Faith

on God's Word; (we) pick and choose which of God's commandments we shall keep and which we shall ignore!

GOD WILL HONOR FAITH!

OUR GOD WILL COME, EVEN IF IT HAS TO BE IN THE FIERY FURNACE!

When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego honored their God, and took their stand, they not only were vindicated themselves, THEY MADE A PROFOUND DIFFERENCE IN THEIR WORLD, IN THEIR GENERATION!

Our sick world needs Messiah! And Messiah will come! He will come, NOW, to His children who look to Him with FAITH! And one day He will come so all the world will see Him!

Prayer: For the ability to SEE Your face!

#182 It Came Upon the Midnight Clear

The Gift of Love

Gifts of Advent—3 of 4

- The Gift of Peace
- The Gift of Faith
- **The Gift of Love**
- The Gift of Grace

"Come Home for Christmas" Sunday

December 15, 1991

John 3:16

I. THE WONDER OF THE OLD CHRISTMAS STORY

We've heard it all our lives, and we never get tired of it: Christmas is love. Christmas is giving. "The people who sat in darkness ... saw a great Light" The wonder of God coming in a totally unexpected Way: God in a Baby!

The wonder of this truth really "got to me" this week when I saw little Andrew Mann Nielson (as the Baby Jesus) in the cradle of straw— a real baby— and watched him move and reach for his mother— and once again I realized that God actually wrapped all His LOVE in such a tiny package!

We think of how from that Baby all we hold so very dear about salvation and life and eternal life have come: no wonder Christmas means so much! We say things like: It's too bad that the wonder of Christmas couldn't continue 365 days a year!

II. CHRISTMAS IS A MESSAGE OF GOD'S LOVE FOR ALL TIME

Sometimes we forget the way that God comes near in OUR time: How He draws near NOW! God still comes the totally unexpected, incredible way! We savor the Christmas traditions, and we even believe the incredible, wonderful story that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself. But sometimes we forget that the real heart of Christmas IS for all 365 days of the year!

When we are the "people who sit (in any kind of) darkness"— when we have the hard places in life: situations or even people threatening to bring us down to ruin, when we have burdens or sins, too often instead of looking for a Higher Power we seek FIRST our own solutions. After all, isn't that what God gave us intelligence for? We never think that God wants to be asked in on every facet, every detail of our lives! This world is too complicated for something as old-fashioned as "faith" to enter in when there are real problems!

But God is waiting to enter into every part of our lives! It wasn't just in Bethlehem that God came in a surprising, loving way! God has invaded the world with His love and goodness!

III. HOW THE GOODNESS OF GOD REACHES A SINFUL WORLD

Faith tells us that at the heart of our Universe is GOODNESS! There is LIGHT and there is LOVE where God sits on His throne. But that is there, and we are here.

So too often we think our faith is just for the life that comes after death; and we wait for Christ to come and ZAP all the bad guys— the porno people and the greedy money grubbers that swallow up the poor people of the world. After all, what can WE do?

So sometimes— all too often— we have neglected to let God really be at home in our hearts, so that He can do whatever He wants to do in His own way!

He is interested in every one of us!

IV. HEAR GOD KNOCKING! KNOCKING!

But "that was then.. and this is now! Right?" Jesus came then as a Baby, but He has already conquered sin and death and hell, right? He is now at the right hand of the Throne of God. Right?

It is true that Jesus has conquered. And it is also true that one day the Bible tells us that this present, evil world will tremble at His coming. But it is not quite true that He

expects us to passively wait until He comes and ZAPS the bad people of the world. Jesus wants to be active in each of our homes and lives.

What do you suppose that Jesus is doing just now?

Yes— He is praying for us. Yes, He is preparing a place for His people— for you and me if we will trust Him. But there is another picture of the glorified, majestic Savior that sounds a lot like the theme of the Christmas story!

In Revelation, Chapter One, John the beloved has a vision of the glorified Christ that nearly overwhelms him. Remember, John walked and talked with Jesus Christ for more than three years. He knew all about the lowly Nazarene, the One who had been born in Bethlehem. But this vision was a revelation in itself! It literally bowled him over! He fell down at the majesty and glory of the Lord Christ!

But in Revelation, Chapter Three, John gives us another picture of this Savior. And do you know what He is doing? He is standing outside a door, knocking! The Savior of the world, knocking at a door, asking to come in!

"Is there any room in there?" Does that sound familiar?

And do you know what door it is that the Savior is knocking on? IT IS THE CHRISTMAS STORY ALL OVER AGAIN! JESUS IS LOOKING FOR A HOME, A PLACE TO FELLOWSHIP, TO EAT AND SLEEP!

That door is the door of your life! It is the door of that situation that is overwhelming you! It is the door to the areas of your marriage that have gone sour! It is the door to the way you look at relationships!

Conclusion:

"Christmas" says to us:

- Light is more powerful than darkness
- Love is stronger than hate
- and Jesus has proved it by his own life.

He has proved it in the lives of everyone who has trusted him.

The Gift of Love

He has changed the course of human history.

He will complete his conquest, He has promised but in the meantime, He still is seeking to come to you and me in his own loving way.

We need answers for the troubles we all face in life: misunderstandings, losses of all kinds, insults, slights, bruises. But before we need answers, we need God's gift of love!

He sent a baby to save a darkened world. And he comes now, knocking, knocking at our doors, in any and every circumstance of life.

To "Come Home for Christmas" means to find that God is our home, and that we are welcome in His family, in His household.

But it is also to let God come into OUR hearts, and welcome GOD into our family situations, to make GOD at home in us!

*"O holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend on us, we pray!
Cast out our sin, and enter in;
Be born is us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell.
Oh, come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord, Emmanuel."*

-Philips Brooks

The Gift of Grace

Gifts of Advent—4 of 4

- The Gift of Peace
- The Gift of Faith
- The Gift of Love
- **The Gift of Grace**

December 22, 1991

Ephesians 3:17-21

3:17 ... so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith

3:19 ... that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God

Introduction

Christmas is a lot of different things to every one of us! Christmas is wonderful! Christmas is exhausting! Christmas is expensive! Christmas is expectations! Christmas is love! Christmas can reflect all of the many sides of what we mean when we say the word "love." [... many shades of "love"]

I. CHRISTMAS AND LOVE AND GIVING

A. CONDESCENDING LOVE

Sometimes love at Christmas means saying "It's wonderful!" when you open a present. Some of the presents I made or bought for my father and mother when I was small were pretty awful. But somehow they actually seemed to cherish them. What you really mean is "It's wonderful that you thought enough of me to give me a present— but, really, what do we need an ash tray for when nobody smokes in our house?"

B. REFLECTED LOVE

There is a joy in seeing other people who seem to be happy. Sometimes love at Christmas means nearly bursting with joy when the beautiful boys and girls of the Sunday School sing about the Babe in the manger.

C. COMPASSIONATE LOVE

Sometimes love at Christmas means thinking about Mary and Joseph and what it means even in our time to desperately need a place to stay the night.

D. THE "PRESENCE!"

Sometimes the deepest significance of the Season dawns on us once again! Sometimes we have a "holy moment," when it seems that God Himself draws near, and we know that He really does love us tenderly. And what more could we ever ask?

E. GRATEFUL LOVE!

And maybe sometimes, just sometimes, love at Christmas might be saying, "Thank You God! You seem to have done all the giving! What can I get You for Christmas??"

It may be that the best Christmas love is not expressed until "gifts are exchanged" at this highest relationship of all! God's wonderful, undeserved Gift to us may be echoed by the gift of our love and our trust to God!

Is it possible that I have anything God thinks is precious? "HOW CAN I ENTER INTO GOD'S PLAN AND SHARE HIS LOVE?" Nowhere is this more clearly reflected than in the way the most honored and highly favored of all mortals entered into the first Christmas. I refer to the holy, sacred story of Mary, the Mother of Our Lord.

II. THE MOTHER OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, THE VIRGIN MARY

A. SHE WAS THE FIRST ONE TO KNOW that there was going to be that First Christmas.

We call the occasion when Mary found out "THE ANNUNCIATION." God sent an angel,

Gabriel, to visit Mary. The story is found in Luke 1:26 - 38:

Now in the sixth month [of Elizabeth's pregnancy] the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee, called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

And coming in, he said to her, "Hail, O woman richly blessed! The Lord is with you!"

But she was greatly troubled at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this might be. And the angel said to her,

"Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus.

"He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end."

And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I know no man?"

And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God.

"And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. For nothing will be impossible with God."

And Mary said, "Behold the bondservant of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

- B. THIS STORY IS "HOLY GROUND" to me. We (should) stand in awe of the way God chose to become one with us; it was a unique- a ONE TIME HAPPENING in the history of our world. I believe it literally, actually, physically and spiritually took place: God became incarnate in the womb of a virgin.

1. GOD COULD HAVE SENT His Son full-grown, a perfect Man formed from nothing; He chose instead to ask a beautiful teenager if she would be the mother of a very special, very human baby Boy.
2. It is deeply significant that GOD CHOSE TO BRING HIS WORD TO EARTH THROUGH A COMBINATION OF SUPERNATURAL AND VERY HUMAN MEANS.

- a. The meeting, the Annunciation was miracle.
- b. But Mary had to make a very human decision. Mary made that decision: she said, "Behold the handmaiden of the Lord!"

The Conception was a miracle; and as the Baby grew within her, the Gift of the Ages was, like all babies, a miracle of creation beyond her understanding or ability.

- C. GOD STILL ENLISTS A COMBINATION OF SUPERNATURAL AND VERY HUMAN MEANS WHENEVER HE REVEALS HIMSELF and His love to this needy world!

God could preach sermons and bind up wounds and speak out against evil by sending fantastic creatures; He chooses to use imperfect, stumbling men and women like you and me.

- D. SOMEHOW MARY'S BEAUTIFUL WILLINGNESS IS VITAL TO GOD'S PLAN.

1. Yes, it WAS to Mary's GREAT benefit; but IT WAS NOT FOR MARY ALONE, or even for Mary, PRIMARILY! The Gift was for the whole world, to the glory of God.
2. Mary reflects this in "THE MAGNIFICAT" [the response she gave to the affirmation or worship of her unborn child she received from her cousin, Elizabeth: Luke 1:46-55:]

And Mary said: "My soul exalts the Lord. And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.

For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant; For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.

For the Mighty One has done great things for me; and Holy is His Name. AND HIS MERCY IS UPON GENERATION AFTER GENERATION TOWARD THOSE WHO FEAR HIM.

He has done mighty things with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and He has exalted those who were humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things; And sent the rich away empty-handed.

He has given help to Israel His servant,
In remembrance of His mercy,
As He spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and his offspring forever."

3. As she praises God, Mary is grateful for what has happened to her, and that is only right; but THE CENTER OF HER PRAISE IS GOD HIMSELF.
- E. This is a lesson we need to learn and re-learn from Mary: It is a blessed and wonderful thing to know God and be blessed by God; but WE ARE BLESSED IN ORDER TO BE GOD'S CHANNEL OF BLESSING; WE ARE BLESSED SO THAT WE CAN MAGNIFY THE NAME OF THE LORD!

III. THE WONDER OF CHRISTMAS GRACE ... REPEATED IN US!

- A. IT IS NOT A NEW THOUGHT that at Christmas we should let the Christ "be born in us today!" In fact, it is a common theme among Christians: Let Jesus in! Make room for Jesus in our hearts! One poet put it this way:

Though Christ a thousand times
In Bethlehem be born,
Yet not within your heart-
Your heart is still forlorn!

IT IS NOT A NEW THOUGHT that Christ within is the Source of Life and Light and all spiritual blessing. We say: "Yes! There is room in our hearts! Be born in us!" We rejoice in the Name "God with us! Emmanuel!"

B. What we dare not forget is that like Mary, WE MUST ACCEPT THE RESPONSIBILITY AS WELL AS THE HONOR OF SHARING THE LIFE of Christ that God has placed within us!

1. It was the Miracle of Miracles when in the Baby Jesus God brought His WORD to this earth! By that Miracle God expresses His love!
2. It is ALSO a great miracle when the Jesus-life is born in us— when we are born again in Him— AND IT IS NOT JUST FOR OUR BLESSING AND BENEFIT, ANY MORE THAN BRINGING JESUS TO BIRTH WAS JUST FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY!
3. I know that is almost sounds sacrilegious to say it, BUT GOD STILL USES A COMBINATION OF SUPERNATURAL AND VERY HUMAN MEANS TO BRING HIS WORD, HIS SON JESUS TO THOSE WHO NEED HIM!

C. SOMEHOW YOUR WILLINGNESS IS VITAL TO GOD'S PLAN. We must come to think of what God wants with us, wants to do through us— and not just how God's grace can enhance our success in life and make us more comfortable.

1. Letting Christ the WORD live in us may make life more complicated at times! THE ANNUNCIATION CERTAINLY MEANT A GREAT DEAL OF MISUNDERSTANDING AND DISCOMFORT FOR MARY! CHRIST WITHIN YOU AND ME WILL MEAN SOME MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND SOME BURDENS FOR US AS WELL!
2. But the Apostle Paul prayed that the Church— the church of HIS time— as well as YOU and ME this very day— might know this miracle. MAY GOD USE YOUR HEART AND LIFE TO LET HIS SON SHINE THROUGH?
3. Let me close this brief message with Paul's prayer from the third chapter of Ephesians (3:17-21). I read from the Amplified Version:

MAY CHRIST through your faith [ACTUALLY] dwell— settle down, abide, MAKE HIS PERMANENT HOME— IN YOUR HEARTS! May you be rooted deep in love and founded securely on love,

That you may have the power and be strong to apprehend and grasp with all saints (God's devoted people, the experience of that love) what is the breadth and length and height and depth of it;

[That you may really come] to know— practically, through experience for yourselves— the love of Christ, which far surpasses mere knowledge (without experience); THAT YOU MAY BE FILLED (THROUGH ALL YOUR BEING) UNTO ALL THE FULLNESS OF GOD— [that is] may have the richest measure of the divine Presence, AND BECOME A BODY WHOLLY FILLED AND FLOODED WITH GOD HIMSELF!

Now to Him Who, by (in consequence of) the [action of His] power that is at work within us, is able to [carry out His purpose and] do superabundantly, far over and above all that we [dare] ask or think— infinitely beyond our highest prayers, desires, thoughts, hopes or dreams—

To Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever. Amen— so be it.

Conclusion:

There is no question about the wonderful Gift God has given to us all at Christmas! We have the gift of grace— of life eternal through the gift of God's Son.

But may there be a gift exchange as well! May we say with all the love we can bring to prayer: Behold the handmaid of the Lord! Behold the bondservant of the Lord! Lord, Here's my heart! Love this world through me! Amen!

174 O Little Town of Bethlehem

The Sacrament of Baptism

Baptismal service

January 5, 1992

Intro:

One of the difficult things for Protestants is fixing in their minds the relative importance of the sacraments of the church. Of all the means of grace, they are possibly understood the least.

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SACRAMENTS AS MEANS OF GRACE

I would like to ask you a very simple question:

A. WHAT IS GRACE?

Grace is unmerited favor of God; grace is that which bestows God's great LOVE on us; grace is God's attitude of forgiveness toward the sinner; grace is a quickening and strengthening of life within the soul.

B. AND MEANS OF GRACE ARE just that: the ways and means, the vehicles or channels by which God bestows His LOVE on our hearts. And what are the 'means of grace?'

My list may not be complete, but I submit seven:

1. WORD OF GOD; and with this I include the faithful the preaching of the Word, as well as reading in order to obey God's will.
2. PRAYER IS PROBABLY THE PRIMARY MEANS OF GRACE; and prayer combines with power with the use of the Word.
3. THE FELLOWSHIP OF GOD'S PEOPLE is a significant and powerful means of grace. God never intends for us to make our way to heaven independent of other individuals, or of other families, or even other groups of believers. God intends that we bear one another's burdens.

The Sacrament of Baptism

4. CORPORATE WORSHIP, in the large groups or celebrations, in the smaller groups united around a lesson or a ministry (congregations,) as well as in the accountability groups of prayer and sharing (cells,) is a means of grace.
5. PERSONAL WORSHIP may be the same as #2, prayer; but it involves the carrying forward of life in the spirit of 'the living sacrifice.'
6. The good old Nazarene theologian, H. Orton Wiley, lists THE SABBATH AS A MEANS OF GRACE! It was introduced at the time of man's creation, and belongs to mankind generally and perpetually.

I am convinced that there is great spiritual power waiting to be released in the lives of the people who can tap the resources of the Lord's Day by observing it joyfully, not in bondage, but in rest and worship and refreshing.

7. But the last 'means of grace' I would mention are THE SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH THAT WERE INSTITUTED BY JESUS.

C. WHAT ARE 'SACRAMENTS?'

We use the term 'sacrament' to signify an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given to us, ordained by Christ Himself as a means of receiving that grace, and as a pledge or assurance of Christ's promise. From the earliest times, the sacraments have been understood by the church to be religious rites that carry the most solemn obligation of loyalty to Jesus Christ and His Church.

1. The RC church teaches seven (7) sacraments: baptism, the Lord's supper (or "mass",) confirmation, ordination, extreme unction (or 'last rites,') penance (or 'confession,') and marriage.
2. All Protestant churches recognize but two: baptism and the Lord's Supper.

SACRAMENTS ARE PLEDGES OF LOYALTY TO JESUS CHRIST; THEY ARE TESTIMONIES THAT MARK CHRISTIANS AS SEPARATE, DIFFERENT FROM THOSE WHO DO NOT BELIEVE.

- D. It is vitally important that we reach out for God's grace in every way we can. [Perhaps we do not take seriously the parables of Jesus when He warned us that it is mortally dangerous to have talents and not use them!] We are responsible not only for what we are, but for what we might be by God's free gifts of grace!

Along this line John Wesley once said: (in 1736)

"I think the rock on which I had the nearest made shipwreck of the faith was the writings of the Mystics; under which term I comprehend all, and only those, who slight any of the means of grace." GFH, p541

In other words, Wesley said that even people who seem to be so very, very spiritual nearly led him astray when they picked out which means of grace they would adopt, and which they would avoid.

Wesley was saying 'I want to be faithful to God through Christ's church!'

- E. And if you wonder what John Wesley thought the 'true church' consisted of, here is a quote from H. Ray Dunning:

"There were two major means that Mr. Wesley seemed to identify as constitutive of the church: the pure Word of God preached, and the sacraments duly administered. This puts him squarely in the Reformation tradition." GFH p542]

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF BAPTISM AS A MEANS OF GRACE

Baptism is clearly one of the sacraments of the church. It was instituted by the Lord Jesus, first by His example, and then by His unmistakable command (in the words of the text:)

Baptism means three things for the believer:

- A. BAPTISM MEANS IDENTIFYING WITH JESUS in His baptism.

John the Baptist baptized many people in the Jordan. This was not clearly outlined in Old Testament law, but it could have some meaning of preparation for the coming of a new order, in that just before the giving of

the Law on Sinai, God told Moses to sanctify the people, and He specifically said: "Have them wash their garments!"

But the baptism of Jesus was unique. Jesus was identifying with sinners, even though He knew no sin. In coming with the sinners, JESUS TOOK THE ROLE OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT; and in the descent of the Holy Spirit HE CLEARLY EXEMPLIFIED THE ROLE OF THE ANOINTED ONE, THE MESSIAH.

No one else was sinless that day, or any other day. But Jesus identified with everyone who has failed; he came to bear our sins and sorrows to the Tree.

No one else could ever hear the Father say: "This is my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!" and have the Holy Spirit descend without measure.

But if Jesus identified with us, with sinful humanity that day of His baptism; then we, as His spiritual sons and daughters identify with Him.

We are not called on to die as the sinless sacrifice; but BAPTISM IS THE WAY OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT; and we identify with Jesus in death to sin (He died for sin.)

We cannot know the fullness of the Holy Spirit as Jesus knew Him, but WE ARE CALLED TO ACCEPT THE ANOINTING OF GOD, indwelling us, and live in the new life and power of that life the Holy Spirit brings.

- B. BAPTISM MEANS INCORPORATION INTO THE CHURCH. The washing of baptism by John indicated a preparation for a new age of the Spirit of God. But Jesus transformed John's baptism, and made it the sacramental portion of His Great Commission: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
- C. BAPTISM MEANS THE INITIAL RECEPTION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. The Holy Spirit is the gift of the Son, and of the Father. He comes to make Jesus real to us. He is the Spirit of Jesus. He does not testify of Himself, but is the fulfillment of the promise: "Lo, I AM with you always, even to the end of the age."

The connection of baptism with the reception of the Holy Spirit seems clear in the New Testament. Sometimes the people received the Spirit as, or after they were baptized; sometimes it was a witness or a seal after they had already been saved.

Acts 2:38 (Peter says:) "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, AND YE SHALL RECEIVE THE GIFT OF THE HOLY GHOST." Here, clearly, the people to be baptized did not yet have the Holy Spirit.

But later, at Caesarea, Cornelius and his household received the Holy Spirit as Peter was preaching to them. And the question there was: "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, WHICH HAVE RECEIVED THE HOLY GHOST AS WELL AS WE?"

In obedience to the command of Christ, we can expect that the sacrament of baptism will be a confirmation of the promise of God the Father and God the Son to bestow the Holy Spirit, personally, and powerfully, into each believer's heart!

January 5, 1992 - To this class of girls being baptized:

We have talked together about Romans 10:9,10, and what it takes to be a Christian.

It is so very simple— and yet cannot be done without the life of God being breathed into us:

1. to truly believe that God has raised Jesus from the dead is in large part the work of the Spirit within;
2. to confess with the mouth that Jesus is Lord is something which we can do by God's help.

This act of baptism is one way that you confess, loud and clear, that Jesus is LORD!

In just a few moments as part of the ritual of Baptism I am going to ask you three questions. Your answer will be, in part, that second part of Romans 10:9,10— for you will be saying publicly that Jesus is YOUR Lord, that you love Him, and that by God's help you will serve Him and do His will!

The Sacrament

Dearly Beloved: Baptism is the sign and seal of the new covenant of grace, the significance of which is attested by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans as follows:

(Romans 6:3-5) "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of His death, we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection."

The earliest statement of Christian faith, into which you come now to be baptized, is the Apostles' Creed. Shall we all affirm our faith as we read it together:

Congregation Read (with the baptizands) the Apostles' Creed: #513 in WS

Question #1 - Will you be baptized into this faith? (If so answer, "I WILL.")

Response: I WILL.

Question #2 - Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, and do you realize that he saves you now?

Response: I DO.

Question #3 - Will you obey God's holy will and keep His commandments, walking in them all the days of your life?

Response: I WILL.

IN THAT BAPTISMAL WATER

1. [OPTIONAL brief statement of testimony.]
2. [Y o u r n a m e], I baptize YOU in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Windows of Heaven

January 5, 1992

Malachi 3:10 *"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this," says the Lord of Hosts, "if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows."*

INTRODUCTION

- A. Malachi 3:10 is one of those texts that lends itself to manipulation by people who want to raise money for churches. It appeals to a strict cause and effect mentality; it may be used to underscore the mind set the ultra fundamentalist, who sees salvation as a strict contract with the Almighty.

Actually, there ARE elements of contract, of promise, even hints of cause and effect here. God says, "If you will do thus and so, you can prove Me now! I will do thus and so!"

- B. But to be fair we need to see that THE TEXT IS A CLIMAX OF THE [TOTAL] LESSON OF MALACHI; and the whole book reveals God's desire to love and to be loved by His people. God is disappointed when His own people are less than they could be.

[The reason God's people do not experience God's full blessing is plain. They have forgotten that real life centers around GOD! One message of Malachi is:]

I. A REVELATION OF SPIRITUAL IGNORANCE ON ISRAEL'S PART

- A. The Book of Malachi reveals that the people who claim to know all about God and religion are in fact exasperatingly ignorant. A recurrent theme throughout the short book is (1) a statement of fact by God, through His prophet; immediately followed by (2) incredulous statements like "How can that be?" "Why do you say that?" "Where is that a fact?"

1. (1:2) They are ignorant of God's LOVE to them. (1:6) They are ignorant of insulting the name of God.

2. (2:14) They are ignorant of any reason why God should despise their fancy worship, even though they have been treacherous with one another. (2:17) They are ignorant of the fact that God is weary of their empty mouthing of prayers.
 3. (3:7) They are ignorant both of the need to return to God, and the way in which they might return to God.
- B. There is no sense of the 'personal' in their dealings with God: [God is "an institution, not a Person with feelings!] How easy to take God for granted! How easy to despise holy things!
1. (3:8) They have never connected GIVING with LOVING GOD! They are ignorant of the fact that when they withhold their tithes from God they are robbing God.
 2. (3:13) They have become CASUAL about SEEKING and DOING God's will! They are ignorant that when they speak for God without being in touch with God they are actually speaking against God.
- C. The call of the prophet is not to condemn, but to re establish true faith. The clear way in which God's people may experience God's grace is practical in nature:

II. THE RE ESTABLISHING OF TRUST IN GOD

- A. God is NOT bound strictly by "contract" to us, or we would all be long gone! We are never dealt with as we deserve, but by God's great grace! God is, however, faithful to His covenant with His people! He is reluctant ever to write off one of His own!
- B. TO LOVE GOD, WE MUST MAKE HIM OUR LIFE'S CENTER
- Our love to Him must not be merely a matter of convenience. Malachi says, sarcastically, to his hearers (1:8): "Try giving what is left over to the IRS! Try paying your bills with left overs with the things you don't want any more! Doesn't that work?? Well, then WHY GIVE YOUR 'CONVENIENCE' TO GOD?
- C. TO LOVE GOD, WE ARE TO SEEK TO LEARN TO GIVE!
1. The people to whom Malachi was preaching were consumer minded! THEY WERE TAKERS! They asked "What can God and religion do for me?"

Malachi (actually God, speaking through Malachi) was seeking to turn around their thinking, to make them covenant minded! God always wants His people to be GIVERS! And in God's economy, and in His own currency it is the givers who are rich!

2. Keying on the areas where Malachi accused the people of ignorance, here is an outline on how we should give:
 - a. Our MOTIVE must be love not profit.
 - b. Our ATTITUDE must be reverence for God and His church; and faith. (Not cynical, not self serving. The widow woman COULD have saved her two mites, saying "I need it more than those rich Pharisees...")
 - c. Our ACT OF GIVING should be sacramental. When the plates go by, the amount you place on the plate is one thing; but the very fact of placing something on the plate can be an act of stewardship, a statement of submission to God's will!
 - d. Our METHOD of giving is NOT unimportant! Malachi mentions tithing!

I think that I have heard most of the arguments against storehouse tithing: Tithing is legalistic. Storehouse tithing is invented to support institutions. O.T. Law has been eliminated. Give to get preaching has decimated genuine giving.

But the fact is storehouse tithing is the floor on which to build a disciplined life of stewardship. I do not limit my personal giving to 10% of my income now; but I grew up in the demonstration of what it means to be partners with God, including faithful tithing during the Great Depression. I will testify that it works!

POINTS TO DRIVE HOME: It is possible to give and not be a Christian, but it is impossible to be a Christian and NOT give. Tithing makes us partners with God in the practical world of finances.

CONCLUSION

The end of this short book is like a fork in the road. Malachi. There is the threat of cursing for those who are arrogant, and choose to remain in ignorance of God's Law and God's LOVE. But there is promise of great blessing as well:

(3:16) "Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord gave attention and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and esteem His name.

"'And they will be Mine,' says the Lord of hosts, 'on the day that I prepare my own possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him.'

"So you will distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him."

(4:2) "But for you who revere my Name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall."

The windows of heaven are open, and God's blessing is promised to those who truly seek to love Him, and let Him love through them. I pray for you and me and for us the joy of being GIVERS to the glory of God! Amen.

173 As with Gladness Men of Old

Giving Beyond the Gift

January 9, 1992

1 Corinthians 13:3

James 3:13-18

INTRODUCTION

The title of this sermon in the bulletin was a little "far out" and I apologize, sort of. (I changed the real title!)

I was thinking about a fragment of an old poem I learned in high school, a poem by James Russell Lowell called The Vision of Sir Launfel. Launfel was a knight who spent his life in search of the Holy Grail (the cup that Jesus was supposed to have used during the Last Supper.)

Of course Sir Launfel never found the Grail. But in the depths of his disappointment he comes across a beggar. He shares his meager food supply with the beggar, and gives him a drink from his own cup. Then he sees that the beggar is the Lord Jesus. The last few lines of the poem are:

"Lo, it is I, be not afraid:
 In many climes, without avail,
 Thou hast spent thy life for the Holy Grail;
 Behold it is here— the cup which thou Didst fill
 at this streamlet for me but now;
 This crust is my body broken for thee,
 The water his blood that died on the tree;
 The holy supper is kept, indeed,
 In whatso we share with another's need;
 Not what we give but what we share,
 For the gift without the giver is bare;
 Who gives himself with his alms feeds three—
 Himself, his hungering neighbor, and Me."

-James Russell Lowell

Giving is NOT unimportant. Last week we looked at the Christian acts of giving. We said that it is possible to give and not be Christian, but it is not possible to be Christian and not give. For Christians are to be givers, not just takers.

It is blessed to give, but our scriptures tell us that giving, in and of itself, is not quite enough. God is interested in why we give! He is concerned about the way we give! God's unselfish agape' love must permeate all that we are, as well as all that we do.

So we see that there are just:

I. TWO WAYS TO GIVE

- A. THERE IS GIVING FOR ANY AND EVERY OTHER REASON EXCEPT AGAPE' LOVE. Even sacrificial giving!

Paul makes a simply amazing statement in the "love chapter." He says:

"Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not the quality of love, it profits me nothing!"

Giving for any and every other reason but agape' love simply does not impress God. It certainly can impress me! I might not be able to tell the difference. I am simply amazed at any kind of genuine sacrifice. But the Bible makes it clear that people can make great sacrifices for less than noble reasons!

- B. GOD'S WAY FOR US TO GIVE IS THE WAY OF AGAPE'.

Agape' is the kind of love that gives the life a center of reference around which every other detail big and small finds its meaning.

Agape' love is usually made interchangeable in our thinking with God's love. We say, "God's love is AGAPE'!" and so it is. It is a love that gives our life a center of reference around which every other detail finds its meaning. But it is important to see that there are other agape' loves, too.

Many wise people who are not Christian have found that "success" of any kind demands a life-centering commitment. The warning of (John) is

"Love (agape') not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any one love (agape') the world, the love (agape') of the Father is not in that person!"

Wise people will always live by a life-centering, life-disciplining agape'. Most people just live from paycheck to paycheck.

II. THE TRULY WISE CHOOSE TO GIVE BECAUSE THEY LOVE

A. We need to remember that there are TWO kinds of wisdom. We come back to the passage in James:

1. James speaks of THE WISDOM OF THIS WORLD. James labels it as earthly, sensual, demonic.

Demonic wisdom is not always bizarre and evil-appearing! Worldly wisdom mocks the agape', or life-centering aspects of God's love. Demonic wisdom gives purpose and discipline to endeavors that begin and end with materialism and sensualism and selfish achievement.

C.S.Lewis makes the evil wisdom of this world seem remarkably like the corporate giants of civilization to me in his book "That Hideous Strength." (I do not at all imply that the likes of IBM are evil; I merely state that Oxford don Lewis portrays evil as having wisdom in great measure; able to organize, able to civilize to a certain degree, able to do many things we would call admirable.)

Wisdom focuses, centers life. But the earthly, sensual, demonic wisdom of this world is not true wisdom because it finally ends in death and chaos. It worships some idea or creature in the place of Almighty God. It destroys, finally, instead of finding eternal life.

2. James also writes about TRUE WISDOM, the wisdom he calls "THE GENTLE WISDOM FROM ABOVE." He tells us it (1) is pure, and (2) it is peaceable, and (3) it is easy to be entreated. It is centered in God and has that peculiar quality called HUMILITY!

HUMILITY, of all the graces, is the one we least talk about! We all have "ego," and we know it. So we don't like to hear about this grace that is so central to true wisdom. HUMILITY gets a bad name in our "love yourself society." But we mistake the essence of what humility is:

Humility is NOT assigning "no worth" to the human personality, even one's own!

Humility is NOT pretending to be stupid or grovelling like Uriah Heep.

True humility says: "I AM NOT GOD!" That's a relief!

And true humility refuses to say, perhaps more than any other thing, that "I, IN ALL MY UNDERSTANDING, AM AN EXCEPTION!"

Humility refuses to say 'I can get by without doing the things of righteousness in a simple and straightforward manner. 'I don't have to spend time with God each day. 'I don't have to faithfully attend upon the means of grace. 'I don't have to keep all the rules— after all, I am saved by grace, right?'

No, the gentle, humble wisdom from God is easy to be entreated!

B. GOD'S WISDOM SEEKS TO FIND THE BEST WAYS TO LOVE:

Did you know that the Bible gives "graded examples of love?" As you follow through its pages— we see developing, expanding, deepening ways of living and giving:

1. O.T. standard: Love your neighbor; hate your enemy; do not do to someone else what you don't want them to do to you.

2. Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Usually we think this is the best we can ever hope to do. But Jesus called His disciples to an even higher standard:
3. The Great Commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you!" Can we ever even come close? Only as Jesus is the heart of all we are and do!

CONCLUSION

If we love like this we will be GIVERS! If we have this life- centering agape' love of God we won't be quibbling over whether we tithe or not. Jesus will be the reference point of love that gives life a center of reference around which every other detail big and small will find its meaning. That is real wisdom!

But, you say, "How can I have a life-centering love that I don't feel? How can I love God, and people, and even myself when I don't naturally feel loving?"

The answer is: GOD'S LOVE IS NOT ACHIEVED BY STRIVING TO PRETEND TO HAVE FEELINGS THAT DON'T EXIST. This kind of love comes from inviting God to dwell permanently in our very being. This kind of love is the result of spending time in God's Presence.

And this kind of love comes from being willing to OBEY the Lord who indwells us. Jesus put it this way, at the close of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said (1) "Those who hear what I say and DO what I say— they are wise! They will stand!" He also said (2) "Those who hear what I say and DO NOT act on it are NOT wise. They will fall." We cannot be Christian and not give! And, too, We cannot be Christian and not love!

Maybe the following doesn't rank as great poetry today, but it says it pretty well, doesn't it?

Not what we give but what we share,
For the gift without the giver is bare;
Who gives himself with his alms feeds three—
Himself, his hungering neighbor, and Me."

Let us pray (This was a Communion Service)

Nazarenes, Consider Your Calling

Nazarenes and the Church of Jesus Christ - Part 1 of 3

1. **Nazarenes, Consider Your Calling**
2. **Nazarenes are Bible Christians**
3. **The Freedom from Sin**

January 10, 1992

I Corinthians 1:26 - 31

Introduction:

-A Personal Word-

I think it is important to share some thoughts on what it means to be a Nazarene. If you know me at all, you know that I love the Church of the Nazarene. I do not consider being a Christian and being a member of the Church of the Nazarene synonymous. Being truly Christian is the most important thing in the world to me. I trust that I am a Christian far and away before I am a Nazarene.

Still, being a Nazarene is vitally important to me, for it defines what I believe and how I act in a great many critical areas of life.

Christians are not to be isolated, laws unto themselves. Christians are to be part of Christ's church; they are born into it. Christians need to be part of some Christian fellowship, some visible part or expression of Christ's church.

If I were not a Nazarene I would hope that I would act in some responsible manner, and not claim to be a Christian while being a total law unto myself, not accountable to anyone or anybody.

There may be Christians still living today who say, "We do not believe in theology or interpretations of the Bible. We just believe the Bible!" But these kinds of people, if they still do exist, are very quick to interpret the Bible for other people who are not quite as intelligent as they are!

Now, to begin: What about the "denomination" called the International Church of the Nazarene? Where did it come from and why? What about denominations, period?

I. THERE IS BUT ONE CHURCH

[ONE, HOLY, APOSTOLIC. CATHOLIC]

ALL Christians, whatever they call themselves, ARE CALLED TO BE "SAINTS" (1:2)
Our basic calling is to be "saints" (1:2) and not first to be Nazarenes or any other hyphenated name. We are not even called first to build the church but to proclaim Christ, and then He has promised to build His own church!

SO WHY ARE THERE DIFFERENT 'CHURCHES IN THE CHURCH'? Why have denominations at all?

We who have been reared in a denomination have a hard time understanding any other form the church of Jesus might take. Those from other traditions cannot grasp the purpose or even the legitimacy of denominations. Why are there "denominations" anyway?

There are ETHNIC reasons. There are DOCTRINAL reasons. There are CULTURAL reasons. There are even PERSONAL reasons for denominations.

There are WORSHIP preferences: Different denominations worship differently when they gather in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Some traditions emphasize RATIONAL DOCTRINE; some traditions emphasize EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE; and still others need MYSTICAL BEAUTY AND RITUAL at the heart of their Christian worship.

Some denominations think they are the only true church. Others "KNOW" they are! There are still other "denominations" that deny that they are denominations!

But even large church groups that do not call themselves by the name 'denomination' find that de facto they must form some kind of alliance to promote joint ventures in mission: to standardize the ordination of their clergy, whatever they may call them; and to find some means of disciplining or keeping pure those sacred doctrines they hold as dear.

THERE ARE GOOD REASONS FOR FORMING ALLIANCE BETWEEN CHURCHES

Denominations can multiply effort; they can serve to make the church more effective. An outstanding example is the mission endeavor in our denomination. Ours is not the only way to go about evangelization of the world. But it is the best way we have found. It has huge pluses, and perhaps some minuses.

One huge plus is that just about 85% of mission money makes it right through to the field! The other 15% is not at all wasted, however— it is in necessary networks of supervision, communication, and the like. Many so-called philanthropic groups do not come near getting that high a percentage of money to the front lines.

The minuses?: Perhaps some individuality is missed; perhaps in the rubric of bureaucracy some injustices are done. But the comparison makes our mission efforts seem wise. More loosely structured mission boards demand more extensive deputation work and much more energy is spent simply raising the support.

Denominations can clarify and develop certain approaches and understandings of scripture that keep the peculiar emphasis or emphases of that denomination strong. [In all honesty just about all denominations have their sacred cows; or arguments that begin with the conclusion and work backward to the scriptural proof texts.]

OUR REASON FOR EXISTENCE HAS BEEN A QUEST FOR WHAT IN THE REST OF THE CHURCH WORLD IS CALLED 'THE DEEPER LIFE' AND IN OUR OWN TERMINOLOGY IS CALLED "CHRISTIAN HOLINESS."

Nazarene faith is "orthodox," in that it does not depart from ancient, creedal statements about the faith. But Nazarene faith focuses on "holiness." By "holiness" we mean a personal quest for genuine piety, a corporate accountability for carrying out the commandments of Jesus, particularly the Great Commission.

But just now I am talking about how we came about as a denomination:

II. THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE AS A DENOMINATION

JUST WHO ARE THESE NAZARENES? They have a unique and God-ordained place in the Christian community. Nazarenes are NOT (or certainly should not be) merely a

pale copy of other groups in their doctrines or practices.

In the Providence of God we came into being for a reason. We believe we were called of God to meet a need. We exist to help people into a holy walk with God!

Sometimes in order to be better understood we say: "We are just like Old Fashioned Methodists" Or "We worship a lot like the Baptists" or we use other good groups for comparisons or contrasts. This may or may not be helpful.

Still, it certainly helps if we know just what we DO believe and don't need to apologize at all for it!

[A very brief history lesson:]

Quite a number of groups or denominations have come about as the result of "reform" or reaction within an established church or denomination. Sometimes denominations have been shaped ethnic or cultural responses to orthodox truth. [United Brethren, for example, were mainly German speaking followers of Wesley in the Pennsylvania farmlands.]

Some denominations have reflected a personality of a charismatic leader. Calvin, Luther, Wesley— But this has been disastrous in some cases, especially when the leader has encouraged it. [Mary Baker Eddy, Russellism (Jehovah's Witnesses; hundreds of sects from James Jones back...]

Our denomination does not primarily reflect any of these origins, although some elements of all may have been present in parts of our formation as a church.

Toward the end of the 1800's there was a large, informal, but pronounced spiritual awakening throughout Protestant America.

I would refer you to Dr. Timothy Smith's book "REVIVALISM AND SOCIAL REFORM" for a scholarly overview. [This was coincidental with the Camp Meeting phenomenon in rural America, the Keswick awakening in Britain as well as the "deeper life quests" in many areas.]

We Nazarenes look to a man called PHINEAS F. BRESEE as our "founder." But actually Dr. Bresee was more of a convener. He found thousands of people who were riding the crest of the revival that was moving through the established denominations and in many places about the turn of the last century.

[My own parents both were products of the tail end of that revival movement; they were saved in the Methodist church and when they pursued seriously the "deeper life" of holiness they found mixed receptions. They were warmly received at Taylor University, which was at that time a "holiness Methodist" school . But they were much more comfortable with the people called Nazarenes, and soon after graduation they joined a great church in Monongehela, Pennsylvania in 1928. The pastor was John Andre. the father of the John Andre at Warren, Pennsylvania (in the 1950s).]

There were Holiness congregationalists in the east (Providence, Rhode Island) Groups in the south (Nashville)— and they merged several times, each time growing larger, and each time adding to the levels of compromise and understanding of what was and what was not "spiritually acceptable."

Some of the comprehension of the movement I knew as a boy [and it was a movement!] seems in retrospect almost sect-like. There was a tyranny of convictions at times. We were strong on personal discipline, and that extended to appearance and manners. It seems, looking back, that culture and refinement were next to godliness, especially in our colleges and schools.

It was good discipline and training for me, I believe— even though it was hard at times.

But underneath it all, BASIC TO EXISTENCE was a commitment to total consecration and Spirit-filled, Spirit-led living. WE TOOK AS OUR MISSION TELLING THE WORLD THAT THEY COULD BE FREE FROM THE TYRANNY OF SIN!

There was always a sense of obligation to the present generation. Dr. Bresee was often quoted: "We are debtors to give the gospel in the same measure as we have received it." (Or was that Dr. J.G. Morrison?)

Nazarenes, Consider Your Calling

There was also a genuine spirit of gentleness among those who were truly "sanctified," and a spirit of holy compromise on non-essentials, a compromise that has not always been evident in every area of the denomination.

Finally, Nazarene worship always seemed to me to be characterized by joy.

NAZARENES HAVE DOCTRINALLY FOLLOWED WESLEY, or at least they have intended so to do. Nearly to the last person, the ministers believe that they are in accord with the spirit of Wesley. Further more, in my view, the leadership of our denomination has (tacitly) agreed: Bresee was a Methodist, and so we have never disagreed with the M.E. doctrine of, say, a century ago. Our early Manuals were patterned after Methodist Disciplines. We have felt comfortable in following what has been a Methodistic tradition.

My personal position has been to try to "leap over" superficial and casual interpretations of Wesley, to read Wesley's Journal and his sermons and explanatory notes, and to try to catch the spirit and the heart of the teaching of this 18th century reformer.

NAZARENES SEEM TO BE ECLECTIC IN THEIR WORSHIP FORMS

WE REFLECT A (GOOD) (EVEN HOLY?) TENSION BETWEEN THE EXTREMES OF EVANGELICAL PROTESTANTISM TODAY: This reflects Wesley's statement to the effect: "In essentials, faithfulness; in non-essentials tolerance; in all things charity!"

CONCLUSION

These have been very sketchy, personal observations. I know that I have rambled, and I thank you for your patience. I think I have some important things to consider as we think together about what it means to be a Nazarene over the next few divisions of this theme. You may have to listen hard, and even hear some things I mean instead of what I simply say.

But in closing just now let me say JUST TWO things about being a Nazarene:

1. If I am going to be a Nazarene I must know for myself what it means to be sanctified wholly.

Our terminology may seem confusing to ears who have been taught other viewpoints; our doctrines may even be in question to other sincere Christians.

BUT THERE IS A HARD, TRUE, CLEAR KERNEL OF TRUTH IN THAT EXPERIENCE WE CALL OUR "CARDINAL DOCTRINE." THERE IS REALITY IN COMING TO THE PLACE WHERE, AS A BELIEVER, I MAKE A COMPLETE SACRIFICE, AND COME TO THE END OF MY SELF-RULE, AND SELF-WILL, AND BECOME A CANDIDATE FOR THE FULLNESS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

I may not understand the psychology of what it means to be sanctified, but I know that it makes the difference between sticking and falling away! I know it makes the difference between going back when the going gets tough or hanging in there and trusting that God is GOD and that God is GOOD!

IF I AM GOING TO BE A NAZARENE I WANT TO KNOW THAT I AM SANCTIFIED WHOLLY!

Not glorified like the saints in heaven. Not perfect so that I cannot or do not sometimes come short of God's glory. But sanctified until every part of my being, body, mind and spirit belong to Jesus Christ, with no provision ever to take them back. Sanctified so that the Holy Spirit has access to all there is of me!

2. And, too, if I am going to be a Nazarene then I will be loyal to my denomination, and loyal to my local church!

I may not agree with everything or understand everything. But the "corporate conscience" of my church will carry great weight in my personal decisions. And any quarrels I may have with my church will be lovers' quarrels. I will be stubborn toward what I see as compromise in scriptural application, and speak my mind when I think my church is wrong, but I will be exceedingly pliable toward God, and ask Him to bless and love my church through me!

Join me in prayer for our church.

PRAYER

1. Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, even though often the world in which we live is dark. Grant us grace to put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility. Grant us grace that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, or in that hour when we shall be called to meet Him, we may be found faithful amid the chaos, rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
2. May the Sun of Righteousness shine upon you and scatter the darkness from before your path: and the blessing of God Almighty— Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you always.

Amen.

Nazarenes are Bible Christians

Nazarenes and the Church of Jesus Christ - Part 2 of 3

1. [Nazarenes, Consider Your Calling](#)
2. **Nazarenes are Bible Christians**
3. [The Freedom from Sin](#)

January 17, 1992

Two texts:

John 5:39 Search the scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and they are they which testify of Me.

Hebrews 4:12 - 13 For the word of God [is] quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the dividing - asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things [are] naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

INTRODUCTION

It probably goes without serious objection that Nazarenes believe they are Bible Christians. I want to challenge that belief in a friendly way by asking three questions:

1. Is the Bible as we have it "the Word of God?"
2. How do we hear God's Word?
3. How do we (Nazarenes) live under the authority of the Word of God?

I. NAZARENES BELIEVE THE BIBLE IS GOD'S WORD

- A. Nazarenes believe in the Bible. But even such a simple statement as saying that the Bible is God's Word can be understood and explained in many different ways. Where does the International Church of the Nazarene officially stand regarding "the Bible?"

1. An excellent place to begin would be with the Manual statement, which good Nazarenes should know and respect. The Manual states:

We believe in the plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, by which we understand the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, given by divine inspiration, inerrantly revealing the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation, so that what is not contained therein is not to be enjoined as an article of faith.

2. The Manual statement is really quite remarkable in what it does not say! It stops short of saying exactly how, or by what method the Bible was written, how it is inspired. It gives room for the mystery which, really, no one can fully explain except by faith.

A key word is the word "plenary," used to describe the inspiration of the Bible. By plenary the article of faith declares that the Bible, in all its parts, is totally inspired, that it is a miracle of revelation. This inspiration is so clear and powerful that "if it is not in the Bible it is not to be made binding on us as an article of faith."

The statement does not make Nazarenes go beyond the clear meaning of those words.

- B. Nazarene roots are "synergistic" roots. We believe that the Bible is a Divine-human book. We believe that by and in and through God's grace the human can and must cooperate with the divine in claiming our redemption. These Nazarene roots reflect a number of very interesting sources.

1. There is the catholicism of the Church of England as reflected in John Wesley. Wesley thought of himself as a Reformed theologian; and while he would certainly deny that in any wise he was earning his salvation there was enough of the Holy Club and discipline in him that he would not abide for a moment any Christian who did not put his/her life where the testimony was! "Bring forth fruit meet for repentance!" was implicit in his very life and living.
2. Nazarenes also embrace of some aspects of Arminianism, about which the rank and file pastor knows precious little. But Arminianism represents a

resistance to extreme Calvinism, particularly in TWO major points. What this says to the general practitioner pastor like myself is that while all grace is of God, yet that grace enables the human personality to participate in its own salvation to the extent that it can choose to resist God's grace or to accept it.

THERE IS ALWAYS MYSTERY ALONG THE LINE WHERE GOD REACHES OUT TO CONVERSE WITH HUMANKIND.

3. The dilemma is most apparent in the way we understand that people are saved. But it is also expressed in the way that we perceive the Bible.
 - a. Some would emphasize God's Sovereignty to the extent that man has had nothing to do with the holy scriptures except hold the pen while God gave the exact words.
 - b. An opposite, humanistic, view says that the Bible is inspired exactly like all other great works of literature, no more and no less. It ranks at the top of human literature, perhaps, at least in many passages. But it is the product, totally, of human effort, and expresses human thought, perhaps divinely inspired, but still limited to human expression, no more.
 - c. But there is at least one other way to view inspiration: others, and we include ourselves here, believe that God has expressed Himself in a way that excludes error in all matters necessary to our salvation, but that this Word, divine Word, has come poured through vessels that are in and of themselves human and imperfect.
- C. How did we get the Bible in this form? Can we say with confidence "This is God's Word!"? I can and I do! But this is a faith statement! The mysteries of God are NOT the magic of God.
 1. The "canon" of the Bible (by which we mean the 66 books of our Protestant Bible) did not come into existence apart from human agency. The Bible did not fall down from heaven complete as we have it now, even though one way or another all true Christians have come to believe that it is God's divine revelation.

2. (A wee bit of "over-simplified history:") It took a long period of time for these various "theories" to develop. The original apostles were much more speakers, preachers, proclaimers than they were writers. But as it became apparent that they would not always be around their messages were recorded in written form.

As early as 150 A.D. Justin Martyr wrote that the gospels of the (present) canon were being read in churches assembled on Sunday.

3. There were also many other writings with claims to be scriptural or apostolic. Gospels were written by Clement of Rome, and under the name of Barnabus, as well as the Shepherd of Hermas.

The letters of Peter and Paul and John and the author of Hebrews and the canonical and non-canonical gospels were "sifted" and tried across the years.

In 325 A.D. Eusebius wrote that "seven writings in the New Testament were not universally received. They were called the "Antilegomena," and consisted of James, Jude, 2 John, 3 John, 2 Peter, Hebrews, and the Apocalypse. (Not the Apocrypha, now.)

It was not until nearly 400 A.D. in the Council of Carthage, in 397, the church officially stated that the 66 books we now hold as sacred were truly scripture.

4. This "human involvement" need not shake your faith that God has given us this Bible one little bit! WE MUST REFUSE TO BE OBSCURANTISTS. When facts are presented they must be assessed and dealt with. But NO FACTS HAVE EVER SUCCESSFULLY CONTRADICTED THE LIVING TRUTH OF THE BIBLE!

D. For myself, I simply believe that the Holy Spirit has been involved in every aspect of the written Word. He has been active in its original utterance, but He also makes it available at the place where it is needed and welcomed. Which brings us to the second question:

II. HOW DO NAZARENES (OR ANY CHRISTIANS) HEAR THE WORD OF GOD?

A. WE HEAR WHEN WE LISTEN! God is speaking in His Word, but too often we are not really listening!

1. Eugene Peterson makes distinction between READING the Bible and HEARING the Word. He is not just speaking about the difference between visual and auditory. The reader has control of what, where, how he shall give attention. Or she is free to just let her mind wander. The listener is engaged in some kind of immediate relationship. A "message" is coming through. personally; like the difference of a pocket radio or a portable telephone.
2. The living WORD OF GOD IS NEVER 'CONTROLLED'! It is not simply abstract truth or "information." It demands life-involvement. That is why Bible preaching is important! To some extent preaching cannot be controlled, and can release the WORD; also systematic and regular reading gives access to the WORD.

[Peterson speaks of the link between "speaker" and "hearer" this way: SPEAKER - WRITER - READER - HEARER. The intermediate links of writing and reading are all too often made all-important. What the original compassion/passion/burden of the prophet or Psalmist or preacher may have spoken or written under inspiration must be received by the help of the Holy Spirit by LISTENING, by GIVING ATTENTION, by HEARING WITH THE EARS OF THE SOUL.]

B. IT SHOULD NEVER BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED, BUT NAZARENES OFTEN HEAR THE WORD OF GOD!!

III. WHAT DOES IT MEAN: 'NAZARENES ARE BIBLE CHRISTIANS?'

DO WE IN FACT LIVE 'UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF THE WORD?'

A. HEARING IS NOT (QUITE) THE SAME AS BELIEVING IN THE AUTHORITY OF THE WORD!

1. One step beyond HEARING (or knowing that God has spoken) is the attitude of obedience. We must bring to our encounters with God and with his Word the

surrendered will.

2. Thus: TO TRULY BELIEVE IN THE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES DEMANDS A WILL SURRENDERED TO GOD ALMIGHTY!

B. Every spiritual awakening, personal and church-wide, has begun with renewed prayer. And every spiritual awakening, church-wide or personal, has also been accompanied with obedience to the Word of God!

1. Our church came into existence because we believe the BIBLE has spoken to us and to the world about the reality of SCRIPTURAL HOLINESS!
2. If I am going to be a Nazarene I must READ the Bible, but more, I must listen for God to speak, and I must gladly put myself under the authority of the Word of God!

Conclusion:

In closing let me repeat a warning!

BEWARE THE BIBLE! It is a dangerous book to have around the house!

1. Beware having it around the house! Just to HAVE IT AROUND THE HOUSE can bring COMPLACENCY! Stacks of Bibles won't make your house any holier ... but you might THINK it is!
2. Beware reading the Bible! Just to READ THE BIBLE can nourish SPIRITUAL PRIDE! We can be like the scriptural expert who went to the house of prayer and thanked God that he was not like the poor publican praying off in the corner, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner!"
3. Beware reading and listening and OBEYING the Bible! But TO HEAR AND TO OBEY THE BIBLE IS MOST DANGEROUS OF ALL!

It can "ruin your life!" All your (selfish) ambitions and plans may just come tumbling down all around your head! You just might hear Jesus say: "Come, leave YOUR way and follow ME!"

And if you do you'll never be the same again!

[Calvinism, as I understand it, was founded on five principles

[TULIP]: Total depravity (nothing good in humanity) Unconditional grace
(Humankind can do NOTHING save themselves) Limited atonement (The "elect"
chosen by God) Irresistible Grace Perseverance of the saints (Eternal security)

Of course, what I call Arminianism disputes some of these, particularly the "U" and
the "I" and the "P." And our understanding of the "T" is somewhat different, as well.

[It is interesting that even then they could not agree just as to HOW they viewed
Divine inspiration. Back then many did believe that the scriptures had been verbally
inspired, and this sacrosanct faith was even extended to the Septuagint or Greek
translation of the Old Testament as well.]

[The various groups differed on the degree of inspiration of the books comprising the
Apocrypha, with all Protestants generally respecting them but giving them a less-
than-scriptural place. One main reason is that Jesus never quoted from or alluded to
any of the Apocryphal books.]

Free From, Free To

A Christian Obeys God's Word

January 18, 1992

Romans 6:22 *Therefore being made free from sin, and become servants to God...*

INTRODUCTION:

Romans 6:22 is one of those golden texts that summarizes, or outlines, a great deal of wisdom in a single sentence. It begins with freedom from sin, and it shows the steps along the Pathway all the way to eternal life. Every step is essential, but I am particularly interested in the first two. They are two sides of the same truth:

1. being made FREE from sin is wonderful;
but it must be accompanied by

2. becoming servants to God!

There is a correlation between genuine FREEDOM and personal ALLEGIANCE TO GOD!

Last week I quoted from a poem to begin the morning's sermon. At the great risk of being taken for a tool of the English teachers of E.N.C. (or at least one of them) I want to read another poem to introduce my thoughts this morning:

Invictus

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.*

*Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishment the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.*
-William Ernest Henley

Whoever or whatever else the poet is representing in this verse, the voice in this poem is not a Christian voice.

First, it is very vague about divinity. It says, "I thank whatever gods may be ... "

Second, the voice claims to be its own master, its own captain. Every Christian has a Master. Every Christian confesses: "Jesus is Lord!" But because we own a Master, Christ Jesus, does that make us not free? Is the spirit of Invictus true freedom? What do we Christians know about freedom? What is the relationship of freedom and authority in the Christian life?

I. ABSOLUTE FREEDOM IS ALWAYS AN ILLUSION, PARTICULARLY IN MATTERS ETERNAL

A. No one has absolute control in other areas of life:

1. We come into this world without regard for our will: No one is free to refuse to be born. Not one of us asked to come into this world.
2. We will leave this world whether we want to or not. No one is free to ultimately postpone death. Whether or not we go kicking and screaming or willingly, we shall all go to meet our Maker.

3. We live in this world with many restrictions:
 - a. Limits of nature
 - b. Limits of circumstance and resource
 - c. Limits of courtesy and civil law
- B. So how do we think that simply because we think or say it is so, that we can control those things of eternal destiny? We simply do not understand what mighty powers are at work!

II. THE DELUSION OF SELF-SOVEREIGNTY

- A. But brave Invictus says, "I know life has its limitations! But I'll stand on my own two feet! I won't use the crutch of religion! Given the limitations of life (as you have described them) I will still be my own master, and chart my own course. What's wrong with that?"
- B. This is "self-sovereignty" and it is a delusion. We cannot simply chart our own course!

To say that self-sovereignty is a delusion is not to deny that we face responsibility for the choices we make. But those choices are made possible (1) only by God's grace; and (2) are choices that must be made between powers and forces far greater than we know.
- C. As soon as we choose to yield to sin and selfishness, we are no longer our own masters. Sin is a choice! As soon as we wilfully sin, we are no longer free. Paul writes:

If you yield yourself to anyone to do his will, you are the slaves of whomever you obey, whether that be to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience which leads to righteousness?

Paul tells us, in fact, that there are none free, apart from God's grace, apart from God's Spirit who brings the law of life in Christ Jesus. He writes:

I find then a law that when I would do good evil is present with me. "O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?"
- D. The delusion of self-sovereignty, of saying in effect "I am god in my little world," is the denial of the fact that actually we are trapped in sin's control, and cannot do anything but continue in sin.

We sin because we are sinners. We cannot help ourselves. We are caught in the current of sin, being swept along to death and hell.

III. TRUE FREEDOM COMES FROM CHOOSING TO BE 'IN CHRIST'

- A. Freedom begins with this God-given power to choose which Master we shall serve. Freedom is of grace, the gift of God that enables us to see our need, and make for the Light!

We cannot withstand the mighty tides of life apart from God's guidance. To be "free" apart from God is actually to be in the grip of other powers, seen or unseen:

It is as though we are adrift on a vast ocean, with a double-ended skiff, and oars, and the ability to row. Some seem to be able to row more skillfully than others. But the currents are strong, and no one can row as fast as the tides.

Sometimes where the tides meet there are great eddies, whirlpools, treacherous places. In other places the ocean currents are so broad the sense of movement is hard to detect. But in every case, the currents in this ocean of time are moving far faster than the fastest rowboat can row. The only hope of reaching a destination is to read the tides, to somehow choose a current, to make one's way across the drifts somehow, to move with the mighty flow.

- B. When we cry out to God for help, and by His grace He enables us to say from our hearts: "Jesus is Lord!" we are swept into the current of His life, and His love, and His grace!

We find that we now have the power to become God's own children. We find grace to become like Jesus Himself, to love as He loved.

With Paul we say

It is no longer I that live (in my own strength - with such freedom and power!) Christ is living in me! The life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me!

C. We begin to experience the freedom that Jesus Christ patterned for us. His freedom becomes our own! How "free" was Jesus? And how can we ever be like Him?

1. Jesus was free from sin! And by His indwelling power, we, too, can be "made free from sin": His grace makes us (1) Free from sin's GUILT: no condemnation. (2) Free from sin's POWER. (3) Free from sin's PENALTY. Christ paid the penalty so that we might live with Him forever.
2. Jesus was free to do the will of God! And we are made free from sin, says our text, as we are made servants to God. Jesus was free from sin, and Jesus came to do the Father's will. The two go together!
3. Jesus was free to live out His life in LOVE!

The way is narrow— if you are on the outside looking in! No one ever faced a harder, more difficult road than our Savior! But He prayed, "Not My will, Thine be done!" He chose to obey and go the way of the cross.

No one ever was more "bound" than Jesus! He was nailed in one place! But in that "binding" Jesus set free all those who would ever trust in Him! And in that narrow way of the cross Jesus won forever a perfect victory over the tyranny of sin and death and hell.

4. Jesus says to every one of us, "Come, Follow Me if you dare! Take your cross, and follow! Come the narrow way of obedience! And I will give you rest!"

CONCLUSION

A. Henley's poem sounds so dramatic, so brave— so free:

*"Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul."*

But it is an empty boast.

B. The text makes it clear: true freedom has two sides— we are never just free from something, we must also be free TO something better!

Free From, Free To

Therefore being made FREE FROM SIN, (we) BECOME SERVANTS TO GOD;
we have our fruit unto holiness- and the end is everlasting life!

We can be free to do the right! To say from our heart, "Jesus is LORD!" sets
in motion all the power wrapped up in this mighty text!

CHRISTIANS ARE PEOPLE WHO ARE FREE TO OBEY GOD AND DO HIS WILL!

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, We ask you to help us to be Christians in all we do! Christians who
are givers! Christians who give because they love! And Christians who delight to do
Your will. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Hymn: *He Touched Me* - Exalt Him #85

Prayer Legacy

GEORGE MUELLER'S PRAYER LEGACY

January 22, 1992

In 1836 in Bristol, England, opened an Orphanage with, I believe, 42 children who had neither father or mother. Later Mr. Mueller was able to open several other homes for orphans, and greatly expand the numbers of children he served, the last house holding 700 orphans.

What was unique about these orphanages, however, was the way they were funded and supplied. Mr. Mueller stated that his third aim was the bodily welfare of the children, but higher than that, he sought their spiritual welfare, that they should know Jesus Christ as Savior. But he declared that his chief aim was the glory of God. He wrote:

"I ... particularly longed to be used by God in getting the dear orphans trained up in the fear of God; - but still, the first and primary object of the work was (and still is:) that God might be magnified by the fact, that the orphans under my care are provided with all they need, only by prayer and faith without anyone being asked by me or my fellow-laborers whereby it may be seen, that God is FAITHFUL STILL, and HEARS PRAYER STILL."

[Read one or two instances of answered prayer:] Read Pages 33-37, starting with the last sentence on page 32: How to be effective in prayer. Conclude with George Mueller's " How to Ascertain the Will of God:"

1. "I seek at the beginning to get my heart into such a state that it has no will of its own in regard to a given matter. Nine-tenths of the trouble with people is just here. Nine-tenths of the difficulties are overcome when our hearts are ready to do the Lord's will, whatever it may be. When one is truly in this state, it is usually but a little way to the knowledge of what His will is.

Prayer Legacy

2. Having done this, I do not leave the result to feeling or simple impression. If so, I make myself liable to great delusions.
3. I seek the Will of the Spirit of God through, or in connection with, the Word of God. The Spirit and the Word must be combined. If I look to the Spirit alone without the Word, I lay myself open to great delusions also. If the Holy Ghost guides us at all, He will do it according to the Scriptures and never contrary to them.
4. Next I take into account providential circumstances. These often plainly indicate God's Will in connection with His Word and Spirit.
5. I ask God in prayer to reveal His Will to me aright.
6. Thus, through prayer to God, the study of the Word, and reflection, I come to a deliberate judgment according to the best of my ability and knowledge, and if my mind is thus at peace, and continues so after two or three more petitions, I proceed accordingly. In trivial matters, and in transactions involving the most important issues, I have found this method always effective."

Focus: Psalm

- 469 I Must Tell Jesus
- 123 What a Friend we have in Jesus
- 441 For God so loved this sinful world
- 209 He is Able to Deliver Thee
- EH 33 Behold the Throne of Grace
- 44 Whate'er I Ask, I Surely know
- 10 Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God

Prayer Requests:

The Freedom from Sin

Nazarenes and the Church of Jesus Christ - Part 3 of 3

1. [Nazarenes, Consider Your Calling](#)
2. [Nazarenes are Bible Christians](#)
3. **The Freedom from Sin**

January 26, 1992

Text: Romans 3:23

What is there to say about sin? We're against it! Which sin are we talking about? "I hope it isn't the one sin I excuse in my life!"

I am not talking just now about this sin or that sin; I am speaking about sin. Sin is not popular. It is a God-related word; God is the Great Irrelevancy.

I. SIN, SALVATION, AND THE SAVIOR

- A. NEXT TO OUR CONCEPT OF GOD HIMSELF, PERHAPS OUR UNDERSTANDING OF SIN IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF OUR PERSONAL THEOLOGY.

What we understand of the nature of sin has a tremendous effect on the way we seek to come to God. It helps determine how we come to confidence that we are saved, ready for heaven:

1. Two definitions that help some and yet don't say it all:
 - a. Wesley "Sin is a wilful transgression of a known law of God,
 - b. "Sins" (plural) are acts; and "sin" is an inner "bent" or "nature."
2. We might better try to think of how sin is a PERSON-al, or RELATIONAL matter.

Whatever else sin is, it is being WRONG with God. Whatever salvation is, it is being RIGHT with Him.

- B. Think with me through two or three "inner dramas" of people coming to seek salvation. See how the idea of what sin is goes to the heart of how we come to trust:

1. A commonly held "Nazarene" understanding of sin. Sin is being "bad," and sinning separates me from God. Salvation is being GOOD (once I've been to the altar to take care of being BAD).

And later I should come back to the altar to take care of the SIN (singular="bent to sin") so I won't get angry any more.

A. The "drama" goes like this:

I come to the altar. I confess my sins as I am told. I am given a clean slate, which assures me I will go to heaven if I die. I have a list of things I must and must not do. I must read and pray. I must not smoke or drink. I should go to church when I can, but then (Significant Other Person) is rather casual about it, so maybe that isn't all that important.

I start out with confidence. Then a couple of bad things can happen:

- a. I keep all the neat rules, like NOT smoking and NOT drinking and so forth, and so I "know" I am saved even though from year to year I never really come to know the Lord Jesus in any personal way, and I never help any fellow mortal move one inch closer to the kingdom of God; or,
 - b. I soon find out that my clean slate is all messed up. I start over several times. Finally I quit in disgust saying that I cannot honestly live a Christian life. I drop away and say there is nothing real in this fake religion.
 - c. Or— in spite of not having a perfect understanding of all these things I find a personal, growing knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, and somehow the miracle continues to grow!
2. Let me have the audacity to change the scene. Now I am a hard-shell Baptist, or a child of strict Reformed-Calvinist roots.
My definition of sin is sort of all the above PLUS— sin is ANY COMING SHORT OF THE GLORY OF GOD! And by that I mean any place I should do

better and don't, or shouldn't do bad and do. It is ALL sin! All my life I hear the Bible preached as propositional truth. "God said it! I believe it! That settles it!" Here's how MY "salvation drama" goes:

I "come forward." With good solid counseling I "receive the Lord Jesus as Savior."

I understand that He is my Substitute, and that His righteousness is IMPUTED as my own. God now looks at me, and instead of my sins He sees the righteousness of His Son.

I am honor-bound to read and pray and prove the reality of my new birth by (1) Baptism; (2) Tithing; (3) Witnessing.

If I do these things

- a. I often come to live far above the raw simplistic application of the very real Truth of this system, and the discipline carries me into a genuine relationship. OR,
 - b. I drift into old ways, and from time to time I "re-dedicate my life" during times of emotional challenge. All the while I am more-or-less consoled by the fact that I have received "eternal Life" which by definition can never be forfeit, otherwise how is it "eternal?"
 - c. Or— in spite of not having a perfect understanding of all these things I find a personal, growing knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, and somehow the miracle continues to grow!
3. Let me be even MORE audacious! Let me describe a person with some form of Catholic up-bringing. Sin to me is pretty much defined by the Church. There are mortal sins; there are venal sins. Jesus Christ is GOD and Savior, but the idea of salvation is mediated through both the Word and the Traditions of the Church. I need to (1) be baptized; (2) confirmed; (3) keep current by taking Mass regularly, which should involve regular confession as well.
My "salvation drama" comes when somehow these truths I have been taught become personal to me. I am saved by being in fellowship with the Church, and obeying from the heart its teachings, and IT mediates and brings me to Jesus

Christ.

Or— in spite of not having a perfect understanding of all these things I find a personal, growing knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, and somehow the miracle continues to grow!

C. IN ALL THESE DIFFERENT STORIES REAL SALVATION NEEDS A PRESENT SAVIOR

No human agency can fully present the truth so powerfully and true that "correct theology" will save. Somehow, by the Word being released and through the preaching I hear, in whatever church, I must grasp -the Idea that God knows ME-! He cares that I have sinned. He is angry with my sins, but I know He loves ME. I am enabled to enter into a personal relationship with Him. I ask Him for mercy and forgiveness. He grants it. I sense that I belong to Him.

[I do not know all the profound things that have taken place in me, perhaps, but I have been genuinely BORN AGAIN: Adopted, Regenerated, Justified!]

A relationship has been established. It is not easily broken! God doesn't give up on His children.

II. SIN AND SALVATION ARE PERSONAL IN NATURE

A. Unless there is a sinner there is no sin!

"Sin does not exist independently of the sinner." Sin is what a sinner does.

The sin is the expression of the sinner. We sin because we are sinners. To

quote premier Nazarene theologian, H. Ray Dunning: "We must not so much speak about sin as about man as sinner."

B. But what about "coming short of the glory of God?"

1. We've had Introduction to New Testament and we know that "sin" is usually translated from the Greek word ...'... ‡ ... (hamartia), which means "To miss the mark," and say "Sin is any time we come short of the glory of God."

But we have only a vague Idea of what coming short of God's glory might be. We think it is failing to live up to all the Ten Commandments, perhaps, or any deviation from God's perfect will.

2. The "glory of God" in human beings is the "image of God." The "glory of God" in you and me is the capacity we have for a good relationship with God Himself. It is the capacity to give and receive love from the Creator of the Universe.

Marred by the entrance of willful sin (original sin) the capacity remains to respond to grace.

C. Thus: SIN is that which RUINS OR PERVERTS RELATIONSHIPS

1. A "deadness" toward God. Living life as though a loving heavenly Father does not even exist.
2. A hostility and dishonesty toward fellow humans. The inability to be authentic, to love and receive love. Shutting down of compassion; living for self in advantage to others. Excluding all or part of the best social dimensions of life. The ultimate individualism.
3. A mistaken relationship toward Creation. Either tending to worship the creation as god; OR, to try to dominate it as though WE were God. A total misunderstanding of God-intended role as Vice-Regents
4. A miserable relationship with our own inner self. Helplessness! The dictator within! The usurper! Domination and Tyranny of self (Romans 7)

D. SO: SALVATION IS THAT WHICH DEALS WITH THE SEPARATION(S) OF SIN: Salvation must, then, do these four things: (and it does! it will!)

1. Freedom TO God. Daring to be open to Him! It gives us access to God on High; from far off places it brings us nigh to precious blessings that never die!
2. Freedom for the Other. The ability to relate to others in agape' love
3. Freedom from the Earth. Creation, nor the material benefits of living in this world, do not dominate.

To quote Dunning again:

"The clues to the boundaries of the mandate (Gen 1:28) is "the glory of God," to which unfallen man would be committed. It thus carries responsibility as well as privilege and implies ecological care-taking."

4. Freedom from Self-dominion

Dunning goes on (I am being VERY Nazarene in my conclusions!)

"The Lord becomes the dominant Partner in all relationships, not in an impersonal, arbitrary, or forced way, but in freedom God is made the Center. The uncoerced partner (you and I) can decide to dissolve the situation by attempting to assume an equal partnership, or by usurping the prerogatives of the Creator. In the Fall in Eden this prerogative was actualized. It has been repeated in kind in each of our lives, until we are set free to put the Lord God back at the center of our lives and assume the correct relationship with Him. -H. Ray Dunning

CONCLUSION:

What can we do about sin? What IS sin?

SIN IS WHATEVER KEEPS US FROM LOVING GOD!

SIN IS WHATEVER WE PUT AHEAD OF HIM!

The only way to really KNOW God is to LOVE Him! Love is how God reaches out to us! God so LOVED!

To love is to know— it seems so backwards!

But ultimately we don't come to God by knowing more, or by being better, or by saying more prayers than the next person.

And we don't maintain our relationship with God by having a superior theology than the Calvinists or Catholics.

To LOVE God— to place Him at the center of all we are or ever will be— to ask HIM to love us and forgive us and live in us— THIS is how we overcome SIN! And it is a relationship that never ends!

#241 *HIS WAY WITH THEE*

Would You Live for Jesus and Be Always Pure and Good

When the Spirit Comes

Receive the Holy Spirit

February 2, 1992 PM

Texts: Ephesians 5:18 and John 20:22

Introduction

1. There are many advantages to being brought up in a holiness church. Yet sometimes I think we get almost too familiar with God and holy things. It is often the most precious gifts that get taken for granted.
2. I am concerned that we holiness churches may come to think that we know all about God, and all about His will, and all about salvation, and particularly, to think that we have all the answers regarding being filled with the Spirit.
3. Even so, we need to ask the question: What does it mean to receive the Holy Spirit? Just what does it mean to be filled with the Spirit? Shouldn't we know the "answers?" Should we, indeed?
4. The answer must be spiritually addressed. Understanding holiness— knowing about being filled with God— is not primarily and first of all an intellectual comprehension, as important as that certainly is.

- a. We must have sound doctrine. Our information about entire sanctification must be both scriptural and Wesleyan.

Unless we have solid Wesleyan preaching, and sound Wesleyan teaching and learning, we will find that we are strongly influenced by the most attractive features of whatever doctrines are being most skillfully or popularly presented at the time.

- b. But even before doctrine is the need for a vital contact with God.

DOCTRINE and EXPERIENCE and PRACTICE are like three legs of a tripod. Each one is absolutely essential.

To the unconverted WORLD the only side of salvation they can see or care about in any way is PRACTICE.

To the safe-guarding of the kingdom, and the ongoing health of the CHURCH, the most important side of salvation is DOCTRINE. But in the life of the INDIVIDUAL (the American rugged individual!!) there is nothing more important than personal EXPERIENCE.]

- c. God's Spirit must bring Christ's LIFE into being into your heart and mine. It will never contradict God's revelation; it will finally agree with sound doctrine. But we are not saved first of all by WHAT we think we know, but by HIM WE KNOW WE KNOW!

- 5. Here is a quote from a great holiness exponent of a generation or so ago, Samuel Chadwick:

"The fullness of God is in Christ and Christ lives in men through His Spirit. He is Himself the gift. He brings all the blessings of grace, and wisdom, and power, but He is the blesser and the blessing. There is in the soul a very true sense of a divinely real Presence. The Spirit makes the Presence real. This is the crowning mystery and glory of grace. The Christian religion is not a set of doctrines about Christ, neither is it a rule of life based on the teaching and example of Christ. It is not even an earnest and sincere endeavor to live according to the mind and spirit of Christ.

It is LIFE, and that Life is the Life of Christ. It is the continuation of the Life of the Risen Lord in his Body, which is the Church, and in the Christian religion as set forth in the New Testament. It is not a system but a Presence; the Spirit of Christ indwelling the spirit of man."

- 6. Our knowledge of the indwelling Spirit— our answer to the question, "What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit needs to have this quality of LIFE in it! We cannot simply say, "I subscribe to the Nazarene position!" Our hearts must be tuned to the Presence of God! NOW we will look at the answer scripturally:

I. WE RECEIVE THE SPIRIT OF GOD WHEN WE ARE BORN OF THE SPIRIT

John 20:22 / Romans 8:9

- A. On the first Easter evening Jesus met with His disciples. Were they glad to see Him! And then the Bible says that Jesus breathed on them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit!"
- B. We receive the Spirit and the great work of being made in Christ's own image is begun, in the crisis moment when we are born of the Spirit of God. Jesus made it clear in talking to Nicodemus that when we are made alive in Him we are born of the Spirit. (John 3:8). And Paul says even more powerfully, (Romans 8:9) If any man have not the Spirit of Christ he is none of His.
- C. No one is ever born again— receives Jesus Christ as personal Savior, without also receiving the Holy Spirit. In understandable zeal for the truth of entire sanctification we may speak of Christians as "receiving the Spirit" as though they had not known Him at all before. This is not scriptural! Every Christian is the Temple of the Holy Ghost, and every Christian is sanctified in this initial and very true sense.
- D. The Spirit brings with Himself into the life of every man, woman, boy or girl who received Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord all the qualities of the Christ-life. There in the inner being are at least the embryonic qualities of all the mighty fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22,23) of love, joy, peace and all the rest.
- E. But the testimony of universal experience is that there is a deeper and deeper relationship with God to be explored. The Spirit is present in every child of God, making Jesus increasingly real, and fellowship with Him possible. Have YOU come alive in Christ by His Spirit?

Still, this is not all there is to receiving God's Spirit:

II. WE RECEIVE THE SPIRIT OF CLEANSING AND EMPOWERING WHEN WE ARE SANCTIFIED WHOLLY

(Acts 2: "They were in one place, in one accord, etc...")

- A. The Bible does not speak merely of the "coming" of the Holy Spirit, but of the COMINGS.
- B. Listen to what a current holiness advocate, Robert E. Coleman, of Asbury, says:

Interestingly enough, when we get through all the theological differences, a remarkable number of men and women greatly used of God from various schools of thought witness to essentially the same kind of a plus experience in their own lives. Naturally, they speak of it in different ways, depending upon their particular doctrinal point of view. Some call it "entire sanctification," "holiness," "perfect love," or "the victorious life." Others may prefer to describe it as "the baptism of the Holy Spirit," "the rest of faith," "death to self," or something else. The terminology, however, is not the important thing. What is significant is that there exists among Christian leaders representing many different theological and church connections a basic unanimity of agreement upon the fact— the fact of a deeper and abiding life in Christ that is entered into subsequent to regeneration whereby the trusting heart is delivered from the bondage of self, filled with the Holy Spirit, and set aflame by the love of God to serve the Lord with gladness.

- C. There is an experience, a crisis experience of entire and complete consecration, of full surrender, to which as children of God we are brought by the loving conviction of the Holy Spirit. To this complete consecration, in response to faith, the Holy Spirit COMES in sanctifying fullness, not merely to reside, but to PRESIDE in the heart of the believer.

But this, marvelous as it is, is not all that is implicit in the simple command of Jesus: Receive the Spirit!

III. WE RECEIVE THE SPIRIT OF ADEQUACY DAY BY DAY AS WE APPROPRIATE HIS PRESENCE AND POWER

(Ephesians 5:18)

- A. The "coming of the Spirit" is not over and ended when we enter the relationship of entire sanctification. For again and again we read in the account of the early church how the people, challenged by evil powers, or blocked by civil authorities, facing death or

imprisonment, would come together and pray, and in answer to their prayer they would be "FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT!"

This important verse, as important as any in the New Testament, is properly translated "Be being filled with the Spirit!" Make being filled with God an on-going reality in your life!.

- B. One reason the power of God is not manifested more in Christian's lives is that Christians are not living at that end of the scale where the Spirit's power is urgently needed!

If we are content to take our pure and holy selves off into the corner (like Little Jack Horner) and congratulate ourselves on our doctrinal purity and our ethical honesty while the rest of the world suffers and bleeds, we will never know the reality of what BEING FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT REALLY IS ALL ABOUT!

But if we stay in step with Jesus by His indwelling Spirit— if we let HIM challenge our pure minds with HIS love— He will take us into situations where we are way over our heads— where we KNOW WE CAN NOT MAKE IT UNLESS HE POURS IN HIS SPIRIT!

- C. But the beautiful thing is— if we are HIS! No holds barred— no reservations— then THE SPIRIT DOES COME! He comes with His adequacy! He comes in His love and power day by day as we need HIM!

Conclusion:

God is bigger than we can grasp! Being filled with His Spirit is a promise that staggers our imagination— but it is His promise!

We may not know all ABOUT God— and we may not even have all the answers about being filled with the Spirit; but we can in fact know God, and we can in fact be filled with His Spirit!

God is not only BIGGER than you think— God is NEARER THAN YOU KNOW! God is HERE JUST NOW! He is bringing witness to the truth about His salvation. He is telling YOU that you can have His Spirit deep within!

GOD: "Do you know Me?" "Do you really WANT to know Me?"

When the Spirit Comes

I ask you myself, this evening: ARE YOU FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT?

ARE YOU SATISFIED THAT GOD HAS ALL OF YOU?

ARE YOU DAILY ASKING TO BE BEING FILLED?

Prayer

Hymn #276 - *"Have Thine Own Way, Lord"*

Light in a Dark World

February 16, 1992

Exodus 27:20-21

Matthew 25:7 *Our lamps are going out ...*

Introduction

I am using The One Year Bible for personal devotions this year. February 7 there was an interesting juxtaposition of Exodus 27 and Matthew 25. There is the common theme of oil lamps and the need to keep them burning bright. And the Old Testament passage spoke to me.

Granted, there are passages in the Old Testament that require patience, lists of names and the like. But the Old Testament is still the Bible. It is part of God's inspired revelation.

Jesus knew and loved the Old Testament scriptures, and quoted from them. He urged even His critics to search the scriptures. "They testify of Me!" He said.

This passage in Exodus can illuminate one very vital Gospel truth. It is the simple command of God to keep the light burning in the inner room of the Tent of Meeting.

I. A LIGHT IN THE TENT OF MEETING

A. AN OLD TESTAMENT 'PICTURE-LESSON'

1. God had delivered His people from bondage in Egypt. They were "free," but they were in the desert. God was leading them to a place they knew as the Promised Land. God led His people by one miracle after another. God STILL leads His people, and it is always a miracle when God enters into the affairs of men and women.
2. God met with His people in a special way in a place called the "tabernacle," or Tent of Meeting. It was a holy place because it was there God's Presence was manifested.

3. The assignment for the priests who looked after the Holy Place is the message of our text: they were to keep the lamps burning with a supply of pure olive oil so that there would be a light in the Tent of Meeting. They were never to let the light go out. This task was a relatively simple chore. Not too exciting. Not too difficult. But necessary. A light in the inner sanctuary, the holy place.

B. JESUS PICKS UP AND EXPANDS ON THIS OLD TESTAMENT THEME:

1. The idea of a well-tended, ever-burning flame in the Holy Place gives insight into (or at least resonates with) the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. You probably know the story line.
2. The setting of an ancient Mid-East wedding is too remote, culturally, for us to make too much of the specific customs. A lot of sermons have been preached about what this or that signifies.
3. But there is one vivid lesson Jesus drives home: A lamp or lamps that were supposed to be burning bright are flickering and going out. And somehow the results of that darkness when the Bridegroom comes are disastrous! Just when the oil is most needed the cry is, "Give us some of your oil! Our lamps are going out!"
4. Probably not one of us here this morning has given thought that today might be the day when we meet the Bridegroom, or when He might return and call for our lamps to shine. But what could Jesus have been teaching in this parable?

II. EACH PERSON HAS A HOLY PLACE, A 'TENT OF MEETING'

- A. A GOD-ROOM IN YOUR HEART! Wherever or however God speaks to you, that God-connection is the most important thing in all the world! GOD IS SPEAKING TO YOU!

When the world is convinced that God has spoken in a special way to this or that person, the religious of the world tend to build a shrine, and people come by the thousands.

But God wants to speak personally, unmistakably, to each one of us!

1. A PERSONAL GOD-CONNECTION IS 'CRAZY TALK' TO A MODERN WORLD - Make no mistake: the very idea that God Himself meets with you or

me is revolutionary. It takes a miracle. We may not think too much about it. Or, we may submit to the spirit of the age and think that God-business is a "personal matter," or listen to the propaganda that God is the Great Irrelevancy. Whatever we think, God still intends to make a keep a connection with each one of us in this present world (as un-holy as it is)! GOD WANTS TO SPEAK WITH YOU!

2. God has put within each one of us a "Tent of Meeting." There is a place built into the human personality a place where we can pray, and where we can approach God. Everyone prays sometime or another. It is this holy place that God wants to help us furnish. This is the ONE PLACE where a pure light needs to be kept burning.
3. This simple "chore" of keeping a flame burning in our Meeting Place with God is easy to overlook. So many OTHER things seem important in this "business-of-being-Christian!" Do this! JOIN here! LEARN these rules! BUT NOTHING IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN TO SEE THAT THE LIGHT OF OUR FIRST LOVE NEVER GOES OUT!
4. PERHAPS OUR GREATEST SINGLE NEED IN A HIGH-TECH WORLD IS THE SIMPLE DISCIPLINE OF DAILY PRAYER.

Yes, it is important that we learn to sacrifice. It is vital that we invest our lives in the inner cities and the rural mission fields. Yes, we must care about the needy.

But all these things are in vain if, when at the end of the day, when we meet Jesus, we have a flickering Lamp at the center of our heart where we are supposed to meet the Presence!

5. John Wesley wrote in his Journal:

"Wisely said the ancients, 'The soul and body make a man; the Spirit and discipline make a Christian.'" (1)

Keeping the lamp of love for God burning is not an impossible thing to do. If it is sometimes a chore, so be it. Think of the Old

Testament priests keeping the lamps lit in the Tent of Meeting, and later in the Temple. Not exciting in and of itself: a light in the holy place.

[But you say: "Get practical! It is difficult! Can you give some help?]

B. KEEPING THE LIGHT ON IN THIS GOD-ROOM OF OUR SPIRIT

1. Come to God person-to-PERSON. Make personal contact every day. Start and end prayer time by affirming your love to God; by telling Him that you are His, available for sacrifice or service. Try to "make contact" every day. Or better, try to walk and talk with God every hour. It is NOT silly. It SHOULD be normal, if we are His people!
2. Develop good PATTERNS of devotion. We will read the Bible. We will pray prayers of worship, surrender, intercession. But these "ways" or patterns will vary. There are different ways to read the Bible; different patterns of prayer. It never becomes "automatic." As soon as you find a new, fresh and meaningful way to "do devotions" it may well go stale. Give even the staleness to Christ! Maybe we honor Him more by praying when we don't feel like it than when we do!
3. Be prepared for the duration! PATIENCE! It takes time to keep the inner chambers of the soul "filled." This is not just an electronic transfer of funds from one bank to another; this is a working of one Spirit on another spirit. It takes some time. Ephesians 5:18 says: "Be being filled with the Spirit!"
4. The INNER LIGHT is the SOURCE for everything else that is done in the Christian Life!

C. IF THE 'INNER LIGHT' IS BURNING, THE WORLD WILL SEE THE LIGHT

1. The inner light unfolds the PROMISE Jesus said that when the Spirit comes (to His own Church) the Spirit will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment to come.(2)
2. The inner light makes real Christ's PRESENCE. Before we need money (and we need money!) and before we need plans and programs (and we need them, too!)... before we need anything else we need to be sure that the light is burning

bright in that Holy Place in our hearts where we meet with God! Jesus died on the cross so that we might have this holy conversation with God! Jesus saves us so that we might be RIGHT with God! Jesus sanctifies us so that we might have fellowship with God!

3. The inner light defines life's PURPOSE Then— if the light is burning in our Inner Sanctum our everyday conversation will be transformed! When the lamp is bright it cannot be hidden within ourselves.

Conclusion

A. THE LIGHT WE MUST KEEP BURNING IS THE LOVE WE SHARE WITH GOD, THROUGH JESUS CHRIST

1. LOVE IS NEVER 'ABSTRACT'. Probably you have heard many sermons about how the "oil" is the symbol of the Holy Spirit; how we need to have this or that experience. I want to tell you that those sermons are true.

But the Holy Spirit is NOT an just an experience or a symbol. The Holy Spirit is NOT "oil" or a "thing." The Holy Spirit is a Person, and at its very essence SALVATION IS A RELATIONSHIP.

To have this "oil," to keep the "light burning" is to make the Spirit of Jesus welcome, and to keep Him in absolute first place in our thoughts and words and actions.

2. JESUS SAID "FOLLOW ME!" We seem to think that this is such a dreadfully hard thing! It IS, if we only think of the "task" of reading our Bible every day, and spending "so much" time in prayer.

But it is not an impossible task if we keep the real purpose in mind! We are making Jesus know that He is loved! We are trying to get to know Him, and know Him better and better! We are keeping HIM in first place!

[Back to Exodus:] The priests had a "chore." It wasn't difficult. It was important. Whatever it took to keep the lamps lit is what they did!

B. OUR FIRST TASK IS TO LOVE JESUS!

1. NURTURE YOUR RELATIONSHIPS. Salvation is first of all a love, and a trust, a relationship between God's heart and your heart.

Every relationship needs to be nurtured. Re-kindling, encouraging, enhancing is necessary for every human relationship. In our marriages, in our friendships, in our families, and certainly within our church family. It is necessary in our homes between parents and children, and between children and parents and brothers and sisters.

And it is also necessary in our most important relationship: our relationship with Father God through Jesus Christ His Son, by the Gift of the Holy Spirit.

2. A CHILLING WARNING!: JESUS SPOKE THESE WORDS ABOUT OUR LOVE FOR HIM: In this same discourse (in Matthew 24:12,13) Jesus made this flat statement. To me it is chilling:

Because of the increase of wickedness the love of most will grow cold; but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.(3)

Who can deny that wickedness has increased during your lifetime and mine?

[I often wonder, knowing that God is just, and knowing how He judged Sodom and Gomorrah, what great impending JUDGMENT lies in store for the civilization in which you and I live! Wickedness has increased!]

But even amid all this wickedness it is pretty much "business as usual" for Christians. We think "We're here! The church is pretty full! WE are righteous even if the world is pretty bad!

But Jesus did not say, "The righteousness of many will grow cold!" And He did not say, "The honesty of most of My people will be

called in question." Or, "The faithfulness to committee meetings will grow slack." That is not what is breaking His heart!

Rather than these, Jesus says, "Because of the increase of wickedness, the LOVE of MOST will grow cold! — You really won't love Me any more!"

The message I get in Jesus' parable about brides and lamps and all is that I need to keep a light burning in that God-room of my heart, where I meet with Him every day! IT ISN'T AUTOMATIC!

How about YOU?

Prayer: Lord— help us to do whatever is necessary to keep that central connection up to date! Keep us close to You. Amen.

Hymn EH #13 *Let Us Sing to the God of Salvation*

1. John Wesley, Works, II, 204
2. John 16:8
3. Matthew 24: 12,13

Thoughts on the Church

FAITH PROMISE SUNDAY

February 22, 1992

Ephesians 4:11-16; 25 It was [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining the full measure of perfection found in Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

THEREFORE, EACH OF YOU MUST PUT OFF FALSEHOOD AND SPEAK TRUTHFULLY TO HIS NEIGHBOR, FOR WE ARE ALL MEMBERS OF ONE BODY.

ALSO

Romans 12:1-5 "So we, being many, are members one of another..."

Including a word or two about "gifts."

Introduction

This is one of the great chapters of the Bible; vital to the understanding of "the nature of the church." We return to it again and again because it speaks of "gifts" and "grace."

Romans 12:1-5 is also tremendously familiar, and Romans 12 speaks also of "gifts."

I. THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT ARE REALLY GOD'S GIFTS TO THE CHURCH "GOD GAVE (GIFTS) SO THE BODY MAY BE BUILT UP"

We have interest in "gifts of the Spirit." Rightly so. But it is easy to be self-centered: what does God have for ME?

The thrust of the scripture is CHURCH-CENTERED: What does God want me to do in order that His kingdom may come?

Our 'gifts' are really not our own, but for the church; you are intended to be God's gift to the church.

WE ARE GOD'S GIFTS TO EACH OTHER!

II. THE CENTRAL PLACE OF 'THE CHURCH' IN THE FAITH

A. OUR VERY LIVES ARE TO BE LIVED WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE CHURCH

We tend to view the church as a "helper" to provide what we need in order to live a full and rich Christian life.

The New Testament view of the church was more like a "second coming" or "spiritual-re-visitation" of THE EXODUS! A body of people, making their way together to a Promised Land under the direct guidance of God!

B. IN THE CHURCH WE ARE EXPECTED TO 'PULL OUR WEIGHT!'

"DON'T BE (REMAIN) BABIES!"

Babies are great, but they are takers. The best thing about a baby is that it does not remain a baby

Babies are also shaky on their legs. They are not much at direction and distance. Mere walking is a victory.

The message of this passage is that as the 'gifts' are exercised, babies become children become adolescents become adults become parents become pillars in the church!

III. WE ARE CALLED TO BE A COMMUNITY OF THE TRUTH (Verse 25)

A. THE "WORD" TODAY IS TRUTH! THE TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE!

Are we willing to live and die by what is TRUE?

The "word" is not (first of all) "RELEVANT." We have spent too much time trying to tell the world that Jesus is nice, and that He doesn't mind this or that just so long as we are "sincere."

We need to hear Jesus say: "I AM THE WAY!"

Are we willing to live and die by what is TRUE?

The "word" is not (first of all) "PEACE" or "JUSTICE." Jesus said: "If you follow Me you will be misunderstood and hated! If you follow me you will have to be more interested in pleasing GOD than in what other people think! I DID NOT COME TO BRING PEACE BUT A SWORD!"

Are we willing to live and die by what is TRUE?

Our effort is NOT (first of all) TO MAKE THIS WORLD A BETTER PLACE IN WHICH TO LIVE: which is NOT an excuse to forget the physical needs of men and women and children—

But we need to hear Jesus say: UNLESS A PERSON IS BORN AGAIN HE CANNOT (EVEN) SEE THE KINGDOM OF GOD!"

B. THE TRUTH DECLARES ALL PEOPLE BORN ARE SINNERS THAT NEED TO BE SAVED

1. The best the world can offer is the old, shop-worn, out- dated model that "If we just make conditions better— if we just educate— if we just legislate— that "Human-Goodness" will "come through".

2. God's WORD says "NO! Mankind is not just POOR, not just SICK, not just UNDERPRIVILEGED . . . but we are BORN IN SIN AND WE NEED A SAVIOR!"
3. UNTIL WE HAVE BEEN TO THE CROSS, AND HAVE BEEN SAVED, WASHED IN THE BLOOD OF JESUS, WE ARE LOST AND ON OUR WAY TO AN ETERNITY WITHOUT GOD AND WITHOUT HOPE!

THE CHURCH NEEDS TO MAKE THAT MESSAGE ITS FIRST PRIORITY!

C. 'SAVED SINNERS' JUST CANNOT MAKE IT ON THEIR OWN!

1. The 'wisdom' of our modern age says "It is stupid to believe in "born-again-type religion," but if you are going to be a Christian REMEMBER THAT FAITH IS A PURELY PERSONAL MATTER!

We have been brought up in a society that values "the rugged individual" so much that even we Christians do not realize the power of true community!

So often when we come to faith, we then fall into the devil's PLOY of isolating and separating and individualizing our faith!

2. Even "church" is seen as a Supermarket where the individual gets supplies, instead of The Tabernacle, or the Meeting Place, where the Body of Christ gets together to hear from the Father; where we find mutual support and help and blessing.

D. GOD HAS GIVEN US THE CHURCH/ AND GIVEN US TO THE CHURCH!

1. We really do need each other. We need to live together in love. Our journey demands it.

Our speaker this morning brought us a shocking tale of what it is like to try to live for Jesus in a hostile environment.

But I wonder sometimes the atmosphere of the United States of America in 1992- right where WE live— is not even more hostile, and perhaps a harder place in which to LIVE IN A COMMUNITY OF ABSOLUTE TRUTH!??

2. William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas have written a serious book (Resident Aliens) in which the main figure of the title describes what it is like for Christians trying to live by the words of Jesus in our present world.

Perhaps we need to come to grips with this figure of living in alien environment. It is hard if not impossible to keep our children away from exposure to the sin. We have to begin early; be wise; ask for God's grace to LIVE BY THE TRUTH!

3. "Individual Christianity" just won't make it in these desperate times!

[WM Greathouse's figure of divers (deep sea sort of divers) in the alien environs with air-hoses going to the surface - communicating by shouting into each other's face-plate— cutting the air-hoses when they become entangled...]

BY GOD'S GRACE, OUR VISION MUST BE THAT 'LOVE ONE ANOTHER,' AND THAT TELLS THE TRUTH TO ONE ANOTHER!

- A. WE SHALL BE A COMMUNITY IF we support each other at the immediate level; the church family
- B. We support each other at the "network" level: Paul goes to Jerusalem, and there sees a great need; he authorizes an offering throughout the Christian churches and carries the money with him for relief of the brethren there.
- C. We "network" with those needs God has entrusted to us:
 - General Budget of \$ 33,000.00
 - Second Church 12,000.00
 - Quincy Crisis Center 2,000.00
 - Team Assignments &
 - Student work? ??,???.??

Conclusion:

On this Faith Promise Sunday we really do need your support, your money! BUT ON A MUCH DEEPER LEVEL, GOD REALLY IS COUNTING ON YOU TO (1) MAKE SURE THAT

YOU ARE SAVED, AND THEN (2) TO BE A PART OF HIS 'EXODUS CARAVAN' ON THE WAY TO THE PROMISED LAND!

You have gifts, if you belong to God! But those gifts do NOT belong to you, to bring YOU fame and glory! Those gifts are for you to pour back INTO THE CHURCH in order that the Church might continue to do the will of its Head, our Lord Jesus!

Entering Gods Rest

March 15, 1992

Exodus 33:14 *My Presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest.*

Hebrews 4:9-11 *There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from His. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest*

...

My grandson, Ben, is 'going down the tubes.' He is a Bruins fan! Last week, through the kindness of one of his uncles, he saw his very first B's game at the (Boston) Garden.

Now Boston at night is no place for a little boy of five- going-on-six. And if you have ever attended a sporting event in Boston Garden you know it is not the place for the timid or the delicate.

Ben began his night by spontaneously praying for a parking space. His dad was foolish enough to drive into Boston. They found one immediately! It cost \$9.00!

Once inside and seated, Ben introduced himself, more or less, to all the people in his section. He felt right at home. He shared his popcorn. He made a number of new friends.

About the middle of the second period Ben had had enough hockey so he lay down in his seat and put his head in his dad's lap and his feet in the lap of the lady on the other side. She was not at all offended, according to the report I got. But for some reason dad decided it was time to go home, and Ben never woke up when he was put into bed that night.

It is wonderful to have such a simple trust, and not have that trust violated! I admit that Ben and hockey are a far cry from Moses and the text. But there is a parallel here: see if you can see it. I'll give you a hint: It has to do with trust!

Moses is a BIG (important) man! Moses is SMART, too! Moses has accomplished the impossible as he has obeyed God.

But now Moses is daunted! He has begun a great task. He doesn't see how in the world he can complete it!

So Moses prays! He says, "Lord, please show me HOW!" (Doesn't that make sense?)

But God answers, "First I need to show you WHO!!" And then God spoke about a place "near to Me," - a place near God!

God's reply to Moses' prayer for guidance says two things that WE can take as our own. It says first, "My PRESENCE shall go with you!" When you are seeking to do my will, you are NOT simply 'on your own.'

And then God said "I- my Presence with you- will give you REST!" When we are conscious that God is near, and all is right between "us" there comes an inner assurance! Again and again we need to go into that assurance! Again and again we need to find the "place near to Me!"

Then God instructed Moses, and there was a special time when Moses beheld something of the power and wonder and glory of God in a marvelous way, in the cleft of a rock.

One question we ask when we read of great mountain-peak experiences of assurance such as Moses had is, was this a one- time sort of thing, or did he then have/ can I have this assurance and rest all the time?

It WAS a time of great reassurance! Certainly the unique experience of God's Presence passed, but Moses could never doubt that God had given him assurance. Maybe that is one of the purposes what the holiness people have always called the "second work of grace." It IS important that we have those times of consecration and glory in response to our cry to God for His Presence!

General Superintendent Lee M. Haines of the Wesleyan Church in a theology conference in February, 1992, Kansas City said that he calls that special time "an intensifying moment of sanctification."

Instead of being just a one-time "blessing," for Moses, this one-on-one walk with God became a way of life: in times of crisis, Moses went to God in private. God gave record in Holy Writ that even in those Old Testament times He spoke with Moses face-to-face!

But you and I are tempted to say, that was Moses— and none of us is Moses! Is there such a place near to God for EVERYONE? Is THAT what Hebrews 4 is saying? Can we live "by the Presence?"

Robert Coles is a Harvard teacher. Robert Coles is also an author. He is a psychiatrist specializing in what makes children tick.

Robert Coles came to faith— or was profoundly changed— by seeing the reality of the "rest of God's PRESENCE" in children of faith, particularly in one six-year-old girl named Ruby.

Ruby had tremendous occasion for stress. She was the only black child in an elementary school in 1960 in New Orleans at the time when federal law said there must be integration. All the white children then were removed from the school by angry parents, so Ruby was the only child in the school. And twice every day hundreds of angry people met Ruby at the door of the school to taunt and swear at her— six years old! In *Travels with Charlie*, John Steinbeck described Ruby, although he did not at that time know who she was or anything about what was going on in her insides. His description of the terrible anger expressed and poured out on the delicate little black child is powerful and almost nauseating.

Robert Coles was also in New Orleans in 1960, on personal business. He was fascinated with the stressful situation; he had studied children in stress here in Boston. He asked for and received permission to interview Ruby and her family during the most stressful time in their lives. To his amazement he found that Ruby and her family were sustained and upheld by a very real and profound peace. He came, almost grudgingly, to realize that the peace was genuine!

Here is some verbatim dialogue Robert Coles recorded in 1960. Ruby's teacher had told Robert Coles that morning that Ruby had spoken to the people who were shouting at her. He was very interested:

I asked her, "Ruby, how was your day today?"

She said, "It was okay."

"I was talking to your teacher today and she told me that she asked you about something when you came into school early this morning."

"I don't remember," Ruby said.

"Your teacher told me she saw you talking to people in the street."

"Oh, yes. I told her I wasn't talking to them. I was just saying a prayer for them."

"Ruby, you pray for the people there?"

"Oh, yes."

"Really?"

"Yes."

I said, "Why do you do that?"

"Because they need praying for," she answered.

"Do they?"

"Oh, yes."

"Ruby, why do you think they need you to pray for them?"

"Because I should."

"Why?"

"Because I should."

Then [Coles continues] Ruby's mother came into the room. She had heard this line of inquiry and she said, "We tell Ruby that it's important that she pray for the people." She said that Ruby had the people on a list and prayed for them at night.

I said, "Ruby, you pray for them at night, too?"

"Oh, yes."

"Why do you do that?"

"Well, because they need praying for." Mrs. Bridges told me Ruby had been told, in Sunday School, to pray for the people. I later found that the minister in their Baptist church also prayed for the people. Publicly. Every Sunday.

I said to Mrs. Bridges, and then to her husband later, "You know it strikes me that that is a lot to ask of Ruby. I mean, given what she's going through." And they looked at me, very confused.

"We're not asking her to pray for them because we want to hurt her or anything," said Mrs. Bridges, "but we think that we all have to pray for people like that, and we think Ruby should, too." And then she looked at me and said, "Don't you think they need praying for?"

"Yes, I agree with you there, " I said. "But I still think it's a little much to ask Ruby to pray for them."

But Robert Coles marveled that he, a trained child Psychiatrist, could not pick up any devastating symptoms of tension in the Bridges home. And he went on to say how Ruby Bridges and her 'inexplicable prayers' had caused him to think of how he had neglected the connection between the study of justice and ethics and fairness and the humble practice of living by the words of Jesus.[1]

To be honest, I don't know if I could have the simple, profound faith of the Bridges family. But the promise of our text is very direct and clear. Let's look at it again:

Entering Gods Rest

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from His. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest . Hebrews 4:9-11

It is NOT a "rest from work" or a promise of an easy life without trials and even, finally, physical death. But it is the same answer that Moses got when he asked God for a crash course in "migration management principles." Remember? God's reply to Moses' prayer for guidance said two things that WE can take as our own: My PRESENCE shall go with you! When you are seeking to do my will, you are NOT simply 'on your own.'

And God also promised (My PRESENCE) - I - WILL GIVE YOU REST! When we are conscious that God is near, and all is right between "us" there comes an inner assurance! Again and again we need to go into that assurance! Again and again we need to find the "place near to Me!"

Like Ben at the hockey game, we know that if we go to sleep before the game is over, we will wake up in the morning where we belong!

[1] Christianity Today, August 9, 1985

A Call to Worship the God of Heaven and Earth

March 29, 1992 PM - Lent IV

Lesson: Deuteronomy 4:23-40 & Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 4:39, 24, 31, 29

Introduction

The Shemä is a focal point for worship. [Deut. 6:4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.] It calls the faithful to the wonder of the Mystery that is our God.

Jesus used the Shemä, recorded in Mark (12:29) when a teacher of the law came to Him, seriously seeking to draw closer to God. This teacher asked Him 'What is the most important commandment?' Jesus, quoting our text, reminded him that the key in seeking to understand God is LOVE! God is to be loved, not merely 'studied' or 'talked about' with disinterest.

And Jesus quickly added that we need to love one another as well.

[Whenever WE speak about God we should always seek to have this added factor of love and reverence and even worship. The "LORD" (note the small capital letters in your English Bible text) refers to what we call YHWH, the "unspeakable name." This is the name that we have translated "I AM THAT I AM."

[God is never an "object." He is to be approached with awe.]

Look with me at some Lenten truth contained in the Shemä:

Deuteronomy 4:6 "The LORD is ONE." (Also) Deuteronomy 4:39 Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

I. OUR GOD IS THE GOD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

A. ONE GOD— a God for all of life and living.

1. Israel's neighbors did not operate from this radical concept of religion. They had gods who met their (perceived) needs. The reason their gods fitted their situation so well was pretty simple: they had invented their own gods.
2. There was probably a strong temptation on the part of the Israelis to take the gods of their hostile neighbors seriously. It "made sense:" their LORD God had done miracles in Egypt and the desert. But what did HE know about agriculture and settled living in Canaan? So Moses reminded them: ONE God— for all of life!
3. Before we condemn these heathen idol-makers- did you ever consider that WE pick and choose bits and pieces of scripture to make a composite sketch of a "God" of the Bible who meets OUR needs— or what we feel or "believe" to be our needs??

[EVERYBODY seems to be an "expert" on the subject of God! We hear people say, "God wouldn't do that!" or, "God doesn't care about that!" And amazingly, God usually agrees with the person talking!]

If we select those scripturally true statements about God that appeal to us, and refuse to meet face-to-face with the God who IS, we are no better than the enemies of Israel, and our God is NOT the God of the Bible.

B. ONE GOD FOR ALL OF LIFE AND LIVING

1. We want a "heavenly God" that we can meet (and leave) in the church; a God to whom we dedicate our babies, and before Whom we take our wedding vows. We want a God to explain our fears of death away.
2. But when we leave the church we have a variety of earthly influences that demand that we listen to them. They want to set our values and kindle our admiration. Our idols may be as concrete and real as a fine car, or as abstract and ethereal as "financial security"— they can be as pervasive as "eternal youth," or as subtle as the intellectual pride of proving we are keeping up with

the academic cutting edge. But we need to recognize them for what they are:
the idols of our day.

- C. ONE GOD — who is still the "self-revealer," the I AM THAT I AM. This text is NOT out of date; remember, Jesus used the Shemä. We come to know this self-revealing God as we reach out to Him in love!

Deuteronomy 4:24 For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

Deuteronomy 4:31 For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath.

II. ONE GOD BOTH MERCIFUL AND HOLY

A. A DIFFICULT TRUTH, BUT TRUE JUST THE SAME

Sometimes justice and righteousness and holiness seem to be incompatible with forgiveness and tenderness and mercy. A God of both awesome justice and great compassion seems to us like paradox: WHAT IS THIS ONE GOD? Is He demanding and just and aloof? Or is He condescending and merciful, a sort of cosmic soft-touch? Is He a God fit for heaven? Or, is He a God for city streets?

1. If only this One God would stay in heaven— and sort of shout down from time to time when he wanted a sacrifice, but for the most part just leave the day-to-day living to us, so that we didn't have to miss the "soaps" or whatever we want to do, we could get along fine.

We could call on Him if our children got a high fever or there was a tornado watch, but for the most part He can just stay in heaven where He belongs.

2. But NO— we do not have just one simple statement (God is HOLY! or God is JUST! or God is 'UNCONDITIONAL LOVE'. We have what appear to be conflicting statements:

A Call to Worship the God of Heaven and

B. GOD IS A CONSUMING FIRE, a "jealous God. Deuteronomy 4:24 For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

1. Granted, this is an Old Testament passage. It represents "earlier understandings" about God, but is it passé? "Jealousy" is usually a mean, cheap adjective. But there is appropriate jealousy!
2. In a marriage relationship petty jealousy can stifle and crush a trust and love; but at the same time a marriage relationship is based on the fidelity of both partners to covenant vows. If the solemn vows of marriage are taken lightly the relationship is in serious trouble. God cares about us so much that He does not take our covenant lightly!

C. GOD IS ALWAYS OPEN TO HEAR YOUR CRY; HE IS MERCIFUL AND LOVING Deuteronomy 4:31 For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath.

1. This, too, is an Old Testament passage. It probably represents a darker age, a more primitive understanding. But it is a part of divine revelation, and states real fact about the nature of a God who has NOT changed.
2. God cares about His people! He listens when they cry to Him. He is NOT anxious to find fault, to abandon His own. His conviction is for the purpose of restoration and communion. God loves YOU!

Can we live with this paradox? If we take the one, we can and must also take the other view of this One God of heaven and earth!

III. WORSHIP THE GOD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

A. THIS IS A CALL TO WORSHIP!

We are never told about God simply for the purpose of information. What we think we KNOW about God is probably not as important as HOW WE ENDEAVOR TO RELATE TO GOD.

1. God loves us; God responds to love.
2. God has promised: Every effort to draw near to Him will be met with a divine response: Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you! James 4:8

B. TWO important facts reach out to us from the call to worship, the Shemä:

1. God will always hear a cry of your heart or mine to know Him! Deuteronomy 4:29 But if from (wherever you are) you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul.

God wants a people who are absolutely crazy about Him! He wants a family who thinks that He is wonderful! He craves our love— in some small way reflecting the great and tender kindness with which He already loves us!

2. God does not exist for us; we exist for Him! Our love for Him demands that we make Him Lord of heaven and earth! ONE God! Only one! God is to be God of ALL your life! Nothing is to be beyond His jealous care:

Deuteronomy 4:39 Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

(Conclusion:)

The Shemä [Deut. 6:4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.] is a focal point for worship. It calls the faithful to the wonder of the Mystery that is our God.

In Mark's Gospel (12:29) Jesus used the Shemä when one person was seriously seeking to draw closer to God.

1. LOVE THE LORD! Jesus reminded him that the key in seeking to understand God is LOVE! He quoted the Shemä, saying that God is to be loved, not merely 'studied' or 'talked about' with disinterest. And Jesus quickly added, that we need to love one another as well.
2. LET GOD BE GOD! Acknowledge the mystery of God. Affirm in your heart that this God is a GOOD God! But don't try to make Him into YOUR image!
3. LET GOD BE GOD! Seek to make ourselves available to HIM, rather than simply using our religion to help us accomplish OUR purposes! DO try to discover what in you and me constitutes the "image of God" in us! WE are made in HIS image! We CAN live in His

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Presence! We CAN live in a way that, by grace, is pleasing to Him and deeply fulfilling and satisfying to ourselves!

Prayer

Hymn # 283 *Dear Lord and Father of Mankind*

A Fresh look at the Church of Jesus Christ

March 29, 1992 pm

Mark 8:27-38 [The Relationship of Faith to Faithfulness] [27] Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

"BUT WHAT ABOUT YOU?" he asked. "WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?"

Peter answered, "You are the Christ."

Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

[31] He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Out of my sight, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

[34] Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "IF ANYONE WOULD COME AFTER ME, HE MUST DENY HIMSELF AND TAKE UP HIS CROSS AND FOLLOW ME. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes into his Father's glory with the holy angels."

I. WHAT SORT OF CHURCH ARE WE?

What sort of church can we be and become?

Our options seem to have been: Shall we be liberal or conservative? Shall we be MORE activist? or shall we be MORE conversionist? Is there any other way?

Increasingly it occurs to me that apart from the Spirit of God, there is not much difference between the fundamentalist and the liberal: both of them demand control of the Scriptures; both of them want to tell you all about what God is and is NOT!

Shall we be activist or shall we be conversionist? Is there any other way?

ACTIVISM DEMANDS THAT WE SEEK AFTER "PEACE" AND "JUSTICE." BUT HOW DO WE DEFINE THOSE TERMS?

Our activity in the world must never get ahead of or fall behind our loyalty to the Christ. Some quotes from Hauerwas and Willimon:

Most of our social activism is formed on the presumption that God is superfluous to the formation of a world of peace with justice.

American Christians, in the name of justice, (often) try to create a society in which faith in a living God is rendered irrelevant or private.

We argue that the political task of Christians is to be the church rather than to transform the world.

"Peace" and "justice" ... are words awaiting content. The church really does not know what these words mean apart from the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth.

[Abstract love is no love at all. "Tell me the story of Jesus!"] STORY is the fundamental means of talking about and listening to God, the only human means available to us that is complex and engaging enough to make comprehensible what it means to be with God.

SO, SHALL WE BE ACTIVIST, OR CONVERSIONIST?

Perhaps what is necessary is that we be (what Hauerwas and Willimon call a "confessional" church. That we relate everything to our statement that "Jesus is LORD!" That we ask Jesus to help us see the world and the scriptures and our own lives and (indeed) REALITY— as God declares that it is! [In the terms of our morning sermon: LET GOD BE GOD! GOD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH! THE GREAT "I AM THAT I AM"!]

Hauerwas and Willimon make a great deal of the Sermon on the Mount. They make the point that (1) The Beatitudes are a statement of the fact. And they also lift up (2) The recurring theme, "Ye have heard it said, but I say unto you..."

1. he Beatitudes are in the indicative, and not the imperative; more a way of stating what the facts are than implying : "This is how you have to be! Get with it if you want to be happy! 'The "Be-Happy Attitudes"'"

If this is true, then we have the indication of a different world than the one described by our culture.

2. GOD IS IN CHARGE! The growing sense of joy that God IS at work! God IS! He is working out His will.
3. This IS God's world; we should not give it over to evil by default. There is great power in the story of Jesus!
4. Jesus DID define the ending and the beginning of time. The world was created by Him, and the world has not known Him. He came unto the world and was not received; but as many as have received Him have received power to become children of God (John 1:12)
5. Some quotes:

"Our biblical story demands an offensive rather than defensive posture of the church. The world and all its resources, anguish, gifts and groaning is God's world, and God demands what God has created. Jesus Christ is the supreme act of divine intrusion into the world's settled arrangements. In the Christ, God refuses to "stay in his place."

II. LIKE PETER WE [AS A CHURCH] MUST BE ABLE TO SAY: JESUS IS LORD!

AND ALSO AS JESUS DEMANDED WE MUST NOT JUST SAY AND BELIEVE AND BE SURE OF THE FACT,

WE NEED TO BE ON THE MOVE IN FOLLOWING JESUS:

Is there a fresh, new way that we can grasp the old, old story? We usually are limited to what our imagination can grasp. It is hard to re-invent the wheel.

We (probably) do not need to "throw away" institutional vessels which contain aspects of the true church. But we also need to be open to more options than just "conservative" or "liberal;" than "activist" or "Conversionist." We use this limited choice in child psychology: "Would you rather go right to bed now, or shall we take your teddy bear with us?"

We can at least begin by telling Jesus Christ that we mean business in following Him! We intend to do whatever we know is HIS will!

One interesting item from this week's reading. A man named Dr. Waldron Scott, in a scholarly paper presented to The Evangelical Round Table in 1986 says that our theology as evangelicals needs to be "a theology of wayfarers" and not a theology of those who "have arrived conceptually." Our times, the people to whom God is sending us, must have this message, "JESUS IS LORD: JESUS IS THE WAY, THE TRUTH, THE LIFE, EXPRESSED TO THEM IN TERMS THAT ARE VITAL TO THE WAY WE THINK AND UNDERSTAND.

Dr. Scott then said, "We need to become more self-aware of the mental categories in which we operate." He then cites modern mathematicians and logicians [named Zadeh, Cohen, and Hersh] who have demonstrated that human being create categories in several ways, ways we call "sets."

The three most basic "sets" (or "mind-sets") are labeled "Bounded sets" and "centered sets" and "fuzzy sets."

The "bounded set" is defined by clear, sharp, stationary boundaries. The category is created mentally by listing the essential characteristics a person or object must have

to be included within the set. Most of the effort spent in defining the category is spent on defining and maintaining the boundary. THE CENTRAL QUESTION, THEREFORE, IS WHETHER AN OBJECT (OR PERSON) IS INSIDE OR OUTSIDE THE CATEGORY.

"Centered" sets, on the other hand, are created by defining a center and the relationship of things to that center. ... There IS a clear distinction between things moving toward the center and those moving away. MOVEMENT IS ESSENTIAL TO THEIR STRUCTURE.

"Fuzzy" sets have no clear boundaries; things may be defined in terms of what things are or how things relate to some external point of reference. THIS IS A PREDOMINANT WAY OF THINKING IN MANY THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES.

Bounded set thinking— is Greek thinking— is the way most of us have been brought up; there is some of it in the New Testament (especially in Paul.)

"It may be that the cultivation of centered set thinking is what we most need today. ...a centered approach seems to correspond most closely with the Hebraic view of reality found in the Bible.[REMEMBER— THERE MUST BE MOVEMENT; JESUS DID NOT SAY "COME SIT BY ME! HE SAID, "COME FOLLOW ME!" AND JESUS IS GOING PLACES!]

This dynamic, relational way of looking at what it means to be Christian may offer us point of contact... with the fuzzy set thinking ... likely to characterize .. from Third World contexts .."

(Conclusion:)

TRANSLATE THIS!

1. To be saved IS "describable" and (in a practical way) understandable:

IT IS ALL RIGHT TO SAY, THIS IS HOW TO BECOME A CHRISTIAN!

conviction + repentance + faith = salvation

THIS IS HOW TO BE SANCTIFIED

complete consecration + faith = (altar sanctifies gift)

A Fresh look at the Church of Jesus Christ

...but this can never be cold, hard, truth apart from a loving, personal relationship to Jesus!

2. To be saved is to be ACCEPTED by Jesus, and to be ACTIVELY FOLLOWING HIM!

Rather than say "What do you want God to do for you?" we might ask:
"WHO IS GOD TO YOU!"

Yes, Jesus SAVES me! But perhaps better said, JESUS is my Savior! There is a story there! An ongoing story of Jesus!

EH 47 God of Grace and God of Glory On Thy People Pour Thy Pow'r

The God of Heaven and Earth

March 29, 1992 pm - Lent IV

Lesson: Deuteronomy 4: 23 - 40 & Deuteronomy 6: 4 - 9

Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 4:39, 24, 31, 29

A Call to Worship

THE GOD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

Introduction

The Shem,, is a focal point for worship. [Deut. 6:4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.] It calls the faithful to the wonder of the Mystery that is our God.

Jesus used the Shem,,, recorded in Mark (12:29) when a teacher of the law came to Him, seriously seeking to draw closer to God. This teacher asked Him 'What is the most important commandment?' Jesus, quoting our text, reminded him that the key in seeking to understand God is LOVE! God is to be loved, not merely 'studied' or 'talked about' with disinterest.

And Jesus quickly added that we need to love one another as well.

[Whenever WE speak about God we should always seek to have this added factor of love and reverence and even worship. The "LORD" (note the small capital letters in your English Bible text) refers to what we call YHWH, the "unspeakable name." This is the name that we have translated "I AM THAT I AM."

[God is never an "object." He is to be approached with awe.]

Look with me at some Lenten truth contained in the Shem,,:

The God of Heaven and Earth

Deuteronomy 4:6 "The LORD is ONE." (Also) Deuteronomy 4:39
Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the Lord is God in heaven
above and on the earth below.

I. OUR GOD IS THE GOD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

A. ONE GOD-- a God for all of life and living.

1. Israel's neighbors did not operate from this radical concept of religion. They had gods who met their (perceived) needs. The reason their gods fitted their situation so well was pretty simple: they had invented their own gods.

2. There was probably a strong temptation on the part of the Israelis to take the gods of their hostile neighbors seriously. It "made sense:" their LORD God had done miracles in Egypt and the desert. But what did HE know about agriculture and settled living in Canaan? So Moses reminded them: ONE God-- for all of life!

3. Before we condemn these heathen idol-makers- did you ever consider that WE pick and choose bits and pieces of scripture to make a composite sketch of a "God" of the Bible who meets OUR needs-- or what we feel or "believe" to be our needs??

[EVERYBODY seems to be an "expert" on the subject of God! We hear people say, "God wouldn't do that!" or, "God doesn't care about that!" And amazingly, God usually agrees with the person talking!]

If we select those scripturally true statements about God that appeal to us, and refuse to meet face-to-face with the God who IS, we are no better than the enemies of Israel, and our God is NOT the God of the Bible.

B. ONE GOD FOR ALL OF LIFE AND LIVING

1. We want a "heavenly God" that we can meet (and leave) in the church; a God to whom we dedicate our babies, and before Whom we take our wedding vows. We want a God to explain our fears of death away.

2. But when we leave the church we have a variety of earthly influences that demand that we listen to them. They want to set our values and kindle our admiration. Our idols may be as concrete and real as a fine car, or as abstract and ethereal as "financial security"-- they can be as pervasive as "eternal youth," or as subtle as the intellectual pride of proving we are keeping up with the academic cutting edge. But we need to recognize them for what they are: the idols of our day.

C. ONE GOD -- who is still the "self-revealer," the I AM THAT I AM.

This text is NOT out of date; remember, Jesus used the Shem,,. We come to know this self-revealing God as we reach out to Him in love!

Deuteronomy 4:24 For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

Deuteronomy 4:31 For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath.

II. ONE GOD BOTH MERCIFUL AND HOLY

A. A DIFFICULT TRUTH, BUT TRUE JUST THE SAME

Sometimes justice and righteousness and holiness seem to be incompatible with forgiveness and tenderness and mercy. A God of both awesome justice and great compassion seems to us like paradox: WHAT IS THIS ONE GOD? Is He demanding and just and aloof? Or is He condescending and merciful, a sort of cosmic soft-touch? Is He a God fit for heaven? Or, is He a God for city streets?

1. If only this One God would stay in heaven-- and sort of shout down from time to time when he wanted a sacrifice, but for the most part just leave the day-to-day living to us, so that we didn't have to miss the "soaps" or whatever we want to do, we could get along fine.

The God of Heaven and Earth

We could call on Him if our children got a high fever or there was a tornado watch, but for the most part He can just stay in heaven where He belongs.

2. But NO-- we do not have just one simple statement (God is HOLY! or God is JUST! or God is 'UNCONDITIONAL LOVE'. We have what appear to be conflicting statements:

B. GOD IS A CONSUMING FIRE, a "jealous God. Deuteronomy 4:24 For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

1. Granted, this is an Old Testament passage. It represents "earlier understandings" about God, but is it pass,? "Jealousy" is usually a mean, cheap adjective. But there is appropriate jealousy!

2. In a marriage relationship petty jealousy can stifle and crush a trust and love; but at the same time a marriage relationship is based on the fidelity of both partners to covenant vows. If the solemn vows of marriage are taken lightly the relationship is in serious trouble. God cares about us so much that He does not take our covenant lightly!

C. GOD IS ALWAYS OPEN TO HEAR YOUR CRY; HE IS MERCIFUL AND LOVING Deuteronomy 4:31 For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath.

1. This, too, is an Old Testament passage. It probably represents a darker age, a more primitive understanding. But it is a part of divine revelation, and states real fact about the nature of a God who has NOT changed.

2. God cares about His people! He listens when they cry to Him. He is NOT anxious to find fault, to abandon His own. His conviction is for the purpose of restoration and communion. God loves YOU!

Can we live with this paradox? If we take the one, we can and must also take the other view of this One God of heaven and earth!

III. WORSHIP THE GOD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

A. THIS IS A CALL TO WORSHIP!

We are never told about God simply for the purpose of information. What we think we KNOW about God is probably not as important as HOW WE ENDEAVOR TO RELATE TO GOD.

1. God loves us; God responds to love.
2. God has promised: Every effort to draw near to Him will be met with a divine response: Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you! James 4:8

B. TWO important facts reach out to us from the call to worship, the Shema₁:

1. God will always hear a cry of your heart or mine to know Him!
Deuteronomy 4:29 But if from (wherever you are) you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul.

God wants a people who are absolutely crazy about Him! He wants a family who thinks that He is wonderful! He craves our love-- in some small way reflecting the great and tender kindness with which He already loves us!

2. God does not exist for us; we exist for Him! Our love for Him demands that we make Him Lord of heaven and earth! ONE God! Only one! God is to be God of ALL your life! Nothing is to be beyond His jealous care:

Deuteronomy 4:39 Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

The God of Heaven and Earth

(Conclusion:)

The Shem,, [Deut. 6:4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.] is a focal point for worship. It calls the faithful to the wonder of the Mystery that is our God.

In Mark's Gospel (12:29) Jesus used the Shem,, when one person was seriously seeking to draw closer to God.

1. LOVE THE LORD! Jesus reminded him that the key in seeking to understand God is LOVE! He quoted the Shem,,, saying that God is to be loved, not merely 'studied' or 'talked about' with disinterest. And Jesus quickly added, that we need to love one another as well.

2. LET GOD BE GOD! Acknowledge the mystery of God. Affirm in your heart that this God is a GOOD God! But don't try to make Him into YOUR image!

3. LET GOD BE GOD! Seek to make ourselves available to HIM, rather than simply using our religion to help us accomplish OUR purposes! DO try to discover what in you and me constitutes the "image of God" in us! WE are made in HIS image! We CAN live in His Presence! We CAN live in a way that, by grace, is pleasing to Him and deeply fulfilling and satisfying to ourselves!

Prayer

Hymn # 283 Dear Lord and Father of Mankind

Guests at the Lords Table

April 5, 1992

1 Corinthians 11:23-30

For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the [same] night in which he was betrayed took bread: 24 And when he had given thanks, he brake [it], and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.

25 After the same manner also [he took] the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink [it], in remembrance of me. 26 For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come.

27 Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink [this] cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. 28 But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of [that] bread, and drink of [that] cup. 29 For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. 30 For this cause many [are] weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.

When the disciples came together for the Passover meal that we call the Last Supper, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who was the host. It was a borrowed room, but it was Jesus who made the arrangements, and took care of the details, even though His disciples helped carry them out. He even took the task usually assigned to the least or the youngest: He washed the feet of those around that table.

The story is in Luke 22, how Jesus sent Peter and John to prepare the large upper room, which they found by following a man carrying a water pitcher. And if we will, Jesus always prepares a table before us when we eat His meal together. Jesus is always the Host at Communion!

Eating the Passover meal, or Seder, is a significant observance in the schedule of every practicing Jew. It is both a solemn holy time, and a warm and wonderful family time. I doubt if we Gentiles can ever fully capture the warmth and the wealth of feeling that have surrounded the Seder for centuries.

That night the disciples were guests at their Master's table. They were together as family, with Jesus as the Host. This was a very significant occasion, and Jesus wanted them to grasp the significance.

"With desire I have desired to eat this meal with you," is the way that He expressed it. "I love you! I want you to know that you are dearer than life to Me!"

And we understand that on that holy night Jesus did something else, something that had never been done before. He transformed the Seder, the sacred Passover meal, with its Paschal Lamb and bitter herbs and remembrance of Egypt and the wilderness and Canaan, and He turned the focus of the meal on Himself.

Can you understand how profane and embarrassing and sacrilegious this would be for anyone but the Christ? But this WAS the Christ! And this was a sacred moment, indeed! All the sacrifices and symbols of the Old Testament were pointing to this sacrifice! The Paschal Lamb became the body of the Lord. The cup became the blood of the Everlasting Sacrifice.

That night Jesus ordained a new kind of Passover Supper. He commanded his disciples to eat of it, and as often as they ate, to remember His death, His shared LIFE, and His promise to come again and eat with them in the Presence of God the Father. This is the sacrament to which we all are invited this morning:

What, then, can we say about

I. THE NATURE OF THE SACRAMENT

[We can only know and understand of God that which He chooses to reveal to us. The sacred MEAL OF REMEMBRANCE for the family of faith will always be in great part]

A. A MYSTERY

1. Any attempt to literalize or explain will certainly fall short of the truth it conveys to those who know God.

[It is not wrong to use our minds in worship; there really is no other way. But when we set our understanding, our "reason" as a condition for God's love and blessing we severely limit our capacity for receiving God's grace.]

2. Suffice it to say that when we partake of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper we encounter

B. A PRESENCE; and by faith we come closer to God than in any other way. Some of our brothers and sisters make it a literal Presence; others have other explanations.

There is something humbling and something of the acknowledgment that we do not have all the answers when we come to the Lord's table. In our arrogance- the arrogance of our culture that has put the "feelings" and "individual freedom" above every other good, it is good that we look with saints across the ages and around the world to this supper as

C. A SIGN AND A PROMISE; a promise of that which is inexpressible.

The church fathers and traditions of the ages testify that this is a means of grace. We come to the table of the Lord, where HE is the Host, not to dictate OUR terms, but to look to Him for assurance that indeed He has come, and has died for us, and that He ever lives on high to make intercession for us!

[But what may we expect this sacrament to BE, to DO for us?:]

II. THE FUNCTION OF THE SACRAMENT

Without pretending to explain the inexplicable, the scriptures do help us understand what happens when we share at the Lord's Table, where He is Host:

- A. It is an exercise in OBEDIENCE. The command, the imperative of the Lord was: "This do! In remembrance of Me!"

The disciples who heard their Lord say those words clearly understood what He was saying and doing! They were to perpetuate that moment when Jesus declared that He, Himself, was the Paschal Lamb.

And that commandment still stands!! The family still meets at the Lord's table. We are here because we want to be— but we are also here because Jesus has commanded us to come! We gladly obey.

B. The Lord's Table is also an exercise in REMEMBERING.

Jesus said that night: " ...this do ye, as oft as ye drink [it], IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME."

As long as we obey we will not forget. We dare not fall away from the clear understanding that HERE, in the BLOOD and the BODY of the Lord, the Paschal Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world, HERE AND HERE ALONE LIES THE ONLY HOPE OF MANKIND FOR ETERNAL LIFE!

C. The Lord's Table is also a TESTIMONY, a SHOWING FORTH. It is a testimony to three worlds that we depend on Jesus for life.

Jesus said: " ... as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, YE DO SHEW THE LORD'S DEATH TILL HE COME."

D. The Lord's Table is also a time of RECEIVING. It is a MEAL. It may not be a physical feast, and there IS mystery involved; but when we come to the Table we are fed.

Jesus said: " ... THIS IS MY BODY, which is broken for you: ... THIS CUP IS THE NEW TESTAMENT IN MY BLOOD ..."

III. THE RESULT OF THE SACRAMENT

A. WE WILL EXPERIENCE RENEWAL

The Lord's Table will a point of new beginning for us this day. No matter where you are in your journey, here we recognize that we are successful ONLY as we remain in Jesus, and that we are failures ONLY as we leave His Presence,

Let us affirm that we are IN CHRIST, by faith, at this Table today.

B. WE WILL KNOW A RE-CENTERING OF LIFE

It is easy to let the focus of our attention slip off Jesus Christ! It is easy to look at PROBLEMS, or at PEOPLE, or at WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN, or at WHAT DID HAPPEN ... and forget that what Christians live for is to abide in Christ.

We have opportunity today to tell Jesus that we are depending on Him, on His sacrifice, on His love. Tell Him that HE is at the center of our lives and living!

C. WE WILL CONTACT A FRESH ENABLING. The Lord's Table is sacred, and not to be manipulated for personal ambition, but at the same time it is a powerful source of strength to each member of the Body to carry forward in the Spirit of the Lord all that He intends for us to be and to do.

From time to time we all need to have this fresh outpouring of God's enabling grace. All across the centuries of the Church of Jesus Christ, the testimony of the faithful has been: It is at the Lord's Table where we receive new strength to continue in the faith.

It may seem that what you need is MONEY, or AN OPEN DOOR, or a JOB, or AN ENCOURAGING WORD. And I do not in any way suggest that you do not need these, and need them desperately. But at the risk of sounding like a raving mystic, let me say that when we have Jesus, when we are centered in Him, we have His promise of "all these things." I am NOT saying that Holy Communion is the answer to all your problems; I am saying that at the Lord's Table, as Jesus draws near, we shall find His enabling grace.

Invitation:

To all who will come— to all who desire to draw near to God- - to all who are drawn by the grace of God to partake— this is the Lord's Table, and YOU are welcome!

Only do not come irreverently! Do not make a mockery of that which Christ has provided.

Guests at the Lords Table

- Come with heart-searching. Open your heart to the Spirit of God. Ask Him to make you worthy to partake.
- Come with your victories— and lay them in gratitude at the feet of the Host. It is through Him that we are more than conquerors.
- Come with your heart-aches and defeats! Come with your doubts and fears! Come with your sin to the blood that speaks of pardon!

Read aloud together "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind" (#283) as a quiet prayer of the entire congregation BEFORE the distribution.

You Have not Passed this Way Before

April 5, 1992 PM

Joshua 3:1-13

"When you see the ark of the covenant ... then you shall set out from your place and go after it. ... Do not come near it, that you may know the way by which you shall go, for you have not passed this way before. ... Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you. .. By this you shall know that the living God is among you ..."

Introduction

My immediate ancestors on both sides were people who either through bravery or desperation dared to venture into absolutely new worlds. My father's father left his wife and small children in the north of England and came to this country where he worked for several years until he had the money to send for them. And my grandmother came by herself on a sailing vessel with those small children.

My mother's father and mother were both children of homesteaders' families on the northern frontier in Michigan more than 100 years ago. About three years ago a cousin of mine visited me here in Quincy— and stayed for all of about three hours. After she got back to Michigan she sent me a good copy of an old photograph taken in 1889, along with some other really old tintype-kinds of pictures of my Michigan ancestors. In that old photo are all four of my maternal great-grandparents as well as my grandfather and grandmother Purchis when they were still teenagers. There they are, dressed in their best clothes and holding their guns and looking for all the world like some realistic western movie. They were homesteaders. They were miles from the nearest telegraph or doctor. Tractors and automobiles and electrical power were still unknown to them. I have reflected many times on the kind of courage it takes to break new ground, to enter territory that has never been entered before.

This is the message Joshua had for his people in the words of our text: "You have not passed this way before!" And whether you believe it or not, in a very real sense,

even though we may try to stay as conventional as possible, even though we may try to do things in a safe manner— every one of us is headed into the unknown. We are facing a future that no one can pretend to understand.

I. WE ARE ALL PRESSING INTO THE UNKNOWN

- A. At certain seasons or stages of our lives we become more aware of the hazardous nature of our choices as we press into the unknown future. I remember standing in the room at the front of the church waiting for the wedding march! But there are many such seasons: the finish of any course of study ... the challenge to decide on a move in residence or employment ... the birth of a baby ... a serious or threatening illness. You may or may not feel like a pioneer. But we are all pilgrims and strangers in search of a city.
- B. And really, every single day we live we are, in one sense, pioneers, trail-breakers. We never know what a decision may bring forth.

If we could see into the future, as God sees, we might try to play god; but God in His love and mercy has veiled it so that we might better learn to trust Him, and walk with Him. I often wish that God might tell me what the next step should be!

[God does not reveal the details of the future; but that does not mean we have to be afraid, because...]

II. GOD HAS GIVEN A GUIDE TO HIS PEOPLE

- A. God's guidance begins with a covenant. God is a covenant- making God. Not "contract," with services rendered for payment received; not "bargaining" with a let-the-buyer-beware attitude. But covenant, or an agreement of good will between two free partners. I did not say free and equal. And I do not say that our freedom is like God's freedom.
- B. God leads us primarily in the context of the church and NOT merely at the whim of each individual. This is hard for the American mind-set particularly. WE have substituted the STATE for our corporate conscience. It is automatic.

God's people will find safety in WORSHIP. Personal prayer, and the study and knowledge of the written Word have vital places in our guidance. But in

the house of God, in the act of corporate worship, in the seeking to praise and honor God the covenant is renewed, and the insights come!

We must revere the Presence! Our task is to follow God. We turn this around all too often and think we come to church in order to get God's advice on how best to achieve our goals or meet our (perceived) needs. Analysis and human evaluation and weighing of all possible alternatives are great and wonderful; but there is no substitute for the clear, direct, certain leading of God! And often that comes in the place of worship!

[Joshua's call was:]

III. CONSECRATE YOURSELVES! SANCTIFY THE LORD GOD IN YOUR HEARTS!

- A. [Back into the story: The children of Israel had been in the wilderness 40 years. Joshua knew God was ready to bring them into Canaan now. But first:] THERE WAS TO BE A SOLEMN ACT OF DEDICATION. "Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts!" Get the foundation sure and solid! Don't try to go forward, to build on a partial surrender!

[Jesus wanted His disciples to go into all the world. But the last thing He told them before He left was "Don't leave town!" WHY? Because they were ready to go and give of their best— but that wasn't good enough!

They had to "sanctify the LORD God in their hearts— that is- - give HIM total allegiance— so that the Lord God could sanctify THEM through and through! Can you see the parallel? If we want God to bless us and use us, then God has to have our total and complete allegiance!]

OUR best isn't good enough in this day— or any day! But when we belong wholly to God, and are seeking His mind— then what God can do is better than our best!

[God DID do a wonderful thing for His people in their tomorrows! They walked through the waters of the Jordan by a miracle!]

You Have not Passed this Way Before

B. WHAT IS THE PERSONAL APPLICATION HERE? Do you need to "sanctify the Lord God in YOUR heart?" Do YOU need to work on your personal willingness to obey? Do I? Before the Lord can do wonders tomorrow, we have to obey Him today!

C. WHAT CHOICES DO YOU AND I HAVE?

1. IF NOT JESUS, THEN WHO WILL BE YOUR MASTER? No man, no woman can serve two masters! You cannot be lord of your own life and expect Jesus to guide you into the unknown future.

2. IF NOT NOW, THEN WHEN SHALL YOU DECIDE TO LET HIM HAVE HIS WAY? God is patient and long-suffering. But God is NOT mocked! Whatsoever a person sows, that is what a person reaps!

And if God is dealing with you over a matter of surrender— some area— some situation— some thing in your life— then to deliberately hold Jesus off is to refuse to receive His leadership! The eternal YES must needs be said in a moment of "NOW!"

3. IF NOT GOD'S GUIDANCE, THEN WHO WILL WALK WITH YOU INTO THE UNKNOWN? The answer is— you will follow your covenant with God, and go with His people, and be a part of His church— or you will walk alone into the darkness where you have never been before!

Conclusion

In two weeks I am challenging the church to a corporate act of dedication as we partake of the Maundy Thursday communion together. At that time we will tell God that this church "sanctifies the Lord God in its (corporate) heart" ... that this church belongs to God without reservation.

We will tell God together that this church expects that "tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among us!" We will be leaning hard on Him as a church, even as we already are seeking to do.

But just now, tonight, I am challenging each one of us as individuals— whether or not you belong to this fellowship— to prepare yourself for the challenge of tomorrow!

HAVE YOU SANCTIFIED THE LORD GOD IN YOUR HEART? Have you set HIM, and Him alone on the throne of your heart to rule and reign forever, unchallenged by idols, and unchallenged by YOU yourself??

Prayer:

Hymn #241 - *His Way with Thee*

The Hosanna People

The importance of the triumphal procession

April 12, 1992

Introduction

It was a day of contrasts! A Carpenter being called a King! Little children and happy disciples praising and shouting for joy while worried power brokers frowned and plotted evil! Bright sunshine on a happy parade while black storm clouds piled high on the western sky!

It might have been funny to see a Galilean carpenter sitting on a borrowed donkey being proclaimed as king— except that no one was laughing in that way.

I. THERE WAS REAL POWER BEING DISPLAYED THAT DAY

[When we think of a power parade we think of the times we have seen a May Day parade in Red Square in Moscow, with thousands of booted troops, and massed gun carriers, and tanks by the score, and missiles. But believe me when I say that on a Sunday morning there paraded down Olivet's hill on a little donkey more sheer power than all the massed armies the world has ever seen!]

- A. The Pharisees and scribes certainly were not laughing. They had watched one failed revolution after another, and had managed to hang on to their temporal power by staying out of Rome's bad graces. This Carpenter from Galilee had never seemed too serious a challenge— until He had condemned "religion for profit" and had gone through the Temple like a whirlwind. His teachings seemed harmless enough— until he told the common people that their righteousness had to exceed the righteousness of the religious leaders! Even His miracles had not been too unsettling— until He had raised a well-known man, Lazarus from the dead, and it seemed that every simple, trusting soul in Jerusalem was going to buy into His Messiahship. The religious leaders were not laughing.
- B. The people were not laughing! There was nothing ridiculous in Jesus to them! They saw kindness and they saw hope and they saw power.

True, they misunderstood the power. They saw this king as an immediate fulfillment to their highest hopes and dreams. They praised Him as best they could.

These were NOT the same people who cried out "Crucify Him!" Can you imagine John and Peter and James and Mary Magdalene and Nathaniel and Zaccheus and formerly-blind Bartemaus and the widow of Nain and ... crying "Crucify Him!"?

No, their faith was imperfect; but the believing people were sure that Jesus was Messiah! And every detail of that procession to the cross was a fulfillment of God's Word!

This procession was a direct fulfillment of prophecy written hundreds of years before, as the prophet Zechariah described in detail:

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. Zechariah 9:9-10

They rightly acclaimed Him King! God was inhabiting their praise that day!

C. And Jesus? Jesus was not laughing, either!

Watch Him as He ascends— then mounts the donkey— then slowly descends Olivet's hill. Jesus knew that He IS the Son of God!

II. THERE WERE STARK CONTRASTS APPARENT THAT DAY

A. There is PEACE on the face of Jesus! Contrast with the STRIFE in the hearts of those who coveted power. Suspicion, questioning every motivation, giving no one the benefit of the doubt; while Jesus, who knew what was in the heart of every human being still loved them and believed in them. [He said to Peter: "You will fail Me. But when you have returned, go strengthen your brothers!"] Jesus is the Prince of Peace; and He has

promised His peace to every one of us! "Peace I leave with you!" How could He do this on the very eve of His crucifixion?

- B. There is LOVE in His face. Contrast with the HATRED of the abusers and the abused. "We've never gotten what we deserve! We will not have You or anyone else pretend to have authority over us! We hate anything or anybody who tells us that we need a savior from sin!"

III. WHY, DO YOU SUPPOSE, WAS THERE A TRIUMPHAL ENTRY?

- A. Because JESUS IS KING! This fact was established to three worlds!

Jesus - the same Jesus who warns against selfish ambition— remember He said, "When you are invited to a feast don't take the place of honor— take the lowest seat"— this same Jesus permitted, even arranged for this parade, this Triumphal Entry!

He acknowledges, He answers the representatives of the temple who tell Him He is in danger of inciting a riot. "It is fitting and proper— necessary— that these people cry out! If they are silent the very ROCKS will cry out! The Creator is HERE!"

- B. There is WORSHIP taking place that day in stark contrast to BLASPHEMY AND DENIAL OF GOD. On that day only brief hours away from the Cross the Worship of God and of His Christ looked over the Valley of the Shadow of Death, past Gethsemane and past Calvary, and even past the Resurrection and the empty tomb to say that from Eternity to Eternity "Jesus Is Lord!"
- C. THE COMPASSIONATE KING — Even in establishing His Lordship, Jesus does not betray His own character: There is a COMPASSION in His face as he comes directly across from the Beautiful Gate and looks over the city wall at the Temple of Herod. Jesus weeps!

IV. WHEN THE PROCESSION BEGAN

This procession had begun in the heart of God before the foundation of the earth was laid. It had been in the consciousness of the God-Man for a long time. Just how God

The Hosanna People

the Son limited Himself in becoming one of us, and how His own self-awareness deepened, and how "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and favor with God and man" we cannot understand. But early on in His ministry He knew that the Redemption of us all would cost His life!

Certainly Jesus knew on the Mount of Transfiguration. In that wonderful hour that can only be recalled with wonder, when His divine glory dazzled Peter and James and John, when Moses and Elijah spoke with Him about the death He would accomplish, even then Jesus knew what He faced in Jerusalem.

Again and again Jesus clarified to His disciples the fact that the Way He had chosen was through the Valley of Sorrow and Death. (Luke 18:31) Somehow the meaning escaped them. We hear what we want to hear all too often!

But as that great Passover of the Eternal Sacrifice came nearer, and Jesus made His way with the disciples to Jerusalem, in full knowledge of what awaited Him there, Jesus continued in character... With the salvation of all mankind on his shoulders Jesus was quick to hear a blind man's cry from the roadside in Jericho; continuing on He looked up into a tree and called Zaccheus down to tell him he was forgiven and loved... all the way to Jerusalem and the Cross.

Conclusion

When does this Triumphal Entry praise end?

1. It never will!
2. It must continue in our hearts, imperfect as our understanding may be. If Jesus is Lord, then let our hearts cry out: Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!

Prayer

Hymn

The King is on Parade

-Palm Sunday-

April 12, 1992

Luke 19:28-38

Introduction

It may have seemed to the casual observer that this was a very impromptu procession, this parade we call the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. It had all the obvious organization of a pick-up game of softball.

But in fact this was a very well-planned and deliberate happening, this one-Man parade! It had been announced in detail hundreds of years before by a prophet born in Babylon:

Zechariah 9:9-10

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.

As unlikely as it seems, even to the casual reader today this was:

I. A PARADE OF INFINITE POWER

- A. Usually when we think of power in a parade we think of booted soldiers marching past Hitler, or massed tanks and missiles filling Red Square. But those powers have come and gone, and the "parade" down Olivet's hill manifested a power that still remains as vital as ever.

In fact, the people that day were thinking of the Triumphal Procession in terms of power as they understood it! And they were all mistaken about the nature of the power they saw, but real power was there:

- B. The enemies of Jesus saw Him as a threat. They hadn't really worried until they heard He had said that everyday common believers should have righteousness that exceeded the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees themselves! And then there were the miracles! And finally, Lazarus! This Jesus had to be stopped!
- C. Many if not all the friends of Jesus saw Him then as a fulfillment of their dreams. "Will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" "Hosanna to David's son! Surely HE is going to throw out the Romans and their stooges!"
- D. But this power, real power, was not what the friends or enemies thought! Jesus was demonstrating the power of LOVE. He was carrying out His mission, which was John 1:12-type power. To as many as were going to receive Him, Jesus was giving the power to become the children of God, to share in God's eternal life, to still be happy and growing and useful when the stars grow old!

II. IT IS A PARADE OF INFINITE DURATION

- A. How long was this procession? About one donkey long— or two, if the mother donkey came, too. About an hour's time, or less, if we just count the time when people sang, "Hosanna!" For just a few moments, in order to declare to three worlds that Calvary was not an accident out of His control, Jesus accepted the praise of the multitude. Jesus was King! He knew where He was going that week! He knew Thursday and Friday were out there ahead! But He also knew that He would know the JOY of completing the Father's will, and releasing the mighty power that makes us all God's children. The parade was short— just a brief flash of power.
- B. But this movement of Christ toward Jerusalem and the hosannas and the cross and the empty tomb beyond began a long time before even Zechariah prophesied about it! John tells us (in Revelation 13:8) that Jesus was "the Lamb slain from the creation of the world."

Out of the fullness of His LOVE God sent His Son.

- C. The movement of Jesus toward Jerusalem and the cross was settled in the heart of Jesus long before this brief parade. On the Mount of Transfiguration He had spoken with Moses and Elijah about where He was going. Again and again He had told His disciples that He was going to Jerusalem to die and to take back His life again.
1. Yet what a strange display of power! Knowing He was going to His death Jesus deliberately kept on doing the things we love Him for; he attended to the details— he heard the blind man shouting from the edge of the crowd— he saw Zaccheus up in the sycamore tree— all this was in Jericho— as he was on His final journey to Jerusalem. Even later in this last week of ministry, on the very night He was arrested this King of All Power in Heaven and Earth took a towel and washed His disciples' feet!
 2. And even though at the end of this procession He entered the Temple and, as He had done before, cleansed it with anger, and demonstrated His authority in a way we cannot understand— it is true that before He got all the way down the hill— when He was in view of the beautiful Temple, this great King of power stopped his little mount and wept over the city that had rejected Him.

III. A PARADE OF CONTRASTS, OF CHOICES

- A. That first Palm Sunday certainly was a day of contrasts! A Carpenter being called a King! Little children and happy disciples praising and shouting for joy while worried power brokers frowned and plotted evil! Bright sunshine on a happy parade while black storm clouds piled high on the western sky!
- B. There was LOVE and there was HATRED contrasted that day! There was PEACE and there was TURMOIL and STRIFE in stark contrast that day! Suspicion, questioning every motivation, giving no one the benefit of the doubt; while Jesus, who knew what was in the heart of every human being still loved them and believed in them.
- There was WORSHIP taking place that day in stark contrast to BLASPHEMY AND DENIAL OF GOD.
- C. The government, and the power brokers, and the policy makers probably weren't too impressed by the POWER of that parade that first Palm Sunday! The same kinds of people in our own world today are exactly the same! Jesus doesn't really matter! God is a

The King is on Parade

"Private Matter!" Faith is the Great Irrelevancy!

But if we listen and look with the gift of faith, we can see those same contrasts clearly even today: love IS stronger than hatred! Trust IS greater than suspicion and pettiness.

And what is more, if we look and listen with our eyes and ears of faith we can hear this King of Kings say, If you really want to, you can come after Me! Get in line! Join the parade!

The only thing is, to join in the parade we must "Deny our own self-sovereignty— and say, 'Jesus is LORD!'" and we must take up our own cross, day-by-day, and then we may follow Him!

Conclusion

And the wonderful thing is that we CAN get in the parade! We CAN, because He DID!

Parades are supposed to inspire. I confess that I enjoy hearing stirring marches, and feel a flutter when the flag goes past. But those kinds of parades pale in comparison to what happens within when the King Himself looks our way and says, "Come, Get in line! Follow on!"

This is the way the writer of Hebrews has put it— and how it has worked again and again for me!

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus who, for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him that endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart! Hebrews 12:2,3

Shall we get in His parade? The line forms here!

Prayer: Help us to see with the eyes of faith, and hear with the ears of faith as You bid us to follow You, for we know that You have the power to make us God's own children. Amen

Hymn 23 (Exalt Him) *Jesus Comes with All His Grace*

Renewal of Covenant

MAUNDY THURSDAY

April 14, 1992

CALL TO WORSHIP

Minister: Come, let us join ourselves to the Lord in an everlasting covenant which will never be forgotten. Jeremiah 50:5

HYMN

INVOCATION

Minister: Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, from whom no secrets are hidden, cleanse our thoughts and enable us to love You, to magnify Your holy name, and pray and worship You by the mighty help of Your Holy Spirit, in the authority of Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen

All: The Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) using "trespasses"

HYMN

PREPARATION

Minister: Brothers and sisters, agree with me in these matters:

The great love of God as shown in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ our Lord deserves and demands a response of love on our part. Is that not so?

People: Amen. It is so.

CONFESSION

Minister: We were all once sinners by birth and by choice, and strangers and aliens to grace. Even now, wherever we are in our spiritual pilgrimage, we must depend upon God's grace and not our own righteousness, or we will be forever lost. Is that not so?

People: Amen. It is so.

Minister: Will you join with me in a prayer of confession, openness, and dependency upon the saving grace of God in Christ?

TRUST

All: We acknowledge a deep sense of dependency upon Your grace and mercy, O God. We are of our own merit but sinners, lost and alone; it is only by Your mercy we have come to be Your children.

We have confessed our sins, and do confess that even now, to this hour, in us apart from You dwells no good thing. As we have prayed "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." so now we do rejoice in Your forgiveness and saving grace, casting all our hope upon Your blood, shed for our sins. On You we put our trust, on You we lay all hope for pardon, for eternal life, for salvation. We call You Lord! We trust You as Savior! Amen.

COMMITMENT

Minister: Let us deliberately yield ourselves now to the Lord. As His servants, as well as His children, let us give up the dominion and government of our lives and of our church forever to God as a living sacrifice.

All: I am Yours, O God. I reverence You. I dedicate myself to Your service.

We are Yours, O God. We reverence You. We dedicate the Wollaston Church of the Nazarene* to your service without qualification or reservation.

[*If you are a member of a church other than Wollaston, here silently pray for your own fellowship that it might be blessed and owned of God.]

Minister: In giving ourselves individually and corporately to God we affirm that we are willing to let God Himself appoint us to our work. Christ has many services that must be done; some of His appointments are more easy and honorable, others are more difficult and menial. Some are suited to our inclinations and interest, others may be contrary to both.

In some ways we please Christ and please ourselves, as when He requires us to feed and clothe ourselves; to rejoice in the Lord, to bless and praise His name. These are the sweet works of being a Christian.

But there will be other ways in which we cannot please Christ our Lord but by denying ourselves, when it will cost us shame and reproach, even perhaps parting with our liberties and accommodations for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

If you are willing, join with me in prayer:

All: Lord Jesus Christ, we affirm that this is Your church, and that we are Your people, I am Your servant. Make us what You will, O God, only let us be truly Yours.

Minister: Lord, have Your way in me.

People: I am Yours to command; I love You.

Minister: Use me or lay me aside, exalt me or let me be trodden under foot for You.

People: Let me be full; let me be empty, only as You will.

Minister: Let me have all things; let me have nothing.

All: We freely, and I personally, freely and heartily resign all to Your pleasure and disposal.

HYMN

RESPONSE

Minister: Brothers and sisters, such a commitment to God Almighty as we have now made is the essence of true Christian faith. When we have cast all our hopes upon Jesus Christ, and when we intentionally and with our understanding have given ourselves to Him than we are Christians indeed, and never till then.

Christ will be the Savior of none but His willing servants. Christ will have no servants except by their free will and consent. Let us now confirm our commitment by singing a covenant hymn, by affirming a solemn covenant, and by taking together the elements of Holy Communion.

HYMN : A CHARGE TO KEEP I HAVE

THE COVENANT

All (Standing:) And now glory be to You, O God the Father, whom I shall be bold from this day forward to look upon as my God and Father. Glory be to You, O God the Son, You who loved me and washed me from my sins in Your own blood, You who are now my Savior and My Redeemer. Glory be to You, O God the Holy Spirit, who by Your almighty power have turned my heart from sin to God.

O eternal Jehovah, The Lord God Omnipotent, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, You are now become my Covenant-Friend, and I, through Your infinite grace, have become Your Covenant-Servant and Child. We are Your people, this is Your church. The Covenant which we have made on earth, may it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

THE COMMUNION

It Is Finished

Good Friday Meditation

April 17, 1992

John 19:30 When Jesus had received the vinegar, He said, "It is finished!" and He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.

A STATEMENT ABOUT CHRIST'S LIFE WORK

The cry from the cross, "It is finished" is the final word in the Gospel of John. "Into Thy hands I commend My spirit" is a personal word of faith; this is a statement about what Jesus has done with His life, and where He had finally ended His earthly ministry.

THE VIEW OF UNBELIEF: IT'S ALL OVER

I suppose there are different ways to hear these words. One interpretation, I hasten to say 'Not my own!', might say that with these words Jesus has simply said: "It's all over!"

The agony has ended, but with it also the noble experiment has failed! 'My disciples are scattered, the high and holy-sounding words I uttered have proved empty. Love is NOT stronger than hatred; the people with the biggest army always win.'

But if this had been the true meaning of these words we never would have heard of Jesus Christ except as a tiny footnote somewhere in an historian's notebook about some eccentric Jewish revolutionary.

This is the interpretation we must give these words however, if all that we see is the cross of Christ.

I know it is Good Friday. I know we aren't supposed to celebrate the Resurrection until Sunday. I praise God that the Cross is God's victory for us over the power and guilt of sin. But it takes the power of the Resurrection to unlock the full meaning of these words: "It is finished!"

It Is Finished

John 20:9 expresses how helpless we would be to see the full meaning of "It is finished" without knowing, as we most certainly know, that Jesus not only died but rose again from the dead. John 20:9 says:

"For as yet they did not understand the Scripture that [Jesus] must rise again from the dead."

From our perspective this side of Calvary, this side of the resurrection, this side of Pentecost and the living Christ inhabiting His church, we know that Jesus was NOT admitting defeat with his statement from the cross, IT IS FINISHED!

THE PERSPECTIVE OF FAITH: IT IS COMPLETE

The only way we Christians can understand these words of completion is in the light of the mighty power of LIFE ETERNAL, the Resurrection Power that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus.

In His own words in the High Priestly prayer Jesus said: (17:4) "I glorified Thee on earth, having accomplished the work which Thou hast given Me to do."

And what DID Jesus come to do?

1. JESUS CAME TO SHOW US THE FATHER.

John 1:1 declared that Jesus is the WORD. In John 14 Jesus tells the disciples, "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father." God is Transcendent, beyond our full comprehension. Yet forever we know what God is, for God is like our Lord, like our Friend, Jesus of Galilee.

2. JESUS CAME TO DESTROY THE WORKS OF EVIL.

I John 3:8 says: "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil." Satan has set up shop on this planet, and has taken many prisoners. He has propagated lies about what real power and real wealth and real satisfaction might be. Jesus has come to set the prisoners of evil free, and show them His own love, and share with them His own life!

3. JESUS CAME TO BRING LIFE TO YOU AND ME.

[Here we come to the truth that from our perspective is central, having to do directly with our salvation:]

John 10:10 I am come that they might have LIFE, and that they may have it more abundantly. And also John 1:12 He came unto His own and His own received Him not; but as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the children of God, even as many as believed on His name.

When Jesus said, "It is finished" He was saying that everything necessary was set in place that we might be God's children, heirs of God's grace in Christ, joint-heirs with Christ to all the love of God's family!

"It is finished!" means that we may be:

justified - counted as righteous in Christ regenerated - new creatures in Christ adopted - brought into God's family with His Spirit crying "Abba, Father" within us and sanctified - or the actual work of making us LIKE Christ begun within our personality

BEHOLD: THE FINISHED WORK

Perhaps the best news is that this cry of Jesus from the cross means that THERE IS NO MORE THAT NEEDS TO BE DONE BEFORE YOU AND I CAN COME TO GOD, to receive this gift of life (this Gift=Jesus Himself!), and to be received into God's family:

This finished work is ours to receive as the Holy Spirit makes it available to us by God's grace:

John 1:12 " ...as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the children of God, even as many as believed on His name."

I'M SURE THAT YOU HAVE RECEIVED THE LORD JESUS INTO YOUR HEART AND LIFE OR YOU PROBABLY WOULDN'T BE HERE TODAY. BUT IF, BY CHANCE, YOU HAVE COME WITH BURDENS OR DOUBTS OR FEARS, FEARS OF LIFE OR FEARS OF DEATH, LET ME ASSURE YOU THAT WHEN JESUS SAID, FROM THE CROSS: IT IS FINISHED!

It Is Finished

HE HAD YOUR ETERNAL SALVATION, AND YOUR PERSONAL ASSURANCE AT HEART.
HE DIED BECAUSE HE LOVES US, AND HE COMPLETED THE WORK THAT MAKES HIS
ETERNAL LIFE OUR OWN!

Prayer:

Thoughts on Christs Resurrection

Easter 1992

April 19, 1992

Easter is a time that begs for a Super-Sermon! It is one of the happiest, most joyful days in the calendar. Almost everybody goes to church (somewhere) on Easter.

But strangely, Easter is a time when I am driven in my own thinking to go back to basics! I ask myself audacious questions like:

HOW DO WE KNOW JESUS REALLY ROSE? and WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT REALLY MAKE ANYWAY?

I grew up with Christmas and Easter, and took a great deal for granted before I made my faith, my Christian faith, my own. And these questions are life and death questions that no one else can answer for us.

On this Easter Sunday morning

I. HOW DO WE KNOW THAT JESUS REALLY ROSE AGAIN?

- A. We know that JESUS ROSE AGAIN because the scriptures tell us so, in their artless, inspired, penetrating way: the disciples, the evangelists who gave us the inspired Word bore witness with their words and with their life's blood. They saw the Risen Lord. They believed!

Charles Coleson in his book *Born Again* gave his compelling reason why he believed the Bible accounts to be true. He told from personal experience of how it was impossible for a few men, with very much at stake, to keep a secret and act out a lie; and the result was that Watergate scandalized our government, and brought down a president, and sent him, Charles Coleson to jail.

His point was that if the resurrection of Jesus were a skillfully devised plot among the disciples, they could not have kept the secret from authorities,

who were themselves so anxious to discredit the resurrection that they were willing to bribe and perjure to deny its mighty power.

And, secondly, Coleson makes the point that nobody dies willingly and bravely for what he or she knows to be a lie. The disciples were convinced that Jesus rose again. Their testimony in scripture is powerful!

- B. We know that JESUS ROSE AGAIN because of the mighty impact His life has made, and is still making during the nearly 2,000 years since His death on the cross. It is impossible to imagine how this world would be without the influence of the Risen Savior. Time is divided by His Coming the first time in Bethlehem. Time as we know it now will end with His return. This world is forever changed because Jesus lives!
- C. But the most penetrating reason men and women can know that JESUS ROSE AGAIN is because, for many of us, we have had a "revelation moment" in which Christ has been made personal to us. We heard Him speak some place, some time, as the written Word came alive, perhaps in a sermon— perhaps in a word of personal witness; and we cannot get away from the reality that He lives, and that He loves us! We have been persuaded! Jesus really is alive!

Which brings up the second, even more impertinent question:

II. WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE, ANYWAY?

A. IT MAKES A DIFFERENCE WHEN WE FACE DEATH

Being really persuaded that Jesus rose again makes a difference when the near prospect of death becomes a reality in someone we love, or even in ourselves!

If Jesus did not rise, Paul tells us, then when we die we die forever, and we shall never see each other again. It makes a difference when we stand by an open grave whether or not Jesus rose again. If Jesus did not rise, then the dead are NOT raised. (see I Corinthians 15:15)

- B. IT MAKES A DIFFERENCE WHEN WE FACE GUILT AND SIN The fact is that we all are born with a sin problem; and we all come to face the fact that evil lurks in the human

heart.

Education won't change the fact of human evil. Human efforts can not make sinful people into saints. But if Jesus died and carried our sins away— and rose again to prove that He conquered sin, then we have hope!

If Jesus did not conquer death, and rise again, we have no assurance that our sins are forgiven. The best we could do would be to hope against hope that maybe His sacrifice was adequate, but we would conclude that probably it was not. We would have no evidence to the contrary. Paul says if Jesus stayed dead then we are still in our sins! Our faith is vain! Futile (see I Corinthians 15:17)

C. IT MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN OUR EVERYDAY LIFE AND LIVING

But does the resurrection of Jesus make any difference in the every day? If Jesus did not rise again, Paul says, we are to be pitied more than any other religion! We are to be pitied because we have been deceived! If Jesus did not rise we are fools, and fooling ourselves!

But if in fact the risen Savior by the gift of his Holy Spirit walks with you and talks with you— in the kitchen when you are doing chores— in the middle of the night when you awaken to worry about finances— in the joy of looking into your child's face while she is sleeping— the reality makes ALL THE DIFFERENCE IN THE WHOLE WORLD! The Risen Savior makes us Friends with God!

This is basic stuff! This is NOT Super Sermon, this is the very essence of what Christians believe:

III. CHRIST'S RESURRECTION IS AT THE VERY HEART OF THE GOSPEL

I Corinthians 15:1-8

A. THE GOSPEL REDUCED TO ARTICLES OF FIRST IMPORTANCE:

THE GOSPEL IS ABOUT JESUS! It isn't that all the rest of the New Testament isn't Gospel; or that the doctrines and teachings and beatitude and

standards of conduct are not important; but first and foremost, the Gospel is about the Person and work of Jesus.

Here it is in a nutshell: Jesus came ... Jesus died for our sins ... Jesus was buried: He really was dead- the scriptures say He preached to the spirits in prison— Jesus rose again— and Jesus is now seated at the right hand of God making intercession for us— Jesus will come again to rule and reign over all Creation! That is the heart of the Gospel!

B. THE RESURRECTION IS THE KEY THAT UNLOCKS THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL STORY

The resurrection of Jesus unlocked the Gospel to the disciples that had known Him in the flesh.

It was not until they were truly persuaded that He had risen that they understood the real power of the Gospel.

John 20:9 is a key verse— and it stands for every person who would be a Christian but has not faced up to who Christ is, and what Christ did: For as yet they did not understand the scripture that [Jesus] must rise again from the dead. (John 20:9)

The disciples were shattered, paralyzed, defeated by the savagery and violence of the crucifixion of their Master. Gentle, meek, unfailingly kind and considerate of the weak Himself, He had been led to the slaughter like a Lamb for Passover.

As it began to dawn that perhaps Jesus had risen they were not eager to believe. They did not want to be deceived again. They did not want to get their hopes up. The post-resurrection appearances of Jesus were universally met with hesitancy at best, with downright stubbornness and unbelief at worst. "We trusted— but we don't trust any more" was the testimony of the two on the Emmaus Road. "Unless I see for myself I will never believe!" was the word of Thomas.

The teachings of Jesus are merely wise sayings, like any other Eastern philosopher, apart from the resurrection. If Jesus did not rise we may as well follow Buddha or Confucius or Mohammed. The Bible is like any other ancient collection of manuscripts. When we read the Old Testament a veil is over our eyes, apart from Jesus and the resurrection, and all we can see is the tortuous path of a people struggling with divine forces and decrees they never fully understand.

But if the resurrection is real, then a startling thing happens. A transformation takes place in the Bible! It seems to come alive! Jesus Himself, the Risen Lord, becomes the KEY to the scriptures.

Before He was fully revealed to the two on the Road to Emmaus Jesus expounded in the scriptures (beginning with Moses and extending to all the prophets, according to Luke) the things concerning Himself: Such a wonderful lesson may have included

- FROM GENESIS 3:15 the seed of the woman triumphant over the seed of the serpent
- FROM NUMBERS 21:9 even as Moses lifted up the (brass) serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up
- FROM DEUTERONOMY 18:15 the confident prophecy of Moses: For the LORD shall raise up a prophet unto you like unto myself..."
- FROM 2 SAMUEL 7:12 David's confidence "I will raise up Your descendant and establish His kingdom forever..."
- FROM ISAIAH 7:14 "Behold a virgin shall be with child.. Emmanuel, God-with-Us!
- FROM ISAIAH 9: "His name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace— of His kingdom there shall be no end
- FROM ISAIAH 42: Behold my servant.. he shall open blind eyes— a bruised reed He will not break

- FROM ISAIAH 53: "A root out of dry ground— the Lord hath laid on HIM the iniquity of us all—
- FROM DANIEL 7:13 the ""Ancient of Days"
- FROM MICAH 5:2 "And thou Bethlehem— out of thee shall come a KING!"
- FROM ZECHARIAH 9:9 "Behold your King cometh unto you, meek and riding upon a donkey.."

Conclusion

How have YOU handled these basic questions of the faith in YOUR own heart? Do you believe that Jesus rose from the dead? To believe, to really believe, is a gift of faith from God Himself!

And to believe that God has raised Jesus from the dead— to really be persuaded in heart— is half-way to the assurance of being saved!

The parts of the wonderful promise of Romans 10:9 and 210 are these:

1. If we confess with our mouth the Lord Jesus— and
2. If we believe in our hearts that God has raised Him from the dead— then— WHAT?
3. Then— we shall be saved!

It isn't enough to confess to being a Christian without believing Jesus lives! And it isn't enough to have the gift of faith, and be persuaded in heart, but not make Jesus Lord!

But if faith and surrender combine— then the resurrection life of Jesus is ours to share with Him for eternity!

162 - *Crown Him with Many Crowns*

Eye-Witness News

Profile of a Witness

April 26, 1992

Acts 1:8 " . . . and you shall be My witnesses"

Introduction:

What does this text: "Ye shall be witnesses to Me!" evoke in your thinking? What is a proper response?

- A. IT SAYS TO ME THAT I PERSONALLY, AND WE, AS PEOPLE CALLED NAZARENES, NEED TO TAKE THESE WORDS TO HEART

Early on in my Christian walk I got the message that I was not a complete Christian unless and until I was also a witnessing Christian. Just about all my Christian life I have had an annoying feeling that I should be a better personal witness of the grace of God.

- B. BUT IT ALSO INVITES ME TO SEE HOW THE PEOPLE TO WHOM JESUS WAS SPEAKING DIRECTLY, AT THAT TIME, UNDERSTOOD AND CARRIED OUT HIS ORDERS:

The context of this text is the end of that period between the first Easter and the Ascension and Pentecost with the outpouring of the Spirit. That was a very important time for the disciples.

Several questions come to mind: [After the death and resurrection of Jesus things were decidedly different. It was not merely business as usual.

"Where did Jesus go at night to sleep?" or, "Where did Jesus go when He disappeared from their sight?" I know that speculation is all too easy. But several things are apparent:

Why, do you suppose, was there a period of 40 days between the Resurrection and the Ascension?

Why, again, were there 10 more days until the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost?

What part do the Old Testament figures of Passover and Pentecost have in the scheme of salvation? It certainly was more than coincidence that these significant events fell on those significant holy days.

I. A TIME OF PERSUASION

Of what were the disciples witness, relative to Jesus?

A. Old Testament fulfillment:

In the matter of the calendar itself:

JESUS THE PASSOVER

Lets take that last question first: From our vantage point we see that the Old Testament holy days found fulfillment in the Person and Ministry of the Savior.

Cynics would say that Jesus was the supreme opportunist. They would say that He sought to fill out the prophecies of the Old Testament.

Jesus filled out the meaning of the Old Testament: Do you understand Passover? Divine intervention in behalf of helpless people who cry for deliverance. Beginning an Exodus that was to climax in a Promised Land.

The planting of a Seed... **JESUS THE FIRST-FRUIT, OR HARVEST** Do you understand Pentecost? The "Seed" planted in the ground brought forth 3,000 souls fifty days later; The first harvest celebrated; and also the giving of the Law on Sinai;

B. Personal encounter/ spiritual revelation: The disciples met the Risen Savior, and He revealed Himself to them.

II. A TIME OF PREPARATION

- A. They were not to leave Jerusalem until they had received the Holy Spirit.
- B. This involved ten days of intensive prayer.
- C. This also involved

III. A TIME OF PROCLAMATION

The overwhelming sense of joy that accompanied the knowledge that they were NOT left orphaned; they were indwelt by the Spirit of their Savior— THIS was the thing that powered their witness.

Their battle cry was, "The LORD is risen!"

We must have this in order to be witnesses, and not hear-say gossips:

- A. A personal encounter of revelation: (not enlightenment only; that is not enough. but God-revealed reality. We must know, be persuaded that God has raised Jesus from the dead. The resurrection is the dynamo that makes everything about the Christian faith genuine. There is nothing wrong with becoming a seeker. If you are not satisfied, ask God to help you look within. Come away with reality. If your heart condemns you, God is greater than your heart and knows all things.
- B. An increasing joy and love for the Savior. This will be "felt," for want of a better word. Deeply satisfying. It will resonate with others who love Jesus, too. The greatest family on all the earth is the family of God. This love will respond to the Spirit's prompting to go. (Philip)
- C. This witness will be both conscious and unconscious. There must be a congruence of the unconscious and the conscious witness. When what we say and how we live are in disagreement people will always finally believe the way we live. But when both coincide there will be effective witness.
 - 1. they took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus
 - 2. we ought to obey God rather than man!
- D. There is nothing wrong with organized effort in witnessing: I have attended special seminars on witnessing, and have undergone intensive on-the-job training; and I have had

concentrated weekend efforts and have led small groups in witnessing. Perhaps if God so leads we might move in that direction again. But however we witness, my deepest concern is that we shall witness for the highest and best of reasons.

- E. Personal evangelism has a bad name in our time: The pluralistic culture in which we live, with its highly personalized view of religion, makes it difficult to witness to the saving grace of Jesus without appearing to violate the unwritten code of respect for other's beliefs.
- F. The tension we feel within when we approach an opportunity to say a word for Jesus Christ is that of standing between a genuine respect for the personality and quality of another human being and the conviction that unless that human being comes to know Jesus he or she will be forever lost. I have the deep conviction that Jesus meant what He said when He said, "No one comes to the Father except by Me!"

Perhaps that tension can sometimes simply be translated as cowardice. But sometimes our normal, natural human reticence to talk about deeply personal, private matters is entirely appropriate.

- G. We must earn the right to speak to people about important matters. There must be some common ground; or, the Holy Spirit must help us to understand that this is a moment when we can and must speak.

"Common ground" means that there is a reason for speaking about personal matters; there is an entry point. [Illustration: How would you feel if someone came up to you on the street and said, "I'm interested in how your kidneys are working!" But if that person were your doctor, and you had been having painful sessions with kidney stones, you would not only be glad to tell the doctor, but you would be flattered to be remembered and asked in a non-official, non-office setting. It would show that your doctor genuinely cared.]

The idea of "common ground" must also be balanced with the concept Jesus gave us of the witness as a sower going forth to sow the precious seeds of the Word of God. The sower sows extravagantly— some falls on the roadway, some falls at the edges of the field, some falls just about everywhere.

- H. Common ground can come because we invite inquiry. If we are an evangelistic church then our public services are a place where people will expect to be confronted with the claims of Jesus, with a witness to His grace. There is a common ground of expectation that the Gospel will be proclaimed.

Bible study groups to which non-Christians or non-evangelicals are welcome and respected are a wonderful idea whose time, it seems, has come.

- I. Common ground can come when we genuinely care about people who may not be of the Christian persuasion. It is not a sin to be friendly. We can genuinely care about people who disagree with us. And the friendliest thing a Christian can do is to introduce His friends to the greatest Friend.

We have been trained to avoid sin, and rightly so; but we are not the world's sin-police. The cross of Jesus was at the very heart of the message the early church proclaimed; but so was the joy and certainty of the resurrection. "This same Jesus, whom YE crucified, God has raised Him up again!"

Profile of a Witness

April 26, 1992

Acts 1:8 "you shall be My witnesses"

Introduction

The days and weeks after the first Easter are, to my mind, fascinating and mysterious. There are a number of appearances of Jesus recorded. They all seem especially significant. They seem to climax with one or another version of The Great Commission. Here: YOU ARE TO BE MY WITNESSES . . . WITNESSES UNTO ME!

What does this text evoke in your thinking?

- A. It says to me personally that I need to take Christ's words to heart

Early on in my Christian walk I got the message that Christians are not complete Christians unless and until they share their good news with others.

And just about all my Christian life I have had an annoying feeling that most of the time I could or should be doing just a little more than I am.

- B. But this text also invites me to look again at the people to whom Jesus was speaking directly, at that time, at how they understood and carried out his orders:

Is there a "profile" of a witness which we can understand from the record of the scriptures? Perhaps it might help us be more realistic about our role in answering Christ's challenge:

I. A TIME OF PERSUASION

- A. The challenge to witness was spoken at the end of 40 days of a mysterious period in Christ's earthly Presence. (verse 3)

1. There are many things we don't know about this period. Questions that bright young people might ask, like: Where did Jesus stay these days? Was He "commuting" back and forth from the Father's Presence?

2. But one thing we are sure of: this was a time when Jesus was proving, assuring, convincing, establishing the fact of His victory over death in the thinking of the disciples once and for all!
- B. One reason the Emmaus Road story grips me so strongly is the deep and growing conviction that in order to know Jesus, really know Him, He has to come alongside each of us and reveal Himself in a personal way. So to my thinking, the "Emmaus Road" experience is a real "key."

A witness is someone who is PERSUADED of the truth. For a witness to Jesus Christ, this means we must have the abiding certitude that Jesus lives! There must be a one-on-one knowledge. We cannot witness what we only know second-hand.

But evidently being persuaded (convinced) was not enough to make an effective witness. There was more:

II. A TIME OF PREPARATION, OF EMPOWERING

- A. The challenge to witness was also spoken at the beginning of a ten-day waiting period. A ten-day prayer meeting. A time of obedient self-preparation.
1. God's timing is evident here: God's timing is evident in the way that the Old Testament holy days were perfectly incorporated in the scheme of Jesus' work of salvation. It was no coincidence that Jesus died at Passover; and it was no coincidence that Pentecost was a feast of first-fruits and harvest; and also, later, was a celebration of the giving of the Law on Sinai.
 2. God's timing is necessary in OUR lives as well: we need to listen, to be persuaded-- we need to STAY when Jesus says "Stay!" and we need to GO when He says "Go!" Like the disciples, there will be definite preparation in US before we can be effective witnesses:
- B. B. The preparation for witness included
1. OBEDIENCE on the part of those that loved Jesus. They tarried, even as Jesus told them to.

2. They also evidently AGREED TOGETHER to wait; they were "in one accord, in one place" when their empowerment came.

Their preparation included doing what THEY could do.

- C. The preparation for effective witness also included God's touch on their lives, doing what they could NOT do by themselves. This included:

1. PURIFYING of their hearts, as Peter later testified (Acts 15:9) of Cornelius-- that God had put no difference between the Gentiles in Caesarea and the Jewish Christians at Jerusalem, for "He purified their hearts by faith!"

This is essential, because we are to lift up Jesus, which is difficult to do with mixed or impure motives. [We are so incurably self-oriented-- and unless God helps us, that becomes self-centered self-sovereignty!]

2. The preparation was also the promised POWER Jesus promised. Not just a human boldness now, but a consciousness that the Holy Spirit had come, that Jesus was very resident in their very hearts, and that their words were inspired.

Out of that PERSUASION and PREPARATION there flowed

III. A LIFETIME OF PROCLAMATION

- A. From the time that the disciples were both PERSUADED and PREPARED, from that time on, they were not all apostles, nor church leaders, nor even preachers, BUT THEY WERE ALL WITNESSES.

1. They witnessed UNCONSCIOUSLY.

Their absurd JOY betrayed them at times. "These people are drunk!"

Their LOVE was attractive! Their consideration and kindness showed even when they weren't trying to witness <<note Peter and John on the way to the Temple taking pity on a beggar... and the people "took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus." >> and John wrote in his First Epistle that the most

effective witness to "outsiders" is Christ's love manifested within the community of believers: He said they will say, "Behold, how they LOVE one another!"

Their HOPE engaged to unseen others! They had a certainty about their lives!

2. But they also witnessed DELIBERATELY! When the occasion arose they spoke bravely and boldly. "We ought to obey God rather than you religious leaders and magistrates!"

B. AND THEIR WITNESSING WAS EFFECTIVE!

When the goal was simply to lift up Jesus and proclaim Him as Lord, the results were left up to Him. But their efforts were never wasted!

1. Sometimes there was wide-spread growth and revival, as when Philip went down to Samaria and the whole town, it seemed, got converted.
2. Other times there was opposition and rejection, as when Paul was dragged out of Lystra and stoned, or when he and Silas were put in jail in Philippi. But in it all Jesus was proclaimed. And the church was edified.

Conclusion

A. WHAT, THEN, IS THE PROFILE OF A WITNESS?

1. SOMEONE WHO KNOWS that Jesus is alive because it has been personally revealed.
2. SOMEONE WHO IS WILLING TO PREPARE, not just by studying, and memorizing a set answer for every question-- although there may be a place for that later on-- but willing to prepare
 - BY OBEYING Christ's command to be filled with the Spirit, to tarry, to wait, to consecrate until their heart has been
 - PURIFIED by faith, and the
 - POWER of the Holy Spirit has come to motivate and support the desire to lift up the Savior.

3. SOMEONE WHO HAS TAKEN IT AS HIS/HER LIFE'S MAIN MESSAGE TO LIFT UP JESUS, to let Jesus live through every day's living.

B. SO, WHAT CAN YOU AND I DO? [How can I come to a "practical conclusion" to this morning's message? Is there something you and I can do to assure ourselves that we are being obedient?]

PERHAPS SOME OF US will feel God's special call, his tug, to prepare ourselves in a special way to be personal evangelists.

AND ALL OF US can be alert and willing to share our faith when the clear opportunity arises, or when the Holy Spirit says, "NOW!"

AND ALL OF US can support those who are presenting the gospel, and who bring people into the church to hear the gospel from time to time.

1. ARE YOU OPEN TO GOD'S CALL TO EVANGELISM? There is nothing wrong with organized effort in witnessing: Personal evangelism has a bad name in our time: The pluralistic culture in which we live, with its highly personalized view of religion, makes it difficult to witness to the saving grace of Jesus without appearing to violate the unwritten code of respect for other's beliefs.

[The tension we feel within when we approach an opportunity to say a word for Jesus Christ is that of standing between a genuine respect for the personality and quality of another human being and the conviction that unless that human being comes to know Jesus he or she will be forever lost. I have the deep conviction that Jesus meant what He said when He said, "No one comes to the Father except by Me!"]

2. DO YOU CARE ENOUGH ABOUT YOUR FRIENDS TO PRAY THAT THEY WILL BE SAVED? If we LOVE people, really CARE about them, get to KNOW them-- then we can talk about serious things to them!

We must earn the right to speak to people about important matters. There must be some common ground; or, the Holy Spirit

must help us to understand that this is a moment when we can and must speak.

3. WILL YOU BE A PART OF A FRIENDLY CHURCH IN THE NAME OF JESUS? This is important! Our support for evangelism begins in an attitude! We must WANT people to find Jesus! We must CARE about people!

In a book about the founder of Walmart, Sam Walton, author Vance Trimble wrote:
[Sam Walton had a pledge for new employees, which he called the "Sam Pledge;"]

From this day forward, every customer that comes within ten feet of me, regardless of what I'm doing, in this house, I'm going to look him in the eye, I'm going to smile, I'm going to greet him with a 'Good Morning' or - a "Good Afternoon," or a "What can I do for you?" - so help me Sam!

It might not be the least important part of obeying Christ's commandment to be His witnesses if we old-time church people might take a similar pledge-- that every person that comes within ten feet of us will get a smile, a loving greeting, and a prayer that God will bless!

Prayer: 354 - I'll GO ... I'll SAY ... I'll BE what You want me to be!

Dealing with Conflict in Loyalties

For E.N.C. chapel

April 29, 1992

- A. A NEW EXPERIENCE, BEING PAID TO SPEAK IN CHAPEL FROM MY OWN PULPIT, WHICH IS NOT MY OWN PULPIT WHEN THIS IS THE COLLEGE CHAPEL
 - 1. reflections on the history of this church's relationship to ENC across the years
 - 2. reflection on the larger relationship of ENC to the church at large, and to the Church of the Nazarene in particular

- B. A FOCUS ON OUR LOYALTIES

".. to thine own self be true and it must follow as the night the day thou canst not then be false to any man.." Shakespeare's character notwithstanding, this is only partially true.

and as Tony Campolo has said in the title of a book outlining several damnable heresies— there is a kernel of truth in most lies; the title is "Partly Right", by the way

WHEN LOYALTIES CONFLICT, how do we address the tension? who or what has to give? William C. Placher in a recent article says

"imagine admissions literature stating something like this: We groom you to success in your careers. We prepare you for graduate and professional work at the best universities or cocktail conversation at the best country clubs. And also, we will get you thinking about the service of the crucified son of a carpenter who calls his disciples to give up all that they have and pick up their crosses and follow." Then Placher adds with bitter irony: "On second thought, perhaps we'd best leave out that last sentence."

So— am I called to be a millionaire, or called to be a monk? Am I to be socially active, or fundamentalist-defender of the faith? Is there any kind of safe way to go? or better, is there any one right way?

C. SEEKING THE DEEPEST, HIGHEST LOYALTIES

Kohlberg, Lawrence Kohlberg, (who had some influence in my understanding of how I think about 'right and wrong'), saw- still in individualized understanding- the highest motivation as being "principled" or "post-conventional" motivation.

He wrote that he had never observed anyone under 22 years of age that was really into this high level of loyalty to truth.

I question that— for the highest understanding of truth is never abstract, never objective. Robert Coles, also an eminent Harvard teacher, has seen in children nine, ten, eleven years of age a spiritual sensitivity that went beyond their rational understanding of moral issues. We are dealing here with mystery!

And I have known many people whose moral understanding may have been lacking, but whose commitment to Truth was so thorough and so irrevocable that they lived like Jesus because they lived with Jesus and Jesus lived through them.

There is a better, a higher way of loyalty. It is the personal loyalty to Jesus that transcends all other loyalties. It denies self-sovereignty ("I am NOT God!") and identifies with Christ's body, the Church, (imperfect as it may be, especially after you join it)!

Conclusion:

Change is threatening. We live in tension between the joy of change and the security of steadfastness.

This is the generation of them that seek Him, that seek Thy face O Jacob!

Abiding in Christ

THE SACRAMENT OF LIVING TOGETHER

May 3, 1992 AM

John 15:5-7 I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I (abide) in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.

John 1:14 The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Introduction:

In this verse are two absolutely essential facts of our faith. If we miss them forget all the rest; if we grasp them, all the rest will find a way to fit in.

I. JESUS WAS MADE FLESH AND DWELT AMONG US

The Word becoming flesh is the miracle of all miracles, the arch-type of all sacraments:

A. THE SACRAMENTAL MIRACLE - A SACRAMENT IS A VISIBLE SIGN THAT CONVEYS SPIRITUAL REALITY.

1. Jesus reveals to us the invisible God; through Him we come to know God.
2. Jesus also reveals to us what humanity is intended to be; the image of God in which God created us, the image which is marred in the separation of sin, the lost image of God that is to be perfected in each of us is manifested in Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

B. The two important theological points are:

1. IN CHRIST GOD PERMANENTLY IDENTIFIES WITH US!

There is commitment on God's part. There is an eternal love expressed.

The word is not "He was flesh" (fuit), which would say that for a while Jesus was flesh as He dwelt among us but now has thrown away that aspect of His being; but "He was made flesh" (factus est). Hebrews 2:16 puts it "(Jesus) too on Him, or assumed the true human nature."

2. THERE IS/MUST BE AN 'ABIDING QUALITY' IN FAITH

It takes "abiding" to understand the love of Jesus. We have to live with Him a while to grasp the fact of His great grace and love.

[Illus: Sir Joshua Reynolds, the acclaimed English portrait painter, said that when he went to Italy to make the acquaintance of the great masterpieces of art there he was greatly disappointed. He said those paintings maintained a dignified silence; they refused to confide in him their thoughts. But Reynolds persevered. He looked at them again and again, he watched them with devotion— and they gradually began to tell him a few of their secrets; and as he continued unwavering in his devotion, they at last flung away their reserve and he saw a wealth of beautiful ideas that was lodged in them. (from C. W. Jones, BI, John I, 59)]

II. JESUS SAID THAT WE NEED TO ABIDE IN HIM

There is a permanence about the relationship we have with Him.

A. LIFE IN CHRIST IS MORE THAN A MOMENT OF DECISION

1. There is a moment in time when we grasp the truth and believe! There is that wonderful moment when we are born again!

2. No conversion in and of itself can in an instant, unsupported, make of Jesus a life-long Friend. True, a wonderful friendship can and does begin in that wonderful instant.

[Illus: Real, genuine friendships grow. Jay A. Bergers— we were different as students here; he seemed so much more intense and earnest; I probably ...]

B. LIFE IN CHRIST IS A MUTUAL 'LIVING TOGETHER'

1. We "abide in Him" - Vine/branches
2. His WORDS abide in us; we take seriously what Jesus has to say to us- not just in a legalistic sense— but in a relational, growing, following way.

C. OUR LIFE IN CHRIST BECOMES SACRAMENTAL

1. Remember THE SACRAMENTS; AND SACRAMENTAL MEANS OF GRACE THAT CONVEY GOD'S PRESENCE TO US— those outward and visible things which convey spiritual reality
 - a. Baptism and Communion: water/bread and wine— the significance of immersion or pouring, of eating and drinking
 - b. Religious or spiritual activities; preaching: gathering together in God's House; obedience: a symbol of God's sovereignty.
2. But ABIDING, living together with Christ makes ALL of our lives POTENTIALLY sacramental. We are to represent Jesus!

III. CHRISTIANS ARE TO BE INCARNATIONAL, SACRAMENTAL IN THEIR LIVING OUT, IN THEIR ABIDING IN CHRIST

The TEXT in us "comes alive!" The CHRIST becomes "incarnate by His Spirit" in the Church!

A. TRUE FAITH IS ALWAYS INCARNATIONAL, PERSONAL

No transforming relationship can be "objective". People are NOT "objects." We cannot "zap the gospel" and then leave. Like Jesus, we must commit to bringing a message and also BEING a message, and staying with the people

God to whom sends us. The message is LOVE! Not some sort of goofy-dust magic we sprinkle and then run back to our ghetto.

This is why morality and loving-kindness can never be legislated. The government is NOT Almighty God!

I deplore the knee-jerk reaction to every crisis of blaming government failure and seeking some governmental action. The moral failure we are experiencing is a failure of incarnation; it is the failure of Christ's followers in His Church to BE THE CHURCH, and to convey to each coming generation the heart of our Gospel, which is the INDWELLING SPIRIT OF JESUS CHRIST.

I will probably stand on City Hall steps next Thursday to pray for the healing of our nation because Neale McLain has asked me so to do. But I hope that my presence there is NEITHER translated as a protest against our mayor or city officials (- actually I am well-pleased with Mayor Sheets!) NOR as any kind of confidence that as city hall or state legislature or congress or President go so go our morals.

B. ONLY INCARNATIONAL FAITH WILL HEAL OUR RELATIONSHIPS - Jesus Christ by His Spirit living in you and me, and people just like us in every race, tribe and nation, is the only hope of this world!

1. We must take Jesus into the work-place. We are training our young people to be "successes;" but are we defining "success" as Jesus does?

[Illus: One woman discouraged her son's call to ministry; there isn't money in it!]

2. Jesus must have access to every part of our home life: Here is where the battle will be won or lost for our children!
 - a. The marriage relationship reflects the love of Christ and His church.
 - b. The parent child relationship reflects the relationship of God to His children.
 - c. The brother-sister relationship reflects the fellowship of the Trinity.

3. Multiplied over and over again, the life of Jesus in His church is more powerful than any other force on earth! Kay Roberts spending hours teaching a newcomer to our country English, or Lorna Owens working with a member of a different culture, or Christians sponsoring homeless people may not get the headlines like some organized lobbyists for legislation of various kinds. But they are powerful manifestations of change that do in human hearts what passing laws can never achieve.

Conclusion:

The miracle of all miracles— the fact that God became flesh and dwelt among us— calls for the most wonderful of responses in all the human experience:

If it is true that in Christ God became one of us, it is also true that we are not fully alive or complete unless and until this miracle has become personal to each one of us!

God is being released in our needy world only as we take God into the work-place, He is willing to bless our homes, but only as He is living IN us by His Spirit!

We are not responsible to change the entire world all by ourselves. To make God visible in this world is too big an assignment for us alone; but we can begin by inviting Christ into our lives, and then by letting God's love be seen in the relationships where we are.

Prayer #84 (EH) Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me; All His wonderful passion and purity. Oh, Thou Spirit divine, All my nature refine, Till the beauty of Jesus be seen in me.

Live in me, Lord Jesus, Live in me Love through me, Lord Jesus.

The Moment of Recognition

Communion Meditation

May 3, 1992 PM

Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" [Jesus had just upset the tables of the money-changers, and upset the usual flow of things in the temple area.]

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture, and the words that Jesus had spoken. - John 2:18,19;22

[The skeptics said "Show us a miracle so that we may believe." Jesus replied, "Destroy this temple and I will raise it in three days time." He was speaking of His body; the disciples understood this after the Resurrection, and it was only then that they understood and believed.]

We receive Communion this evening still in the afterglow of Easter. We should never get out from the afterglow of Easter, for it is the power of the Resurrection of Jesus that energizes our faith and makes the work of God's kingdom go forward.

People get frustrated in their faith on the 'lesser miracles' of the Bible. Did Samson really kill 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey? How about Joshua praying for the sun to stand still for the best portion of a day?

But there are two or three fundamental miracles in the Bible which boil down to one, really: Was God Almighty truly in Christ Jesus, reconciling the world unto Himself? If God was incarnate in Jesus Christ, and if Jesus died on the Cross for the sins of the world, and if Jesus truly rose again from the dead with victory over sin and death and hell, then all the other questions of faith can stand in line for their explanations.

I truly believe that Jesus Christ, born in Bethlehem, was Almighty God, and came to be our Immanuel. I truly believe that He died on the Cross for the sins of the world, that He is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. I truly believe that

The Moment of Recognition

Jesus Christ of Nazareth rose the third day from the grave and lives forevermore, seated at the Right Hand of God the Father Almighty. This faith is exceedingly precious!

Do you believe? Can you believe? Will you believe? Will you confess that belief? Romans 10:9,10. Such faith is the gift of God. It must be received with great reverence and joy and gratitude. It must be confessed openly. This time of Holy Communion is an opportunity to confess our faith, and to receive of God's hand His grace anew. ...

This is the Lord's table.

All who will partake in simple faith, and with submission to His Lordship, let them draw near.

1 Corinthians 11:23-30

Admonition to eat and drink reverently.

To Reach a Distant Star

May 8, 1992

Without faith it is impossible to please Him; for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a Rewarder of them that diligently seek Him. -Hebrews 11:6

INTRODUCTION

I am a seeker after God. This is a favorite verse of mine; a "life verse" that I live by every day. The example here is Enoch, one of two men the Bible describes as having been translated, i.e., simply "beamed up" to God's Presence.

But there is another "life verse" that says that the seeker is God: You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen YOU, and ordained you that you should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain. - John 15:16

Just who is seeking whom?

Being human, we want to reduce this mystery of who is seeking whom; so we go to one extreme or another— "My life's work, even my spiritual existence depends entirely on ME!" Or, "If it is God's will then certainly HE will work it all out?" Which is true? Shall I be super-active? or shall I take a passive role in faith?

Actually, the Greeks had another way to use verbs of action. We have two: "I act!" or "I am acted upon." The Greeks had a middle voice, "I enter into the action!"

Finding God's best will for our lives is not just a matter of our effort, or a matter of praying that something will turn up. It is a matter of 1) believing that God IS God! and it is a matter of diligently seeking to keep our life centered in Him. Yet all the time we are seeking, Jesus is at work— we are seeking the One who has already located us, and is at work to bring about His life in us:

You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain. -John 15:16

I. I HAVE CHOSEN YOU

CHOSEN: THE SOVEREIGN HAND OF GOD IN OUR LIVES . . . IN YOUR LIFE

I believe in the Sovereignty of Almighty God.

E.N.C. did not 'happen'

You have not chosen Me, I have chosen you!

The full attention of a Personal God. Not possible to be fully Christian and kiss off our days with a tip of the Bible toward a distant Sovereign; we are meant to live and walk with this God in a holiness that brings sanctity and balance to all of life and living

II. I HAVE ORDAINED YOU AND CALLED YOU

- A. APPOINTED: THE APPOINTMENTS OF GOD - the over-ruling alchemy that will not waste a consecrated life

God's choice is also God's appointment: Frustration, disappointment, failure are inevitably part of the human condition; God has promised not to overlook us; He knows the way that we take and when we are tried we will come forth as gold; this may be "pie in the sky" to the outsider, but it is what God's people utterly must trust: God will not waste a consecrated life.

- B. CHARGED: EVERY ONE OF US HAS THE SAME BASIC PURPOSE EVEN THOUGH WE EXPRESS OUR VOCATIONS IN UNIQUE WAYS. THE UNIVERSAL CALL IS TO BEAR FRUIT. THE LIFE OF CHRIST DEMANDS INCREASE.

The Christ-LIFE within the Vine and reaching to the tip of every branch;

III. I HAVE PROMISED YOU SIGNIFICANCE

PERMANENCE: YOUR FRUIT TO REMAIN

Dealing in millions of dollars is impressive; dealing in eternity and infinity is the Christian's call. We are to be about the Father's business:

ENC is among the giants of education in Boston/Cambridge; like Bethlehem among the least in Judah . . . but what can be said of the Stockwells and the Merkis and the Patches and the Spangenberges and the Harold Parrys and the Pauls and the Camerons and the Halls and on and on?

Not a passing display, but eternally significant life work. We write in lives ("You are our epistles, known and read of all men," said St. Paul to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 3:3)) What we work in, concrete and steel, will have lasting significance for decades; what we achieve, in words or sculpture, may last even for centuries, but what we write with the pen of God in human experience will endure to eternity.

This vital connection of Vine and Branches is the same today as when Jesus spoke the words. He is the Life; abide in Him! Seek after the seeking God as though the finding depends on you! But remember, in our following after Him He has already chosen us, and ordained that we should go and bear MUCH fruit, and that that fruit might remain!

Her name was Evelyn. She was a daughter of an Appalachian farmer, and she finally got to college by the merest of chances, or so it would seem.

She took an undergraduate degree at Trevecca Nazarene College, and then with her vision expanding and her obedient spirit following the Light, she passed through these halls, sat where you sit, on her way to medical school and wherever God might want her to go.

What a winding, interesting, seemingly circuitous path her life followed! How rich she became!

She was a medical doctor, first in Africa, then in Papua New Guinea, and made a life-saving contribution to scores if not hundreds of lives.

She was a preacher, and reached many hungry hearts with the simple Gospel.

She was a linguist, and will be remembered for at least a hundred years in the Southwest Pacific for her translation of scripture and commentary into pidgin.

To Reach a Distant Star

While still an undergraduate, in April of 1945 Evelyn Ramsey wrote these words. She called her poem, "Aspiration:"

ASPIRATION

*I do not know what men will say when I have gone,
Or is it vain to think they'll know I've journeyed on?
I do not know what hearts will sigh When ends my day,
Or who will take my tasks and bear Them on their way.
But this I know: that I have aimed So high, so far,
And I have stretched my soul to reach The distant star.
I've given all my life and pow'r To do my task
And this has been my burning prayer. I do not ask
To seem to men a great success If only I
May still be reaching for that star When I must die.*

-Evelyn Ramsey 4/22/45

Living Stones

ANNUAL MEETING SERMON

May 10, 1992

Matthew 16:18

Introduction

The story of Peter's Great Confession, "Thou art the Christ!" is extremely significant because Peter's confession is every Christian's confession. He speaks for every true believer. "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God!" is the foundation on which our faith is built.

Jesus was pleased with Peter's confession. He was pleased that Peter's mind was open to divine revelation. In response to Peter's Great Confession Jesus made this Gigantic Declaration:

"Blessed are you Simon, son of John- for flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven has revealed it. And I say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."

Two elements stand out in this declaration of Jesus. To Peter he declared (1) "Your name means "stone;" you are going to live up to your name by My grace." And then, to Peter and the rest of the disciples Jesus said, as well as to you and me today, (2) "I will build My church with material such as this !"

Was Peter the rock? Was the confession ["Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God!"] the foundation, the rock on which Jesus would build His church? Can Christians other than St. Peter hear Jesus say: "You are to be a part of my plan in the building of My church?" Is that scriptural?

Writing years later, Peter himself answered this question. It is as if Peter asks the rhetorical question: "Do you think that I, Peter, am the rock on which Jesus builds? Listen:

"As you come to HIM, the living Stone, rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to Him, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. I Peter 2:4,5

Jesus says to all who confess Him: (1) You are a rock! You are who you are! You have gifts and grace! " or, better, "You don't really KNOW HOW MUCH YOU CAN BE by My grace!"

And then Jesus says, "If you confess Me as Lord, then on this Rock— your confession and my LORDSHIP!— I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it!"

My message on this Annual Meeting Sunday is that JESUS BUILDS HIS CHURCH THROUGH PEOPLE JUST LIKE US.

Just who are we? What can Jesus do with the likes of us? What is Jesus seeking to build with us here?

I. WE ARE ON THE CORNER OF A COLLEGE CAMPUS

- A. **History.** Wollaston Church of the Nazarene was called into existence by Eastern Nazarene College. There was no Nazarene church for miles around, and so services were held on campus. It was something like four years after the tiny college moved here from Rhode Island that the Wollaston Church of the Nazarene was officially organized, in 1922. That is 70 years ago!

For the first 32 years we worshiped in college buildings- first Canterbury, then the famous Gymnasium. For the last 42 years we have worshiped on this corner of the campus which was sold to the church for \$1.00, 30 years in a large basement sanctuary, and now nearly twelve in this sanctuary which gets more than 100 hours of use each week in college-related ministry.

We are happy for the shared history, and proud to be vitally associated with Eastern Nazarene College on many levels of vocation.

- B. **Personal impact:** Pastor J. Glenn Gould and Wollaston church had a strong impact on my life; as a student I saw here visible demonstration of local church loyalty in members of the college community: Bertha Munro, J.R. Naylor, Madeline Nease, and many others, some of whom may be here this morning.

Hundreds of students have sought God at these altars, myself included.
Hundreds of decisions have been made to follow Christ here in this church.

- C. **Trust:** We are inextricably linked with Eastern Nazarene College. Opinions have changed back and forth about the merits of having an on-campus church; but the fact is we are here. We intend to be lifting, sharing, partners in serving Christ. We will be giving loyalty— how can we do otherwise and be what Jesus intended?

II. WE ARE IN A VITAL RELATIONSHIP TO A SPECIFIC TRADITION

- A. Doctrinally we are holiness Wesleyan.

1. We are in a living dialogue with others of like precious faith. We are not unaware of the Chuck Swindolls and the James Kennedys; we are not at all antagonistic to the Pentecostal or the Calvinist-Reformed or the Anglo-Catholic traditions, but we are committed to a dynamic, relation-centered, life-changing heritage of holiness of heart and life.
2. We share Wesley's insight that justification by faith and sanctification by faith are equally vital aspects of salvation; this Wesleyan way that finds its course by respect for tradition, reason and experience while placing final authority in the inspired, God-breathed Word that is the Holy Scripture.

- B. We are part of a specific district in the Church of the Nazarene, the New England District. We want to be a vital part. It seems sometimes that we are/will be misunderstood because we are a part of a college community. We cannot let that deter us from taking part in every district activity which is humanly possible to us.

III. WE ARE INCREASINGLY IN CONTACT WITH A DIVERSE COMMUNITY

- A. We come from many directions to worship here.
 - 1. We come from churches much larger and much smaller; we come from churches of many different traditions of worship and polity. That is to be celebrated, not complained about.
 - 2. We cannot try to be what we cannot be; our worship must flow out to God of the very best of what we are. But we can honestly seek to welcome every person, whoever he or she may be, and greet them with love in Jesus' name.
- B. More and more we are seeing non-college-connected community-type people coming to worship with us. HOW WE VALUE THAT! We need the on-going conversation with our community. In our desire to serve the college we cannot and should not, we must not give our community friends any reason to believe that we are exclusive in our attitudes:
 - 1. We welcome to membership those from many backgrounds. We actively SEEK your participation in the life of this church!
 - 2. We stand ready to be a resource and support for those who may never join us!
 - 3. (I would hope that YOU MIGHT CONSIDER PRAYERFULLY MEMBERSHIP IN THIS LOCAL BODY!)

IV. WE ARE SEEKING TO FUNCTION AS A VITAL PART IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

- A. WE WILL BE LOYAL TO JESUS CHRIST, OUR HEAD
 - 1. The human body is a wonderful machine-and-more. The Psalmist may not have known bio-genetics, but he had it right when he said: "I am fearfully and wonderfully made." The Body of Christ is no less complex and wonderful.
 - 2. By the Spirit we will seek to be aware and to be sympathetic to all of Christ's Body everywhere; and yet we at Wollaston are called to be ourselves! Called to be just like no other church!
 - a. What works somewhere else may well work here, it may not. The key is what does the Head say? The pastor is NOT the Head; and yet the pastor had better be in touch; the leadership of the church, board and directors and others, they are NOT the Head. But they had

better be in touch.

- b. How do we know we are being directed by the Head? It must be our constant, earnest desire!

B. WE WILL OFFER WORSHIP THAT IS GOD-CENTERED

1. Changing Times and Eternal Values: One of the biggest challenges facing me as a pastor nearly 37 years is to know how and when to gracefully change, and when to firmly hold the line:
 - a. The idiom changes; the way speech is used, the meaning of words. A purist, an English major, a word-lover— I often hate to see such changes; on the other hand sometimes I am part of those changes.
[I recall when I said, in reply to 'how did I like a dish my mother cooked, "Not bad!" It is hard to believe, but that expression, which we know means "Very good!", was new to my father; he took a very dim view of such a cool non-endorsement.
 - b. The Gospel never changes: English language changes, communications changes, musical tastes change; but the Gospel is eternal truth, the message of God's love is unchanging— and so we have the dilemma of continuing to present a changeless message in a changing culture.
2. A college church must in some sense be a cultural trendsetter. That cannot be a dominating goal, but it is NOT inconsequential, either. At the same time a college church, like every other church that intends to obey Jesus Christ, must speak to the people of its day and age. This is our sincere intention.
3. The one uncompromising criteria to which we will seek to hold all our various expressions of worship, whether in song or spoken word or any other human expression of our faith and love to God, will be the desire for excellence. We will seek to do our very best, to offer to God no unworthy, unprepared, ill-considered, self-serving endeavor in the name of "relevance."

In the back of the mind of this pastor is the pseudo-scripture of Alexander Pope, who wrote:

Be not the first by which the new is tried, nor yet the last to lay the old aside . . . or was it vice versa?

C. WE WILL BE DEDICATED TO BEARING MUCH FRUIT

1. Shared alumni

We even now have sons and daughters all over the world. We cannot claim them as "ours" in any exclusive way any more than I can claim all the credit for my magnificent family of grandchildren.

2. Second Church

We even now share in the reality of hundreds at worship that would not have been at worship, at least not in quite the same way, if we had not been faithful at Second Church. We didn't do it ourselves. We didn't do it perfectly. But in spite of human shortcomings, Jesus built His church and we were at least some small part!

3. The weekly miracle of worship

To this moment the most important thing we do is worship God right here! This is not a show! This is a TRYST! This is a meeting time! This is when our hearts are cleansed and renewed. The word is proclaimed. The living stones report for duty.

Conclusion

Maybe some of this has been too elementary, too boring to you. But I have spoken about what is foundational and basic to me.

Prayer

EH #47 God of Grace and God of Glory

Jesus and Temptation

May 17, 1992

Luke 4:1-13 (8) And Jesus answered and said unto him, "Get thee behind me, Satan, for it is written, 'Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve.'"

Introduction

Ever since the Garden of Eden we human beings, young and old, have been plagued with TEMPTATION! The LURE OF FORBIDDEN FRUIT!

I must have been about 12 or 13. My cousin and I— you remember him?— were on a Saturday hike through Potter Park, the metropolitan Zoo and park system along the Cedar River in Lansing. Boys that age are usually hungry, and I remember very well coming to a pavilion area and just like Yogi Bear discovering a big picnic basket.

We looked all around, and there was not a person in sight. We took the lid off the picnic basket and looked in. I can still remember what was on top— the biggest, fattest, most scrumptious sugar cookies I think I ever saw!

THAT was temptation!

We knew that they didn't belong to us. But we reasoned, we rationalized, — even though we had never heard the word— that probably the people had forgotten all about them. And before you know it we had overcome the temptation! WE STUFFED OUR MOUTHS AND BEGAN TO EAT!

Just about that time a very upset young man appeared from nowhere and collared the both of us! As I recall, he had me by my left arm, and he had Dick by his right.

I prepared to meet my Maker right there! I had led a pretty full life for a 13-year-old, but still I could have wished to live a little longer. But all hope seemed gone.

Just then Dick had another temptation, which he coupled with opportunity. It was the strong temptation to LIE! Two or three kids about our age were walking past the

Jesus and Temptation

pavilion. "Those kids right there told us we could have all we want!," he said, and I almost believed Dick myself.

Wonder of wonders, the young man let go of us and over my shoulder as I disappeared into the bush I could see him collaring the unsuspecting young people. After that I never looked back.

As I recall I didn't see Dick again that day, either. I think I'll send him a tape of this sermon! It's a true story! It was a losing bout with temptation!

But there are other, even more serious ways we face TEMPTATION in hard, cold, real-life situations:

YOU'RE A PRETTY GOOD STUDENT, and you've done all your assignments, and you're even in an honor track because you've done so well. You know the competition is keen for honors and scholarship; and you know you are just about as good as anyone else in the class.

But you also know that some of the other bright kids are cheating on tests, and helping each other with the answers. You know that you could cheat and get a better grade more easily, too. It isn't fair!

That's temptation!

Or, consider this:

YOU'RE A CHRISTIAN HUSBAND (OR WIFE) and you love your spouse. But frankly there are times when the marriage is sort of "blah." The schedule is so hectic that there isn't too much time for real romance— just dirty laundry and TV dinners and maybe a Little League game squeezed in here or there.

But there is that nice person at work that is genuinely friendly, and always ready to smile and listen, and occasionally there is lunch, and... when the mind begins to wander, and the will begins to toy with the "What if?" and the "If only!" and "I am never really understood at home..." then, recognize it,

THAT IS TEMPTATION!

We can analyze it— we can talk about it— but in the end we will have to deal with it; and temptation is always the first step to disaster; it is an invitation to sin and separation and to death itself!

I. THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS, OUR WORD ON HOW TO OVERCOME:

A. The Temptation of Jesus is recorded in all three of the synoptic Gospels. Immediately following the triumph of His Baptism, when the Spirit descended on Him like a dove, and the Voice of God the Father was heard from heaven saying, "THIS IS MY BELOVED SON IN WHOM I AM WELL PLEASED!" Jesus was led (driven) into the wilderness where He faced the worst that Satan could bring against Him.

1. This Temptation reveals Jesus as our Champion, defeating temptation both for Himself AND for us,
2. AND as our Example, giving us practical help so WE can defeat temptation when it comes to us! And it DOES come!

B. HOW IS JESUS OUR CHAMPION?

1. He removed the "defeatist" spirit! We do not have to be defeated!

Jesus is called the Second Adam (a whole new Life!) The First Adam, in his failure to overcome temptation, gave a defeatist message to the entire human race. "We are trapped by sin!

What can we do?!" cry the sons and daughters of the First Adam. St. Paul puts it this way: "In Adam (we) all die!" (I Corinthians 15:) Jesus, the Second Adam, changed all that! Jesus says, "You CAN overcome sin and temptation BY MY GRACE and POWER!"

2. Jesus faced the identical temptations of our first parents; under different conditions: Both Adam and Jesus were innocent; but holiness is more than innocence; the holiness God intends for you and me comes from deliberately choosing right over wrong. Jesus showed us that in the Spirit's power it is possible!
3. Temptation to sin is summarized in I John 2:16 "For all that is in the world, the LUST OF THE FLESH, and the LUST OF THE EYES, and the PRIDE OF

LIFE is not of the Father, but of the world."

Think about this summary of temptation for just a moment:

a. THE LUST OF THE FLESH (which we associate mostly with sex)

has to do with satisfying legitimate needs or drives in illegitimate ways. Adam and Eve, as recorded in Genesis 3, were tempted by "forbidden fruit." According to the account,

"Eve saw that the tree (which God had told Adam and Eve not to eat from) was good for food."

SATAN SAID TO JESUS: You are hungry! Use your miracle-working power to work magic! Do as I say! If you don't take things into your own will and way you will perish!

SATAN SAID TO THE GOOD SCHOLAR: "GRADES ARE BREAD AND BUTTER ON YOUR TABLE! IF YOU DON'T CHEAT YOU WON'T EAT AS GOOD!"

Certainly it was not and is not wrong to eat, or to legitimately fulfill any of the God-instilled desires of the flesh. But (1) it is wrong to obey Satan, and (2) it is wrong to disobey God where there are clear guide-lines laid down; and (3) it is wrong to let the flesh dictate and command us in what we do.

God does not want His children to be under the control of anyone or anything except Himself and His love for us.

b. THE LUST OF THE EYE (which we might see as one of the great sins of our age: the I WANT WHAT I SEE!)

Eve saw that the forbidden fruit was "pleasant to the eyes."

SATAN SHOWED JESUS all the kingdoms of the earth in a moment of time and said, "Aren't they beautiful? Wouldn't

you like to have them all at your feet? If you will give me a moment of worship, I will cease to oppose you and you will..."

SATAN IS A GREAT PROMISER, but he is also a liar!

This is the wish-book syndrome. We don't even know what it is we want until we are told; then we want what we see. For years Sears-Roebuck gave away their great BIG BOOK catalogs free— knowing that GREED— artificial needs— would pay for them over and over— we seem to think we cannot get along with what we SEE!

But Jesus said I will not seek what I may legitimately want on Satan's terms.

- c. PRIDE! John "The pride of life!" Putting SELF at the center in place of God.

Eve saw that the forbidden fruit "was to be desired to make one wise!" The promise of the Tempter had been: "You will be as gods!"

SATAN SAID TO JESUS: "Jump down! Make a spectacular scene! Get the adulation of the crowd on your PERSONALITY, instead of your holiness and your obedience to the Father and Your calling into being the Church.

WE ARE ALWAYS TEMPTED TO MAKE AN EGO TRIP OF OUR RELIGION:

There is pride of FACE. There is pride of RACE. There is pride of PLACE. But perhaps the most insidious of all is PRIDE OF GRACE!

"I (we) have a lock on genuine religion!"

In all these temptations Jesus broke the power of the Siren song of Satan. His death on the Cross enables us to follow Him in recognizing when temptation comes, and in saying "No!" to temptation when it does come. And it surely does!

[But Jesus has not only provided the power in His own defeat of temptation, and on the Cross; Jesus shows us HOW to resist. Let me summarize:]

II. JESUS, OUR EXAMPLE OF OVERCOMING TEMPTATION

A. DON'T QUIT! TEMPTATION IS NOT SIN.

Don't quit because you are sorely tempted! The Son of God was not exempt. We should not take temptation to indicate God's disapproval.

Following God's will does not exempt us from temptation. Being filled with the Spirit does not exclude us from temptation.

B. RECOGNIZE THE EVIL ONE! TEMPTATION IS THE SOLICITATION OF SATAN.

Recognize the HELLISH source of the twisting of your desires!

Jesus will enable us to RECOGNIZE the Source of temptation: the Deceiver. The twister; the distorter; the accuser of the fellowship... there is a power that will oppose all that is good and right and holy. [There is a clear difference between the accusation of Satan and the conviction of God the Holy Spirit.] To recognize that is to be half-way to victory!

C. RESIST, DON'T REASON WITH THE ENEMY!

DON'T TRY TO "REASON" WITH SATAN.

Jesus did NOT reason with Satan. He resisted him. As soon as we recognize: this is temptation! we must refuse to negotiate, and simply ask God for grace! "Lead us NOT into temptation!" Jesus didn't "toy" with temptation!

D. USE THE WORD OF GOD! DO USE GOD'S PROMISES IN WORD AND SONG.

Jesus used the written Word as THE INSTRUMENT for defeating temptation:
In every case Jesus could say from His heart and memory:

"IT IS WRITTEN!" I'll go by the Book!

E. PERSIST! DO HOLD ON, IT WON'T LAST FOREVER!

Jesus resisted with His might! "Get thee behind me, Satan!" Jesus turned His back on further discussion. After holding steady, Jesus was ministered to by angels (both Mark 1 and Matthew 3) There came a divine, supernatural strengthening. And then Jesus found respite for a season. (Thank God, we do not have to face continual, unending temptation!)

F. BELIEVE IT! JESUS IS WITH YOU! REMEMBER, JESUS IS WITH YOU!

WE have something which Jesus Himself did not have in the wilderness.
Jesus faced temptation alone. But Jesus has promised that He will ALWAYS be with us. Jesus Himself is THE PRESENCE that overcomes temptation.

Conclusion:

We are not just children of Adam and Eve! We do NOT inevitably need to be defeated by temptation!

PRAYER:

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil!"

#60 (EH) *Give Me a Holy Life*

Jesus High and Lifted up

May 16, 1992

John 8:28 When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know...

The conflict has begun in the ministry of Jesus. The day of his popularity is passing; He has fed the 5,000 and that is wonderful. But He has talked about giving His flesh and His blood for the life of the world.

In these paragraphs Jesus has made a very controversial claim, and followed it with a challenge:

He said: I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD! That is a pretty good claim!

He went on to say: ANYONE WHO WALKS WITH ME WILL NEVER NEED TO WALK IN DARKNESS EVER AGAIN! That is pretty amazing, too!

But the challenge was this:

Jesus said: UNLESS YOU BELIEVE WHO I AM YOU WILL NEVER SEE ETERNAL LIFE— YOU WILL DIE IN YOUR SINS!

Naturally, it got some strong reaction. "Just WHO do You think You are?" was the outburst from the Pharisees. It was crunch time, time to make a decision about Jesus. They had Light with them. The Holy Spirit was working on them to reveal the truth about Jesus. But Jesus spoke of a time when there would be NO DOUBT— the whole world will know who Jesus IS!

Every time Jesus is Present, every time we hear His word, there is...

I. A CLEAR CHALLENGE TO DECIDE ABOUT JESUS

- A. I AM the light of the world; FOLLOW ME AND YOU WILL NEVER HAVE TO WALK IN DARKNESS (WITHOUT A GUIDE)
- B. Unbelief (Pharisees) does not accept simple truth: "You do not speak the truth!"

- C. Jesus says: "Unless you believe that I AM who I say I am, that I am "HE!" (i.e., the Messiah) You will die in your sins!"

Either we exercise faith and seek Him NOW; or there will be a time when we will see the truth too late!

- D. (text) "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know who I am!"

II. JESUS IS THE ONLY WAY TO KNOW THE TRUTH- OR BETTER, JESUS IS THE TRUTH!

- A. Jesus was speaking, of course, about being lifted up on the cross to die. He was saying, "The Cross will make things clear!" The Cross will stand throughout eternity as the mark of Who God IS, and prove that He is both HOLY and JUST.

The scriptures record that the Roman who had charge of the crucifixion knew there was something different, something HOLY about this Man on the middle cross. The Pharisees knew it the, too.

- B. But WHENEVER Jesus is, lifted UP, it is THEN that people come to know the truth!

III. SEE THE WAYS IN WHICH JESUS IS LIFTED UP

- A. (As He said, Jesus was) LIFTED UP ON THE CROSS. The challenge there was SIN! JUSTIFICATION! Jesus our RIGHTEOUSNESS!

- B. (But Jesus was also) RAISED FROM THE TOMB. The Enemy now was DEATH! Jesus our LIFE! REGENERATION! II Co. 5:17

- C. (Jesus then was lifted up as He) ASCENDED INTO SESSION. The concern was SEPARATION, and ALONE-NESS. Jesus was going away!

Jesus our BROTHER! God our FATHER! Jesus sent us His Spirit to BRING US INTO THE FAMILY OF GOD! ADOPTION!

But that is only true as it becomes personal; as the truth draws near with power. When Jesus is lifted up in witness, something wonderful takes place:

D. (It is the church's privilege to lift up Jesus so the world can know the truth) PROCLAIMED
IN WITNESS...

1. ... to our own salvation by others: GRACE RECEIVED TO DELIVER US
FROM THE POWER AND THE GUILT OF SIN
2. ... by our own confession to the salvation of others: GRACE IN SEASON, OUT
OF SEASON IN EVERY SITUATION TO LIFT UP THE SAVIOR AND
SHARE HIS LOVE

E. EVERY EYE SHALL SEE THE PAROUSIA - JESUS, HIGH AND LIFTED UP, WILL
BE REVEALED TO THE WHOLE WORLD!

CONCLUSION

What do you know for sure about God? What do you know for certain about your own
standing with Him? There is one way that you CAN know!

The Joy and Wonder of Worship

May 28, 1992

John 4 / 2 Kings 6:12-23

I. A LESSON ON THE HEART OF WORSHIP

The story of Jesus at Sychar, of His conversation with the woman at the well of Jacob there, is itself a "well" to which we go again and again for an inexhaustible supply of refreshing truth.

Jesus is returning from the Passover holidays in Jerusalem, returning to Galilee, and He has chosen to go through Samaria instead of around it. Samaria is simply a no-man's-land to be hurried through, so far as the disciples are concerned. But to Jesus it is different.

Jesus engages a Samaritan woman in conversation; He asks her a favor, actually. She is not exactly a 'pillar in the community,' nor any expert in things holy. But she is precious to Jesus. He reveals Himself as Messiah. He tells her that He has a source of living water that eternally satisfies; He tells her that He is what LIFE is all about! She believes— she goes and brings back a crowd from the town. They prevail on Jesus, the Messiah for the pure Jews, and Jesus stays with them three days. Evidently Jesus believed He was their Messiah, too!

But during the course of the conversation the subject of worship was brought up by the Samaritan woman. It is perhaps not the main point of the conversation at all. But Jesus "throws away" a line which we may well ponder here this evening:

The woman is personally wounded by the knowledge that Jesus knows all about her, and her failures. She seems to try to divert the conversation, to "squirm" to one side or the other with a question about "religion." She lifts here eyes to the twin peaks above the well, Ebal and Gerazim, the mountains of blessing and cursing— the well and the two high hills are there at this very moment:

The Joy and Wonder of Worship

"Our fathers worship HERE," she says. "You (Jews) say that we need to come to Jerusalem for true worship. Which is true and right?"

Here comes the throw-away: "You worship what you do not know," Jesus says, "But we (Jews) know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews." But without a pause Jesus continues: "But the time is coming— in fact, it now IS, when neither here nor there will be the place to worship, for God is Spirit, and they that worship God must worship Him in Spirit and in truth! The Father is actually SEEKING such, those who will worship in spirit (Spirit!)"

A. Three ways to worship

1. IGNORANT WORSHIP; sincere, tradition - informed only; not to be despised, but to be superseded:

Samaritans, polyglot; scriptural antecedents diluted and polluted by mixture; despised by Jews

Innocents in our midst, informed second-hand; their ideas of God come from what they observe (Luther: "I did not like to think of God as "Father" because my father was so severe ...")

Danger of any second-generation from reality in revelation: if it departs from first-hand attention to revelation its worship is IGNORANT

2. INFORMED WORSHIP; based on God's Word; "salvation is of the Jews"
Theirs was the Torah; theirs was the history of Exodus; theirs was the physical witness of Jerusalem, the Temple:

Psalm One: Blessed is the one who meditates in God's Word day and night

Levitical truth: Sacrifices, observances, .. all pointing to Schema:
Hear, O Israel, the Lord is ONE!

3. **INSPIRED WORSHIP:** They that worship must worship in Spirit and truth. The true worship of God must both be **INFORMED** and **INHABITED BY GOD HIMSELF!**

B. **SPIRITUAL WORSHIP** is the intended way we shall worship.

Spiritual worship requires **ONE THING!** God's Presence! "When Messiah comes, He will take care of this dilemma!" "I that speak to you right now, I **AM** Messiah!"

The **PLACE** is not unimportant: "Our fathers worshiped here; you Jews worship in Jerusalem... which is right?"

Jesus did not say that the place means nothing: "This is My Father's house, and you have ..." "Jesus went to synagogue as was His habit.. "My house shall be an house of prayer .. 1.a And the **METHOD** is not unimportant, either: The very coming together is ordered: "Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together... Prayer is proscribed: "Our Father ... Sacrament is ordered: "When you come together 2. But everything else is subservient to God's Presence The Spirit of Jesus The Spirit of glorifying HIM The Spirit of truth, guidance The Spirit that does His three-fold work of conviction, conversion, and inspiration (John 16:8)

II. A SURVEY OF THE STYLES OF WORSHIP

Worship defined by William Temple:

"Worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God." It is finding in God the real purpose of our being, and is the ultimate joy in all of Creation.

"His is my soul, redeemed from all sin His is my heart, purified within His is my life, transformed from above His my whole being, an offering of love!" -NYPS Theme Chorus '60- '64

The Joy and Wonder of Worship

- A. Worship is the expression of one's true self in love before God. There is personal worship, with an intimacy known only to the two participants; and there is corporate worship, when individual bodies of believers express their worship.

And it is when two or more people expose their hearts in worship that potential disagreement and lack of trust begin to rear their ugly heads. For each true self is different from each other true self. There must be some give and some take.

- B. The temptation is to make judgments of methods of worship in terms of value before God: i.e., "Cathedral worship" is better than "Banyan-tree worship" is better than "Appalachian worship."
1. The critical, judging spirit excludes "outsiders"
 2. The non-discriminating spirit offends the Spirit: Jesus must be lifted up; excitement does NOT equal inspiration.
 3. The Spirit will do what He will; there are "mixtures" of humanity and divine blessing in the best of worship, perhaps;
- C. There is a temptation to imitate other methods and miss the vitality; to despise one's own roots/reality and see only the best/beauty in other ways. God wants us to give OUR best to Him!

William Willimon on "Episcopal converts;" "Baptists make overly-gung-ho Episcopalians.. "I like Episcopalians who were born Episcopalians..."

Conclusion:

- A. Explore our own sincerity in worship; the element of trust in daring to bring OUR best to God, and not to despise others.

In the 6th chapter of 2 Samuel is a scene right out of a Shakespeare drama: David has been successful beyond his dreams; God has blessed him. He goes to the house of Obed-Edom with proper preparation and brings the Ark of the Covenant to the center of the capital city as a symbol of the fact that Israel shall be centered in God.

As the ark moves toward the city David is overcome with joyous emotion and begins to dance before the ark with all his might. He gets right down with the slave girls and the street people in a genuine expression of his delight.

But in an upper window, standing half-hidden behind the curtains, stands David's wife, Michal, Saul's daughter, intently watching. She is a princess, and not used to seeing the king mingle with the help. She is disgusted in her heart, and when David finally comes in she tells him as much. "You really distinguished yourself today, King David! It wasn't your finest hour!"

David's reply was, "It wasn't for your benefit! It was before the Lord! And I will give to God whatever I believe I should give to Him!"

And the account goes on: (23 And Michal, the daughter of Saul, had no child to the day of her death. She was barren from that time forward!

- B. Even now, the way you are applying this scriptural message may tell you more about yourself than you want to know:

No doubt you are vindicating the way YOU love to worship, or the way that YOU believe is true worship. We are made that way— truth at first seems to reinforce our own position.

But however you consider worship to be ideal, there are those who truly worship in Spirit and in truth who on the surface of it would be uncomfortable with your style; and there are those who know God and worship in truth whose ways of approaching God would not be comfortable to you.

The most unattractive attitudes I know about have been (1) religious fundamentalists; and to a lesser extent, because I have had lesser exposure, (2) snobbish "High Church"-types, which I have usually written off as "liberals."

1. Please see that each one of us can be both the discriminator and the discriminated against; and it is imperative that we do not go the route of barrenness and despise those who are worshipping God in truth, even though in their humanness they may seem culturally out of it.

The Joy and Wonder of Worship

2. Please pray that the expression of our worship here will be the sincere expression of who we are in total love and obedience before the great God we love. Pray that the evolution of our worship will enable the tasks of the church, EVANGELISM and EDUCATION and FELLOWSHIP and SERVICE to flourish in powerful ways, for WORSHIP IS THE HEART OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST'S BODY, THE CHURCH!

The Ascension of Jesus

May 31, 1992

Acts 1:1-11

Introduction

[Consider using #513 as "Lesson"- The Apostle Creed, with emphasis on the phrase, "He ascended into heaven.."]

If we are consistent in observing special days, we need to have a few other days in our Christian calendar beyond Christmas and Easter. This past Thursday was also a special day in the church year. (What was it? Right! I knew you would know!) It was Ascension Day, the 40th day after Easter, the day we are reminded where Jesus IS!

[Narrative: Jesus walked up the hill called Olivet. He spoke a few last, important words. Then He simply 'lifted off' and a cloud received Him out of the disciples' sight. Jesus was gone!]

Is this to be taken as history? Is it simply another of the many myths about the comings and goings of man's invented divinities? WHAT DOES "HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN" SAY TO US? IS JESUS STILL THE JESUS OF GALILEE AND THE GOSPELS?

I. WHAT HAS CHANGED, FOR THE DISCIPLES?

- A. On the surface of it, everything was changed. And it couldn't be for the better— for what could be better than having the Son of God on hand, visible, palpable, audible— now in a moment of time He is gone, and apparently He is not coming back for a while!
- B. But as the next few days and weeks unfold, the changes begin to clarify:
 - 1. The locus of the evangel of the Gospel; It WAS the Person of Jesus in the flesh, in His face and spoken word and deed; NOW it is indeed in the Person and work of Jesus,but NOW in His BODY the church ("As the Father hath sent Me, so send I you. "YE shall receive power the Holy Spirit coming upon you... "YE shall be witnesses unto Me...")

2. The scope of the assignment has now gone into Phase Two; the CHURCH becomes the vehicle, where before it had been Israel, and Jesus own message had been limited to the immediate vicinity of Galilee and Judea. Now "YE are a chosen people, a royal priesthood... "Ye shall witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria.. and the uttermost part of the earth... (NOTE "part" not "parts"— it is where we are, not where we aren't ...)
- C. The actual level of personal attention on the part of God, the level of intimacy, if you please, has the potential for becoming constant.

II. WHAT REMAINS THE SAME?

- A. Jesus is the same!
1. This same Jesus will return! Human! Physical!
 2. This same Jesus cares deeply for each of His OWN. That does not change! "I have kept them Thou gavest Me!" (John 17) Jesus is still very much involved with each one of His children/ servants/ friends!
- B. Jesus' MISSION is still the same! Only now Jesus is doing His mission through the Church; through YOU and me! Why did Jesus come?
1. HE CAME TO SHOW THE WORLD THE FATHER GOD! He is the Word. He came to reveal God. Not to simply teach about God, but to BE God-with-us! Jesus gives God a focus to our finite understanding.
 2. HE CAME TO SAVE THE WORLD! He came to bring us God's LOVE and God's LIFE. He came to DIE for our sins. But now Jesus has committed this task of bringing the news of salvation to US! To the CHURCH— to YOU and to ME!
- C. Jesus' SPIRIT is still the same: We are not supposed to try to continue His work in our own worldly ways. LOVE is still the dominating power; love is still stronger than hate. HOPE is still a legitimate dynamic- Jesus has promised that we can trust the future in His hands. FAITH is still our viable connection with the Father— and we are to live by constant communication and prayer!

III. WHAT, THEN, IS THE ADVANTAGE OF THE ASCENSION?

A. HE IS NOW WITH US IN REALITY BY HIS SPIRIT

Jesus sends us the Spirit of God. "If I do not go away, " He said, "the Comforter will not come. But if I go away I will send Him to you."

B. HE IS AT THE THRONE OF GRACE FOR US

1. He is God's WORD to us, and now He becomes our ADVOCATE, our word, to God! (Romans 8 "He makes intercession")
2. Jesus is our tender, kind, High Priest, ascended into the Holy of Holies with His sacrifice for sins, but bearing also the knowledge of our frailty. We are loved at the center of the Universe! Jesus prays for us. Conclusion:
3. He fulfills all scripture: All the promises of the Word are there for anyone to read; but somehow it is different when we realize that "ONE OF US" is there at the Right Hand of All Power!

We know that He will make all things come 'round to His Glory and OUR (ultimate) GOOD! (Romans 8:28!)

There's an old story about a mother who wanted to keep her child informed as well as amused; so she bought a jig-saw puzzle picture-map of the earth, with lots of pieces. "See how long it takes you to put this map together," she said.

The boy had the map finished in just a very few minutes. It was amazing! "How did you do it so fast?" the mother asked.

"Actually, it was easy!" was the answer. "There is a picture of a man on the back. I just slid it on the checkerboard and turned it over!"

There is the face of a Man at the Back of All History! And that Man is even now at the Throne of the Universe! He ascended into heaven! If we keep His face in view, He will make sense, finally, of our world!

Do YOU need reassurance in your world? I do in mine! There are times when I am absolutely overwhelmed! IT IS THEN I REALIZE I NEED TO LOOK FOR 'THE MAN'S FACE ON THE BACK OF THE PUZZLE!'

The Ascension of Jesus

Prayer: Thank You for helping us to pray, and helping us to live for You day by day.

Hymn No. 157 *The Lord Jehovah Reigns*

The Pentecost Preacher and His Sermon

June 7, 1992

Acts 1:14 *"Then Peter stood up ... and addressed the crowd"*

If there was a human leader on that first great Day of Pentecost- and there was- there is no doubt that it was the big fisherman, Simon Peter. It was evident that day that Peter was very much the same person that he always had been— ready to speak at the drop of a hint— something to say on every subject whether he had something to say or not. Peter was very rarely at a loss for words.

But it was also evident that Peter was a different man from what he had always been, all at one and the same time. He spoke with firmness, and yet with compassion and love. He was not at all hesitant to tell the truth- "You crucified the Messiah!" was a part of his message. But Peter was also holding out in love the offer of eternal life, of forgiveness for sin, of union with God! Impetuous, fiery, very-human Peter was also very conspicuously a man of tenderness and compassion and love!

I. THE TWO GREAT EVENTS IN PETER'S PREPARATION FOR THIS SERMON

I would like to suggest that TWO VITAL THINGS HAD HAPPENED TO PETER, two things that were absolutely necessary for Peter to be able to do what he did on Pentecost.

THE FIRST THING might not seem to be connected with Pentecost. But I argue strongly that if this had not happened Peter would never have preached his sermon that day. THIS FIRST THING WAS A RATHER PAINFUL LESSON ON LOVE BY PETER'S LORD. Jesus took Peter aside, and talked kindly but firmly to him, and had him crying for mercy. This lesson is recorded in the 21st chapter of John; actually it is the reason John extended his gospel beyond the climax of Thomas's confession of faith in chapter 20.

You know that story [Narrative.] The lesson that day was, "Peter, I know that you do love Me; but if you want to prove that love, then feed My sheep!"

THE SECOND THING that happened to Peter was almost beyond description: IT WAS THE DELIGHTFUL, FRIGHTENING, ASSURING, HUMBLING, AWESOME OUTPOURING OF GOD'S SPIRIT, as recorded here in Acts 2. When Pentecost was fully come the Holy Spirit descended, and the disciples all knew that Jesus was at the Right Hand of the Glory on High; and at the same time they knew that Jesus was somehow present— that He was with them, or IN them by this magnificent Gift of the Spirit!

Peter was the one who got his sermon recorded. But he stood up "with the Eleven;" that is, they all were witnesses that Day. Peter was the preacher, but the entire CHURCH was the instrument of evangelism and worship by the power and purity of the Spirit of Jesus!

II. WAS PETER'S ['TWO-STEP'] EXAMPLE UNIQUE?

The answer to that is honestly both "Yes!" and "No!" Of course it Peter's life, his story is unique, for Jesus took Peter aside, and dealt with him in private, as He did to no other. It was Peter who had denied the Lord three times. It was Peter who had to answer to his Master; who had to face up to his shortcoming and failure.

The "private" lesson on love and loyalty was unique to Peter. But you can be sure that there were 120 individual, unique, stories in that Upper Room that first Pentecost! You can be sure that the Risen Savior had dealt with each one of those disciples just as if there was no other person in the world. You see, Peter was not the only one who had forsaken Jesus during His hour of trial and sorrow. The Bible tells us that they all forsook Jesus and fled!

Peter's story is familiar to us. But you can be certain that every one of these men and women had a meeting with the Lord! They were here in the Upper Room because Jesus had said, "Don't leave Jerusalem until you have received the Promise of the Father!"

EVERY CHRISTIAN HAS A SESSION WITH JESUS, SOONER OR LATER! Peter had to face the Lord and settle it not only that he was forgiven for his back-sliding, but that his LOVE was Christ-centered, not Peter-centered! Peter had to make sure that he was Christ-confident, not Peter-confident! Peter settled it that he was going to be

Christ-obeying, not living by Peter's own self-will! And every one of us has to settle that, too, before the fullness of the Holy Spirit can be poured out into our lives! [That is what Romans 12: 1, 2 is trying to explain to us! We come to see and know and enjoy God's will when we have made a complete living sacrifice of ourselves to God!]

These are exactly the same issues that Jesus must deal with in each of our lives before the fullness of the Holy Spirit is given to us! THE HOLY SPIRIT DOES NOT COME ON UNPREPARED, UNCARING, DISOBEDIENT HALF-HEARTED CHRISTIANS!

Before the Holy Spirit can come upon God's people with power and cleansing there has to be the settling of basic issues, and the most central of those issues is about LOVE!

Two great things had happened in Peter's life: one of them was when Peter settled it that he loved Jesus more than his own selfish way. The second was this great BAPTISM OF THE SPIRIT!

III. THE FULLNESS OF THE SPIRIT- THE PENTECOST "THING"

Was the awesome outpouring of the Holy Spirit unique? Once again, YES— and NO! It has never happened quite the same way ever again. THAT was the initial outpouring! THAT was the great BIRTHING of the Church in its present assignment.

It never has happened quite that way since. BUT it has happened again, and again. And it needs to keep on happening!

We tend to focus on the accompanying signs. God is still looking for people, individuals and churches, who love Jesus more than anything else, and who love each other— and who are willing to obey God and seek His Promise of the fullness of the Spirit, and stand up where they live and tell the world that Jesus is alive, and that He is still in the sin-forgiving, life-giving business!

"Repent, and be baptized," said Peter, with the power of God filling his whole being.

"And you will receive this assurance, this awesome Holy Spirit— and you can join the Church!"

Prayer

The Pentecost Preacher and His Sermon

Into Sacrament of Holy Communion

Angels Come to Call

A One-Act Play in Three Scenes

June 18, 1992

Acts 10

Yes, I believe its historical truth and accuracy; but it needs to be "seen," to be "real" as we read it:

I. SCENE ONE: OFFICER'S HOME IN CAESAREA

Time: June 21, 36 A.D.

Place: A beautiful spacious cut stone home in the Roman city of Caesarea, on the eastern most coast of the Mediterranean; Caesarea is the Roman provincial capital of what is now Lebanon, Israel and parts of Syria and Jordan.

Cornelius, a Roman centurion, commander of a famous Italian Regiment, is praying. It is 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and his work day is behind him. Perhaps he is in the atrium of his spacious house; he is meditating on all the things he has seen and heard.

Cornelius is a good pagan. He is a true seeker after truth, after God. He is not a Christian, but he cannot help but have heard something about this development in the Jewish community.

Cornelius has not been a typical occupational military presence. He is a loyal Roman, but he believes that the best thing Rome can do for the empire is foster true understanding and good will. And as Cornelius has become acquainted with the Jewish scriptures, the revelation of Jehovah, he has been impressed. This is "a" good religion! He has sponsored the building of synagogues; he has fostered tolerance and kindness to the Jewish people.

This day is much like many other days— the administrative duties have been cared for; the new men have been assigned, the men to be retired or sent on leave have

been reviewed; letters have been received and sent, and now a little quiet time seeking to communicate with the Great Unknown. Cornelius has had this growing hunger in his heart for God and has not known quite how to express it. And then— it happened!

It happened in the inner court of Cornelius' lovely home in Caesarea— and angel of God suddenly stood before him! The angel spoke his name! "Cornelius!" Cornelius was startled, to say the least. His reaction was the same as yours or mine would be: he was terrified! But Cornelius was a military man, and his fear did not control his actions. Cornelius looked the angel right in the eye! And he said to the angel, "What is on your mind?"

The angel did NOT tell Cornelius about Jesus. He did NOT make known the Roman Road or the Four Spiritual Laws. He DID give Cornelius encouragement, and told him the next step to take.

The encouragement was the assurance that God in heaven knows what Cornelius is doing on earth.

The next step was a specific assignment to a specific place to see a specific individual who was staying with a specific person. He gave enough directions so that Cornelius could send for the help he needed.

Within the hour Cornelius had sent three men on the day-and- a-half journey down the coast to Joppa to find this man called Peter. And this is how the first scene ends.

II. SCENE TWO: THE HOME OF SIMON, THE TANNER BY THE SEA

Time: The next day, just about high noon. Peter is waiting for dinner to be announced.

Place: Simon the tanner's house. It is by the sea. It isn't too hard to find, for the tanning business involves soaking raw animal skins in vats; fermenting the fermentable, potent smells—

I know it is silly because churches had not yet been developed, and the Nazarene nap syndrome was still millennia away; but somehow I picture a Sunday afternoon

just after church in the house where I live; I've finished preaching and I am temporarily exhausted; the kids are doing their thing- Helen is in the kitchen— for we always used to have the biggest meal of the week— and I usually lay down on the couch until it was time to slice the meat or whatever— and it wasn't too hard to drop off into a quick nap.

Actually in the hot mid-eastern climate a leisurely noon mealtime is pretty much world-wide.

However it happened, the Bible says that while Peter was hungry and waiting for dinner to be served he fell asleep and fell into a trance that was somewhere between dreaming and a visitation from God, or so it seemed.

[THE 'VISION' - A "sheet" let down from heaven with pork chops and lobsters and apple pie with ice cream . . . all non-kosher foods—]

Then the Spirit spoke clearly to Peter: Men are just about to ring the doorbell! Don't be afraid. I'm in this. Peter went down the stairs and met the men at the gate— and invited them into the house.

What kosher rules were broken I do not know— I doubt any at this time. A Jew can have non-Jews in his home— the contamination begins when the Jew goes into the heathen's house and/or eats off defiled vessels.

The men stay overnight with Peter in Simon the tanner's house.

III. SCENE THREE: OFFICER'S HOME IN CAESAREA

Time: June 24 or 25, same year

Place: scene set same as Scene One, except now there are a score or more guests eagerly waiting the return of the men Cornelius has sent away.

When Peter came in he first talked briefly about himself, who he was, and how he was (usually) limited! "I have never mixed with Gentiles! But God has been speaking to me! Here I am!"

Then Peter got down to business! He began to tell Cornelius and his household and guests about the Christ who fills all of revelation, and who had transformed his own sinful heart!

As Peter spoke about Jesus things began to click into place. "I had heard about this Man," Cornelius may have said. "But I hadn't know quite how to fit Him in to what the Jewish scriptures say. Now this makes sense!" The Holy Spirit was illuminating Peter's preaching.

When Peter, helped along by the Spirit, said, "If you believe in this powerful Name that is above every Name, you will receive forgiveness of sins," Cornelius's heart leapt for joy! In his heart he said, "I do believe!" And the same thing was happening in the others gathered there. God descended in a wonderful way. Peter's sermon was interrupted, but his message came through loud and clear!

They had a testimony meeting— and then they had a baptismal service— and then they started the First Church of the Nazarene in Caesarea with about 20 charter members!

I know it doesn't have that all down in the King James version. But as Dr. Knight said at Assembly, that is what us preachers are for! (To explain what isn't written down!) ;-)

Conclusion/Application

This chapter says two things to me, loud and clear: Hebrews 11:6 is true: God will meet with those who seek after Him diligently; and YET— God uses...

A. When our focus is on Cornelius it makes us aware that

1. "in all nations there are people seeking after God." and
2. it encourages us that God answers those who seek him.

[Illus: At the last General Assembly one evening the emphasis was world mission, and there were several people in our own generation— current— who were raised pagan, but to whom God has manifested himself. One of them will speak with us here next Sunday! Janine Van Beek. Another was a

man who lived in the rain forests of South America— to whom God gave the name of a man to seek after in a mission situation.]

B. When our focus comes to Peter there are several things this passage teaches me:

1. I never know my own prejudices; I must be open to the Lord. Then I can also be myself.
2. When God wants a job done He sends for a man or a woman. Imperfect, faulted, weak, prejudiced— still God does not give the Gospel message by angels— at least not usually! God uses redeemed people!
3. The POWER is in the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus— in His life within! When Peter said Jesus is alive, and if you believe in His name you will receive forgiveness of sins— as he spoke the hearers believed and received!

Home of the Soul

June 19, 1992

Psalm 84:5-7

Last week I saw the E.N.C. graduation ceremony on the local cable TV. One feature that I hadn't really noticed in the actual ceremony— perhaps because I was very cold, or perhaps because of other stimuli— was the chirping of the birds that apparently live under the portico roof in front of Gardner Hall. From our perspective they were insignificant or a minor nuisance. From their perspective, perhaps, we were uninvited guests on the front doorstep of their home.

The Psalmist paints us a word picture— of small and insignificant birds who make their home in the very center of the Temple area. [Maybe he had just come from the Temple area, and had noticed how the sparrows had made themselves at home.] He contrasted and compared how much the birds seemed to be at home with the deep longing that he felt in his own heart to truly be "at peace" with himself and with his God.

[Even to his dying day David wished that he could have done more— he was ambitious to build the Temple itself— where the tabernacle was now standing— the sacred place on Moriah where Solomon would finally erect the temple that was to be one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.]

Mankind is different from all other creatures. We have longings that go so deep that we don't always know what the longings are for. Sometimes, perhaps most of the time, it takes a long time, usually, to find out what really will satisfy the deepest longings of the soul.

I. THE HOME OF THE SOUL IS NOT A 'PLACE' OR A 'THING'

A. THINGS OF THEMSELVES CAN NOT SATISFY

Intellectually, perhaps, we Christians believe this. But I wonder if we do ever accept it! The old question asked of rich people— "How much money is

enough?" is just about always answered: "Just a little MORE!" [Illustration: Robert Coles, eminent Harvard teacher, was "converted" as a spin-off of a study he was doing during the civil right struggle in Louisiana) at least partly because of the witness of a six-year-old little girl named Ruby Bridges.]

Coles has said that his studies have increasingly shown that poor Christians, even at the poverty level- are consistently happier, better adjusted and more fulfilled as people than are rich unbelievers! I may be over-simplifying his summaries, but the gist is there:

"Among the poor he had expected defeat and despair; he found some- but he also found strength and hope and courage. Among the rich he expected satisfaction; instead he found boredom, and alienation, and decadence..." The religion of Jesus Christ— salvation I prefer to call it- - is NOT the "opiate of the masses" as the early Communist leaders were quick to label it; (Marx said it; Lenin and Stalin believed it.) It is not the tool of the get-rich or get-well middle classes, either— but it is a life-motivating, life-changing, life-lifting Reason for living in and of itself!

B. BUT THINGS ARE NOT UN-IMPORTANT, EITHER; FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS A REAL KINGDOM!

After all, the world we live in is a beautiful world. We need to keep our "worlds" straight when we quote "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world." For another verse says, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son (to save it.)" This world of creation reflects God's majesty and His glory; the world of people and relationships often reflects the image of God in care and concern. We would have to be dead not to see beauty in the lochs and braes, the Everglades, the heavens— the wonders of this world.

But often when the heart gets hungry for home, or for a beautiful scene remembered, it is not just for that place or that time you long... but it is because your heart was made by the same Hand that made the scene

remembered! Perhaps you are not aching and longing for Scotland, but you are homesick for God!

II. THE HOME OF THE SOUL IS BEING 'RIGHT' WITH GOD

- A. "Happiness" is (1) being "at home" with God in some deepening reality; and (2) finding strength for the day in God Himself (4,5)

Blessed (happy) are they that dwell in Thy house: ... Blessed (happy) is the man, the woman, whose strength is in Thee (Psalm 84:4,5)

We say, "IF ONLY circumstances were different!" or, "If people would just LET ME DO WHAT IS RIGHT!" But we need to see that: Circumstances and people can not really short-circuit this being at home with God:

Elizabeth O'Conner is quoted by Bob Benson, from her book *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*:

Each of us is the artist of his own life. The materials we are given to work with, the conditions we work under and what happens to us, are part of the drama of what we shall do with our lives. But the materials and conditions and events are not in themselves the determining factors. Whether a man arrives or does not arrive at his own destiny- the place that is peculiarly his- depends on whether or not he finds the kingdom within and hears the call to wholeness- or holiness, as another might say. The man who hears that call is chosen. He does not have to scramble for a place in the scheme of things. He knows that there is a place which is his and that he can live close to the One who will show it to him. Life becomes his vocation.

- B. Let us close these thoughts by speaking a bit about 'the "How to" of being at home:' [if I may without being presumptive:] The writer of Hebrews said "Here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come" (Hebrews 31:14.) So we must somehow be "at home" with God while we are on the way to His House. We must dwell in the house of the Lord while we are still pilgrims. Does this sound paradoxical? How can this be?

Paul writes (in Ephesians 3:17-21) "(May) Christ dwell in your hearts by faith"- let Jesus be at home in YOUR heart! These two thoughts go together: We are "at home" in God when we make Jesus "at home" in us! Does that make sense?

C. HOW MAY WE SPEAK OF MAKING JESUS 'AT HOME?'

1. This is mystery! JESUS CHRIST CAN INDWELL US! How can Jesus indwell us, even as He indwells the Word, and even as He became flesh and dwelt among us? These are areas of wonder, where the Infinite makes contact with the finite!

A born-again child of God is a miracle on the same line or order as the great miracles of God!

"But when He saved my soul/cleansed and made me whole/ it was a miracle of grace!"

2. But there are PRACTICAL WAYS WE CAN LET THIS MIRACLE HAPPEN WHERE WE ARE:
 - a. If Jesus is "at home" in us— and we in Him, it is because WE HAVE INVITED HIM TO OUR PLACE! It could be just as simple as that: Have YOU asked Jesus in to live in your heart, like a little child might ask?
 - b. Then, to, WE OPEN OUR LIVES TO JESUS, MAKING HIM LIKE "FAMILY": There are no secrets from Him— nothing we will not discuss freely with Him— no unshared subjects!
 - c. Finally, WE LET JESUS DO HIS WORK IN US! If we will let Him— give Him free rein, we will find that Jesus has an agenda! HE has work He needs to do in us if He is to remain "at home." I must see that He has the chance to work!
3. If we will invite Jesus in, and keep no secrets, and ask Him to do with us whatever He will— we will experience A GROWING SENSE OF THE REALITY OF CHRIST!

This world is real! But the eternal world is even more real! And we will understand the SECURITY, the PERMANENCE of this relationship! All other joys grow and fade again... all other relationships come to an end as we now understand them. But this love, this being "at home" with Jesus will NEVER end in disappointment!

Conclusion:

Probably the Psalmist was at a low point when he identified with the small and insignificant birds who make their home in the very center of the Temple area. But he was expressing a confidence in this Psalm that the deep longing that he felt in his own heart to truly be "at peace" with himself and with his God would not be overlooked by the God he loved. And David's greater Son picked up on that very theme when He said, in Matthew and Luke that God the Father sees even when a sparrow falls to the ground, but you and I are worth much more than many sparrows! (Matthew 10 = 2 sparrows for a farthing; Luke (bargain day) 5 sparrows for 2 farthings!) From Matthew:

Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing- a half- penny!-?? and one of them shall not fall to the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not, therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows!
Matthew 10:29-31

If little birds can be at home in the Temple, David reasoned, then I guess that I can take God at His word and make my home IN HIM!

Are YOU "at home" in God? Is Jesus "at home" in YOU?

Have you invited Jesus into your heart? Is He "at home " there?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, Make us truly "at home" in You tonight! Amen.

276 *"Have Thine Own Way, Lord!"*

High Road, Low Road

June 28, 1992 (pm)

Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees! Make level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

Make every effort to live in peace with all men, and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Hebrews 12: 12 - 16

I recall two or three "masterpiece sermons" that Dr. Edward Mann used representing E.N.C. when I was (what we called) a "quartet boy." One began with a bit of verse about "high road" and "low road" and being dissatisfied with "misty flats in between..."

"Behold I show you a way, and ways, and a Way. And the high soul goes the high road, and the low soul goes the low— and in between, on the misty flats, the rest grope to and fro..but to each is opened a high road and a low, and each soul must determine the way his soul must go." -don't hold me to this quote...!

The whole Book of Hebrews is about the high soul finding the high way of holiness! It is about the BETTER way! All Christians who start out with Jesus are on the High Road. There are NOT two ways for Christians. Either we are following after Jesus, following after holiness— or we are sidetracked somewhere, lost or in the process of getting lost; groping our way into the "misty flats" of compromise.

There are several "warnings" in the Book of Hebrews. They are NOT usually popular; we don't think we need warnings. Our hearts are pure! But how do Christians who start out so ideally and with good intentions get off the high way of holiness?

I. WE CAN LOSE THE HIGH WAY THROUGH NEGLECT OR IGNORANCE

(2:1-4)

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard. so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. -Hebrews 2:1-4

- A. Key words here are "careful attention" "drift away" and "ignore;" we may be in danger simply because we are so familiar with the way of salvation that we take it for granted!

TO LISTEN EARNESTLY TO GOD? Others may hear God speaking because they are listening— we may miss conversation with God Himself because we are blinded by so much light— or perhaps thinking that knowing facts is the same as knowing a Person.

The chilling warning here is that we are responsible not only for what we hear— but for the light or opportunity we may have— responsible for what we COULD hear easily if we would only listen!

TO "DRIFT AWAY" ? So very gently, so slowly— watching inconsistencies in people— emphasizing the negatives— believing doubts, doubting instead of seeking— like a boat slipping away from a mooring— unattached, soon a tragic loss.

TO IGNORE ALMIGHTY GOD ? The supreme insult— to go past God as if He were not there! Our mighty nation is in great danger of doing exactly this! We DO have a state religion— the religion of secularism! We shall pay for this by being by-passed in the revival which is coming!

- B. The warning is: THOSE WHO IGNORE GOD WILL NOT ESCAPE HIS JUDGMENT!

II. WE CAN LOSE THE WAY OF HOLINESS BY UNBELIEF

(3:12)

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. ("an evil heart of unbelief" KJV) Hebrews 3:12-13

- A. The illustration here is the Children of Israel, having been delivered from slavery in Egypt, but stopping short of the Promised Land.

They were characterized, possessed, by a spirit of ingratitude, and continually looked back on the best of slavery from the worst of the pilgrim's life.

They also had a spirit of rebellion, against the Laws of God and the discipline of Sinai and Moses.

Worst of all, perhaps, they had a spirit of blindness to God's PURPOSE. God intended for them a home, a country of plenty. They could not think beyond this day! They quickly forgot how God had brought them this far miraculously!

- B. The warning here was that their hearts would be hardened and they would no longer be able to understand the love of God. What is the "unpardonable sin?"

III. A THIRD WARNING IN HEBREWS IS A WARNING AGAINST IRRESPONSIBILITY

Two verses:

(5:12) Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's Word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!

and

(6:1-6) Therefore, let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity. Let us not lay again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instructions about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so.

It is impossible for those who have been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

- A. The warning is not that it is wrong or evil to be immature; any more than it is a sin to be a baby! Babies are FUN! If you don't believe me take Jake to the South Shore Plaza for half an hour! The warning is that it is tragic to REMAIN immature! To refuse to try to grow and develop and accept responsibility as well as privilege! This is a deadly danger:

This spirit is characterized by wanting to be satisfied— but NOT being willing to accept responsibility!

This spirit is characterized by wanting all the fruits of hard labor— but not accepting the day in, day out discipline that produces fruit. [Like our first garden in Cherry Valley— yielded NOTHING!]

- B. "Peter Pan" Christians are not only burden to others— they are in grave and mortal danger themselves! [What IS the unpardonable sin?]

IV. FINALLY; IT IS POSSIBLE TO LOSE THE WAY OVER DIVIDED LOYALTIES!

(Text) There is no higher call, ever, than "Follow Me!" from Jesus Himself. The fullness of the Holy Spirit is not a call to division— it is an enabling to know Jesus better, to understand what Jesus said better, to be more and more like Jesus. This is what Jesus taught about the coming of the Spirit:

"He (the Holy Spirit) will not speak of himself, but whatsoever he shall hear he will speak. He will glorify Me: for he will take of mine and show it you. John 16:13-15 Wesley's translation.

To every child of God there comes a call to total, complete dedication. We in the holiness "movement" have made a specialty of it; we call it our "cardinal doctrine." But hearing it, or being familiar with it does not make it happen. Each of us must be willing to "lay aside every weight" and "the sin that doth so easily beset us" and follow after God's will for our lives!

It is possible to have a clear witness; that we have done just that! Like Jacob at the Brook Jabbok, we need to wrestle with the angel— until God's blessing is more important to us than even our lives!

"What is your name!?" the angel said, when it seemed that Jacob was exhausted.

"I am Jacob- the usurper- the mixed of motives!" was the honest answer. "But I will not let you go until you bless me!"

Your name is now ISRAEL!" said the angel. And Jacob's name, and the very heart of his character were changed!

Conclusion:

This has been a "negative message." I MAKE NO APOLOGY FOR THAT! WARNING! is a big word in Hebrews! But let me end this message, not with words about how to "get off" the Highway of Holiness, but how to be sure to stay ON!

After all, the best way to avoid trouble is to stay as far away from it as you can. When we must go into the danger zones or the battle-ground God has promised us grace. But Jesus also taught us to pray: Lead us NOT into temptation, but deliver us from evil!

And right here in this 12th chapter— this "warning"— is a sure formula for not failing!

1. (12:2): Fix your eyes on Jesus! A great share of our trouble comes when we listen to our fears, or listen to bad people, or listen too much to good people— before or more than we listen to Jesus Himself!

The very dearest, sweetest, most godly person will sometimes be wrong!
They will sometimes fail!

Jesus did not fail!

Jesus endured contradiction of sinners against himself— even to the point of death; can we endure our hardships, even if it kills us? Will we?

KEEP LOOKING TO JESUS!

2. (last): Make every effort to live in peace with all men (And women) and to be holy; for without holiness no one will see the Lord! It takes EFFORT to be at peace with people! If only we could live out our lives in solitary vacuum with no one but a perfect, holy God! WE are so perfect!

What is the effort involved? Not a simple thing— but Paul put it this way (in his testimony before Felix—remember?)

Acts 24:16 So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and (people.)

Whatever it takes— keep your eyes on Jesus! Keep your conscience clear! Stay open— keep 'fessed up! For if we walk with Jesus daily, we shall never leave the High Road!

Prayer - EH #75 *Jesus, My Strength My Hope*

When God Speaks to Your Child

July 2, 1992

I Samuel 3:1-11

[Children's Story may precede this— the story of how Samuel heard God speaking to him, and thought it was Eli, the priest. Finally Eli told Samuel to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant hears You!" And then God could talk to Samuel, which He did for the rest of Samuel's life!]

Introduction:

Listen!

What do you hear? There is a difference between hearing and hearing!

Sometimes we hear only what we expect to hear— or what we want to hear!

Do you think that maybe God has a problem 'getting our attention?' How do we hear?

How do we get our children to listen for God's voice?

I. ONE WAY WE CAN ENCOURAGE OUR CHILDREN TO HEAR IS TO LISTEN OURSELVES!

Thankfully, children are not limited to the spiritual sensitivity of their parents! But a child who has believing parents can be grateful—

There is a recurring theme in scripture and in life: faith is more "caught" than it is "taught." The teaching is important— but the teacher is more important than the lesson, usually!

II. WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM ONE MAN'S UPBRINGING: SAMUEL

- A. We would NOT want to try to adopt Samuel's families' life-style or methods. But by the same token, it is sort of silly to refuse to see the good side because of old or ancient customs. Polygamy / the actual rearing of Samuel from a pre-teen in the Temple; hardships

of separation, perhaps overcome by the special circumstances.

B. But there ARE several things about the Samuel story that greatly impress, even today:

1. Samuel was very much wanted. He was deeply loved.

a. Every child ought to have this luxury! But because children are by nature very demanding as a responsibility; and so unless we deliberately choose to love them with God's help we will probably err in either resentment which a child can/will feel, or in indulgence, where we trade quality investment of ourselves for things that money can buy. Children do not become people of integrity by having money thrown at every problem!

As a matter of fact— money, or lack of it, does not really affect this basic love and esteem in the parent-child relationship!

b. What our children need is the assurance that they have parents that love them! Ideally there is a father and a mother; when that is not the case - as it is not in many, many homes, - a Christian single parent can and will find God's help, and can be a godly example. When there IS a father and a mother in the home the greatest gift they can give their children is (1) a genuine love and kindness and consideration for each other!; and then, also (2) a respect and sense of self-worth for the child!

c. We shape our children by our attitudes! If we take delight in them, they will learn that they have worth! If we consistently demean them, and tell them of their inadequacy they will reward us by becoming fulfillment to our prophecies! (Never "You are bad!" always "What you DID was bad! YOU are good! I love YOU!")

2. Samuel was "given to the Lord!" Here is another basic principle: Our children "do not belong to us!" They are NOT property! They are NOT an extension of our ambitions or careers. We DO have a God-given AUTHORITY which we

must lovingly exercise; but that authority diminishes year by year as the child develops. We are parents, NOT God!

3. Samuel was cared for and prayed for faithfully! His physical needs were met. There was no doubt as to the love and the esteem and provision that was made for him.

The single most important inheritance we may give our children is earnest, diligent, often importunate INTERCESSION! Like a hammer striking a rock, it must finally yield!

4. Samuel was in God's house when God finally spoke specifically to him.

When a family builds its life into the church their children get the idea that God is really important. Why do we have to be head-in-the-sand Fundamentalists in order to see that God is, and must be, the most important thing in our lives if we are Christians?

We are so sophisticated that we think that being Christian is a HEAD THING! Intellectually conceived! If we understand it, then we ARE it!

WRONG!

Being God's people is a head thing and a heart thing and a sit-down thing and a stand-up thing and a Monday thing and an all-the-time thing! We do it best by building our lives into the church!

God will speak beyond the regular services of the church, certainly! BUT THE REGULAR SERVICES ARE THE HEART-LINE, THE MAINSTREAM! IF WE TAKE THAT AWAY FROM OUR CHILDREN, WHERE WILL THEIR CHILDREN GO TO HEAR ABOUT GOD?

[There is a difference between religion and spiritual life. But religion is the conduit, usually, and certainly there is a need for religion, the Christian religion—]

5. (Finally) When God goes looking for a man or woman of God, He often starts by speaking to a girl or a boy! But I know boys and girls— no one here of course, — that seem to me to be so busy keeping a non-God schedule that they don't have time to breathe, let alone listen to God speak in the quiet of their heart.

III. GOD IS ALWAYS SPEAKING IF WE CAN GET QUIET ENOUGH TO LISTEN

- A. As we listen right now God is saying to YOU: I LOVE YOU! "Troubled Christian, I know— and I care!" "Sinner person, I love YOU— and not just your 'soul.' You are GOOD! You are worth saving! I died on the cross for you— to make you good— to lift you up to be clean and pure and to walk with Me right down here on this earth!"

- B. As we listen God is saying to all of us:

"I really want to have you walk with Me! I really want to be your best Friend! I want you to share every part of your life with Me!"

Conclusion:

God is speaking just now!

But we need to stop and listen! We need to deliberately listen! If WE try, then perhaps we will be able to encourage our children to hear God's voice, too.

Prayer

#338 (Last two verses) *Lord, Speak to Me that I May Speak*

Communion Legacy

July 5, 1992 PM

Acts 20:25-35

Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace which can build you up and give you an inheritance among those who are sanctified. I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

These words were spoken by Paul to the elders of the Ephesian church. Paul was on his way to Jerusalem, and he believed, with good reason, that he would never see these men again. He had a solemn burden on his heart for this church he loved. It was a message first of all of warning.

Paul used words of military impact; words of security. "Be on guard!" "Guard yourselves and guard all the flock over which you have any influence!"

Why is such vigilance necessary? Is not this an age of tolerance, and of understanding? Are not people who do not agree with us still good people, on their way to be with God as well? Our vigilance is not against people of good will. It is against evil people and against false doctrines or distorted truth. Paul was not tolerant of heterodox doctrine.

He says in Galatians 1:

Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:7-10)

Paul took his doctrine seriously! He says here that he never stopped warning the Ephesian church night and day for the three years that he lived there with them! The heart of our Christian faith is the doctrine of Jesus Christ. The watershed, the benchmark against which we measure "true" or "false" doctrine begins and ends with our doctrine of Jesus Christ!

How seriously do we take our Christology? Who is Jesus Christ to you? Who is He to our church? Is Jesus Christ Almighty God? Is Jesus Christ the Lamb of God which takes away the sins of the world? Is Jesus Christ the ONLY propitiation for sins? How personally do we take our Christology?

Paul says to the elders: "Guard yourselves!"

Who is Jesus TO ME? Is Jesus Lord to YOU?

The gospel is not so much "what" we know as "Whom" we know; God is probably not going to worry too much about the nuances of baptism or terminology of holiness. But the "what" is important, too! And Paul is concerned about people who DELIBERATELY and SELFISHLY and KNOWINGLY seek to twist and use the Gospel for personal reasons.

Paul put it this way: "SAVAGE WOLVES WILL COME IN AMONG YOU" and then Paul said, "EVEN FROM YOUR OWN NUMBER THERE WILL ARISE PEOPLE WHO DISTORT THE TRUTH!"

How can we hold these two important truths together: We must love everyone and be truly open to all people of good will, and, We must be on guard against those who distort the truth? The answer is in Paul's solemn commitment of his loved ones as he prepared to leave them. It was a two-fold commitment which we need to take seriously:

Paul said

1. I COMMIT YOU TO GOD!

Be faithful to your God! Be close to Him! Talk to Him! Remember that faith first of all is a living relationship! Christians cannot hope to stay pure unless they have a working prayer life, and maintain an openness with their God. We need to pray the essence of the Lord's Prayer, with true meaning, with deliberate intention, every day that we live!

2. I COMMIT YOU TO THE WORD OF HIS GRACE!

Be faithful to your New Testament! Read your Bible! Be open to its reproof, rebuke, exhortation!

I am absolutely astounded by the shallowness and superficiality of much that passes for Christian. I used to think that at least the Catholics have some sort of grounding in their CCD classes; then I read a blistering exposé in First Things written by a good Roman Catholic laywoman saying that the level of doctrinal and scriptural illiteracy is appalling in her church even as it is in Protestant circles.

So-called born-again Christians cannot name the Ten Commandments, cannot name the Four Gospels, cannot quote enough scripture to witness to their own salvation—and we wonder why we are ready to fall for twisted applications of scripture when they come along. This may seem like a negative sort of lead-in for communion. But communion needs to be a time of heart opening and soul-searching. We need to take responsibility for the flock that is ours!

Communion Legacy

We need to be shepherds of the flock of Christ! Let us come to the altar with our needs, our sins, our confession; let us here receive God's forgiveness and grace—and receive His inheritance among all those who are sanctified!

The Extravagance of God

July 12, 1992

No good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly . . .blessed is that person who trusts in You! Psalm 84:11,12

Introduction - Father God; Is He Indulgent or Extravagant?

There is a world of difference between an indulgent parent and an extravagant one. [Maybe in our modern use of the words they have become interchangeable; but they are not the same!] The difference, I think, lies in the motives and in the wisdom of the father or mother as they lavish either gifts or love on their children.

Oversimplifying, perhaps: an indulgent parent gives a child what it wants, and usually for selfish reasons. Instead of spending self by giving direct attention and listening/hearing the child, the indulgent parent finds it easier to spend money and buy trinkets or toys, big or small.

An extravagant parent, on the other hand, may enjoy buying things, too. But the extravagance is in the love itself; in the sheer delight that comes [at least occasionally] in giving far beyond what the child "deserves." ["I deserve it!" is another sermon!]

Most children, at least on the surface, would probably like a rich and indulgent parent. But common sense tells us that real joy and happiness can be found in homes both rich and poor, and real meanness and sorrow, too.

What sort of Parent is God to us? Are Christians really "better off" than unbelievers? Does it "pay to serve Jesus?" What does it mean to be "blessed" by God?

I. THERE IS MYSTERY INVOLVED IN GOD'S BLESSING

- A. God is God! No question about it, there will always be things about prayer and answers to prayer and blessings and things spiritual which we may never understand. God will never be manipulated!

We can never reduce God Almighty to our "cause-and-effect" manipulation.

- B. Make the faith statements! God is GOD! And God is GOOD! But we can never be certain WHY things happen; why they are PERMITTED to happen. When we look into the Book of Job (which is a text on suffering) it is full of 'very wise sayings' that simply ARE NOT TRUE! (but reflect the common ways that people think, even to this day!)

II. THERE IS THE FACT OF STRUGGLE IN ALL OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

Good OR bad, religious or not, every human that lives finds challenges and frustrations:

- A. The Bible declares "The way of the transgressor is hard (Proverbs 13:15)
 - 1. It doesn't always seem that way. In fact many of the richest people in the world seem to be the most wicked; or at least they flaunt their unconventional morals.
 - 2. But ultimately, rich or poor, life gives back what has been sown; Galatians 6:7 "Be not deceived; God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."
 - 3. In the end the transgressor faces eternal separation from the GOOD and the HOLY that is our loving, lavish God!
- B. But even in the life of faith THERE IS LIFE-AND-DEATH STRUGGLE!
 - 1. There is a struggle to break through INTO life itself! God rewards those who SEEK Him! (Hebrews 11:6)

Jesus said, "Strait (constricted) is the gate and narrow the way that leads to life everlasting!" (Matthew 7:13,14) To CONFESS and to REPENT and to ACKNOWLEDGE OUR NEED OF GOD is never easy! (Greek word is AGONIDZOMAI)
 - 2. There is the FIGHT OF FAITH . . . for God's Way demands that we trust His love— that we renounce our humanistic-centered answers, our self-centeredness, our demands for INDULGENCE, and learn to make the desire of God's will our way of life!

Isn't that a pretty dismal way to live?

III. THE FACT IS: GOD IS NOT INTERESTED IN MAKING OUR EXISTENCE DISMAL OR SMALL

Just because the world does not center in our perceived needs does not mean that God does not have our best interests in His mind:

- A. Our God is a sun and shield! Do you remember Romans 8:28? "In all things God works!" God WILL give grace and glory! God is in the CONSTRUCTION BUSINESS! His best promise to us is not so much "I will GIVE you..." as it is "I will MAKE you!"

[The Prodigal Son story (Luke 15) begins with the prodigal saying to the father "Give me!" But it ends with him crying "MAKE me!"] God takes delight in bringing His people into the stature and likeness of His only begotten Son! I John 3:1,2 say, "Beloved NOW are we the children of God, but it doth not yet appear what we SHALL be; for we KNOW that when HE shall appear we shall be like HIM!"

- B. God's way brings deep satisfaction:

- FREE FORGIVENESS
- SENSE OF DIRECTION (which I confess must be renewed from time to time)
- ONCE IN A WHILE A DEEP PERSUASION OF GOD'S LOVE

- C. Permit me two personal insights. They sound so simple and trite that I am almost embarrassed to repeat them.

1. JESUS IS PRESENT WITH ALL BELIEVERS! HE IS PRESENT WITH ME!

I remember when this has been deeply reinforced. I can only describe it as the sense of loving contact with a PRESENT Friend.

Jesus is NOT my "peer." He is NOT my equal. His opinion is NOT to be considered along with the opinions of others until "I decide!" But Jesus IS my Friend! Jesus is YOUR Friend!

2. WE ARE USHERED INTO CHRIST'S COMPANY / FELLOWSHIP / SALVATION / OR WHATEVER WE CALL IT BY LOVING HIM THE BEST WE CAN. AS POOR AS OUR LOVE MAY BE, JESUS APPRECIATES IT!

The Extravagance of God

He will refine it. Jesus loves us! Jesus loves ME!

- a. The old "formulae are true" Thank God for the lessons I learned in Sunday School and church about "how to be saved." Most of us have to have some...
- b. ...but we cannot coldly pursue "the facts of salvation" apart from an utterly sincere, open, growing FRIENDSHIP with the Lord Jesus Christ. God gives us new insights, and we grasp them and use them— and then when we think OUR wisdom has given us a handle on LIFE things grow stale and cold— and we realize that salvation is not an "IT" it is a "HIM!" It is a bond of love between a Father God and His children, individually AND collectively!

Conclusion

As we begin to mature, and especially as we grow older, we see how much more important than things are the very real intangibles of love and respect that make up the relationships of family, both God's family as well as our smaller nuclear families.

If we are to be like Father God then we shall have to learn to bless our loved ones!

We can not all lavish magnificent gifts on those we love, and if we could and did, indiscriminately, we might hurt more than we helped (indulgent.) [I've had dreams, I confess, of being able to surprise my married children who struggle from time to time.]

But we all can give extravagantly of our love!

Once upon a time there was a wealthy businessman who with his beloved wife had an only daughter that he loved very much. Even though he had to be away quite often, he provided and cared for his wife and her very well indeed.

One day the businessman came home from a long trip. The reunion at the airport was happy, with hugs all around. The daughter threw her arms around her father's neck and said, "O Daddy, I love you more than anything!" And he said, "I love you, too, dear!"

That evening at supper the father said, "It 'got to me' today when you told me how much you love me! Do you really?"

"O yes, Daddy!"

The father sort of smiled, and then he said, "Well, then, I really want your pearls!" This made the daughter smile. What would her father want with her pearls? What could he want with a string of paste and glass beads, for that is what they were. But she loved those beads! They looked so pretty when she got dressed up!

"You don't really want my pearls, do you?" she asked.

"Well, yes, I really do!" said her father.

Just a little cloud came over her face. She did not know why her dad wanted those beads— maybe he didn't like her wearing jewelry? Maybe they were more valuable than she thought and he wanted to trade them somewhere in the world? All this crossed her mind for just a tiny moment, and then she reached up and undid the little clasp and handed the pearls over to her dad. And he took them, and reached over and dropped them into the wood box that stood by the fireplace, like he was throwing them away— which he was.

For then he reached into his coat pocket and brought out a long string of real matched pearls, gems of great beauty, and handed them across the table to his daughter.

She looked at the pearls, and she put them on the table for the moment and she got up and came around and threw her arms around his neck again and said, "O Daddy, thank you! But I do love you, just you, more than anything!"

No good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly!

God will - with His gifts - give us Himself!

Prayer

#44 - My Jesus I Love Thee

Obeying the Higher Law

The Story of Naaman and Elisha

July 26, 1992 AM

Romans 7,8

Lesson:

Romans 7: (12) so then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. ... (14) For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. ... (16) ...I agree with the Law, confessing that it is good. (21) I find then a principle (law) that evil is present with me- the one who wishes to do good. For I joyfully concur with the Law of God in the inner man, (23) but I see A DIFFERENT LAW in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. (25) With my mind (I am) serving the law of God, but ... with my flesh the law of sin. Romans 8:2 ..the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

It was all going very well indeed. The career was ahead of schedule- there had been victory after victory, and promotion after promotion, and now Naaman had been made Chief of Staff and General of Generals. He was on top of his world!

Then— he noticed a few strange sensations in his hands; he saw some white spots on his wrist. After a few days he went to see the doctor. He was shocked by the report! The report was: "You are a leper!" This statement, this diagnosis changed all of Naaman's life. It was a death sentence! Sooner or later it would become common knowledge, and he would be shunned, outcast, and the result was certain deformity and death! The Bible says, "Naaman was a great man— BUT he was a leper!"

But what makes this story worth telling is that even though this pagan general had a sure sentence of death, and by all the laws of nature was doomed to die, HE HEARD A WORD OF HOPE, A MESSAGE ABOUT A HIGHER LAW.

This word of HOPE came from the most unlikely place! It came from a little slave girl— a little girl from Israel that had been captured in one of Naaman's conquests. The little girl evidently cared about Naaman, and she said to her mistress—

"I WISH NAAMAN COULD GO TO ISRAEL— THERE IS A MAN THERE WHO KNOWS GOD— AND WHO COULD CURE HIM OF HIS LEPROSY!"

It wasn't much— but when you are desperate you don't need much to send you looking. The little girl told her mistress and the mistress told Naaman and Naaman told the King of Aram— and the king said, "GO FOR IT!"

So Naaman, the conqueror of nations, the general of generals, takes a small caravan of valuables and heads for Samaria and the King of Israel.

When Naaman arrived in Samaria, the capital city of the Northern Kingdom, he wasted no time. He went right to the top! When he got through stating his reason for coming, King Jehoram (wicked Ahab's wicked son) was absolutely beside himself.

"I'VE COME TO ISRAEL BECAUSE I'VE HEARD YOU HAVE A CURE FOR LEPROSY!"

Everyone knew that there is no cure for leprosy, but here stood the general of one of Israel's traditional enemies, making an impossible request. Naaman was a fearsome sight to all the neighbors of Aram, and Israel in particular.

"AM I GOD?" asked the king to his subjects. "WHO DOES THIS RAVING MANIAC LEPER FROM SYRIA THINK I AM? HE IS SIMPLY PICKING A FIGHT WITH US! HE INTENDS TO DESTROY ISRAEL!"

Naaman, for his part, was in no mood to fight or argue. He didn't think there was much hope, anyway. He simply gave the word and the caravan wheeled about and turned to go back toward the north and east.

Just about that time a man came running through the crowd. His name was Gehazi, and he was the servant of Elisha the Tishbite, a prophet of God.

[Now Elisha was not exactly well-accepted at court. His style of worship was obsolete, and his idea of direct contact with God was not too sophisticated. And Elisha was not always civil to King Jehoram! But somehow Elisha had got word of the king's problem, and so he had sent his servant with a message to the king.]

"SEND THE GENERAL OVER TO ME!"

It took the king about ten seconds to decide that sending General Naaman to the prophet would be a good idea. He didn't know where the prophet lived, but Gehazi was willing to guide him. So the entourage turned and left the palace.

When they arrived at the home of the prophet Gehazi went in and found Elisha. I think Elisha was in the back garden.

[Elijah was a rugged man, an outdoorsman, fond of camel skin coats and honey and locusts. But Elisha was a city person, smooth and civilized, and yet not one bit less fearless or straightforward than his illustrious teacher had been. He was not over-awed by the power of Aram's armed might outside his doorway. He did not need to satisfy any personal curiosity.]

Elisha sent word by the servant, and never himself spoke a word to Naaman:

"GO AND WASH IN THE JORDAN SEVEN TIMES AND YOUR FLESH SHALL BE RESTORED TO YOU AND YOU SHALL BE CLEAN."

"There it is! Take it or leave it! You are offered healing- - at the price of obedience and faith in God! At the price of doing as you are bidden, not as you think you ought to do!"

The Bible says,

But Naaman was furious and went away and said, "Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place, and cure the leper. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of

Obedying the Higher Law

Damascus better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?" So he turned and went away in a rage. (5:11-12)

"IT'S TOO SIMPLE! IT'S TOO HUMBLING!"

The message of finding the higher law is not unique to this story. That message is that WHEN WE COME TO THE END OF HUMAN RESOURCES, IF WE WILL ACCEPT HIM ON HIS TERMS THERE IS GOD!

We may think that we have life pretty much under control— and yet we discover that we are sinners! Like Naaman, we are under sentence of death! The wages of willful sin is death!

We seek help for the symptoms of our sinfulness- the damage it does to our lives. We go to church— we ask for help in many accepted channels and we hear things like:

1. Sin is an outdated concept. There really isn't any sin any more— it is a combination of our environment and our inheritance. We have received a bad deal from our parents. Whatever feels good is all right to do.

But somehow we KNOW that we are on a collision course with a just and holy God— and that we are not prepared. or...
2. We are offered various human therapies which are helpful as far as they go, but which can not reach to the depths of the real need of our lives, which is freedom from the power and guilt and condemnation of sin. We are not just people who sin— we are SINNERS!

And THEN— we hear the simple Gospel message:

The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, shed on the Cross of Calvary, cleanses from all sin! Christ died for the sinner! Or this passage in Romans 10: (8-11) "the Word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and if you believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved!"

And our "sophisticated" reaction is like the ancient Aramean general, the leper named Naaman. "IT IS TOO SIMPLE!" NAAMAN'S STORY DOESN'T END WITH HIM GOING OFF IN A RAGE:

His servants prevail on him with common sense: "What can you lose?" He goes to the banks of Jordan— maybe to the same place Jesus was baptized, who knows?

He looks up on the banks and sees the natives watching. He knows he will look stupid! But he wades in— and dips under the water.

Nothing! He dips again— and again

Nothing! But seven times down and the seventh time up he looks— and . . . the white spots are gone!

He comes up out of the muddy water and heads, dripping, for his chariot. "Go back to that prophet's house!" he orders the driver. The caravan wheels around again and heads back for Samara.

And this time Elisha the Tishbite comes out. Maybe there is even a little smile on his face.

"Here is a million dollars!" says the general, Naaman.

"I won't take one red cent!" says the prophet. (Evidently he is on salary, like Billy Graham; or else, he hasn't learned how to make a big prophet like the TV prophets.)

The general rides away a man who is convinced of the power of Jehovah God!

Summary and Application:

I suppose that I have read this portion of Romans -speaking about being bound by lower laws— and then finding freedom in higher laws— a hundred times or more. It is NOT a simple, easy passage. We think as we read, "Why do you make it so difficult? Why don't you simply spell it out in language that we can easily understand?"

Two or three things come to mind when I think of 'easily understanding' the Word of God.

Obedying the Higher Law

One is— that the way of salvation is easily entered, simple to grasp, requiring only the obedience of faith to say, "Jesus is LORD!"

But another is— that we think that because eternal life is a free gift, then it does not require study and application and effort, like any other wonderful truth. We think in arrogance that we know all that is to be known simply by our native intelligence. And that simply is NOT so! Paul speaks of the deep things which the Corinthians OUGHT to have been grappling with, but they simply were going over and over the same elementary truths of arithmetic, not realizing the depths of algebra and calculus and wonder that God had for them to understand and practice.

And finally, along with this lack of willingness to study: We think that God should always bend to our way of thinking; we think that we are the measure of understanding. But we must be willing to endeavor to follow God's teaching, and enter into His lessons.

This, then, is a difficult passage. It expresses the deepest joy of freedom and life in God found anywhere in the Bible. But it demands our full attention. We will not plumb its depths in this sermon together, and I hope that you will not solve its meaning this afternoon and come back with all the answers tonight. But you can begin, or you can continue— as I am sure that we all are in some measure engaged in this "heart-of-Romans truth."

Have you submitted to the Lordship of Jesus Christ? Are you even NOW confessing with your mouth, and by God's grace, believing in your heart? It is profoundly simple, and simply profound— but the freedom and power of Romans 8 is for us all! We can obey God's HOLY law, and be FREE from the "law of sin and death" as we submit to the "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus!"

Elisha said to Naaman, "Go, wash and be clean!"

The Spirit says to you and to me: "Confess, believe, and be free from sin and condemnation!"

Prayer

Hymn No. 465 Trust and Obey

The Great I AM is Where You Are

August 30, 1992 PM

Exodus 3: *I AM THAT I AM*

John 10: *I AM the Door...*

Everybody knows what God is like! That is— until they try to describe Him. Sometimes I think we are like the little kindergarten boy painting at his easel, with his frock made out of his father's shirt.

"What is that you are painting, Andrew?" "I'm painting God!" "But Andrew, no one knows what God looks like!" "They will when I get done with this picture!"

I. THE INEFFABLE GOD

A. The fact is God is NOT 'LIKE.' He is INEFFABLE! God is NOT "like" anything! God IS! Not is LIKE, but IS! Do you see the difference?

B. We may not have pictures of God, but God is a God who reveals Himself to faith:

1. In ancient times God spoke through prophets and holy men of God:
2. He revealed Himself to Moses as: I AM THAT I AM
3. The great "Call to Worship" of the Old Testament is still valid:

(Deuteronomy 6:4,5) "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Jesus re-emphasized this call to worship, and added, "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

4. There is ONE God of heaven and of earth. One "God for all purposes": this was a revolutionary concept to ancient peoples. They had gods for everything. But then, you see, they constructed their gods; but the God of revelation was different— IS different, I should say.

In a practical way, it is still revolutionary to say "There is ONE God of heaven and earth!"— for we have "one God" to take care of life's "ritual times" when we are "born" and "married" and when we "die." But all too often in between we serve the non-gods of the culture, the day, the age— and Christians are not distinguished from the rest of the non-believers!

But remember, it is still true: GOD is ONE— God of heaven and earth. He is "not LIKE."

II. THE IMMINENT GOD

- A. This great, transcendent God has a face. [The INEFFABLE is also the IMMINENT.] While it is true that we will never "know" God in the sense of comprehending all that He is, it is possible to KNOW Him right here and now in the sense that He IS our Friend, and that He desires to BE our Friend.

And so it is that this great God of heaven and earth has made Himself available to us.

As the writer of Hebrews opens his epistle:

"GOD, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through Whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power." (Hebrews 1:1-3)

God has a face. That "face" is Jesus. As we come to know Jesus, we come to see God, and to know HIM, the I AM.

- B. This great God meets us at our point of need. WE are NOT the center of the Universe. GOD does NOT exist for us; WE exist for HIM. But at the very same time, God stoops to our weakness; God loves us; God reveals Himself to us as Father and Friend and Loved One.

And so sometimes we say "God is 'like'" when we try to describe ways that God relates to us:

1. Consider just ONE writer's attempt to show us the nearness of God in Jesus Christ: John (in His Gospel) records Jesus as saying:

I am the Bread of Life I am the Door I am the Good Shepherd I am the Light of the World I am the Way the Truth and the Life I am the Resurrection and the Life I am the True Vine (and Ye are the Branches)
2. Let me lift out just ONE of these "I AM" statements: "I am the DOOR!" A doorway is (1) an entry and an exit; a door is (2) a source of security, a haven; a door is (3) access to the "beyond" ("By ME you shall (not only come IN and find LIFE, but you shall) go in and out, and find pasture.")

Jesus Christ is the ACCESS to everything GOOD and everything WORTHWHILE in all of life! He is God-making-life-available!

III. WHERE CAN I FIND THIS GOD?

A. You CAN'T find Him— He has to find YOU! But good news! He is always LOOKING for you! He is speaking if we will listen!

1. The face of Jesus is reflected in the love of His people. I need to see it, and sometimes I see it in you. You need to see it, and sometimes you see it in me.
2. It is important that if we know God, we need to give Him access to us so others who are seeking Him will not be disappointed!

B. Our greatest privilege is to press into the knowledge of Jesus

Conclusion:

What is God like? God is a great Mystery! But God is also the gentle Jesus you have known since you were a Baby! God is Your dearest, closest Friend! God is NEAR— just NOW!

His promise is: "Draw near(er) to Me— I will draw near(er) to you! (James 4:8.)"

Prayer:

The Great I AM is Where You Are

Wherever we are in our spiritual journey, O God; show Yourself to us in newer, fresher, stronger ways.

Whatever our needs may be just now, O God; help us to see that You are what we need most of all. And so, help us to come near to You so that You can come near to us.

In Jesus' name. Amen

Invitation - (Essence of the prayer) - Hymn 247 *Only Trust Him*

The Privileges of Faith

August 29, 1992

Lesson: 1 Corinthians 3:5-23

Text: 21 "All things are yours..."

Have you ever wondered what it might have been like to grow up wealthy? (With money, that is. Without having to "make do" on every little thing.) I have wondered myself.

I'm a depression child; I have trouble with a verse that says: "All things are yours!" I find it, frankly, hard to believe!

The Depression made one indelible impression on me, I'm afraid! I catch myself quoting the price of everything— pinching pennies. That is not all bad.

But I need to beware lest I become like Judas who believed all extravagance was wrong, even when it was poured in fragrance and love over the head and feet of Jesus.

God's children never should waste anything. Like good rich children we should realize the worth of every dollar. But still the fact remains: we are NOT Depression Children spiritually! We are children of the King of kings. And here is Paul telling us:

All things are YOURS!

What can he mean? ALL THINGS! MINE!

I believe this means that when we belong to God in Christ, then like a loving father He seeks the very best for us!

I believe this means that when we are where God wants us to be, then heaven and earth are obligated somehow to see that God's best will works for His glory and our ultimate good.

I believe this means that you and I are incredibly wealthy and yet that usually we don't know how to "zero in" on our privileges:

I. GOD'S CHILDREN HAVE THE PRIVILEGE OF PARTNERSHIP WITH GOD IN LABOR

The privilege of working.

Work is not a curse; work has been cursed ["In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou till the land."]- there are elements of drudgery in even the most exciting lines of labor. But we live to work; our joy is in our accomplishment. Life consists of purpose, of mission. We do not live, we cannot be fulfilled until we have found a meaning for our lives.

This verse tells us that believers are co-laborers with God. We are not hapless slaves, to carry on God's labor as He commands; we are not spectators to watch God work as we sit back and wish; but rather we are slaves of love, willing to labor FOR God, only to discover that He intended that we work alongside Him, and be a part of what HE is doing in this world.

[The work of the institutional church is not totally coincidental with the work of believers together with God. There is good and necessary work to be done in and for the church. But most Christians will find their place of fulfillment outside the official, designated tasks of the church! The church becomes an equipping, supporting, energizing, loving center out of which the work of the church members, working together with God, is carried forward.]

Work has a bad name among some evangelicals. We are saved by grace. No question about that. Not of works, lest any man should boast. True.

But later in this same epistle (1 Corinthians 14) Paul speaks about grace bestowed on himself, and in the same breath says "I have worked harder than any of the other apostles!" Grace enables us to harness our energies

II. GOD'S CHILDREN HAVE THE PRIVILEGE OF THE AWESOME BEAUTY OF WORSHIP

There is that within us that desires the beauty and the majesty of temple worship. We may not recognize it; we may have stifled it— but there is that within each of us which cries for orderliness and beauty.

The church— God's people collectively ARE God's temple. Together we constitute the habitation of the great God. All the beauty and majesty and symbolism and glory of a cathedral are built into God's temple.

Low-energy; high-energy— zeal— human joy— all are good in turn as they fill a place. But nothing but the inhabitation of God in His holy temple will satisfy the need each human heart has for taking his or her place in the living cathedral which is the home of God when His people are at worship.

Willimon's remark about an evangelical who left to join the Episcopalians: he "loved the dignity and stateliness and ritual and ceremony of their services." "I love Episcopalians who are birthright Episcopalians," was Willimon's remark. "But somehow low-church people never quite get it right." The rector's blunt retort to the would-be Anglican: "Go join the Masons! We don't want you!"

III. GOD'S CHILDREN HAVE THE HIGHEST PRIVILEGE OF ALL IN BELONGING TO GOD

The privilege of belonging. personal faith/belonging

We think of wealth as an accumulation of possessions. The Corinthians had adopted to some degree a narrow view of what it meant to be people of faith: "This is how genuine faith IS:"

But Paul said, "No! This radical belonging to Christ (YE are Christ's!) puts us at the center of all truth: ("Christ is God's!- - and in HIM, then ALL THINGS ARE YOURS!"

What does that mean?

Conclusion:

The Privileges of Faith

We get everything backward because we start with the premise that we know what will satisfy. We are pressured to "add faith" to our loves just in case there may be some truth to this heaven and hell stuff.

We work hard so that we can retire from work.

We think of worship and beauty in worship as superfluous, and want religion that is "practical" and that "meets our needs."

We think that "belonging wholly to Christ" is something for missionaries or for people stupid enough to be full-time pastors or holiness college professors.

We think that really being serious about our faith must be like going on a diet: everything good is fattening.

But the Bible tells us that when we belong to Jesus everything good in the universe is in orbit around our best interest!

ALL THINGS ARE YOURS!

Not because in and of yourself you are so great— but you are Christ's and Christ is God's and so Your work is God's work and God's work is your work and Your worship is attended by angels...

The Cost of Discipleship

September 6, 1992 AM

Text: Luke 14:25-35

Introduction

The disciples were absolutely ecstatic. The Jesus Christ Evangelistic Team was really going big time. True, they hadn't built their own separate temple yet, but there were multitudes— no, GREAT multitudes in attendance every service! The portable Score Board said,

- Attendance Today=5,608;
- Attendance Last Week=4,906;
- Offering Today= 5 loaves 2 fish (enough to feed 5,000 people!);
- Offering Last Week= 7 loaves 6 fish (and over 4,000 people fed!)

Money was coming in for the poor- people were being healed— the whole country side was involved. What a great excitement!

I. TO WHOM WAS JESUS SPEAKING?

Jesus said these words NOT to people who were antagonistic- not to obviously wicked people- but to great multitudes who were attending His ministry; who were "going along"...

A. "Success" is not always what it would seem:

B. A "sifting of motives" was indicated:

1. Jesus began to speak. He was not unkind, but He was not being very diplomatic, either! It seemed as though Jesus ought to get them committed little by little— to tell them the really hard stuff after He had their names on the membership roll. But no, He was saying some really strange things:

If any of you people want to do more than just tag along for the loaves and fishes— if you really want to come after Me— and you

do not hate your father and mother and wife and husband and children— and your own life, too— you cannot be My disciple!

2. This was a challenge to 'commitment-to-the-death'!

As if "hating father and mother" wasn't bad enough, Jesus began to talk about death- of the need to be willing to die for Him, or with Him— even the shameful death that the Romans reserved for the lowest of the low, He said:

And if you do decide to come after Me, then you have to take up your own personal cross— be willing to lay down your life— and you have to follow Me.

- C. The honest meaning of these heavy words: I do not seek to soften the force of the hammer-blows of Jesus words. But it is obvious at the beginning of our response and reaction to these words that Jesus is not preaching hatred of any sort. He is NOT saying that his followers should go home and tell dad and mother, "I hate you now— I am following Jesus— so 'Good-Bye'"

[This, then, is something else than a demand that Christians hate everything and everybody but Jesus and God. If that were so, then TASMANIAN DEVILS would be a good model for our Christian disposition. We have enough Tasmanian Devils in this world— and not a few in the church, perhaps!]

II. WHAT WAS JESUS SEEKING?

The answer is obvious, even trite: JESUS WAS SEEKING COMMITMENT AND LOYALTY. But I am afraid that the depth and scope of this challenge escapes us. We SAY we understand, but:

A. THE COMMITMENT JESUS DEMANDS IS ABOVE EVERY OTHER COMMITMENT.

1. A Christian who has not settled that there is only One Person to obey, ultimately, may do many good things— may be highly organized and Bible-trained— may even be ordained and well thought of by fellow Christians. But a Christian who has not made the supreme commitment of loyalty to Jesus Himself is like the Jetliner hurtling through the skies— when the announcement

came over the intercom:

This is your captain speaking— we have some GOOD NEWS and some BAD NEWS today. The good news is that we have a jet-stream tail wind, and we are making over 600 miles per hour ground speed. The bad news is that our Loran (radar) is broken, and we don't have any idea where we are going!

2. This COMMITMENT underlies and undergirds all we ARE and DO for Jesus.

a. WE CANNOT LOVE GOD'S PEOPLE AS WE SHOULD APART FROM THIS

Jesus clearly intends that we love our fathers and mothers— that we love each other. It was His great concern the night He was arrested. "Love one another!" was His commandment— we call it the Great Commandment.

b. WE CANNOT SHARE GOD'S LOVE WITH THE WORLD WITHOUT THIS

Jesus also intends that we love the world, even as God so loved the world when He gave His only begotten Son. Just before He rose into the glory, Jesus said, "Go ye into all the world and preach the Good News to every creature!"

c. Both of these commitments— to the church, and to the world— rest on the strength of an absolute loyalty to Jesus Christ Himself!

B. JESUS ACKNOWLEDGED DIFFERENT LEVELS OF COMMITMENT.

He was not denying them, nor was He interested in destroying them.

1. The legitimate commitments of life: Look with me at some levels of commitment— on an increasing scale: like

- a. buying a car on time; like
- b. enlisting in the military service; like
- c. enrolling on an academic program— or, like

- d. saying to a girl or a boy some enchanted evening, "I love you!", or like
- e. following that strong commitment up with vows at an altar; or like
- f. looking into the face of a newborn baby and saying, "God help me, I will be a good father, or good mother!"

These are all valid commitments, but the most important, by far, are those that involve the lives of other people. We call them relationships; but every relationship has some measure of commitment.

2. Life needs/demands a Master Commitment: An "agapé focus" that gives a life staying power: Jesus demands this level of commitment to Himself.

Deverne F. Fronke, wrote in his book *Ultimate Intention*: "Believers may not often realize it, but even as believers we are either centered on man, or centered on God. There is no alternative. Either God is the center of our universe and we have rightly adjusted to Him, or we have made ourselves the center and are attempting to make all else orbit around us and for us."

The great Henry Drummond once told a class of theology scholars, "Don't touch Christianity unless you are willing to seek the Kingdom of Heaven first. I promise you a miserable existence if you seek it second."

The only thing wrong about that statement would be IF we limit it to preachers and missionaries or "special Christians!"

III. WHAT RESPONSE DID JESUS GET WHEN HE SPOKE THESE WORDS THEN?

[Resume narrative:]

Luke does not tell us exactly what the response of the great multitude was that day. But we do know what happened to the Jesus Christ Evangelistic Crusade.

John tells us that one day Jesus was preaching like this, talking about His own death, and the fact that He alone is LIFE and that He is the Bread of Life— and the people simply got up and went home.

And there was a scandal— the treasurer was stealing from the offerings— and he reported Jesus to the authorities— and you know the rest. From great multitudes it boiled down to just a few— and they weren't too steady.

But Jesus loved them! And he turned to the disciples— you can read about it in John 6— and He said, Are you going to leave Me, too?

Peter's heart was broken! He said, "Lord, where else in all the world can we Go? YOU have the words of eternal life!" And THAT was what Jesus wanted to hear!

Jesus knew that "great multitudes" do not do the heavy work of the Body of Christ, the Church. We enter that Body on personal decision, one-by-one! That is how Peter and the others decided then; that is how we must decide now! IT MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE!

Oh, the PERFORMANCE of the disciples after that was far from perfect. They had to go through the fires and the ten-day-prayer-meeting, and to experience the Descent of the Spirit. But they LIVED for Jesus and they DIED for Jesus and the world has not been the same since!

IV. WHERE ARE YOU IN YOUR COMMITMENT TO JESUS?

Conclusion:

- A. God knows that the very good things in YOUR life can be rivals to the best. Our order of priorities has to be settled once and for all. Jesus demands our first and highest allegiance!

Will you quietly say to Jesus right now:

- I give my life to You!
- I will give it in a dramatic, public martyrdom

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- I will give it in small, daily doses in a rural place where no one knows but You.

B. This allegiance means a PERSONAL, DAILY FOLLOWING:

1. A LOVE THAT FOLLOWS JESUS (27) -the only dynamic, power, that can carry out such a commitment is a personal relationship, the knowledge that Jesus is near and that He approves!
2. "Going along" is not the same as following. Count the cost! Carry your cross to your own crucifixion. Die NOW! Live forever! Come after Jesus!

Prayer - Help me to hear this challenge as for the first time! Help me to give to You everything I have— and everything I am— for time and for eternity. Amen.

Hymn #63 *I Am Thine, O Lord*

The Equation for Real Happiness

September 6, 1992 PM

(Communion)

Psalm 1

Introduction:

Why "Equation"? Because there is a real balance in this Psalm that reflects the balance in the true life of faith. Rev. Mike Ballard said to me in conversation this morning that there are really five Gospels— and most people use the fifth Gospel the most of all. And that fifth Gospel is simply all the promises lifted out of the other four— a totally positive message.

Psalm One is both positive and negative. But let's begin at the beginning:

"Blessed" as used in Psalm 1 means "happy." Not silly- happy, or joke-happy, or good-luck-happy— but genuinely glad-to-be-alive-happy. It isn't a bad way to be.

"Blessed" comes by way of a life lived in harmony with God. It is based on a totally focused life; one that is centered in God, as Jesus demanded, and as we spoke about this morning.

"Blessed" doesn't just happen. If we have this kind of "blessed" it comes because we stay connected to grace, God's riches, undeserved, unearned, but not unwanted or unsought.

I. THE ELEMENTS OF TRUE HAPPINESS As Outlined In This Doorway To The Psalms:

NEGATIVE: Blessed is the (man) that walketh NOT in the counsel of the ungodly;
NOR standeth in the way of sinners; NOR sitteth in the seat of the scornful.

I don't quite know what to make of the progressive "inertia" there . . .

The Equation for Real Happiness

But I DO know that we have need of the negative grace of God: for forgiveness (or taking away our guilt) and for cleansing (or taking away our envy, bitterness, evil attitudes and all the rest)

And I do know that we have need of staying away from that which leads back into sin:

Godly separation from the world! What is it?

POSITIVE: Blessed is the (man) (1) whose DELIGHT is in the LAW of the Lord! The way God makes things work!

"In the stars His handiwork I see!"

What God demands is exactly what makes us happy!

We get the idea that God's law is like bad-tasting medicine- - maybe it is good for us— but it isn't really good! But David tells us that God's WILL IS OUR TRUE DELIGHT!

KNOWN (in touch): "The LORD knows the way of the righteous." It is the devil's work to isolate us— and to make us feel that we are alone; that no one cares, especially God! The LORD knoweth the way of the righteous!"

NOT unknown (out of touch): The ungodly are not beyond the factual knowledge of God— but they place themselves out of His relational knowledge. They are not in His friendship circle by their own choice— for that requires LEAVING sin as well as RECEIVING grace . . .

FRUITFUL, ON PURPOSE

- Planted
- Nurtured
- Fruitful
- Lasting

- Everlasting ... the greatest source of happiness (with the possible exception of grandchildren) is the inner persuasion that God has used you in some small way!

II. THE KEY TO ALL THIS HAPPINESS: "DAY AND NIGHT"

Never getting far away from the Presence of God!

Is this realistic?

Should we think about God and His way all the time? Isn't that somehow neurotic?

Let's be exceedingly practical and honest: HOW TO:...

1. You cannot maintain what you don't have; so you must be born again!
2. You have to make that SUPREME COMMITMENT!

Then comes LOYALTY (the commitment maintained, through:)

- Worship
- Public
- Private

and also maintained by

- Fellowship in the Faith (the Great Commandment) - People you pray for every day, and who pray for you. People you would give your life for. People that have also made the Supreme Commitment and are being LOYAL. and by
- Witnessing to the Faith (The Great Commandment) - An attitude toward the whole wide world; expressed toward the people God makes available to you. I want to close by talking about a most intimate and personal part of this EQUATION of happiness:

III. MAINTAINING AN INTIMATE PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

A practical close:

A plan for personal devotions.

The Equation for Real Happiness

I challenge you to use this way for thirty days through revival with Janine Tartaglia at the end of this month. NOW TO THE SACRAMENT OF COMMUNION:

The Kingdom of God is a Party

[1]

September 13, 1992

Text Luke 15:1-10

Luke 15:6 "rejoice with me"

Luke 15:9 "rejoice with me"

Luke 15:32 "It was right that we should make merry"

Introduction

Anyone knows that this chapter is about being lost and found. We learn a lot about a seeking, caring God from these three brief stories. But there is more to these stories than meets our first glance. It is significant WHY Jesus told these stories— and TO WHOM! It may surprise you that these parables are as much about the attitude God's people should have toward those who are lost as they are about salvation itself.

[When Jesus told these stories He was going about His business— doing what He normally did. He and His disciples were taking the kingdom of God into the weekday world. They were expressing their faith outside the temple as well as they faithfully worshiped inside. They were eating with publicans and sinners. And the religious elite, who were always looking for flaws in Jesus, grumbled about it.]

I. THE PEOPLE THAT PROMPTED THESE PARABLES

- A. The people to whom Jesus addressed these stories were learned; especially in the written law; they were scribes and Pharisees— people who literally lived and breathed the Torah.
- B. They were grumblers; or in some translations, they were murmurers— complainers.

To "murmur" means a soft, low complaint— a whine— they talked among themselves instead of openly asking Jesus about their concern. And complainers and murmurers and grumblers are basically unhappy people.

- C. They were out of touch with the basic work of God in Messiah. This basic work is exactly what Jesus had come to do.

[This basic work of God in Christ— WHAT IS IT?] [Precisely what the stories were about.]

II. RECONCILING THE LOST TO GOD

- A. Jesus came to bring God down to where we live in order that he might bring us up to fellowship with God forever! The whole entire idea of "lost" is being away, separated, out-of-touch with God!
- B. And so— this lesson: "Variations on the theme of lost-ness" Three stories on one theme: being LOST is serious business— God Himself is interested in finding the lost— and all heaven is pleased when the lost is brought back!
- C. Being LOST is something to which we can all relate to some extent: "Have you ever been truly LOST?"

[Illustration: My son Stephen was (at least mis-placed) in the Museum of Natural History in New York City. He was nine years old. For more than an hour— and there was concern on his part and ours: "Where were you?!?"]

1. Lost like a sheep: "All we like sheep.. turned each one to HIS/HER own way! An introduction to THE UNIQUE ISOLATION OF DAMNATION. Hell will be full of isolated individuals wrapped in their unique selfishness... Hell calls out "Do your own thing! Be yourself! Rise above the masses!" The shepherd simply goes after us one by one! See Him seeking...calling..
2. Lost like a coin: "Many of life's forces are 'set' before birth. You are the product of many forces beyond your control: Your IQ... your \$\$.. your limits... your country of birth... God comes SWEEPING AWAY THE DARKNESS— valuing His image— "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" Think about that!

Every man, woman, boy, girl is a coin with God's image stamped on it— and Father God is looking for His precious coinage!

3. (Lost by deliberate bull-headed choice!) The third "lost" in this chapter is— a lost child! A Prodigal. A lost that must have a response of WILL in order to be found!

- D. Perhaps as He spoke to the Pharisees and scribes Jesus had His hand on the shoulder of Peter— and he and the other disciples thought of a man they had met among the tombs in Gadera, his name had been "Legion"— they thought of a woman bent over from infirmity for 18 years that Jesus had straightened up with a word— they thought of the ruler of the synagogue in Capernaum, named Jairus, whose daughter had been raised from the dead— and of another woman who had had an issue of blood for 12 long years that had just touched the hem of Jesus' robe and had been healed.

And they ALL understood what Jesus was about: Jesus was where He was and was doing what He was doing because He loved them all! And He especially was there to bring us all— all lost without Him— to bring us all to God!

- E. But there is another part to this message to the Pharisees: a common thread beside being LOST and FOUND. All three stories end with REJOICING!

It is a measure the reality of our faith not only what our attitude is— but what "turns us on!"

[These sour intellectuals weren't happy until others could dot the "i" and cross the "t" like they did— and then they didn't have it right— but they couldn't see that Jesus was finding the lost before their very eyes!]

III. THE PURPOSE OF THE MESSAGE

[Why, do you suppose, did Jesus bring this lesson to the Pharisees?]

- A. The "usual" application is vital: God is seeking YOU! God loves YOU! Whether you are lost by carelessness or by (seeming) circumstances— or even by deliberate choice— God still loves you and is seeking you! God is waiting for you to "come home to HIM!"

The Kingdom of God is a Party

B. But what was Jesus saying to the "wise" that day?

1. Do not mistake the work of Messiah! People are LOST apart from God! They are not lost because they are not keeping your rules or because they are "liberal" or "fundamental" or "educated" or "simple." They are lost if they are away and apart from God!

God is always concerned about the lost. He is illuminating, revealing, sweeping the corners; He is calling, carrying, bandaging, forgiving. What God can do in regard to the lost, God does.

2. GOD IS ALWAYS LEADING A CELEBRATION OVER THE FOUND!

God is a cheerleader, who applauds every sincere effort toward the light— who makes heaven ring with music when a child in VBS sings "Into MY heart, Lord Jesus!" and really invites Jesus in!

Conclusion - God is our Father; He wants us to be like HE IS!

1. If we are away from Him, then it is important— absolutely the most important thing in the world— that we be saved! Sheep - coin - son/daughter — God is moving heaven and earth to bring you back!
2. But that is not where this lesson ends.
 - a. We must be like God in NEVER GIVING UP ON THE LOST. We should be God's candle— God's broom— God's under-shepherds—
 - b. When we cannot go and force people to come, we must be like the Father: praying waiting watching— ready to run down the road and say "Welcome into the FAMILY!"
 - c. We must learn to love the sinner without entering into the sin. We do not have to approve of what people are doing in order to let them know that they are important. People are NOT going to beat the door down to the church if they are "lost sheep" or "lost coins." By the grace of God they have to be sought!
 - d. OUR HAPPINESS IS COMPLETE WHEN IT IS LIKE GOD'S OWN JOY; IN SEEING THE LOST COME HOME! This chapter just a hint into what God's heart must be— how much God loves YOU and ME— how he spares no effort

to locate us— and Jesus loved even the scribes and Pharisees! He was seeking THEM, too!

Prayer: Help us to be like You, O God!

Hymn # 68 O to Be Like Thee

[1] The title are Tony Campolo's words, (of course).

A Servant Named Shrewd

September 20, 1992 am

Lesson: Luke 16:1-13

Last Sunday we looked at Luke 15, a chapter the church likes to apply for its own evangelistic use, even though Jesus addressed it first to the Pharisees and scribes.

Today we look at Luke 16, a chapter the church likes to use to describe "others," even though Jesus first addressed it to his own inner circle of disciples.

This is a difficult passage, but before we look at the hard part, we need to address the obvious part, the truth which is assumed at the very outset.

The parable is about a trustee, or manager of an estate, called in some versions a "steward." Whatever the English word, the meaning is clear; the story is about one person entrusted with managing another person's wealth and property, charged with acting in his master's behalf. The disciples understood the meaning of 'steward':

I. WE ARE ALL STEWARDS OF ALL THAT WE ARE AND HAVE

A. Christians are people who have said, "Jesus is LORD!" We are people who have said that God has both CREATED us and REDEEMED us, and so we are acknowledging His ownership, His right to be glorified in every part of our lives.

1. Non-Christians and unbelievers reject this out of hand. We would expect them to! "No one is going to tell me what to do!" is the very essence of human nature.
2. What I cannot understand is Christians who have not settled it that they belong to God! Really, if we can say, by the Spirit of God, "Jesus is Lord!" then we have no choice! WE ARE STEWARDS!

B. HAVE YOU THOUGHT WHAT BEING A STEWARD MEANS?

1. Our THINGS belong to God. When we talk about stewardship this is usually what we are thinking about. Our money, our talents, our possessions are supposed to be dedicated to the glory of God.

But this is not the heart or essence of what stewardship is about; it is the result of our being stewards.

2. [Coming a little closer to the heart of the matter] Our RELATIONSHIPS belong to God. Our inter-personal actions are to reflect God's ownership!

We cannot "give" another human being to God, in the truest sense, for they have to do that for themselves. But we can and MUST give the relationships of life to God!

The easiest relationships to give God are the ones that have not yet been crystallized. When we give God the future, and seek His will in entering new relationships, we avoid great heartache.

The richest and most rewarding human relationships are when all parties involved cooperate in seeking God's will together.

But in the less-than-ideal relationships of life: the mixed marriages, the give-and-take of church viewpoints, the misunderstandings between mixed generations, - the Christian Steward can invoke the lordship, the ownership of Jesus in his or her relationships.

There is more truth here than I can pack into one corner of a twenty minute sermon, but let me use just one important relationship to represent them all:

HOW DO WE GIVE OUR PARENT- CHILD RELATIONSHIPS TO GOD IN FAITHFUL STEWARDSHIP?

The need for stewardship is especially keen in the parent-child relationship: Parents, what is YOUR goal for your son or daughter? I am not just talking about dreams and hopes— but what are you trying to do with the life that has been entrusted to your stewardship?

Let me suggest one over-arching goal (and I borrow without apology from H. Norman Wright) [1]

Our goal as parents is to empower our children to become mature and to release them to become independent from us and dependent on God.

3. [Our THINGS, our RELATIONSHIPS—these are vital. But] THE VERY HEART OF STEWARDSHIP IS WHEN WE GIVE OUR VERY SELF TO GOD! I cannot tell you how important this is!

Is the Christian faith RADICALLY INDIVIDUALISTIC, or is it A SURRENDER OF (EGO) SELF to a Holy and Good God, and by so doing ENTERING INTO A COVENANT OF COMMUNITY WITH THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST??

The latest outrageous claims of our hedonist media— "You deserve to feel good!" "Do whatever fulfills YOU!" — are as old as Eden. Unregenerate human nature wants to be god! Shakespeare put this in the mouth of a father of weak character giving advice to his weak son:

"To thine own SELF be true, and it must follow as the night the day thou canst not then be false to any man." But the sad fact is that we cannot be true to ourselves apart from a relationship with our Maker. And those who do not pretend to know God cannot be expected to buy this business of being trustees of our lives.

It is no good to surrender our THINGS, and our RELATIONSHIPS — our husbands, wives, children— if we do not truly surrender ourSELVES!

The entire New Testament is written in the context of THE SURRENDERED LIFE! The life lived out for God in the community of believers!

The New Testament does not indicate a METHOD of community, but the SPIRIT OF COMMUNITY IS THE ESSENCE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH! We exist to edify the Body, to surrender our right to "self" to the Lord of the Body, and we believe and trust that this is the pathway to true life!

C. One other thing about stewards that is "obvious" here: STEWARDS ARE CALLED TO ACCOUNT! Christians shall give an account of their trust. As trustees, stewards, managers, Jesus made it clear on many occasions that we shall be called to accounting.

1. We ARE saved by grace, through faith, and not of works- - so when we come to know Jesus as Savior and Lord all our sins are forgiven, and we shall not have to answer for them. We do not need to face Judgment Day with dread.
2. The servants of God WILL face a time of accounting when rewards will be assigned according to the faithfulness of service. Over and over Jesus taught things like:

"Don't hide your talent in a napkin— or you will suffer loss!" "To whom much is given much shall be required!" There will be an accounting! These truths are obvious and can be accepted at face value from this passage. But the passage is not simple!

[Narrative: This servant Shrewd knew (all the above.)

He also knew his "number was up." So he devised a scheme to soften the crunch of judgment! He used his power of office to undercut the demands of his master— "don't pay the full amount!" He thought that maybe he might get a job with a competitor— And the master actually expressed a form of admiration—before the hammer came down!]

II. THE IMPACT OF THE SHREWD SERVANT STORY

- A. [FORESIGHT IS GOOD!] The master of Shrewd commended him for planning ahead. "The children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light!" What can this mean?

A dedication to objectives and goals. The kingdom of God is not a profit-driven business. But there is no undertaking in all the universe as important as kingdom business.

And yet in our attitude we often treat the kingdom as a second-class hobby. We treat our paycheck with supreme deference; we then address our leisure and vacation times, our schedules of personal interest— AND THEN WITH WHAT IS LEFT OVER WE THINK OF GLORIFYING OUR MASTER.

The children of the world take their career success very seriously indeed. Can we children of light take a lesson from Shrewd? WHAT OBJECTIVES AND GOALS DRIVE US? WHAT GOALS DO YOU HAVE FOR YOUR CHILDREN??

B. ["FORESIGHT IS GOOD!" BUT] "I'M AN EXCEPTION" NEVER WORKS IN CHRIST'S KINGDOM! To "cut corners" in the least bit in spirit, or in principle is to lose everything!

1. On the surface it would SEEM that this is one time that Jesus gave approval to doing a wrong thing for a right purpose (or, the classic "The end justifies the means.") But this is simply NOT so! The end NEVER justifies the means! Jesus NEVER violates His own holy character!
2. What recourse did Shrewd have? He should have thrown himself on the mercy of his master!
3. The lesson closes with a broad hint into the deepest truth of which we are capable of grasping: that eternity is the real target for our faithful relationships here and now! Ponder this enigmatic statement:

"If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who shall give you that which is your own?" (11,12)

Conclusion:

If you are a Christian, you are a manager, a steward, a trustee. You have no choice whatsoever. The only choice that you have is...

WHAT KIND OF TRUSTEE ARE YOU GOING TO BE?

A Servant Named Shrewd

Prayer

Hymn No. 51 (Exalt Him) Because I Have Been Given Much

[1] Wright, H. Norman, The Power of a Parent's Words, Regal Books, Ventura, CA., 1991, pp 41,42

The Love of a Great God for Little People

September 20, 1992 PM

Psalm 138:6 Though the LORD be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly...

There are four phrases which stand out to me in this brief Psalm.

- "I will praise You with my whole heart!" (1);
- "In the day when I cried You answered me, and strengthened me with strength in my soul." (3);
- "Though the Lord be high, yet hath He respect unto the lowly" (6); and "The LORD will perfect that which concerneth me." (8). The Psalm begins in praise, and ends in confidence.

I would like to begin with the third phrase, "Though the Lord be high, yet hath He respect unto the lowly" (6) for it is the wonderful heart of this truth.

I. A GREAT GOD WHO LOVES LITTLE PEOPLE

- A. Our God IS great beyond our comprehension: the greatest minds of the world cannot penetrate His mysteries [Stephen Hawking— the laws of physics stop at the edge of a "black hole." He speaks of probing into the mysteries— to know the mind of God... if there is a Creator!]

There IS a Creator! He is big enough to fill the Universe. But He is condescending enough to dwell in the heart of a junior boy or girl who sings, "Come into me heart, Lord Jesus!"

- B. When we are self-sufficient or self-important, we don't need God, and God does not come to "a summons." But those who love Him, and who let Him know their needs have God's attention!

God hears the prayer of the lowly in heart!

- C. Even trouble cannot separate this great God from His people (7) "Though I walk in the midst of trouble thou wilt revive me!"

- D. AND NOTHING CAN ULTIMATELY FRUSTRATE GOD'S LOVE! "The Lord will PERFECT! Complete! THAT WHICH CONCERNETH ME!" (8)

II. A GREAT GOD WHO ANSWERS PRAYER

- A. Our God usually does not do for His people what they do not request! We need to cultivate the habit of talking EVERYTHING over with God in prayer! "Ye have not because ye ask not." When our hearts are centered, then we can have freedom in prayer. John 15:7
- B. We have all been taught that we need to pray. But we never have been quite sure WHY! But prayer is how we (1) get acquainted with God, and it is also how we (2) connect to His great reserves and reservoirs and resources of grace. "When I cried, YOU heard and answered!" said the Psalmist. When we pray, God listens!

III. WHOLE-HEARTED PRAISE

David put the "key" to assurance first: it is the will to praise God with an undivided heart!

I quoted the great Henry Drummond last Sunday, when he once told a class of theology scholars,

"Don't touch Christianity unless you are willing to seek the Kingdom of Heaven first. I promise you a miserable existence if you seek it second."

I said that the only thing wrong about that statement would be IF we limit it to preachers and missionaries or "special Christians!" When we praise God with ALL our hearts, this great God Himself stoops to where we are!

Conclusion

God is great! He is concerned with the nations, and the planets and stars. But God is so great that He is deeply concerned with your decisions, and your needs!

When I was starting out as a Christian I prayed for miracles, and I believe they came. Is God different today? Can He still change hearts, and mend relationships, and bless lives?

Of course He can!

But we need to tell Him our concern, to "cry out to Him!"

And we need to pray with an undivided heart!

We cannot praise and pray over top of known sin in our lives. We need to confess our sin. If there are things that are wrong in your life, then even though God wants your very best, He cannot break through and give it to you because you have a divided heart!

And we cannot fulfill God's will for our lives (or see HIM fulfill it!) over the top of willful holding back in the stewardship of our lives! God does not want our gifts and talents as much as GOD WANTS US! HE WANTS OUR UNDIVIDED LOYALTY! HE WANTS OUR LOVE!

CAN HE HAVE YOURS?

#397 - Where He Leads Me I WILL Follow

A Story of Separation

September 27, 1992

Luke 16:19-31

Introduction:

1. The two men in this story were opposites in many ways.

[THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS AS THEY SEEM TO BE ON THE SURFACE]

We do not know both their names, but Jesus gave the one man the name "Lazarus." Lazarus is the Greek form of the Old Testament name "El-eazar" which means "God my help!" Clearly Jesus was giving him a character sketch in his name, like "Christian" in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Tradition has named the rich man in the story "Dives."

Dives was rich, Lazarus was very poor. One man wore Brooks Brothers suits, the other got his clothes for free at Good Will. One had more than he could eat of caviar and steak, the other scrounged behind restaurants.

The two men both died, but even their death served to magnify and make permanent the contrast, only now the tables were turned around. The poor man died and was carried by angels into Abraham's bosom, the place of the righteous. The rich man died, and was buried, and opened his eyes in a place of torment.

In this last scene, the final tableau of the story these men are on opposite sides of an impassable chasm. On the one side is heaven. On the other side is hell.

2. [WHAT WAS IT, REALLY, THAT WAS THE DIFFERENCE, THE POINT OF SEPARATION BETWEEN THESE TWO MEN THAT BROUGHT THEM TO BE ON OPPOSITE SIDES OF THIS CHASM?]

At the very least this story of Jesus makes us think about destiny— the hereafter. What can we say about heaven and hell?

3. SPIRITUAL REALITY TRANSCENDS HUMAN OPINION

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT DESTINY? I choose to know about heaven and hell only what is revealed in God's WORD. I reject other voices— the "near death experiences" are not any guide on which to build my faith and hope. I choose to trust what Jesus taught about life after death.

ARE HEAVEN AND HELL REAL PLACES? A simple answer to this is, YES! Jesus spoke of them as real. He told the thief on the cross that he would be with Jesus that very day in a real place. And He told his disciples, "I go to prepare a PLACE for you that where I am there ye may be also."

4. But heaven and hell are spiritual realities that extend their influence throughout human existence. The spirit of heaven is the Spirit of Christ. Where Jesus is present, there is an aura of heaven. The spirit of hell is the spirit of isolation and hopelessness and selfishness. Hell is where there is no love, joy, peace, no patience, kindness, goodness, no loyalty, gentleness or self-control.

I want to go to heaven THEN! But I also want to live in the spirit of heaven NOW! Is that possible? I want to avoid going to hell THEN! But I do not want to live in the pain and isolation of hell NOW!

This division that marked a contrast between these two men in life and in death, that became an impassable chasm, THIS DIVISION IN SOME FORM EXTENDS THROUGHOUT HUMAN EXISTENCE!

I. THE SEPARATION BEGINS IN THE DIVISION OF THE HUMAN HEART

- A. People all over the world are KIND! And people all over the world are CRUEL! And sometimes they are the very same people! How can this be?

1. Paul addresses the human dilemma (Romans 7)

"When I would do good, evil is present with me! O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?"

God's people have always known the tug and pull of two worlds.

2. David cries out in one of his prayers (Psalm 86:11)

"Teach me Thy way, O Lord! I will walk in Thy truth: unite my heart to fear Thy name."

3. The Mosaic laws, the basic call to worship, which the Jews use to this very day, is (Deuteronomy 6):

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One; and thou shalt love the Lord with ALL your heart . .

4. Jeremiah cries out: (Jeremiah 17):

"The heart is deceitful above all things, who can know it?"

B. GRACE MAKES IT POSSIBLE TO RESPOND TO GOD'S LOVE, AND TO LOVE GOD WITH ALL OUR HEART!

The Gospel of grace gives us the good news that in Jesus we can have a heart that is forgiven of the guilt of sins, and made free from the power of sin and that enjoys walking in the Presence of the Spirit of Christ. We love to emphasize with our Reformed and Calvinist brothers and sisters, "We are saved by grace through faith, not of works, lest any man should boast." But we are fools if we think that there is no relationship between the way we live and the spiritual condition of our hearts!

II. THE SEPARATION CONTINUES IN THE FIGHT OF FAITH

WE ARE CALLED TO STAND WITH GOD AND RIGHT FIRMLY ON ONE SIDE OF THE ABYSS!

The way we live is an indication of the way we shall spend our destiny!

- A. It seems contradictory to say we are saved by God's grace, and through no efforts of our own, and then seem to turn around and say we have to fight to stay saved!

1. What we do not accept so freely is the fact that the way we live is an indication of the connection we have with God; we are not saved by being "good," but this confrontation of heaven and hell extends into every facet of human life, and God's people are to manifest God's spirit.

2. Christians are those who know where the chasm is, and who stay on heaven's side. Christians are those who continue to walk in the light of God's Presence. Do you know I John 1:7 ? What does it say?

"If we walk in the light, as he [God] is in the light, we have fellowship one with another; and the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin."

Life in Christ is by grace. But life in Christ is to be lived out in the light of God's known and revealed will. Those who walk in darkness are manifestly on the wrong side of the division that becomes the abyss.

3. It is not enough for us to say the correct words at some altar of prayer. It is not enough to acknowledge the truth that Jesus died for all the world and that he died for me. We must say, by the Spirit, "JESUS IS LORD!"

When Jesus is Lord we are called upon to separate ourselves from the spirit that inhabits the other side of the abyss.

B. The call to separation is greatly misunderstood.

1. THE CALL TO SEPARATION IS NOT A CALL TO COMFORT, to gather our skirts of self-righteousness about us and let the world be damned. The Son of God left eternal glory to walk among us, and He expects His sons and daughters to go where there is sin and suffering, too.
2. THE CALL TO SEPARATION IS NOT A CALL TO LEAVE THE NORMAL RELATIONS OF THIS WORLD. Christians are capitalists and socialists; they are rich and they are poor; they are married and they are single.
3. BUT THE CALL TO SEPARATION IS ONE OF DIRECTION AND OF SPIRIT. We cannot be Christian and continue in the spirit of this world. WHAT IS THE 'SPIRIT OF THIS WORLD?'

[Was it wrong for the rich man to have many fine things? I believe the answer to that is "No." But THE RICH MAN COULD SEE HUMAN MISERY WITHOUT BEING MOVED IN HIS HEART!]

His SPIRIT betrayed his heart! It was wrong for him to have these things while he could have done something very specific about helping another person at his doorstep!]

- C. The spirit of the world is INSENSITIVITY and it is SELFISH. If we do not separate ourselves from this evil spirit we will end up separated from God and from everything good!

Let me talk to you about the way that we use our television viewing:

Twenty-five years ago a man named Marshall McLuhan said that instant communication would make "A Global Village" of our world. We can instantly watch war being waged halfway around the world.

But at least one philosopher has said that instead of becoming a Global Village we have become a generation of "Global Voyeurs." One thing which TV can do to us is make us get used to things that ought to make us violently ill.

We do not dare to constantly be interested in other people's suffering and their sin without investing our lives or else becoming hardened.

- I am desperately concerned about the casual and perverted presentation of sex in our prime time so-called entertainment.
- I am even more concerned when often sex is combined with violence.
- I am deeply concerned about channels on cable that are specifically beamed to our junior-high age kids— who have a lot of discretionary money. If you have cable tv I challenge you to sit and watch MTV for twenty minutes or so. The sheer anger, the sheer perversion, the sheer occult overtones, the powerful sexual images are straight out of the pit of hell. Are your children watching it? Your neighbors' children are.

Christians are called to separate themselves from this kind of thing. It is NOT something you can ignore and it will go away. It is on the wrong side of the abyss.

We must find ways of bringing our children in contact with the Spirit of Christ! We ourselves must be certain that we have made the separation!

D. The spirit of the world is PASSIVITY in spiritual matters.

Perhaps we are not doing what we ought; we have the prodding of a still, small voice— but we keep it drowned with noise or with business.

What can we do?

1. We can stop watching filth and violence.
2. We can commend good and we can cry out against evil.
3. We can stop apologizing for being at war with the spirit of the world.

III. THE HOLINESS OF GOD DEMANDS A SEPARATION

A. Why, do you suppose, did Jesus ever tell this story?

1. He wants us to think about destiny.
2. He wants us to see that what we ARE is what we are fast BECOMING!
3. He loves us and wants us to love Him!

B. I want to go to heaven! I want to take my loved ones with me! I want to see my neighbors and friends on heaven's side of the struggle before it is too late. Do YOU?

Paul, the apostle of grace, gives us this ringing call (in 2 Corinthians 6:)

"Wherefore, come out from among them, and be ye separate, says the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will be a Father unto you; and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord!"

Can it be that this week we have a little opportunity to get a fresh view of eternal things? Can our revival be one means God can use to help us in this struggle that reaches into our lives? It is NOT too late to call on God!

Prayer: Revive and renew us, O God!

Hymn No. 47 EH God of Grace and God of Glory

What is This Thing Called Eternal Life?

September 27, 1992 - PM

Luke 16:19-31

INTRO:

Illustration: The professor who introduced his course on Christian theology by putting a bowl of beans on the desk and having his students guess the number; a number which he later revealed. The professor then asked "Which is Christian faith more like?: (1) Guessing the number of beans in a bowl? and later finding out a number, OR, (2) 'Your favorite song?'"

The unanimous response was, "Our faith is like our favorite song!"

Then the professor would try to show them through the rest of his course how they were wrong: Christian faith is dealing with truth-fact that is not changed according to our whims. Thankfully, if we believe the Bible, our faith is not as fragile as having to guess at absolute truths. But our faith IS based on truth that is truth whether or not we happen to believe it!

However can I say it? Believe it— THE FACTS OF SPIRITUAL LIFE ARE FACTS!

I. HEAVEN AND HELL ARE SPIRITUAL REALITY

Luke 16:19-31 Is an oriental story representing absolutely true values - Jesus has a way of turning our value-systems upside down.

He sketches a poor-but-angel-attended blessed man and he contrasts him with a rich-but-wretched damned man.

In the beginning of the story we are almost envious of the rich man and certainly feel sorry for Lazarus.

At the end of the story we are curious about Lazarus' surroundings— he is in an Oriental heaven, eating grapes, lounging on rugs, in the very lap of luxury— while we

What is This Thing Called Eternal Life?

are even more curious about the rich man's surroundings, for they are one of a very, very few glimpses into what we call "hell."

Dives, as we have come to call the rich man, is parched, in torment, begging for one drop of water.

**** We're looking for details: Jesus is giving us basic, vital truth! ****

II. THE WORD OF GOD IS TO BE TRUSTED!

- A. The concern of Jesus is that we discover who we are before it is too late to act on the knowledge.
- B. The Word of God will tell us exactly who we are and what God is like and where we are headed!

The rich man asked Abraham to send back a man from the dead to warn his brothers to change their ways. Jesus had Abraham say, "They have Torah! If they will not hear Moses and the prophets, they would not listen to a man come back from the dead!"

C. HOW CAN I TRUST THE BIBLE?

It is not so easy to submit to the authority of Jesus, and seek to let His words sink down into our souls to show us, rich or poor, what we really ARE, and what or whom we really LOVE and SERVE.

It is not so easy to reject the idols of comfort and of security and to believe that, rich or poor, there is not that much difference in our deepest needs.

It is not so easy, whether we are rich or poor, to deliberately submit to the call of Jesus to follow Him to the cross on the way to the Throne.

GOD IS PATIENT WITH TRUE SEARCHING, SEEKING!

III. GOD IS LOVE, BUT GOD IS GOD!

- A. There is no doubt that human understanding of God grows and develops as we come to know Him better. There is even some truth in seeing a "progressive revelation" from early history and Old Testament times until now.

But we will do well not to think of "the God of the Old Testament" as opposed to "the God of the New Testament" as though God is made in man's image. We will do well to remember that the name of names for our God was given to Moses at the burning bush, the unspeakable name that means "I AM THAT I AM"!

What we say of Him, and what we THINK of Him will make a great deal of difference in how seriously we will take His Word. But it will not affect one iota the Holy One that IS WHO HE IS, and changes not!

B. There is no doubt that following Jesus and being a true Christian will be expressed differently—in many different ways by different people!

1. But being saved and making Jesus Lord! is not "like your favorite song!"
2. Jesus died on the cross to provide the way of salvation! - God is God! He deserves our total allegiance and loyalty! He is HOLY—and He cannot fellowship with selfish, unspiritual, unscriptural home made religion!

Believe! Repent! Confess! Receive!

Conclusion:

What is your faith?

Guessing beans? It can be more than that—it can be TAKING GOD'S WORD EXACTLY AS HE GIVES IT!

ARE YOU ONE WHOSE FAITH IS LIKE "YOUR FAVORITE SONG! I'll worship my own higher power in my own way!

God help us to come into contact with the God of heaven and earth! Help us to believe HIM against all other words! IN JESUS, AND IN HIS WORD, IS THE TRUE SPIRITUAL REALITY!

Text: Luke 9:25 For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?

Prayer - #7 Exalt Him - JESUS IS LORD!

What is This Thing Called Eternal Life?

Illustration:

John LeCarré's novel *A Perfect Spy* pictures a man, Magnus Pymn, with great intelligence and sensitivity, a chameleon able to fit into any and every situation, but who had no abiding loyalty or abiding foundation of trust on which to build his life. He rose to the top of his profession, and had the world at his feet. But his life was absolutely empty. The final solution he found was suicide.

Life Begins with Thanksgiving

October 10, 1992

Luke 17:11-19

Ten leprous men who stood at a distance met Him; and they raised their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

I. THE 'SHUT OUT ONES' APPLY TO JESUS FOR MERCY

They came in a group. But they were not either brothers or true friends. They stood a distance apart because they were shut out of normal human connections. They were lepers.

Being shut out and kept at a distance was more painful than just being gravely ill. What the ten lepers wanted more than anything else in all the world was to get well. But getting well was what they believed would be a means to the end of normal, happy, integrated LIVING.

What they wanted was to get well; what they craved was being loved and being a part of things and being whole. Being well was important. But being WHOLE was all-important.

You might think that these lepers at least had fellowship in their own group of ten. "Misery loves company" is an adage that we all know and quote. Perhaps we don't know what "Misery loves company" really means. It takes more than a common misery to create true loving fellowship.

During the 60's, amidst all the call for equality and brotherhood, and rightly so, among the peoples shut out from the mainstream of society- there was at the grass-roots, one-on-one levels in the movement a sense of separation. In the tent encampment on the Mall west of the Capitol, which was called Freedom City, Dr. Ralph Abernathy told later that there was segregation between the various minorities. Those speaking one language did not want to associate with those speaking another, and so forth.

Jesus accepted these outcasts as they were. He began the process of healing, and gave them the HOPE of "A NEXT STEP."

II. THE 'SHUT OUT ONES' EXPERIENCE THE HEALING POWER OF OBEDIENCE

- A. Jesus met them at the point of their perceived need. There was authority in His voice as He spoke to them. Their faith was inspired.

Jesus gave them an assignment within the law. Jesus told them: "Go and show yourselves to the priests!"

This posed a dilemma. They know they were leprous. That was a fact. They could not even come NEAR the priest in that condition. But they could not be re-admitted to society until they did! The ten lepers had a challenge!

- B. Faith in Jesus does pose a dilemma. We cannot come to God with sin in our lives. But we cannot be saved unless and until we do come to Him! We cannot have fellowship with God until we are free from the guilt and pollution of sin.

I WONDER IF WE GRASP THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SEPARATING POWER OF SIN! THE STORY OF THE TEN LEPERS COMES CLOSER TO HOME THAN WE WOULD LIKE TO THINK!

We KNOW that we are sinful, that we come short of God's glory. Our sinful, selfish condition means that we are "shut out ones" and can not approach a Holy God in any significant way apart from a word of divine grace.

- C. When Jesus said, "Go show yourselves to the priests!" the ten lepers heard a word of grace; they said, "What do we have to lose?" And taking Jesus at His word they started off, polluted and leprous as they were.

And the Word is (14) "as they were going they were cleansed." Evidently there was a healing power in their obedience to the Son of God.

- D. We, too, have heard that divine word of grace. We have heard it over and over again, until we almost take it for granted. We think that it is no light thing to be able to go to the holy place and pray. But we are cleansed because we have heard Jesus say, "You may come to the Father in My name!" Our sins are forgiven, our sinfulness is cleansed as we

exercise the faith in Jesus and His Word and His sacrifice on Calvary and believe that in HIM we are healed!

The miracle of wholeness had BEGUN:

Tremendous power was manifested that day. Ten lepers, polluted, outcast, "shut out ones," started out for the temple, and ten lepers were legally and ceremonially and literally CLEAN before they ever got to show themselves to the priests.

Tremendous power is manifested whenever people obey the clear command of Jesus! We can trust His Word that "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world." It is a wonderful thing to be saved, and on our way to heaven— to realize that we may enter into fellowship with all God's people.

III. ONE "SHUT OUT ONE" TURNED BACK AND COMPLETED A CIRCLE

[Perhaps I am reading more theology into this parable than I should. Holiness preachers have long been accused of this. But as one great man (Uncle Bud Robinson) responded to this charge I say, with him: "If we can see second-blessing holiness where it ain't, then you ought to be able to see holiness where it IS!"]

- A. What I see in this vignette from Jesus' ministry is that the healing or cleansing of these lepers was not really completed until there was more than a selfish receiving on the part of those applying for grace.

One of the ten did NOT go directly to the priests to receive his official document of cleansing. He started to go, and in his obedience he was healed.

But before this man re-entered society officially he went looking for the One who had cleansed him! As he went his heart was overflowing with gratitude and praise to God! His praise to God was evident and abundant and overflowing!

B. Jesus made some comments and a pronouncement!

Ten people that day received the benefits of God's grace! Ten people were reached by the love of God, and made legally and ceremonially clean. But nine of them kept on going without a backward glance.

These people seemed to be a puzzle to Jesus. "Where are the nine?" He asked. It seems they never thought of the God-connection; never thought of a personal expression of praise and thanksgiving and love to God.

I am not saying they just "took it for granted" but that is the way it looks to me!

Jesus seemed to be amazed that the one that did turn back in love was not even a bona-fide Jew! He was a despised half-breed Samaritan, who was an outcast before he even got leprosy!

Jesus pronounced this ONE man, this SAMARITAN "Whole!" "Saved!"

Conclusion:

[Briefly reiterate the purpose of salvation is NOT to free us up for selfish living, BUT to enable us to COME IN to fellowship with God Himself, and with God's people, where true WHOLENESS begins!]

Prayer

A Return to the Shepherd Psalm

October 11, 1992 PM

Communion Meditation

Psalm 23

Jesus said, "I AM the Good Shepherd." John 10:10

The phrase in the 23rd Psalm, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies," is somehow comforting and at the same time mysterious. I often think of it as I approach the sacrament we call the Eucharist, or Communion. And then the phrase takes on an almost immeasurable depth of meaning. This is the table of the Lord!

A TABLE GOD HIMSELF PREPARES

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. A good shepherd knows his sheep; knows what they need, and provides for them. If we are His sheep, then we need to believe that He knows what we need and will provide for us.

What we need is not always what we are most concerned about. I am pretty sure that if a flock of sheep caught wind of a wolf in the vicinity they would be very apprehensive. They would have reason to be worried if their shepherd either did not know about the wolf, or was unable to deal with the wolf. But the shepherd might not be quite as concerned, knowing exactly what he was going to do to protect his sheep.

Jesus knows we need food and fellowship and refreshment. He knows that we are human and frail.

God Himself has provided strength for our journey. Our meat and drink come from the very life of our Shepherd, who lays down His life for the sheep.

A TABLE IN DEFIANCE OF MANY UNCHALLENGED SO-CALLED FACTS OF LIFE

Life is filled with "enemies."

The Psalmist speaks of the "valley of the shadow of death." Life at times is harsh, and dark, and foreboding. We shrink back from that which would destroy us. The only thing that kept the Psalmist from a death of shattering fear was the Presence of the Shepherd. For the presence of the enemies was evident!

Personal enemies! David had real enemies, people who wanted to do him in, to kill him. We have real enemies, too. Life is NOT a game, it is for real.

We have personal enemies; that which would keep us from believing that God really will guide us into abundant life. The Table of the Lord is a corrective that says, What I need more than anything else is You, O God!

Enemies of the CHURCH! The very spirit of our age is corrosive to the spirit of the church, and vice versa. And some of our worst enemies are attitudes from within, attitudes that can be corrected at the table of the Lord. [Perhaps you may think I'm "reaching" to include this, but it needs to be said:]

In the book -Resident Aliens- William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas list some rather unconventional "enemies of the church" which may be present as we partake at the Lord's Table:

- A. One such enemy is SENTIMENTALITY. Commenting that "exciting services" and "good feeling" have become ends in themselves in the ministry they write;

"When that happens the church and ministry cannot avoid sentimentality, which we believe is the most detrimental corruption of the church today.

Sentimentality, after all, is but the way our UNBELIEF is lived out.

SENTIMENTALITY, THAT ATTITUDE OF BEING ALWAYS READY TO UNDERSTAND BUT NOT TO JUDGE, CORRUPTS US AND THE MINISTRY. This is as true of the conservative churches as it is of the liberal. Sentimentality is the subjecting of the church year to "Mother's Day" and "Thanksgiving."

Sentimentality is the necessity of the church to side with the Sandanistas against the Contras. Sentimentality is "the family that prays together stays together."

Without God, without the One whose death on the cross challenges all our "good feelings," who stands beyond and over against our human anxieties, all we have left is sentiment, the saccharine residue of theism is demise. [1]

- B. A second enemy is LETTING THE WORLD DEFINE THE CHURCH; or accepting conventional definitions of the church. If the church accepts the values of our rotten culture, then (and I quote again:)

(The) church will be a source of conventional, socially acceptable answers, a place to reiterate what everybody already knows, even without the church. We shall die, not from crucifixion, but from boredom.

(We- especially pastors are conditioned) "to think in terms of what the church can do to help people- but within parameters set by a society that does not know God. In that myopic world view, solutions to what ails us will be petty. WHAT SORT OF COMMUNITY WOULD WE HAVE TO BE TO BE THE SORT OF PEOPLE WHO LIVE BY OUR CONVICTIONS? [2]

- C. A third enemy of the church named by Hauerwas and Willimon is UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS: We try to make the church whatever WE think it ought to be, or what we think the WORLD wants it to be to meet their perceived needs. Hauerwas and Willimon are speaking especially of pastors, but this truth applies to us all. We must focus in on what GOD wants us to do, and then we find we have peace with Him, and with ourselves! Listen to what they say about pastors, and see if there is an application for you in this enemy of "Unrealistic Expectations":

Pastors come to despise what they are and hate the community that made them that way. Because the church is not a place to worship God, but rather a therapeutic center for the meeting of one another's unchecked, unexamined needs, the pastor is exhausted. Only a few months into his or her first pastorate the new pastor realizes that people's needs are virtually

limitless, particularly in an affluent society in which there is an ever-rising threshold of desire (which we define as "need." There is no job description, no clear sense of purpose other than the meeting of people's needs, so there is no possible way for the pastor to limit what people ask of the pastor. Not knowing what they should do pastors try to do everything and be everything for everybody. The most conscientious among them become exhausted and empty. The laziest of them merely withdraw into disinterested detachment. Not knowing why their pastor is there, the congregation expects the pastor to be and do everything. They become unrealistic critics of the clergy rather than co-workers, fellow truth tellers."

Self hatred is inevitable in someone who feels abused, prostituted, unfairly criticized. The burden of being a generally good person, open and available to people of unbounded need is too great for anybody to bear. Self-hate and loneliness result. [3]

IN THE PRESENCE OF THESE ENEMIES, as well as all others, we have THE TABLE OF THE LORD, which is prepared for us by the Shepherd Himself! And, how does this truth apply?

A TABLE OF BOTH PROTECTION AND WITNESS PROTECTION

By coming humbly to partake of the Blood and Body of the Lord, in obedience and in faith, we find the strength to obey, to take daily direction, to keep in the Path of Righteousness for His Name's sake.

We find that our enemies are powerless to keep us from the Pathway, so long as we are careful to stay in His Presence. Have you read or re-read Pilgrim's Progress lately? Remember the lions that stood by the pathway just ahead? Remember how they were chained, and could not reach to the center of the path?

WITNESS

On November 16, 1989, members of the church family met in the gathering room after the funeral of Donna Bowers. (She had been cared for for weeks in Esther

Sanger's living room in a hospital bed.) The church family sat around tables, and then one after another Donna Bowers' friends stood and told stories of her kindnesses.

Later four of us made the trip to Attleboro for the interment. John, Janice Nielson, Esther Sanger and I. We sang, four part harmony,

"My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness... On Christ the solid Rock I stand all other ground is sinking sand."

The cemetery workers were amazed. "Do you always do that?" they asked.

WE COME TO THE TABLE, TO THIS SACRAMENT, FOR STRENGTH IN THE MIDST OF OUR ENEMIES. BUT AS WE DO, THE CHURCH ITSELF IN A SENSE BECOMES THE SACRAMENT

If a definition of "sacrament" is an outward and visible sign of a spiritual reality—then is not the church to be a living sacrament making visible the love of THE GOOD SHEPHERD WHO CARES FOR HIS OWN?

Our first concern is not what other people may see, but what in fact we ARE, and what we are TO BE and TO BECOME. But what other people may see is not unimportant; as we pay attention to the reality, then what three worlds observe will be the gratitude and worship and appreciation and love of a people who have a God they call "Father" and whose love makes them truly "family." Is there any reality in this vision? This table may well be a key to true evangelism!

Finally,

A TABLE OF PERPETUITY

God will provide for us, as family, in HIS house where we shall dwell with Him, for ever!

[1] Resident Aliens, Hauerwas & Willimon, 121

[2] Resident Aliens, 122

[3] Resident Aliens, 124

Jesus is Lord

October 18, 1992

[Preached at Morning Star Baptist Church, Blue Hill Ave in Roxbury, October 18, 1992 on the occasion of Pastor John Borders' 11th Anniversary Celebration]

JESUS IS LORD

Romans 10:9,10 *If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and if you believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you shall be saved.*

1 Corinthians 12:3 *No man can say, "Jesus is Lord!" except by the Holy Spirit.*

INTRODUCTION

An anniversary is a milestone and calls for celebration, which we are doing. But a milestone is a reminder of where we are, and how far we have come, and what direction we are going. It is a time to make certain that we are on the right road, in the center of God's will.

An anniversary is time for a "tune-up." The idea of tuning up makes me think of the way a great orchestra works. Before they make beautiful music, they spend a good deal of time making sure they are in tune. [Junior high orchestras don't!]

The way a church gets in tune and stays in tune is by learning to say together, by the Holy Spirit, "JESUS IS LORD!"

If YOU are saying "Jesus is Lord!" by the Spirit— and I am saying "Jesus is Lord!" by the Spirit, then we are coming into harmony!

I am going to ask you some questions today, and the answer to every question I will ask is— "Jesus is Lord!" But you may have to think a little bit about just where and how to put the emphasis. I'll show you what I mean:

"WHO is Lord ? — JESUS is Lord!

"Who is LORD ? — Jesus is LORD !"

Let's begin by reaffirming WHO is Lord!

I. WHO IS THE LORD OF THIS CHURCH ?

A. Who is the Lord of heaven and earth? (JESUS is Lord!) Who is the great Lord over all the church around the world, regardless of language, race, culture, or nation? (JESUS is Lord!)

Who is the Lord of this church? (JESUS is Lord!) Who is the Lord of YOUR life? (JESUS is Lord!)

B. But who is JESUS?

1. Jesus is the greatest teacher who ever lived. But that is not enough!
2. Jesus is the sinless One; the great example for us, how we should live! But that is not enough!
3. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God; He is the CRUCIFIED ONE, who died for the sins of the world— for your sins and my sins; He is the LIVING ONE, whom God raised from the dead when He had conquered sin and death and hell; He is the COMING KING, coming again to judge the quick and the dead. THAT is who Jesus is! THAT is who we mean when we say, by the Holy Spirit, JESUS IS LORD!

Let's move on and reaffirm what Jesus IS to us?

II. WHAT PLACE DOES JESUS HAVE IN THIS CHURCH ?

A. What place does Jesus have in heaven and earth? (Jesus is LORD!) What place does Jesus have in the TRUE church of Jesus around this world, regardless of language or race or culture or nation? (Jesus is LORD!)

What place does Jesus have in THIS church, the Morning Star Baptist Church? (Jesus is LORD!) What place does Jesus have in your heart and in your life, day by day? (Jesus is LORD!)

B. But what does it mean to say, "Jesus is LORD!"??

What does it mean to have a "LORD!"?

1. It is a statement of FAITH regarding this world as a whole; we will say more about that in just a moment; but

2. What about saying Jesus is LORD in our church, and in MY heart?

"I don't want just anyone telling me what to do!" - As a matter of fact NO one likes people bossing him/her around.

JESUS IS NOT A "PRESIDENT," OR ONE WHO "PRESIDES OVER SOME SORT OF A DEMOCRACY." (What do you THINK about this, Lord? Maybe if it is a good idea we'll vote on it and use it.)

Certainly there are things we vote on as churches— but we never vote whether or not to do the Lord's will! Our question is never shall we do the Lord's will? It is always, "Lord, SHOW US— and we will DO it!"

3. Being totally Christian means just that— saying, "God, I want Your Son to live in me, by the presence and power of your Spirit! I WANT You to tell me what to do! And by Your grace, I will DO it!"

IS JESUS TRULY LORD IN YOUR HEART AND LIFE? THAT is where the real "tuning up" needs to take place!

Oswald Chambers wrote: "There is only one crisis, and the majority of us have never been through it. We are brought up to it, and kick back every time, until God by his engineering brings us right to the one issue: 'Deny forever your right to yourself.'" If YOUR heart says this, and MY heart says this our churches will reflect the harmony— we will be coming into tune with God's will!

We have been saying JESUS is Lord! We have been saying Jesus is LORD! But there is another word there, in the middle! It tells is WHEN Jesus is going to be in charge! When is this going to take place? Can you answer me?

III. WHEN WILL JESUS BE THE LORD OF THIS CHURCH ?

"Jesus IS Lord!"

- A. When will Jesus be Lord of heaven and earth? (Jesus IS Lord!) When will Jesus have control over His true church, His children all around the world regardless of language or culture or race or nation? (Jesus IS Lord!)

When will Jesus Christ be the Lord of Morning Star Baptist church? (Jesus IS Lord!) When will Jesus be the Lord of YOUR heart and life and mine? (Jesus IS Lord!)

It takes real faith to put this statement in the present tense. Particularly when our world is in such desperate straits. The writer to Hebrews said "We do not yet see all things put under the feet of God's men and women; the full, recognized kingdom has not yet arrived— BUT WE SEE JESUS!"

The wicked enemy of our souls is loose on our earth; wickedness abounds. Satan is called the prince of the power of the air, the ruler of this age. BUT BY FAITH WE SAY THAT JESUS IS THE OVER-RULER! JESUS IS IN CHARGE! JESUS IS LORD!

- B. But what about in YOUR church and MINE?

1. It is a gift of faith to look to the past and see Jesus hanging between heaven and earth, dying on the Cross for you and me, and to truly believe that the Cross was not the end for a great martyr—BUT THE OPENING OF THE DOOR TO ETERNITY BY THE LORD OF LORDS AND KING OF KINGS! It is good, and it is right to say, Jesus WAS Lord!"

It is a gift of faith to look to the past and see the open entrance to an empty tomb, and know that THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS DEFEATED SIN AND DEATH AND HELL! In the Resurrection, Jesus WAS Lord!

2. It is also a gift of faith, and even more thrilling to look to the future when our Lord shall return, and the promise is that EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL CONFESS THAT JESUS CHRIST IS LORD TO THE

GLORY OF GOD THE FATHER! I say with all my heart, and I believe it is true that, JESUS WILL BE LORD!

3. But what does SAVING FAITH say? It says, Jesus IS Lord! Right here and now, in the midst of problems! Right now, when the church is imperfect— (or isn't your church imperfect?)—but right now, I affirm that JESUS IS LORD!

Conclusion:

Jesus will use us when we say by the Spirit: Jesus can do what HE wants to do with us when we say by the Spirit:

Thank God Jesus WAS Lord on the Cross! Thank God Jesus WILL BE Lord throughout all eternity!

But by the Holy Spirit, we affirm that so far as WE are concerned this very day, Jesus IS Lord!

Mystery of Prayer

October 18, 1992

Luke 18:1-8

Last of the ninth- Red Sox v Yankees (in the "olden days") at Fenway. Red Sox batter steps in and makes a sign of the cross on the plate with his bat. Yogi Berra wipes off the plate with his big mitt and says, "Let's let God just WATCH this game, OK?"

Good for baseball ... TERRIBLE for life! OUR GOD IS A GOD WHO GETS INVOLVED IN OUR AFFAIRS! But HOW? (Prayer is NOT simple- - "writing checks" or "going to the store") PRAYER IS TRULY A MYSTERY!

One insight into the mystery of prayer is this story. It is NOT too difficult to understand.

I. THE STORY

An unfeeling, unfair but POWERFUL judge. A helpless but PERSISTENT widow. {In the FACE of the judge all the time...} A SATISFACTORY conclusion— the judge's power transferred to the woman's need.

[A story of contrast: God is NOT like the judge, etc.]

II. THE PURPOSE

Luke tells us "up front" why Jesus told this story. This story is to prompt us 1) TO "LIVE IN GOD'S FACE" ("Men ought always to pray")

God wants an intimate access to every part of our lives. We need to "stay in His face" in that we bring every burden and every joy to Him. This is totally foreign to those who don't know our God. But it is the way He has designed that His people should live. This story is also to encourage us 2) NOT TO GIVE UP! ("Men ought always to pray and not to faint")

God intends that we should lean on Him— depend on Him in the spiritual warfare that is the reality of life.

III. THE QUESTION

Jesus followed this parable on prayer with what seems a surprising question. "WHEN THE SON OF MAN COMES WILL HE FIND FAITH ON THE EARTH?" (Why did He put it here? NOT by mistake!!)

- A. THE DAYS OF CHRIST'S COMING WILL BE TESTING DAYS. Is there a battle for souls going on now? Only a FOOL cannot see how desperate are our times! (MTV— Madonna - Sex combined with violence - casual use of God's NAME - accepting the SHOCKING as "normal")
- B. STAYING IN GOD'S FACE IS THE ONLY WAY WE SHALL WIN THIS WARFARE! IN OUR ARROGANCE AND CONCEIT WE THINK that what the church needs to do is educate better, or hold a few more seminars on current evils, or learn the rules of church growth- and so we do- - and THEN we sincerely pray and ask God's blessing on our efforts!

BUT PRAYER IS WHERE WE BEGIN! PRAYER IS THE ESSENCE OF SPIRITUAL WARFARE! We cannot do anything until and unless we have prayed!

CONCLUSION

A God who just sits along the first base side in the front row and just watches may be all right for baseball. That is even probably good baseball theology.

But unless we have a God that does more than just WATCH in our day-in, day-out living, then what is our Christian faith all about?

We TALK too much, and we PRAY too little. Already we KNOW more than we DO. G. Campbell Morgan wrote: "Any study of prayer which does not result in praying is not only not helpful it is hurtful."

IN THIS STORY WE ARE THE HELPLESS WIDOW WOMAN! We cannot do anything until and unless we have prayed! We need to see that, as Jim Couchenour said at our

last General Assembly, "Prayer does NOT support the work of the church; PRAYER IS THE WORK OF THE CHURCH!" LORD, HELP US TO PRAY!

Prayer

Hymn EH #54 *O Breath of Life*

The Lord of All Saints

Comes Where We Are Seeking Him

November 1, 1992, All Saints' Day

Luke 19:1-10 (The Story of Jesus and Zaccheus in Jericho)

Text: Hebrews 12: 1 3

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, **FIXING OUR EYES ON JESUS**, the author [leader] and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down on the right hand of the throne of God.

For **CONSIDER HIM** who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart.

I. THE SEARCH FOR THE REAL JESUS

Luke 19:3 "And he (Zaccheus) was trying to see who Jesus was, and he was unable because of the crowd..."

- A. THE ESSENCE OF OUR FAITH IS KNOWING JESUS, and faith to know is always a gift of God, not an exercise of our own superior intelligence.

This seems so simple, and it is simple to child like faith. But what we forget as we mature sometimes, as we see the horizons of truth rush away from us in this great Universe, is that the knowledge of Jesus continues to be, and is always a divine revelation, a gift of God.

1. Zaccheus couldn't easily, naturally see Jesus. His small stature in the big crowd becomes a symbol of us all; "Can a man by searching find out God?"
2. Even the incarnate Christ had to be spiritually, divinely revealed **HAS** to be spiritually, divinely revealed. We are exactly where Zaccheus was: "trying to see who Jesus **IS!**"

B. LOOKING FOR JESUS CAN BE A LONELY THING.

There were people between Zaccheus and Jesus:

1. Bad people who hated him: Some possibly had reasons to hate a tax collector. Others simply put Zaccheus into a category, which is easier than dealing case by case.
2. "All" "Nice" people who "understood" him: how easy it can be to think we "understand" when we don't have any idea of the pain another is facing. We "explain things" very glibly at times; we make light of other peoples' struggles. It is no help to say, "Your situation is not all that bad!"

Christian actress Kari Jenson Gold wrote an article on the ideal marriage shortly after she herself was married. It was a great article and was published in a number of places, scholarly and otherwise. Then three years later she was divorced. She wrote recently, "I remember after my own divorce, when friends asked how I was, I sometimes replied that I had lost my honor. Almost no one knew what I meant, and certainly no one agreed with me. Everyone was far too busy "being supportive" . . . We do ourselves and our friends no real service by making nice and making light of something as serious as divorce and marriage. Not if we hope for a better and more faithful future." She goes on to say, "If what we all aspire to is health rather than virtue, gratification rather than strength of character, how can we hope to find a foundation for a lasting commitment?"

Zaccheus may have had plenty of people to tell him what they thought he ought to do but he wanted to see for himself who Jesus was!

"People" are supposed to be "witnesses," and God uses the Church to help bring people to the knowledge of Jesus. But can it be that we Christians have tried to be so nice and helpful that we have actually obscured Jesus from people who would see Him?

Philip Rieff was quoted as saying that "contemporary churchmen have a penchant for abandoning all Christian dogma and practice that does not readily lend itself to therapeutic purposes."

We all seem to think that we know instinctively what people need, and what God is up to in their lives, and how the will of Jesus comes down on the things that matter to us and our precious causes. If we listen to our friends we will hear, "Ought!" "Should!" "Essential!" "Lo, He is HERE!" "Lo, He is THERE!"

C. ONE MAN MADE A DETERMINATION TO FIND OUT WHO JESUS WAS/IS

The crowd, the many people, were confusing to Zaccheus.

If everyone is busy describing Jesus to us, how can we ever come to find Him for ourselves? If we are always listening to this expert, or reading that latest book, do we take time to simply get alone and wait on God Himself?

So Zaccheus climbed a tree in the hopes that he might get some kind of glimpse for himself. Remember "And he (Zaccheus) was trying to see who Jesus was, and he was unable because of the crowd..."

II. THE SURPRISE: JESUS FOUND THE SEARCHER

Luke 19:5 "And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, 'Zaccheus...'"

A. [ON THIS 'ALL SAINTS DAY'] IT IS IMPORTANT TO SEE THAT GOD REVEALS HIMSELF TO US ONE ON ONE!

1. God is a Rewarder of them that diligently SEEK Him; but in the end we see that God Himself is the Seeker; Hebrews 11:6; and (2 Chronicles 16:9) "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward Him."
2. The particularity of the Gospel Jesus called Zaccheus by name. He came to where Zaccheus was, and stopped. Anonymity was impossible. The gospel

finds us where we are, and digs us out, one by one. "He was speaking just to ME!"

Conviction is always focused, and always redemptive. We are made miserable for a purpose; God LOVES us, and does not make light of our condition. But He convicts in order to bring true repentance and healing and forgiveness.

Accusation, on the other hand, is the enemy's business. It has as its purpose despair and frustration.

- B. ON THIS ALL SAINTS' DAY IT IS ALSO ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL TO SEE THAT (although we are saved one at a time,) GOD DOES NOT SAVE US INTO ISOLATION!

The fellowship of the Gospel

Zaccheus was not "enlightened" [touched by saving grace] and then put out on his own resources to make his own way. Jesus said, "I'M COMING TO YOUR HOUSE I'M COMING HOME WITH YOU!"

That morning Zaccheus set out to see who Jesus was and before the day was over Jesus was looking at him over the coffee cups!

I know it isn't quite that pat or simple but it still is true (Hebrews 11:6) that IF WE WON'T TAKE SECOND HAND REPORTS ABOUT WHO JESUS IS, WE CAN FIND THAT HE WANTS TO BE OUR DAILY COMPANION.

III. THE SECRET OF ENDURING

Hebrews 12:3 "For consider Him ... so that you may not grow weary and lose heart." Just what does the story of Zaccheus the tax collector and All Saints' Day have in common?

Seeing who Jesus is ... knowing Him ... fixing our eyes on HIM ... taking Him HOME with us .. is what this "great cloud of witnesses" is vitally concerned that we do! THE SURVIVAL OF THE CHURCH DEPENDS ON THE PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS CHRIST! {I despise the Uni Uni association with the "Earth Goddess" religions in the name of "broadening" and "tolerance."}

A. IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT WE SEE JESUS FOR OURSELVES.

The revelation of Jesus Christ to His Church, and then the Church's witness of that revelation to the whole world, is what the entire New Testament is all about. Jesus is "the AUTHOR and the PERFECTER of our faith." (Hebrews 12:2)

1. WE NEED A MIRACLE! Like Zaccheus, we will find it difficult to know just who this Jesus is, apart from a miracle. People will be happy to tell us who Jesus is, and that is all well and good to a point.
2. THE MIRACLE IS FAITH ITSELF! Jesus still comes where we are, by His Spirit! He stops under our tree, and says, "Come down!" This is reality! It has happened to every born again Christian. Some more spectacularly than others, perhaps (like Saul of Tarsus.) But I remember, don't you?!

B. THE CHURCH SURVIVES BY LIVING, TOGETHER, IN CHRIST'S PRESENCE!

If we are to ENDURE it is essential that we "CONSIDER HIM!" (Hebrews 11:3)

1. Our CHILD LIKE love for Christ does not need to fade as we become "too sophisticated for His company and simple leading." JESUS IS NOT HINDERED BY OUR GREAT INTELLIGENCE (COMPUTERS/ETC.)
2. NOTHING ... EVEN GOOD THINGS ... CAN BE PERMITTED TO "PINCH" THE MASTER RELATIONSHIP! Don't let even good causes or ideas come between us and the worship and loyalty we owe to a Savior who is also Almighty God!

Conclusion:

I heard a black Bishop speak recently about the need of "A JOSHUA GENERATION"! He was speaking, I believe, about the need of the church to quit wandering in circles and press into the PROMISED LAND of God's victory! We come to church occupied with our overwhelming NEEDS, and look to God for His help in OUR agenda. Thank God that He DOES supply help and healing. But is that what the faith is about?

The Lord of All Saints

God expects US to take our place in this "Great Cloud of Witnesses!" God expects Zaccheus to not only be a TAKER and a RECEIVER, but by His transforming grace, Zaccheus becomes a WORSHIPER and a GIVER OF GRACE!

Jesus reveals Himself not simply for our salvation and personal satisfaction but so that we may take our place alongside Him in the great BODY OF BELIEVERS!

Prayer Mighty Savior, Come where we are

Hymn EH 47 *God of Grace and God of Glory*

When Smart People Ask Dumb Questions

November 8, 1992

The Sadducees asked Jesus a question. It was not a very practical question. And it does not seem on the surface to matter very much one way or another. But a great deal hung on the response they would receive that day from Jesus.

These were very smart people. They were cool and suave, but their intention was very deadly. If they could take the letter of the law and reduce it to absurdity they could undermine the authority of Jesus.

The Sadducees represent a religious mind-set that is still around 2,000 years later: a way of thinking that is more interested in being in control than it is in discovering who God really is.

No religious group has a corner on this "Sadducee mind-set," either! Extreme fundamentalists use the Bible like a club to beat down opposition, and never mind the Spirit of Christ. So-called liberals close their minds against any authoritative word from God, or any admission that there is an authoritative revelation.

People like these Sadducees want answers! They want answers, whether or not they even know the questions! The answers they want have to leave them still in charge, or they reject both answers and questions out of hand.

The questions they ask today are: How can the Bible speak with authority when it is obviously the work of scores of different people, handed down across hundred of years, and hammered into a canon by synods and sessions of fallible church groups?

The question they asked Jesus that day was: "Now there were seven brothers.. and one got married, and died— and so on, and so on... In the resurrection whose wife will she be?"

Jesus does not "fit into human schemes." Jesus was not always cooperative when it came to answering questions. He always spoke the truth. And he spoke the truth in love. But He always spoke from faith to faith.

When Smart People Ask Dumb Questions

In the opening paragraphs of this chapter the scribes and chief priests and elders asked Jesus where He got His authority. Jesus knew they were not interested in following Him. They were clearly hostile. He answered their question with a question: "Remember John the Baptist? Where did HE get HIS authority?"

The authority figures got into a huddle and said to each other, "If we say THIS... If we say THAT..." and then they calculated how to answer and finally said to Jesus: "We can't tell you where John got his authority."

And you remember, Jesus answered them: "I'm not going to tell YOU where I get My authority, either!"

Nobody, but NOBODY ever pushed Jesus around with words!

That is not to say that Jesus doesn't answer questions from smart people. Or from dumb people, either for that matter of fact. Remember how patient Jesus was with Nicodemus [1]: Step by step he led this brilliant man to personal faith.

And remember how Jesus was more than patient with a Samaritan woman by the well of Jacob in Sychar [2]?

Jesus never confused doubt with unbelief, or ignorance with stupidity and carnal foolishness. Jesus was the very model of patience and kindness. But to these Sadducees who asked Him this "whose wife will she be in the resurrection" question, Jesus did not give any answer at all. The question simply was not germane to the realities of the kingdom of God.

By their debating skill or use of idle curiosity they sought to avoid the deeper question about God's character. Here in their very presence was God's Son. Here was the WAY to eternal life— making Himself available to the people, to THEM! And they were saying things that amounted to, "If You know so much about heaven, then 'How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?'"

Even in His "non-answer" to the specific question of the Sadducees Jesus was not rude. He simply indicated that they didn't have the first inkling about the realities of resurrection life.

In his response to their bringing up the subject of life hereafter, Jesus spoke of the "children of this world" as well as the "children of God" and the "children of the resurrection."

He made it clear that what awaited the "children of God" when they become the "children of the resurrection" is beyond our full comprehension now. He told them that life in the "resurrection reality" is different from the orders and institutions we know now. "They are neither married nor given in marriage." (This seems to disappoint some people greatly. Others are counting on it.)

Jesus also made it clear that to be children of God is the equivalent to partaking of eternal life. "Children of God" who become "children of the resurrection" never know death. They close their eyes here, and they open them to new quality of life in God's Presence.

One thing this passage proves is that it is easier to ask Jesus trick questions than it is to ask Him to make us children of God.

The heart of our faith is not difficult to understand. Following Jesus demands intellectual integrity. But it is also a humbling thing to be a follower of Jesus. We have to relinquish OUR control, and give up OUR authority, and take up OUR cross and follow Him where HE says.

It is all right to bring Him our honest doubts. We can bring Him those unanswerable questions— and we all have them. But when we know we are face to face with Truth we have to say, with Thomas, "MY LORD AND MY GOD! [3]" and know the assurance that while some things are beyond our complete understanding, it is possible to be right with God!

There is this Sadducee mind-set that becomes what Walter Brueggemann calls a "theological gamesmanship (that) rudely interrupts the long-known and trusted truth about God's character. [4]"

It is easier— especially for smart people who know they are smart— to ask trick questions than it is to look Truth in the face. When we have had a glimpse of Jesus—

When Smart People Ask Dumb Questions

when we have seen Him in the faces of men and women of God— when we have heard Him knocking at our heart's door- we need to make Him welcome at any cost.

There may be times when it is good to speculate about the life hereafter, or argue about specific religious scruples, or consider the immanence of the Second Coming. But Jesus came as the Author and the Perfecter of a New Covenant that goes DEEPER than the absurdity of stringing out rules and the letter of the law into deliberate tangles.

The writer of Hebrews puts it (8:10)

I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be My people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor or a man his brother saying "know the Lord" because they will all know me from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.

The question, then, is not what street of gold we are going to reside on in the New Jerusalem, but whether or not this God is your God, and whether or not you are His woman, His man!

The question is NOT "Could God possibly inhabit the "big bang theory?" but has God for Christ's sake forgiven your wickedness? and does He remember your sins no more? The core of our faith is simple, direct: It concerns compassion, and justice. There is no need to make things complicated.

The work of obedience can be rudely interrupted by ventures into venal curiosity— curiosity that has at its heart the desire to avoid the real issue: will I have this God, this Man, Jesus Christ, as my Lord and my Savior?

Prayer - Lord, Help us never to slip into the role of the Sadducees, and talk religion while our hearts grow hard and cold and we lose YOU out of our lives. Amen

[1] John 3:1-21

[2] John 4:4-26

[3] John 20:28

[4] In an exposition of the lectionary in a Fall, 1992, issue of Christian Century magazine.

Preparing for Apocalypse

November 15, 1992

Luke 21:5-19

Toward the end of His ministry Jesus spoke a great deal about the fact that this life is transient, and that nothing here is forever. He gave a strong emphasis, recorded in all the Gospels, to what we call "final things."

Jesus made it clear that His disciples- and that includes you and me- would face strong opposition, and struggle, and even death. But He also wanted them and us to know that His people face this unknown future with strong, even supernatural confidence.

There is an ongoing popular fascination with the supernatural, with people who say that they can peer into the future. At the same time, there is a knee-jerk rejection, at least on the part of the media and the so-called intellectuals of our age, of any connection of the Christian faith with a prophetic stance.

The New Testament is a book based on the hope of Christ's coming again. Our lesson for today zeroes in on the Day of Judgment:

I. A DAY WHEN THE TEMPLE WILL BE GONE

No one wants to sound like a religious nut. To speak of apocalypse as a judgment of God is "OUT"— to speak of ozone layers or oil depletion or widespread famine is "IN."

But we have lost the paddle to our canoe, and we are headed into the rapids above the falls. Or to change the metaphor, the beautiful temple is disappearing. We are rapidly nearing a time when the things we have looked to for security will come unglued around our ears.

VIOLENCE is at one and the same time a matter of entertainment AND a source of increasing alarm. TV shows portray killing and bloodshed and of course that has NOTHING to do with society at large [sarcasm- MM] — "just a mirror"— but at the

same time we have portions of Interstate Highways "off limits" because snipers cannot be controlled— we have a rash of a new crime called "car-jacking" until we think twice before driving through the city in the daytime.

I certainly do not have anything but sorrow and sympathy for individual families caught in the web of alcoholism and violence to loved ones; but take any issue of any newspaper and look at the Court Record— you will see item after item of people arrested for "Assault and Battery" and the last name of the assaulted is the same as the last name of the assailant.

SEXUAL EXCESS is at one and the same time a matter of entertainment AND a source of increasing alarm. TV shows portray kinky sex as attractive and desirable; the sexual dimension of romantic relationships is distorted and given expectations all out of agreement with wholesome reality. Of course TV entertainment has absolutely NOTHING to do with influencing community behavior ["How did we get started wearing our baseball hats backward— so we could look like WHO? What great American RAP hero?"]— but at the same time we have children having children, we have contraceptives legally handed out in public schools while it is illegal for a teacher to even have a Bible on his or her bookshelf in public view of the pupils.

RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY for results of moral or immoral choices are largely a thing of the past. People are condemned or set free in courts of law on the basis of legal decisions that have less and less to do with the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule and more and more to do with humanist relativism.

The great Temple of Judeo-Christian culture, so beautiful and so long in building, built on the foundation of long-accepted scriptural principles, has been totally undermined at the foundations, and it is shaking down around our heads.

We are not GOING to experience Apocalypse, WE ARE IN THE MIDST OF THE TORNADO— IT IS UPON US. We are not GOING to suffer danger and loss— in case you haven't noticed, times have changed. This is the day when we should read the last chapter in the Old Testament, and when we should begin preparing the way for Messiah, our HOPE:

For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.

But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth and grow up as calves of the stall.

And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be as ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the Lord of hosts.

Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded you at Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments.

Behold, I will send Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.

And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to the fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

(Malachi 4:1-6)

II. A DAY FOR CAUTION, BUT NOT FOR ALARM

How shall God's children act in the light of Apocalypse?

A. A TIME TO BE WARNED

There is a real possibility of deception. Christ's very first word is "Caution!" "Take heed!" Our greatest peril is not in the terrible evils of the day, deadly as they are. But as children of God, our greatest danger lies in getting out of touch with reality. When I think I know how to be good, to be "spiritual" apart from submission and daily dependency on God in humble watchfulness I SET MYSELF UP FOR DECEPTION!

Different ways of being out of touch have different names: "Rationalization" "Judgmentalism" ["I'm not as bad as ____!"] "Denial" "Delusions" which spring from old-fashioned sources called "Pride" and "Lust" and "Greed" and which have as the root cause the first primal urge our first

parents felt in the Garden of Eden: "We shall be as gods! We shall set our own course!"

Jesus warns us: "Children of God! Don't chase after promises that don't center in Me! Don't go here or there to meet the Christ!"

B. A TIME FOR CONSOLATION

When ye hear of these things— DON'T BE TERRIFIED!

How can Jesus say this, when He knows what will take place is frightening?

How do little children find assurance when there is a frightening thing happening? By a Presence!

III. A DAY OF HATRED AND OPPOSITION

A. This part is not pleasant. It is hard to believe that seeking to be and to do GOOD— to follow the Prince of Peace— will inspire virulent hatred!

1. We are not above our Lord; and HE was crucified. Something of this CROSS must be willingly borne, even though our flesh and our souls cry out, "O My Father!"
2. We will find that Christ's Spirit alone can enable us to RE-ACT in the Spirit Christ showed: (a) He was MILITANT against the SIN (He cleansed the Temple); (b) He prayed for the SINNER ("Father, forgive them!")

B. We have seen virulent opposition:

1. Item: Patrick Buchanan, a Roman Catholic journalist, called "a fascist" for taking a stand on scriptural issues
2. Item: A Globe article last Thursday morning noted that murder arrests for 15-year-olds have risen 200%. James Allen Fox was quoted as saying the nation is poised on an epidemic of murder like that which occurred in the late '60s and early '70s when the crime rate doubled in five years. 30 cities in America have set records for homicides in the past couple of years, "but the really bad news is that this is nothing compared to what we will see in the future." Let me read you a little more from that same article:

Q What's the connection, if any, between violence in popular culture— TV, music, movies— and the increases in boys who murder?

A "Technically you shouldn't be renting an R-rated movie to an 8 year old or a 10 year old, "Fox says," but no one's stopping the kids so movies like 'Faces of Death' became an instant success by word of mouth and a few newspaper articles in USA Today. Its a film that shows all sorts of death scenes. Or 'I Spit in Your Grave' or other movies where women are raped and mutilated.

"We have a generation of kids that are bring raised on slasher films, a generation of kids whose first view of sex is a rape scene in a movie, and that's because of the videocassette. I'm very concerned about what's going to happen. In about five or 10 more years this generation of kids that's been raised on rape movies will reach an age where these sorts of attitudes can be translated into behavior.

Item: In a related article in the same issue Michael Medved, a secular film critic and reviewer stated the obvious in a long article: the direct connection between the filth on the TV and movies screens and the growing violence in the streets.

C. A Pastor's Prediction:

This hatred for God's people will intensify. The civil rights movement was for the most part good.

Groups heretofore called socially unacceptable are using the same tactics, and allying themselves with minority races and women to cry out for "equality" and social acceptance on the basis of overt sexual behavior, or for legitimization of occult or pagan practices as recognized innocent religions, instead of the anti-Christian and ungodly evils that they are.

It will soon be against the law to say out loud that it is wrong to have sexual relations outside of marriage, whether hetero- or homosexual, even as it is PROPERLY against the law to shout racial slurs.

Make no mistake, I certainly do not hate or shun the homosexual person. But I do hate the flaunting of sin wherever it may be.

IV. A DAY OF TOTAL CONSERVATION (18)

- A. After all this shocking talk about end-times, (when parents will betray children, and brothers and kinsfolk will sell out their loved ones—after some are summarily put to death—and hatred abounds) Jesus tells His disciples, and us, "Not an hair of your head will perish!" What can this mean? How shall we receive the apocalyptic writings?
- B. Our purpose in submitting to the authority of texts such as ours today is NOT (1) to endorse a theology of fright; nor is it an attempt (2) to give an intellectual solution to the mystery of eschatology.

But as we HEAR the Word, and as we SEE "the Temple coming down around our ears," WE ALSO SEE THE LIGHT OF HOPE IN THE PROMISE OF GOD'S SALVATION.

- C. There are different ways to react to God's promise that the world as we know it is coming to an end:

NOAH OBEYED, PREPARED, PREACHED. And Noah saved his family, but as he prepared, he preached. He was despised— but he became an example for "the remnant."

LOT CONTINUED PRETTY MUCH BUSINESS AS USUAL until the final warnings. His family was torn up ...

HEZEKIAH: "Well, it won't happen in MY life-time, so why should I worry?"

- D. I don't know how or when Jesus will return; I don't know whether anti-Christ will be a man of peace to deceive many by bringing seeming order out of chaos. I do know our times call for men and women of faith and obedience and trust. I know that our loved ones' lives are at stake. Will you take the words of Jesus personally to heart, as the Holy Spirit makes

them your own?

Of the three models, Hezekiah, Lot, or Noah—— NOAH becomes the paradigm to follow. Our "family" is more than flesh and blood. The ark is God's plan for preservation— HIS Word. Our purpose is not selfish, but obedient.

Prayer

Hymn 193 *One Day*

The King Like David

November 22, 1992

John 18:33-38

Colossians 1:11-20

In what was humanly a most vulnerable and helpless hour for Jesus, he was asked what seemed to be an audacious question. He stood bruised and bound, after a sleepless night during which He had been arrested and dragged from one place to another, roughly questioned by authorities, before the Roman governor who represented the world-wide power of Rome. The governor asked the prisoner, "Are You a king?"

I. THE QUESTION, THE ANSWER

- A. On the surface it looked simply ridiculous. And as we read familiar words 2,000 years later, we think we understand so well that we miss the drama:

Pilate: "Are You a king?"

Jesus: "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world then my servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not of this realm."

Pilate: "So you ARE a king?"

Jesus: "You say correctly that I am a king. For this cause I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice."

Pilate: "What IS 'truth'?"

- B. Jesus said to Pilate, and to all the world, that He came into the world— that He was BORN to reveal truth. Hearing truth and listening to Jesus are inseparable parts of the same process. Perhaps the proper question that morning was— and still IS— 'WHO is truth?'

II. THE KING BEFORE THE GOVERNOR, THE GOVERNOR BEFORE THE KING

- A. When we re-create the scene of Jesus standing before Pilate in our minds' eye, if we use a worldly mind-set we see weakness standing before power. We see a victim standing before a dictator. We see a martyr standing before false and wicked injustice. We see one man with the power of life and death standing before another about to die.

But with the eyes of faith we are amazed to see that, yes, weakness IS standing before power— but the power is NOT with the Roman. We see one Man with the life of the other in His command, but the one in danger of death is NOT the Man from Galilee. How can this be?

- B. In His own words Jesus told Pilate several things that morning. He said:
1. He IS a king!
 2. His kingdom is not derived from nor dependant upon earthly power either to establish or to maintain it.
 3. His is a kingdom of TRUTH. The King Himself IS the witness of TRUTH.
- C. But what sort of KING stood before Pilate that day? Listen to the epistle reading from Colossians 1:13-30:

For He [God the Father] delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us

TO THE KINGDOM of His beloved Son,

IN WHOM WE HAVE REDEMPTION, the forgiveness of sins. AND HE IS THE IMAGE OF THE INVISIBLE GOD, the first-born of all creation.

FOR BY HIM ALL THINGS WERE CREATED, both in the heavens and on the earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities— all things have been created by Him and for Him.

AND HE IS BEFORE ALL THINGS, AND IN HIM ALL THINGS HOLD TOGETHER.

HE IS ALSO THE HEAD OF THE BODY, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything.

For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth, or things in heaven. Colossians 1:1 -20

The majesty of Jesus is veiled as He stands before Pilate. But the Christ is ETERNAL! All that the scriptures say of Him as true— in eternity, in the future, in the present— were true that day:

1. The image of the invisible God! Holy, loving, patient, pure.
 2. The firstborn of all Creation.
 3. By Him all things were created, both visible and invisible.
 4. All things were created FOR Him.
 5. The KING was prior to all things, co-eternal with God.
 6. IN HIM ALL THINGS HOLD TOGETHER!
 7. He is the Head of the church.
 8. He is the firstborn from the dead
 9. Through HIM all things are reconciled unto Himself, since He made peace through the blood of His cross, things on earth and in heaven.
- D. If Jesus IS who the Bible claims Him to be— if He is King as HE HIMSELF said that day— then whom do you suppose was REALLY on trial the day Jesus was crucified? Pilate asked the wrong question- "WHAT is truth?" He was looking at truth! He should have asked "WHO is Truth?"

But even to this day we Christians— who know the Beatitudes and the Ten Commandments and the Apostles' Creed keep asking "WHAT?"!! We

confuse "truth" with the knowledge of the facts and OUR interpretation thereof. Too often we fail to see that we cannot know TRUTH apart from the PERSON who IS truth and who REVEALS truth.

III. WHAT DO YOU DO WITH A REAL LIVE KING?

- A. Pilate pronounced (1) a true verdict ("I find NO fault in this Man!") and (2) an utterly false and unjust sentence ("You take Him away and crucify Him...") And then the Roman soldiers proceeded to play a game with this King.

The Roman garrison was adjacent to the Temple grounds. In recent years the pavement has been uncovered in what was the ground floor of that fort. This pavement (Gabbatha) is marked with dimly carved figures, something like a giant chess or checkerboard. On that checkerboard the common soldiers played a cruel game with condemned prisoners. They crowned them with thorns and wrapped them in an old robe and then they gave mocking bows along with all the abuse and resentment that they felt toward their own wicked masters. Jesus was not the first nor the last to be degraded in this way.

But in their shameful ignorance that day they mocked the One Person who is the "glue of the Universe!," the One who holds all Creation together by the power of His Word! Jesus was on His way to "make peace through the blood of His cross," and so "to reconcile all things to Himself!" And these people did not have a clue!

- B. This horrifies us. WE would never treat the King that way! But think about this: To do anything less than to acknowledge Jesus as truly Sovereign in our lives is to make a mockery of His kingdom. Unless we are submitted to Him in every part of our lives and living, then He is not truly the King of our lives.

There is a world of difference between the grace of SAVING FAITH and the arrogance of HUMAN PRESUMPTION. To say that we are Christian when we are not wholly submitted to the King is to take the place of Pilate and ask

the question, "WHAT is truth?" when we know we should be saying to the One who is the Way and the Truth and the Life, "JESUS IS LORD!"

Presumption MIMICS saving faith! Faith and presumption may look similar, as presumption MIMICS faith's confidence and assurance. But the confidence presumption gives is NOT a Holy Spirit assurance, and it will turn into terror before the appearance of the Sovereign Lord.

To say that we are Christian and then to say that we shall decide for ourselves what is right and wrong, and how we shall live apart from divine revelation and apart from the Lordship of Jesus is to mock the King of Kings, even as the soldiers put the purple robe on Him the day He was crucified.

- C. Jesus is the chief cornerstone of life for all the Universe! He is the stone the builders rejected, but when we build on Him we "stand firm" and we "fit in" with all the truth of the Universe. When we reject Him the Bible says that He will fall upon us, and grind us to powder.

CONCLUSION

We have come full circle in the church year, and next Sunday we begin again with Advent. This last Sunday of the year we call "Christ the King Sunday." It is a reminder that history is NOT simply going around in circles, but that because Christ IS King, one day the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ.

The Lord Jesus Christ is NOT coming to vindicate OUR way of life, nor OUR interpretation of the content of "truth." "Jesus is LORD!": and when He returns it will be HIS life that is vindicated, and HIS glory that will be revealed!

We are called to discernment NOW! We are called to faith NOW! We stand with Pilate NOW— where it LOOKS as though we have the power to decide "What shall we do with Jesus?"

I know it seems like a sudden leap forward into the Advent story, but we are called to the faith of Joseph, who couldn't believe the kind of King who was coming, from the

The King Like David

line of David the shepherd boy who became a great king. Joseph had a hard time believing the angel who told him:

"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife: for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

"And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins." (Matthew 1: 20 - 21)

We keep looking for the spectacular, when instead Jesus stands before us in the everyday living of life, in our joys and in our sorrows, it seems as if HE is on trial for HIS life! And we keep making life and death decisions for ourselves, when we have the TRUTH Himself ready and waiting to be our own CHRIST THE KING!

Prayer:

Hymn: #11 *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name*

Swords into Plowshares

November 29, 1992

Advent I

Isaiah 2:1-5 THIS is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem: IN the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. MANY people will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us His ways, so that we may walk in His path." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. HE will judge between nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more. COME, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Introduction

This popular phrase, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares," has a context of prophetic vision. In this vision, which we believe is God's Word, the prophet sees:

1. a movement, a drawing, an attraction TO Mount Zion, the center of the worship of Jehovah God, which Mount has taken its place as chief among the mountains of the world. He sees also
2. a flowing or outflowing FROM Mount Zion, as the nations SEEK and FIND God's good Word of life and enabling. And then:
3. and THEN ONLY comes the promise: They shall beat their swords into plowshares... How does this "connect" with HOPE and ADVENT and REALITY and with CHRIST'S COMING?

I. THE VISION OF THE PROPHET

- A. The prophet's vision flies in the face of what WE think of as "reality." The world is NOT beating a pathway to the house of God, and doesn't seem about to start.

Nevertheless, God's WORD is what the prophet hears and what he declares. Reality is called into being by the word of God! God speaks, and creation happens!

Advent is a time when darkness is challenged! Advent is a time when a Light shines in the darkness, and will not be extinguished. Isaiah declares that Mount Zion will become irresistibly attractive!

- B. Be aware, also, that the prophet's vision is a universal, inclusive, world-wide vision. Isaiah was a Jewish prophet, speaking to a limited audience about God's chosen people, the Jews.

But God's message from the first call of Abraham has always been one of world-wide, inclusive grace. "In YOU," God said to Abraham, "In you ALL THE NATIONS OF THE EARTH WILL BE BLESSED!"

- C. The prophet's vision began with the call: "COME, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord." The world-wide, universal vision begins when God's people walk in the light.

II. THE ROLE OF THE PROPHET

- A. All God's holy people are called to share the calling of prophet. God calls individuals to prophetic tasks within the church, and as spokespersons for the church. But God's plan was that His people would bear witness to Him by their pure worship, until the nations of the world would see a difference.

Remember the words of Moses himself, when he rebuked Aaron and Miriam for being jealous of his leadership? Hear the scripture:

And Moses said unto him (Aaron) "Enviest thou for my sake? would that all the LORD'S people were prophets, and that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them! (Numbers 11:29)

- B. When the Church understands her role as prophet, the world will have a vision of the coming Prince of Peace.

How will this bring peace in Northern Ireland, or in Bosnia- Herzegovina? If peace comes there, it will be because some part of Christ's body has released the mighty power of God's LOVE in that place. There is no peace apart from the Prince of Peace; there is no complete expression of His love apart from His Body!

- C. But how do we, here, now, in our little corner of the world- -HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO FILL OUR PROPHETIC ROLE?

Respectfully speaking, the great world at large is not just now your problem! TV is part of the problem: We get hooked into other people's problems until we FEEL for them, and either throw a little money at them, or do nothing at all— while our lives fail to reflect the light of the Presence of God where we live!

Your problem and mine is plugging into the task to which God has called US here and now! God's prophets must be sent, and they must tell the truth as God gives them the truth to tell.

[What does all this have to do with the text? And Advent? What, indeed, can we say about the nations "flowing into Jerusalem?" The ATTRACTION of God's holy mountain?

ATTRACTION is a quality or property of God Himself! How many things in this world are really attractive?

God's WORD is attractive! God's people, as prophets, are challenged to tell the truth:]

III. THE CALL OF THE PROPHET

"O house of Jacob! Let us walk in the LIGHT of the Lord!"

- A. The church can only be a prophet through OBEDIENCE! [Above all else, a prophet is called to tell God's truth! As God's people (1) do we even know the truth? (2) Are we

communicating HIS message of hope and love? or our own ideas of what that message might be? CHALLENGING GOD'S PEOPLE TO TELL THE TRUTH:]

1. We must speak the truth by SEEING THE INVISIBLE

The sustaining power for the prophet is knowing that God has called! The world will probably call it insanity, but the prophet knows when it is spiritual reality! Witnesses are those who know what they have seen. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s most powerful phrase, perhaps, was a prophetic vision: "I HAVE SEEN THE PROMISED LAND!"

Have we SEEN the great King? Is spiritual reality central in our lives?

2. We must speak the truth by LIVING IN THE LIGHT. Most of the forces in this world PUSH and DISPLACE and EXERT PRESSURE. Love is a force that DRAWS.

3. We must, finally, speak the truth ONE ON ONE WITH THOSE NEAREST TO US.

For what it is worth, the wars IN THE WORLD AT LARGE today are not, for the most part, 'nation versus nation.' They are, instead, wars of hatred between people of the same nation— people who speak the same language and often look and dress alike- - but who are driven by blood feuds and grudges ancient and modern.

And for what it is worth, the SINS that do us in are not great sins of the culture at large so much as the sins of back-biting and infighting and pettiness and frustration.

B. The quality of the church's role as PROPHET in this needy world cannot rise above the level of TRUTH as it is spoken in the everyday lives of the people that make up the church. Our homes must reflect this TRUTH. The prophet says to us: "O HOUSE OF JACOB, WALK IN THE LIGHT OF OUR LORD!"

We are concerned that our services be attractive— that we speak the language of our culture. And rightly so.

We are concerned that our sermons say exactly the right thing— that our music be correct. We are concerned about what WE do— and rightly so.

But when the world begins to see a Church that truly walks in God's light— that speaks the truth of God with actions as loudly as it does with words— when our homes are places where we express kindness and forgiveness and love, and our spirits manifest the love and joy and peace and all the other fruit of the indwelling Spirit, then they will come streaming up the mountain!

Conclusion:

Advent is a time of HOPE. It is a time of looking forward to Christmas and all the beauty and wonder.

But Advent is also a time of preparation and heart-searching. It is a time for facing up to reality! The prophet's vision reaches to where WE are, today! The CHURCH is called to its task: WE MUST BE GOD'S PROPHET! The world desperately NEEDS to hear the message, to SEE the light shining in the darkness!

Advent is a time when God challenges you and me to walk in the light of God's truth!

How do we respond to such a "far out," Old Testament message?

Perhaps we need to respond first of all by admitting that in many ways our lives are no different from others who do not have the light of the knowledge of God!

Then perhaps we need to ask God for Christ's sake to forgive us, and help us to come into the light, and to walk in the light- - whatever the cost may be to other goals and aspirations!

Why don't you give the people who live in your house a real Christmas present this year? Instead of just giving nice things, give them a new dad, or a new mother, or a new husband or a new wife! Give them a brand new son that expresses love by kind

Swords into Plowshares

obedience! Give them a brand new daughter who gives no cause for worry and concern! It is possible!

When we have been to the mountain— when WE have seen the light of the coming king— then WE will declare this Advent message that THE PRINCE OF PEACE IS COMING!

Prayer

Hymn 227 - *Jesus, I Come*

The Legacy of Abraham

January 10, 1993

Genesis 15:6 *"And Abram believed God and it was counted unto him as righteousness."*

It may be that you have started the New Year by beginning again to read your Bible through. I visited Mary Rankin this week, and as sick as she is, her Bible was open at Genesis 12.

Abraham is the first three-dimensional character of the Old Testament. Oh, we think we know Adam and Cain and Abel, and Noah, but they really are pretty shadowy in my mind. But somehow Abraham comes across the millennia as a real person, great enough to be the father of three great world religions, and real enough to be shown as fudging the truth when he was in a dangerous place, although in the end no one ever came across with more integrity before God.

Abraham is a good person to think about in the formation of our own walk with God. Every stop along the way of Abraham's life is worthy of concentrated study. But come with me for a brief overview of the whole sweep of his magnificent faith walk.

1. A second generation pilgrim. His father, Terah started for Canaan, but settled down in a civilized place and died there. Abraham had the formidable task of respectfully surpassing his own preceding generation. Maybe that is no problem to the hubris of the youth today. It certainly was for me.
2. A trail-blazing obedience. (12:1) Abraham started for Canaan even though he had never been there before, nor knew anyone who had. He made his mistakes; he lived in tents; he fled to Egypt. He prospered. But in it all he walked by faith.
3. A self-effacing humility. () He would rather give up things than to stand and fight with friends and loved ones. He said to his nephew "You choose!" And in effect he was saying to God "When it comes to my pathway, YOU choose!"
4. A noble faith. (15:6) Abraham was unwilling to accuse God, even though he did not understand why he seemed to be misunderstanding the original promise. "Maybe I need to

lower my idea of what you meant?" he seemed to ask.

In reply God took Abraham out under the stars. Sometimes I wish our children could look at the stars more than they do! It is hard to hear a word from God when all our leisure time is filled with spiritual emptiness at best—and spiritual garbage at worst.

Perhaps a comment or two on our viewing habits is in order here? I don't think it is totally irrelevant that we are a generation of faith-pygmyes and we watch TV, while Abraham was taken out of his tent and under the canopy of the heavens to get a perspective on just how small he really was in comparison to how big God's Creation really is. I've seen some pretty awesome things on the 19-inch tube, but they're still just images of the real thing.

And some of the things we absorb from that tube positively stunt our possibilities of nobility and growth in faith!

In the latest Herald of Holiness there was a powerful paragraph written by Paul and Marilyn Turner in their "marriage enrichment" column. Listen:

"We do not arrive at a healthy self-esteem by absorbing the voyeuristic daytime public confessionals, erroneously called talk shows. These are strange programs in self-esteem that reward people for amassing weird aberrations but dispute others for claiming to be healthy. If you're healthy you may be accused of being "in denial." We pay a big price for a pathology that lessens our inner peace and fills our minds with trash." [J. Paul & Marilyn Turner in Herald of Holiness, January, 1993 issue.]

This noble faith of Abraham joined with the promise of the Eternal God in this seemingly uneventful chapter (15) and became a COVENANT. Perhaps this is the essence of the Bible: God is a covenant making God dealing with believing men and women! "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness!"

5. Abraham was a major-league intercessor. He saw his nephew delivered even as he saw God's judgment on the evil citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah () The dialogue "Will the LORD spare Sodom for 50, 45, 40, —down to 10...??" Perhaps we stand closer to God's wrath than we realize today; perhaps we are more like Lot than we are like Abraham. But we do see the principle that righteous people are somehow a deterrent to judgment day wrath. And we see the powerful influence of one person who has the courage to ask God to spare others!
6. Abraham tried to help God along, and instead produced forces that eventually became rivals to his own interests. Ishmael should never have been born, although the Arabs believe the other way 'round!
7. Abraham gave up his dearest love for the love of God, and in so doing he became actually a living portrait of God the Father in His love for a needy world. (22)
8. Abraham rates 10 chapters in Genesis, and countless references in the New Testament. In Romans 4, and Galatians 3, and in Hebrews 11 we are reminded again of the "father of faith," Abraham, the man who dared to believe God. James (2:21,23) calls Abraham "a friend of God."

We cannot be giants of the same stature as Abraham. But we can have the very same quality of integrity in our dealings with God. We can be honest. We can be obedient. We can give God our most precious gifts in the confidence that He will not waste them... "God will not waste a consecrated life!"

Prayer

#397 Where He Leads Me

Behold the Lamb of God

January 17, 1993

John 1:29-37

Advent and Christmas begin the Christian year. The time immediately after Christmas is a good time to recall the way in which the glory of our Savior was revealed to the world in the early days of His life and ministry.

The first unfolding or revealing to the world one might say began with the angels song and the worship of the shepherds, but is usually associated with the visit of the Wise Men, when they brought kingly gifts and acknowledged the Babe as their own king of kings.

The third event we associate with epiphany took place on the Mount of Transfiguration, when Peter, James and John were astounded by a glimpse of the sheer majesty and holy glory of their Master after His actual ministry had already begun in Galilee. We will look at that scripture, Lord willing, in four or five weeks.

The second of the epiphany events took place at the Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, and is what we focused on last Sunday morning. We continue to look at that event this morning in the word of our text: "Behold the Lamb of God!"

I. A SERVANT AND A LAMB

A. Last Sunday's text, from Matthew and Isaiah 42, was "Behold My Servant!" Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of his public servant-hood. We marvel at the mission and the spirit of the Lord Jesus. To some extent we can understand the Suffering Servant. We appreciate the gentleness and the promise of justice. But now, from John's account of the Baptism, we hear a different metaphor to describe our Savior: "Behold the Lamb of God, that takes away the SIN of the world!"

1. This symbol, of a LAMB, does not "compute" with moderns; (1) we are removed from the rural scene; (2) we do not grasp the full scope of the need for atonement.

Behold the Lamb of God

2. But this same symbol connected very powerfully with those who heard the Baptist that day. And it would be well for us to ask God to help us "connect" as well, and help us He will!

B. Why of all things, "a Lamb?"

1. The little animal itself is a living symbol of innocence. Have you ever been privileged to watch a field of sheep in the spring time? The figure of a Lamb speaks of the innocence, the sinlessness of the Savior. Christ IS the Pattern for a new race.
2. But these Hebrew people knew a much deeper, more poignant meaning to this word. For every Jew knew that a Lamb is the symbol of atonement, as well as the designated Passover sacrifice. To the devout Hebrew the Paschal Lamb was a physical reminder of the reality of sin and the terrible cost of guilt, but at the same time a symbol of salvation through sacrifice.

II. A LAMB AS BURDEN BEARER

"Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the SIN of the world!" Right HERE we have jumped into the heart of what real salvation is all about. Jesus came to DIE! All the gentleness and mercy and teaching and healing and Servant-hood are incomplete and unavailing unless Jesus, the Lamb of God, can take away our sin!

- A. A Lamb of God to take away sin is "unnecessary" according to what many otherwise intelligent people believe today. Sin is a "God-word" and God is the great Irrelevancy. "SIN" implies accountability or blame, and in our modern times no one really is to blame! We are a generation of victims! It isn't our fault!
- B. But the Bible is old-fashioned. It doesn't excuse lying and adultery and stealing and cheating. It calls gossip and back-biting and evil speaking and slander "sin!" And it says that the wages of sin is DEATH! People may say "I don't believe in a God that would send people to hell! I don't believe that is a sin!" But the strange thing is that God IS! He is NOT the God of our making. It is important that we believe in God, but His existence certainly does not depend on whether or not we think He is "this way" or "that."

Whether or not we call it "sin," the fact remains that this world is under a sentence of death, because we all have sinned and have earned sin's wages!

- C. To speak about "sin" is somehow to be "out of touch with reality." We are not sinful, but rather poorly adjusted, or victims of abuse, or otherwise disadvantaged. There is no question that innocent people are victims, and that people need healing and help— the ministry of the Suffering Servant! "A bruised reed He will not break..." But why is it that the most powerful weapon against many of the more flagrant evils of our day is still the atoning power of the Blood of the Lamb of God, that takes away the sin of the world?

A cultured, brilliant, ruthless lawyer rises to the highest circles of power in our nation and the world— willing as he put it to walk over his own mother if she got in the way— and he ends up in prison where he acknowledges that he is a sinner. He beholds the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of Charles Colson! And from that transforming touch perhaps more good is done for suffering prisoners than from any other movement of our century!

- D. The very idea of sacrifice, especially blood sacrifice, is somehow made to seem "abhorrent" to the modern mind. But we are out of touch with the way life really IS! And in the meantime the way life is lived out in the streets of our cities grows increasingly violent— and still we think that we are 'a sin-less society' — we are not to blame; we are victims— and yet there is no balm in Gilead to cure our wounds.
- E. God is NOT an angry God seeking reasons to destroy us. He is not the creator of ancient cultures. God is a load-lifter; the Psalmist says the Lord "daily bears our burdens;" Peter writes that you should "cast your burden upon the Lord and He will sustain you."

But we are not simply victims, helpless pawns, falling down into hell with no recourse, either. The heaviest load any man or woman knows is GUILT. We may not recognize it. If we do recognize it, however, we soon come to the realization that there is nothing we can do to expiate, expunge, erase,

Behold the Lamb of God

eradicate, remove it. We can cover it, or make excuses for it. But only a sinless Sacrifice can deal with it.

- F. God in His love has made us capable of reaching out for atonement from the guilt and power of our own evil nature and deeds! We are created in God's own image— and we are GOOD! But we are also testimony, each one of us, to the fact that God's image is marred.

All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his/her own way. And the Lord has laid on HIM the iniquity of us all!

We have been looking this morning into the very heart of what real salvation is all about. Jesus came to DIE! All the gentleness and mercy and love we need to make a part of our own servant-hood can never take place until we have beheld the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

III. A LAMB THAT IS ALSO A LION

This same apostle, John the Beloved, that wrote these words of the Baptist, "Behold the Lamb of God!" at the beginning of Jesus' ministry was the only one of the twelve apostles not to die a martyr's death. As an old man he was exiled for his faith in severe circumstances on an island, at least for a period of time, according to tradition. But while John was on the island of Patmos, he received a vision we call The Apocalypse, or The Revelation.

All Christians agree that John's Revelation is scripture, and that it has visions of conflict and ultimate victory of God and Christ over the forces of darkness and evil. Not too many of us agree on too many of those details— the book is like a surrealistic painting.

But two things or perhaps three are strikingly easy to understand in John's vision. I say "three" because Chapters Two and Three, the messages to the churches, are strikingly relevant and need to be read and heeded.

But the other two powerful facts from Revelation are these: First, in Chapter One, the lowly Nazarene, the Suffering Servant, the Lamb of God is revealed to John the Beloved in His full post- resurrection glory. There is no doubt that this is the Lord Jesus Christ, that John knew so well. But the glory is overwhelming! John falls at Jesus' feet like a dead man!

But the glorified Son of God puts his right hand on John and says, "Don't be afraid! I am Alpha and Omega!"

In other words, the epiphany of Jesus Christ is not over yet!

But the second is this: The chief figure or symbol of the conquering Christ throughout this last Book of the Bible is that of the Lamb! It is the Lamb that conquers evil!

The hymn of heaven is recorded in part in Revelation 5. Some of it goes like this:

And I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice:

Worthy is the LAMB that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.

And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, To him who sits on the throne, and to the LAMB, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.

And the four living creatures kept saying, "Amen." And the elders fell down and worshiped.

Called to Be Saints

January 17, 1993 PM

1 Corinthians 1:2 "...to the church of God which is at Corinth to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours..."

Introduction

In reading Paul's LETTERS WE OFTEN we go right into the "text, proper" and we skip the introduction. But this introduction is a "zinger!"

"To the sanctified!" to those "called to be HOLY!" or "called to be SAINTS!" or, in this NIV— "saints BY CALLING!"

"Sanctified?" "Holy?" "Saint?" ... Well, that introduction leaves me out!

What's that you say?

I say 'That introduction certainly leaves me off the hook!'

What do you mean?

Well— first it says it is written to the church at Corinth, wherever that was ... and that is not my church; and, too, it says, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, and I never professed to be sanctified in any way shape or form, whatever it means "to be sanctified;" and finally It says "called to be saints!" And that is the last thing in the world I will ever be— or ever want to be!

Are you a Christian?

Sure— I love Jesus. But this "saint" stuff and this "sanctify" business is NOT, definitely NOT for me!

[Maybe that is the way a lot of people feel about this... but wait a minute! Is this how Christians should think and talk?]

I. WE CAN TRUST GOD'S LANGUAGE!

- A. "Holy" is NOT a "bad four-letter-word!" "Holy" is at best silly and at worst repulsive to the secular mind. It brings to mind an end to natural, happy, free life and living; an end to aesthetic enjoyment, et al.
- B. "Holy" is NOT for super-Christians— it is THE NT norm! The Spirit is for the entire church. The Spirit is THE life within. What we don't always realize is that every Christian knows/has the Spirit in measure; we are "sanctified in Christ" but we are CALLED TO BE SAINTS.
- C. The secular mind does not shrink from saying "We're Number 1!" Or "we're the greatest!" Or, "Just do it!" But it becomes strangely humble when it comes to holy things and says, "Holy? Who ME!?? Never!!"

II. WE CAN TRUST GOD'S CALLING!

- A. It is in this "call to be holy" that every one of us will find our only hope of real JOY! God has made us for Himself; that is what we exist for!

To be holy is (1) to belong to God! It is (2) to dare to believe God loves us— believe it so much that we dare to say "Not MY will, but YOUR will is best for ME— for EVER!"
- B. The SPIRIT of Christ is the Sanctifier. He is described as COMPANION and FRIEND and THE SPIRIT OF JESUS (a Presence!) He desires to fill and cleanse and purify and empower every Christian. He wants to make us COMPLETE.

[When we are SAVED we are thinking "survival" or "forgiveness." But this "calling to be holy" brings us to think LOVE and TRUST!]

III. HOW CAN WE IN ANY WAY BE CALLED "HOLY?"

- A. We need to be radically HONEST with God! Holy is NOT for "super-Christians!" Not for people who have it all together." It is for people who NEED it!
- B. We need to recognize our RADICAL DEPENDENCY ON GOD (AND EACH OTHER!) If we are going to answer this "call to be saints" we can't "do it ourselves!"

But if we are seeking to depend on God He will come through for us!

- C. We need to DELIBERATELY LIVE IN THE SPIRIT! There is such a thing as a "crisis of sanctification" when we can say an "everlasting YES!" That is the norm, at least. But every "saint by calling" has to consciously walk in the Spirit!

Galatians 5:25 says "If we live in the Spirit LET US ALSO WALK IN THE SPIRIT!"

And Luke 11:13 says "If we being evil know how to give good gifts to our children HOW MUCH MORE will the Father give the Holy Spirit to them, that ask Him!"

Conclusion:

Don't shrink back from this call of God! Don't be afraid to step up and answer God's call to be saints!

THE SUPREME ACT OF LOVE TOWARD GOD THAT YOU CAN MAKE IS TO TELL GOD THAT YOU ARE WILLING TO HAVE HIM CONTROL YOU FROM THIS TIME FORWARD, EVERY PART AND PARCEL OF YOUR LIVING!

Dwight L. Moody said once, "The world has yet to see what God can do with just one person who is entirely His, and I intend to be that person!"

Have YOU done this? Will YOU invite the Lord into every part of YOUR life? Being "holy" is NOT being weird. Being HOLY is trying to be LIKE Jesus!

Prayer

#40 I Want to Be Like Jesus

Answering the Call Follow Me

January 23, 1993

We have been tracing "beginnings" during this post-Christmas season. We have been seeing how Jesus was revealed to the world; how he began His ministry. (Magi; baptism; leaving the carpenter shop; calling His disciples.) A portion of next Sunday's lesson, from Micah, seems to "fit in" just here.

1. IT IS POSSIBLE TO ANSWER GOD'S CALL

HOW do we respond to Christ's call?

Are there any guidelines? Can we come with any certitude to believe that we are really followers of the true God? Or is this all just "what is true for ME?"

2. GOD HAS SOME SIMPLE, CLEAR GUIDELINES FOR HIS PEOPLE

If what I understand is being taught in our schools, and what I hear propagated in the media is factual, then to believe there are clear and distinct guidelines of right and wrong taught in the Bible is to be truly out of step with much of the so-called culture of our time.

3. FAITH DEMANDS COURAGE TO CHOOSE

If you are going to be a child of God, a born-again Christian in any Bible-believing sense you had better make up your mind that you will have to go against the strong currents of our day.

President Kent Hill of Eastern Nazarene College said last evening in his "remarks" at the reception in Quincy Market that if the godless forces of an atheistic communism brought the USSR to chaos and ruin it is no less true that the godless, empty philosophy of pluralism and total relativity of truth threatens to destroy what we know as Western Civilization.

But how does that "interface" with the call of God, and the challenge of Jesus to "Follow Me!"?? Is it possible for an individual in 1993 to (1) hear a

call from an Infinite Other we call God; and (2) to follow in any intelligent, satisfying way, with any degree of assurance?

I BELIEVE THAT IT IS!

I. HOW IS IT POSSIBLE TO OBEY CHRIST'S "FOLLOW ME" FROM OUR HEARTS?

A. THERE MUST BE A CALL FROM GOD!

1. We could not hear from God unless and until He chose to reveal Himself to us. God has always been willing to talk to man. As Frances Schaeffer said, "He is THERE and He is NOT silent!"
2. God apparently has always had a witness. Melchizedek. "Other sheep." By a Burning Bush to Moses. By dreams to Jacob and Joseph. By the Scripture. By Jesus Christ, and by the Holy Spirit. God speaks. If you reject the authority of the scripture and set up your own criteria for good and bad, you do so at the peril of your perspective, and your life.

B. THE SCRIPTURES SPEAK CLEARLY: GOD HAS REQUIREMENTS

God's requirements: What does God expect of us? Can we ever hope to "live up?"

1. Micah, an Old Testament prophet says:

Micah 6:8 He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?

When we think of God's requirements, we think mostly of what we DO. And what we do IS not unimportant. But even more important to God is why we do what we do. What we value, how we love!

And most important of all to God is the purpose He made us in the first place— why we are here— and what really fulfills us and makes us completely happy for time and for all eternity! God LOVES us, and wants us to learn to LOVE HIM!

2. Jesus, in Mark's Gospel, says this:

Mark 12:30 And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength; this is the first commandment. (31) And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.

II. RE-DISCOVERING THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

- A. To follow God we have to FOLLOW! And God is prepared to lead us! But "right" and "wrong" is not so much a list of "in" and "out" things to do... first it is a list of what we shall LOVE!
- B. FIRST— we are to love the Lord. We are to commit to following Him. We are to say, "You convince me it is YOU, and I will do whatever You say!"
SECOND — we are to love our neighbor as ourself!
- C. All too often we call ourselves followers of God, Christians, when we try to turn these two commandments around. FIRST, we seek to love our neighbor with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. And THEN we seek to love our God as ourself!
- D. It is not by accident that there are TEN commandments— and that the first FOUR have to do with honoring God. The last SIX are DRIVEN by the POWER that comes from obeying the first FOUR! We cannot truly love our neighbor as God intends until we love God.

III. DISCOVERING THE RUDDER OF THE SOUL

- A. The whole question of following Christ's call hangs on the idea of "love." Thou shalt LOVE God! Can LOVE be commanded?

THE HEART OF THE GOD-WALK, THE GOD-LIFE IS FROM THE INSIDE OUT!
But how can we control how we feel? How can we control the thought life? Is such a thing possible? Do I simply decide, "Now I will LOVE God!"? Do I say, "Now I will not COVET!"?
- B. TO 'LOVE' IS A CHOICE! TO "FOLLOW" MEANS A HEART RESPONSE! When Jesus calls, you will know it! And you had better listen, for nothing you ever learn will be more

"true!"

And when Jesus calls, it is possible to respond by an act of will!

- C. We will never be saved by will power. But we will never be saved until we join our wills with the will of God!

Conclusion:

Is it possible to "follow Jesus" in any literal, satisfying sense in this modern day?

Not "part time." Not simply in skepticism. You may have been brought up by "fundamentalists" who said "It is so because it is so" or even worse, by "second-hand Christians" who taught you that being a Christian is simply a matter of rules, and joining, and staying out of trouble.

But Jesus still calls: Come walk with ME! Trust ME! I will help you love mercy! I will help you DO justice! But you must walk HUMBLY with Me!

To follow Jesus is neither simple nor easy! It requires faith! But if you hear the call you can be certain Jesus will BE there the rest of the way home!

We pray— "Lord, if You will bring spiritual reality into my life I will DO what you say— I will LOVE what You want me to love— but please, JUST LET ME WALK WITH YOU!

232 *Just as I Am* (O Lamb of God, I Come!) or

43 *O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee*

Your Place in Gods Church

February 12, 1993

INTRODUCTION

"Hail, mighty man of valor! The LORD is with thee!"

YOU ARE HOLY!

YOU ARE CALLED TO BE HOLY!

A HOLY GOD CALLS YOU

A HOLY HEAVEN AWAITS YOU

A HOLY CHURCH

Gideon didn't know if the angel was making fun of him, or was just very near-sighted! But with God's help Gideon became just that, a mighty man of valor!]

If a letter came to your house addressed to "the saints" at your residence, how would you respond?

When you read or hear read the challenge anywhere in the Bible: "Be ye holy for I the Lord your God Am Holy!" how do you receive it?

The very idea of "holy" or "holiness" invokes strong reactions. In general there are two:

1. One response to holiness says, "Who me?" Then with great humility the heavy responsibility of sainthood or holiness is ever so lightly pushed aside.
2. The other response says, "I will be holy!" But then it proceeds to define the beginning and ending of the call to holiness strictly in the individual, in the "me."

I. THERE IS A PERSONAL CALL TO HOLINESS Which Cannot Be Ignored.

A. YES, GOD CALLS US PERSONALLY: (re: Romans 12:1,2)

1. God calls EACH of us, deals with us, convicts and convinces us, so that we might be enabled to fellowship with Him.

2. God calls EACH OF US TO HIMSELF. To be "holy" means we are in a special relationship to God. Our "holiness" is not a "LOAD OF GOODNESS" that makes US "holy" in all we do or say.
3. ONLY GOD IS HOLY in any underived way. All holiness comes from HIM. God cannot fellowship with the unholy.

The dilemma: you have to be holy to come near to God, and you can't come near to God unless you are holy.

B. TO BE GOD'S IS TO BE HOLY:

Whatever is God's [possession] IS holy; the struggle is not to make ourselves holy so that we can approach God; WE CANNOT DO THAT OURSELVES!

How do we get clean hands and a pure heart so that we may ascend the hill of the Lord?

Somehow the struggle is not to be HOLY— but to give ourselves wholly away to God, and to know that He has accepted our gift. What is HIS— He makes holy!

C. TO BE HOLY INVOLVES BEING PART OF GOD'S HOLY CHURCH

Our passion for personal holiness must flow into a holy love for Christ's church if it reflects Christ's own heart, his love:

"Holy" has been preached almost exclusively from a personal, experiential approach. We have measured our holiness by the inner, emotional response (i.e., "I feel sweet, or peace, or feel love, etc.), what we sense personally, enabling: "I am not ashamed to testify" "I find that I can forgive."

This personal side is absolutely valid and necessary. And yet it can be extremely centered in self! The corrective for this is remembering that we are sanctified in relationship to Christ's church, which is to be HOLY!

II. GOD'S CALL "BE HOLY!" IS ALWAYS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CHURCH

A. THE CHURCH IS THE FOCUS OF CHRIST'S LOVE (Text)

Ephesians 5:25 "... Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for it, that he might make it holy with His own blood, and present it to Himself pure and radiant, without any spot or wrinkle, holy and blameless."

B. THE CHURCH CAME TO LIFE ON THE DAY OF PENTECOST

Peter preached: "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel!"

C. THE CHURCH'S CALL TO HOLINESS INCORPORATES THE INDIVIDUAL 'PERSONAL CALL TO HOLINESS' AND MORE:

1. The CHURCH is to be united with God by the sanctifying grace: John 17:17
Sanctify them: "That they may be one with us"
2. The CHURCH is promised the empowering Spirit: Acts 1:8 - [this was to the ASSEMBLED church-to-be]
3. The CHURCH received admonition and challenge from the glorified Savior in Revelation 2,3

D. HOLINESS IN THIS CORPORATE SENSE IS A SUBMITTING AND SURRENDERING TO MAKE THE CHURCH MUCH MORE THAN OUR INDIVIDUAL TESTIMONY CAN BE.

This is a risky, scary thing: to submit one's individual rights into a sense of community.

(Hippies did it— and they were disillusioned every single time!)

(James Jones persuaded many to do it; the results were disastrous.)

(Still, there it is: the disciples had all things in common; they relinquished their own rights. What principle is this?)

III. THE HOLY CHURCH WILL MANIFEST GOD'S LIFE IN THIS WORLD

A. The LOVE of God - The COMPASSION OF HOLINESS must be manifested in the context of the corporate faith. The Apostle John said the greatest "selling point" that the

church has is: BEHOLD HOW THEY LOVE ONE ANOTHER!

- B. The COMMUNION of God - THE COMMUNITY OF HOLINESS must also be manifested in the corporate faith. The church described in Acts 2 was manifestly unselfish! They gave whatever they had in order to make the kingdom go forward. "THEY HAD ALL THINGS COMMON!"

We can re-capture some of that "belonging"! The nursery needs to be staffed. Little children need to be cared for. People need to be loved and prayed for. It isn't a matter of communism, or giving, although in my mind tithing is a "floor."

- C. The LIFE of God - THE VIBRANT REALITY OF HOLINESS will also be made manifest in the corporate faith! [I am not speaking of synthetic excitement.] When God meets with His HOLY CHURCH it is always an enormously important occasion!

Some time ago in some church promotional literature one "managerial-type" pastor likened his church to a filling station. HE SAID: "The 'real world' is out 'on the road.' "

I take exception.

The church is like a home. THIS is a dining room. The meal is fuel for the tasks to be done. But it is also a sacrament of love.

Physically — too much of our eating is 'fast food' filling station mentality. HAPPY is the family that several times a week sits down together in love to eat, talk, laugh, think, remember, enjoy each other.

Spiritually — what the church does 'out on the road' IS vital; the only way that Jesus gets "out of the Bible, out of the four walls of the church" is in you and me. In our lives.

But what we do IN the church is much more than a smelly selfish gas station. It is more than "tanking up."

We are family- God's HOLY family! We LOVE each other! When we eat, Paul said, wait for each other!

Conclusion:

SO, HOW IS THE CHURCH 'HOLY?'

1. You [PERSONALLY] are called to holiness as a child of God.

You are already sanctified, if you are a Christian at all— for you are dedicated, given, baptized into the Body of Christ. You are being sanctified. God wants to sanctify you through and through, with His cleansing reaching every deliberately surrendered part until you know you have said an everlasting, "YES!" And one day we shall be sanctified completely! In a way we cannot imagine, "When we shall see Him we shall be like Him!"

2. We [AS GOD'S CHURCH!] are called to holiness as a unit. We can have the baptism of the Holy Spirit that fosters compassion.

I get tired of seminars, and of super-stars, and of methods and techniques.

But we must avoid any false humility that says, "I'm no saint! Holiness is for the day of the kerosene lamp and the button-down shoes. We can't have that kind of fellowship!" Can't we?

I'm going to ask you to join with me in the closing prayer today, A JOINT AFFIRMATION (on this Pentecost Sunday) that we belong to God as a church!

Prayer:

We, the Wollaston Church of the Nazarene, affirm that we belong to You, O God. We believe that what belongs to You is truly holy. We ask that You will make us wholly Yours that we might walk with You and fellowship with You and obey You in all that we say and do, that You may have your perfect will in our congregational life. Amen.

HYMN #19 *Thanks to God Whose Word Was Spoken Or*

#39 *Spirit of Faith, Come Down* (Wesley)

Jesus Strength in Weakness

February 28, 1993

For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the One Man the many will be made righteous. Romans 5:19

Musings on "Temptation"

This past week my "grand-dog" "ate" my sheepskin hat. I guess I was too proud of it— I thought I looked like a proud Russian cossack. Now I look like a survivor of the siege of Leningrad that got shot in the head!

I tell you this to confess that at the time I think I underwent temptation. I had the strong urge to strangle a certain large golden retriever!

I. THE HEART OF TEMPTATION DISCOVERED

A. Just what IS "temptation?" You MIGHT say:

- Temptation is when you are pushed or pulled to do something you know you probably shouldn't.

OR,

- Temptation is when you are ENTICED, drawn by the BAIT of something good to do something BAD.

OR,

- Temptation is the LURE to commit an act of SIN!

And probably all these are right. But there is something more basic, more fundamental about temptation in the two Bible stories in our lessons today than even being tempted to commit sin.

B. Temptation is a solicitation to part company with God! It is an invitation to go against divine revelation.

1. In the Garden of Eden (1) God walked with Adam and Eve "in the cool of the day;" there was fellowship. But God also (2) talked with Adam and Eve, and they knew what God wanted them to do and not to do in some clear fashion.
 2. The tempter came to say: (1) I'm not sure God actually HAS spoken to you! and (2) If God HAS spoken to you He didn't get it right! God is WRONG!
 3. When they chose (they chose!) to part company with revelation, they were cut off, separated, spiritually orphaned!
 4. As we will see, when Jesus was tempted, Jesus used the words of scriptural revelation as weapons in the battle to resist and division between Himself and the Father's will!
- C. Simply stated: The goal of temptation is not just to get you to sin, it is to separate you from God, and ultimately, to damn your soul in everlasting death!

II. THE 'BESETTING TEMPTATIONS' OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

A. A. The "timing" of temptation.

1. 1. Now, at Lent.

When we decide to walk with Jesus is when we begin to face the full strength of temptation. Temptation is the lot of all those who face the day. If we take the way of Christ and seek to walk with Him we will inevitably come face to face with temptation.

2. 2. Temptation immediately followed (Matthew 3:17) the great assurance at the Baptism by John. God spoke from heaven: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."
3. 3. Temptation will oppose every single movement toward God. Wherever you are in your spiritual pilgrimage, you need to recognize and resist your temptation:

B. Recognizing temptation for what it really IS!

Temptation is a life-long fact of life for those who would walk with Jesus. It never just "goes away." If we think it does, we've been blind-sided!

1. The temptation of the beginner is distortion. The perspective of the Way is all mixed up. Sometimes the Christian Way is made to seem impossible! It seems such a long, hard road. [I was sure my mother would get lost in Junior High school; I tried to give her directions to my home room (208, Miss Hagan. Somehow, she found her way.)]

Or, by the same distortion method, at the first we are tempted to think "we have arrived!" This way is SIMPLE! The "old folks" have made such a big deal out of it— all they need to do is really get the kind of sincerity I have!

[Keep your eyes on JESUS! Distortion usually comes from watching people more than we look to HIM!]

2. The temptation of the progressing Christian is often connected with discipline. Why do we need day-in day-out, regular use of the "means of grace" to press into the deeper things of the Spirit? Isn't that "works religion?" Or, conversely, thinking that a technique or ritual, even a good one, can make us like Jesus! But the fact remains: No Christian ever develops into her/his potential without the dimension of spiritual discipline. There simply are no short-cuts and all such are temptations to err.

3. The temptation of the veteran is scruples and fear.

It is not the easiest thing in the world to pass the torch to succeeding generations while maintaining a Christ-like spirit.

[Do you know where the word "scruple" comes from? Neither do I! But I have read that it comes from a root which describes getting a tiny little pebble in your shoe. Did you ever get a large grain of sand in your sandal? Unless it is removed it soon becomes as big as the Rock of Gibraltar, and nothing else, not even the love of Jesus seems very important!]

III. LESSONS FROM JESUS' TEMPTATION IN THE WILDERNESS

Genesis 3 is an important lesson for us about temptation. But we can thank God that it is NOT the final word! [A brief description of the wilderness temptation here: The fasting; the approach of the tempter; the use of scripture. But it is important here HOW THE SCRIPTURE WAS USED.] Jesus became our Champion! There are some lessons we can learn from His victory:

A. Temptation is not sin.

The fact is, temptation is often most keen in the experience of the resolute. ("When I would do good...")

Jesus was tempted, and He was both holy and noble. Temptation may appeal to the very best within; but there is always a little "twist."

B. Temptation opposes any spiritual progress. As soon as we choose to respond to grace and walk with God we face opposition. Jesus faced temptation immediately after His Baptism by John in the Jordan; immediately after the heavens opened and the Father said, "This is My Beloved Son, and the Holy Spirit like a dove descended upon Him in a wonderful epiphany of glory!

He faced it again when Peter spoke against His death after the Great Confession ("Get thee behind me, Satan!") And again in the Garden of Gethsemene. Temptation's timing is exquisite! It never seems to come when it is easy to face!

C. Temptation is a deadly warfare.

1. Jesus taught us to flee to the scriptures. We are not simply to "use" them as some sort of technique, but to genuinely love and respect them, and to LIVE under their authority.

- a. Knowledge of the scriptures will give us an awareness of the twist of temptation. The tempter in fact sought to justify his attack by USING the scripture. But something was wrong!

- b. THE TEMPTATION TO "USE" THE SCRIPTURE IS ALWAYS DANGEROUS. An irreverent attitude toward revelation is ALWAYS an invitation to darkness.
 - c. Cultivate a reverence for the Word of God. Satan is never far away when we approach the Word of God with skepticism: Awareness of an enemy: what Satan knows about you; what Satan knows of the scripture; Satan's use of the scripture.
- 2. Jesus did not argue with Satan (that is, attempt to 'reason' with him).
 - 3. God gives us grace to resist, to CHOOSE the right! Temptation is settled, finally, by choosing. Goodness is always a result of choice; otherwise it is just "nice-ness."

IV. WALKING WITH JESUS IN OUR TEMPTATION

- A. Jesus is MORE than an example; He is our Champion!

The possibility of moral goodness means also the possibility of its opposite. This is where Adam failed. This is where we all have failed, ever since. We have "turned every one to his/her own way (Isaiah 53)."

- B. Our strength lies in HIS authority.

Temptation does not last forever, and when we resist we are ministered to, and we are strengthened.

God sees, He cares, He approves, He loves!

The angels of God still minister!

Conclusion

The heart of temptation is— to separate you from God and His love. But the heart of Jesus is to bring you into life and fellowship with God.

As we seek to walk with Jesus during this Lenten season, we will be opposed! It is never simple or easy to "draw near to God!"

Jesus Strength in Weakness

So in the hour of temptation, do not simply flee from the act of sin. Oh, yes! DO flee from sin! But flee TO THE STRENGTH OF JESUS!

Prayer

O God, Who does not lead us into temptation, but Who does deliver us from evil:

We acknowledge that we do not live by bread alone, and that the wealth of our living is more than material things and money. You are the Bread of Life, You are the Joy of Living.

Is This All There is to Life

March 7, 1993

Romans 4:1 "What shall we say that Abraham ... has found?"

The question of our text, "What has Abraham discovered?" comes between two Bible stories in our lesson for today; one from the Old Testament, one from the New. Both of these stories touch on the profound mystery of life itself. Let us start with the Old Testament story. I hope that you can come to it with "fresh eyes."

I. THE CALL FOR 'A RADICAL DEPARTURE'

- A. (A story. A true story.) Once upon a time there was a good man. He had a good family. He had good connections. He was living in a reasonably comfortable manner. He was abreast of the latest modern technology. His life was not in crisis. But deep in his heart there was the nagging uncertainty, the question he could not put into words:

"IS THIS ALL THERE IS TO LIFE?"
- B. Then one day this good man became aware that Almighty God was talking to him. Just how this awareness came about I can not tell you. [We're so sophisticated... we "know" God doesn't talk to people ... now! Or does He?] But Abraham heard a call from God that sent him packing. It was a call of a loving God, calling a seeker to Himself.
- C. We usually miss this basic fact in the telling of this great story. But God was answering the question that sooner or later we all come to ask: IS THIS ALL THERE IS TO LIFE? God was saying, "Well, no, as a matter of fact THIS isn't all there is to life! And if you are willing and obedient, I will show you what your heart is seeking! I want you to "come home" and live your earthly life WITH ME as your closest Friend!"
- D. In order to find his true home in God's Presence, Abraham had to LEAVE all false security behind. ("Entering" almost always also means "leaving.") God said, "I want you to LEAVE... your country your people your father's relatives and above all your right to control your own direction!"

But never lose sight of the fact that this was (1) a call from God (2) inviting Abraham into a one-on-one relationship with Himself!

II. QUESTIONS THIS PASSAGE RAISES:

1) Does God still call people like He did Abraham? 2) How would God get your attention if He wanted to speak to you? 3) How might we respond to a call from God in 1993?

A. Does God still call individual people?

1. My 'message' is "yes:" I am convinced that God is thundering His call to a "radical departure" ... all the life stories of conversion and salvation, from Noah, and Abraham, and the Exodus, and the prophets are being echoed today in one great call "Save yourselves from this reprobate civilization!" In a society where it is a criminal offense to hand out Bibles in the schools - while it is commendable to teach perversion and hand out birth control devices; where millions of people use abortion as a means of birth control after the fact; where public media does its best to ridicule anything supernatural that has to do with God Almighty, while at the same time promotes the worship of Mother Earth and in the name of Pluralism makes Jesus Christ sound like a bigot when He declares:

"No one comes to the Father but by Me!" ... still in all this God calls,
"Leave the prison of your self-made gods— come away from a Scripture that YOU edit and cut and pick and choose and stand in judgment over — leave the bondage of "what so-called sophisticates might think," — and step out on a journey of faith with Me!
2. My personal testimony is "yes:" I know you would expect an evangelical Christian minister to answer in the affirmative. I can answer that I am certain, convinced, sure, that God spoke to me when I was living selfishly and out of fellowship with Him. He spoke to me by both love and fear; by what I might call "Behold the goodness and the severity of God" (Romans 11:22)

B. How would God call YOU, if He wanted to call you?

1. God speaks through dramatically unspectacular, quiet "means of grace," through a regular submission to the Word; by an habitual obedience in prayer; by the sacrifice of praise and worship in the corporate worship of the church.
2. It might just be that God has a quiet but absolutely vital message for you during this next week of revival services. I ask you now if you have re-arranged your schedule even one little bit in order to give God a chance to communicate with you during this Lenten Season— and even perhaps through Floyd and Barbara Flemming, who have been praying and preparing for their ministry in the Word to us? It doesn't make much difference HOW God is calling if you are not listening, or tuning in on a completely different channel.

[I toyed with the idea of just reading Wesley Tracy's editorial in last week's Herald. It really challenged me. So here it is:]

COME ON HOME[1]

Isn't it time for you to come home? Haven't you had enough of the world's shallow gratifications? Haven't you had enough counterfeit answers to your heart's deep needs? Haven't you leaned your ladder on the wrong wall too long already? Aren't you tired of trying to be a classy sophisticate who knows all about things timely— progressive education, career enhancement, political correctness, next season's fashions, and the done thing?

Are you not tired of having just enough religion to make you uncomfortable at a cocktail reception and yet ill at ease in the presence of the Holy?

There is time to come back to simple holy living. A time to come back to self-control, Christian simplicity, and spiritual discipline energized by God's grace.

"Now is the time. We have been through it all— the grasping, the looking, the searching. We have lived as people who try to serve God and mammon, and we know now that it cannot be done.[2]

Too many Christians have drifted into letting the world tell them how to dress, what to drive, what songs and entertainment with which to saturate the soul, and just how to put me first at the expense of other people whom nobody puts first. Some who take the name of Christ seem owned by their ambitions, chained to a success formula, enslaved by the hunger for prestige— diseases they have caught from our sinful culture. They fill up the ranks of the Christian jet set. Visit any important Christian conference and you will see them— "dressed alike, talking alike, smiling alike, looking over the shoulders of the people to whom they are speaking in order to see who else has come into the room." [3]

The world has taught us to reach for the things that matter least while neglecting the things that matter most. Prayer, Bible study, devotion, and obedience have been elbowed to the margins as Christian self-help propaganda taught believers to dress for success, win through intimidation, fulfill themselves, enjoy sex, and lose weight. Richard Baxter's 17th-century description fits today's cosmopolite evangelicals like a glove:

When we should study God we study ourselves; when we should mind God, we mind ourselves; when we should love God, we love our carnal selves; when we should trust God, we trust ourselves; when we should honour God, we honour ourselves; and when we should ascribe to God and admire Him, we ascribe to and admire ourselves: and instead of God we would have all men's eyes and dependence on us, and all men's thanks returned to us, and would gladly be the only men on earth extolled and admired by all. And thus naturally we are our own idols. [4]

Even spirituality has become something to be utilized. We were coached to practice the spiritual disciplines in order to achieve self-fulfillment, discover happiness, become fully human, and overcome stress. Such behavior is a lilac-scented blasphemy. The only reason to practice the spiritual disciplines is because of who God is.

Not even Hollywood has "out-glitzed" evangelical religion. Popular Christianity has been polled, charted, televised, and made "user friendly" by the best ad crews in the world. But now we know that making Christianity compatible with the loose living and undisciplined conduct of our culture does not work. The popular church "has lower standards for membership than those for getting on a bus." [5] But we have learned a few lessons, haven't we? "Now we can see . . . where uncontrolled living goes. We know the misery. We have felt it." [6]

It is time to come home. Time to stop trying to be citizens of two countries. It is time to stop trying to blend God's way with our own wants and lusts. Come home to Christian simplicity, discipline, and holiness of heart and life.

The journey is not easy. The worldly culture will try to sweep you back into its whirlwind of shallow gratifications, its conscience- deadening maze of greeds and lusts, its "cosmetic diversions and plastic pleasures."

Resist them in the power of the Spirit. They are vapors of fantasy that lead only to emptiness. On the other hand, the holy life to which God is calling you is "astonishing in its completeness," as Thomas Kelley writes. Of the holy life, he says,

Its joys are ravishing, its peace profound, its humility the deepest, its power world-shaking, its love enveloping, its simplicity that of a trusting child ... It is the life and power of Jesus of Nazareth.⁷

C. Yes, God calls! The last question, is How can we respond? :...

III. WE CAN RESPOND WITH FAITH

The other story of the morning is from John 3. Here is another wealthy, successful, respected man, a leader in society, who is asking himself:

IS THIS ALL THERE IS TO LIFE?

He comes to Jesus by night. He says, nice things to start the conversation, but Jesus almost interrupts him to say: "Unless you are BORN AGAIN you cannot even SEE the kingdom of heaven!"

Nicodemus was a sort of "literalist." "How can such a thing be?"

Right at this place Jesus reminded Nicodemus of an Old Testament story every Jewish child knew— and ever Christian child ought to know, too. You know it, too— remember the Children of Israel had been disobedient, and as a judgment an invasion of poisonous snakes began a fatal assault on them, left and right. God had Moses fashion a serpent of brass and lift it up on a pole. As many as looked to the serpent recovered. Those who refused to look died.

Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Your journey into life starts with a look! It begins with faith in what I am going to do on the Cross of Calvary! Faith is trusting ME!"

Conclusion:

Our text tells us that Abraham, the father of faith, discovered something. Just what was it that Abraham discovered and passed on to all people of faith?

It is the answer to the question so many have asked through the ages:

IS THIS ALL THERE IS TO LIFE?

Abraham discovered that real LIFE is about walking with God! Getting to know God! And in the text Paul tells us that God still wants people to walk with Him by faith.

God still calls people to come HOME into the growing assurance that we can live in the will of God, and we can KNOW it!

I'm convinced that if we answer this call, two things are necessary:

- a. We need to deliberately break the insulation that separates us from entering into God's Presence, the "Shekinah." God's Presence is life-giving. We must enter into the Presence and worship, wherever we are coming from.
- b. We need to break the bondage of self-consciousness before the judgment of other human beings. "If I buy into this radical response I will be stepping back into the '30s— I

will be an ignorant sheep—" NOT if it is truly GOD who is calling you to come HOME to HIM!

Footnotes

1. Editorial by Wesley Tracy in The Herald of Holiness, March 1993, 2,3
2. WT quotes Roger C. Palms, Enjoying the Closeness of God
3. WT quotes Palms, Enjoying, 20
4. WT quotes Richard Baxter, The Saint's Everlasting Rest
5. WT quotes Harry R. Rudin, Christian Century, June 4, 1952
6. Wt quotes Palms, Enjoying 30
7. WT quotes Thomas Kelly, A Testament of Devotion, 29

Fourth Man in the Fire

March 21, 1993

Every good Christian boy or girl, along with every good Jewish boy or girl, knows the story of the three Hebrew children in the furnace. We "get" the "lesson" we are "supposed" to get from it. BUT TWO THINGS WE JUST MAY NEED TO REMEMBER:

1. (1) THEY DIDN'T GET TO BE HEROES INSTANTLY! What happened then started when they were teen-agers!
2. (2) SOONER OR LATER, YOU AND I ARE GOING TO BE IN THAT FURNACE!

I. MAKING SOME LIFE CHOICES EARLY ON:

It is possible to settle some things forever when life is mostly still "out ahead." Then whatever comes, good or bad, the important decisions fall in line with the most important decision.

- A. A. Judah had been conquered by the dominant kingdom and ruler of the world, Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar. But the king was open-minded, and wanted to absorb the best of the various cultures in his far-flung empire.

1. [ONCE IN A LIFE-TIME OPPORTUNITY]

So he made a decree: If suitable Hebrew youth could be located, a full, all-expenses-paid scholarship was to be made available to the greatest school in the world. A three-year graduate study in government and upper-level management, with a guaranteed prestige job waiting. But there were very tough entrance exams.

The physical exams were unreal. Unfair, yes! But there they were:

2. [PHYSICAL GIFTS]

Applicants had to be in perfect health, and they had to be judged as very handsome. [That would have left me out!]

But the mental and psychological tests were even more rigid. [3. EXCEPTIONAL MENTAL GIFTS]

These men had to have I.Q. scores off the chart! After rigorous testing only four young men from Judah were admitted to the program. Their names were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. They were IN! And they did go on to very illustrious careers in government!

- B. This is where their "life commitment" first was challenged. [THE "GOD-FIRST PRINCIPLE"] Early on in their "graduate program" the four young men faced their first challenge.

It was the food! College people always complain about the food! [I like E.N.C. food!] Their problem was not what you might think...the food was too "good!" It was not how they had been taught to honor God.

They were not disrespectful. They talked it over. They prayed. THEY DECIDED THAT BEING FAITHFUL TO GOD WAS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN THEIR LIVES! They were faithful and God honored them!

The "God-first principle" was a source of contention all their lives— but also a source of witnessing power!

- C. It helps if we can settle some things early on

1. God is good!
2. The Bible can be trusted!

Run (like you would from a snake) from anyone who tries to take away your faith in the Bible to speak with authority on all matters of your spiritual life. Settle it early that you will give God the benefit of the doubt, and that whatever the cost you will honor HIM!

3. God's people need to stick together!

Your bosom buddies, your "soul-friends" must be those who will pray with you and stand with you and support you in sorting out God's will from God's Word. You need the church!

4. Don't compromise on little things if God's will is involved!

You cannot be "selectively obedient" to God's known will!

II. LIFE'S COMMITMENTS WILL BE CHALLENGED!!

- A. A king on an ego trip takes the place of God.

Several years later, these men were well on their way to a great career. (This is where "the story", PROPER, BEGINS.) The king decided that HE was not getting enough respect— so he made a statue "of gold" and demanded that all the known world bow down and worship the statue which HE had set up— in his own honor!

Everybody, but everybody was there at the great day of honor! The Babylonian Symphony Orchestra was there. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were there. Daniel evidently wasn't there. The Bible doesn't say where he was.

When everybody else bowed down, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did NOT! And they were hauled in before the king himself!

- B. Principles under fire! SOME THINGS YOU DON'T "ARGUE":

(The respectful but at the same time BLUNT speech these three men made:)

1. We do not have to answer you, O king, in this matter. The argument is over before it starts in our minds.

Some things you don't "argue":

(Why were they so sure? Because they took literally the Ten Commandments, among other things: "Thou shalt not make any graven images ... Thou shalt NOT bow down and worship them!")

They had "bet their lives" on God!

2. A statement of CONFIDENCE IN ALMIGHTY JEHOVAH GOD. "Our God is able to deliver us from this unjust command of yours, O king!"

They were willing to die for the right!

3. A statement of (beyond CONFIDENCE!) Abandonment to the love of God!
"But even if God does NOT save us, make NO mistake, O king, WE WILL NOT BOW DOWN AND WORSHIP THIS SHINING STATUE!"

- C. THE MIRACULOUS DELIVERANCE ... natural destructive power of fire abated ... a mysterious Presence walking with the three in the midst of the furnace ... a pagan king both alarmed and convinced, if not converted.

III. STATUES AND THE FURNACES TODAY

- A. Perhaps it is harder to walk with God and live for Him right now, in our time, than it was for Daniel and Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego!

It is NOT a simple thing to sort out the truth from the garbage!

- B. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE STATUES?

Today's "Golden Images" are unchallenged popular slogans that "everybody" says, and "everybody" is expected to give agreement with:

There are a lot of these "statues hanging around, like "Look out for #1 first!" and "The bottom line is the bottom line." and "The one with the most toys ..." and "Personality is more important than character."

"If you are famous then surely you are important." "If nobody knows you then surely you are NOT important."

But the one that troubles me the most as a Christian Pastor is "Religion is private!" This is the one that says, "You worship your God in your way, and I'll worship mine! 'My God wouldn't do this .. or that!' as if we own God .. and create Him .. as if there is no One True God who has a right to own us and make demands on us!"

Think about it! Religion is PERSONAL! God loves YOU! But religion is NOT PRIVATE! It effects the way you live in the world! You can't love God and serve Him and act as YOU damn please!

Whatever you do, don't bow down and worship these lying, damning idols!

But we belong to God! He tells us what to do!

C. RECOGNIZING THE FURNACES

The KING wasn't the enemy ... he was the tool of the enemy! Paul tells us in Ephesians 6 "We wrestle not against flesh and blood!" When you are in the furnace ... and it burns and you know your next breath is going to be your last ... look around! There is Someone who will be right there with you in the midst of the burning fiery furnace!

The enemy is the devil, the accuser of the Family of God— the force behind the evil in our world.

Turn in your HYMN BOOKS to #549 and read the Scripture lesson (Ephesians 6:10-18) with me:

1. Do YOU have on this armor of God?
2. Have you settled it that you belong to God, and not the other way 'round?
3. Are you RIGHT WITH GOD just now??

This world needs some heroes! People who won't bow, and who won't burn, and who will mind God and take this world for Him!

Prayer:

#68 EH I Will Serve Thee Because I Love Thee

Seeing and Believing

March 21, 1993

John 9

Introduction

He was bewildered, in a completely new world. You would think that everyone would be totally happy that he could see. But in fact he hadn't had a lot of peace ever since the miracle.

Not that he ever wanted to go back to the old way. He still hadn't gotten over the wonder of things; things that everyone else seemed to take for granted. Like the ever-changing color of the sky. Like "color" itself— he never imagined the splendor of birds and flowers and insects. Like the face of his mother. Still, he wished he could find ten minutes alone and get some peace.

He remembered again for the thousandth time how it began:

The Encounter With The Healer

He had felt like a curiosity, a sort of freak on display, when the Healer had first come within earshot. He could hear people say, "Master, did this man sin? or was it his parents that sinned? that he was born blind like this?" He felt his face burn as he realized these voices were discussing him, and he knew that people had turned their curiosity on him.

But then he had sensed something else. He was not sure how he knew, but he knew that he was loved. The Healer's voice said, "That is not the way to look at other people! We aren't looking for guilt and blame now!" And then he knew the Healer was coming very close, and he felt a hand on his shoulder, and another hand applying a warm compress to his eyes. The Healer had said, "Go and wash in the Pool of Siloam!" Then he could hear the Healer and the other voices with Him move on down the street.

He hadn't had any trouble getting to the Pool of Siloam. He knew his way around his lightless world. He had gotten on quite well indeed for all the years of childhood and growing through adolescence. Now as a young man he was as independent as many resourceful sightless people seem to be. He was partly accompanied and partly led by any number of curious people who had heard what the Healer said. There were many witnesses to what happened next. But the Healer Himself was not there.

As he had been commanded, he had made his way to the Pool, and then more cautiously had felt his way to the water's edge. Kneeling down he had scooped handfuls of water from the pool to his mud-caked eyes. And as he washed, the mud came off, and with it went his blindness. His eyes were healed, and he could see perfectly. And then is when it all began. This turmoil inside!

Surprising Complications Of Sight

In the first place he had a hard time finding his way back home! There was so much crowding into his sense receptors— the thronging crowds of people to be looked at— the colors of the stone buildings, the meat hanging in front of the open stalls, the camels, the donkeys, the dogs and cats— he simply had to shut his eyes from time to time to try to remember where he was!

Then, he saw his family for the first time! They were happy, but they could hardly believe what they were seeing! But even while they were getting filled in, it all began! Here came the questions— the loaded questions from the people who seemed to hate the Healer. He couldn't believe the tone of their interrogation. [It almost made him think of the Inquisition, and that hadn't happened yet for 1,000 years!]

They went over the whole story again and again. And while it was perfectly clear that this man had been born blind, and that now he could see as well as anyone, it was also clear that he had never even seen the Healer.

The Painful Price Of Honesty

There is power in a personal witness. He did not try to tell what he did not know. He would not denounce the Healer who had loved him enough to care! He was "cast out!"

Then Jesus Came!

This time it was not as a Healer or restorer of sight. The Bible says "Jesus found him!" Jesus came to where he was ... his sight had served to get him into trouble—but not beyond where Jesus could go.

Jesus may have said, "I hear they have cast you out!" "Yes, they have, Rabbi!" "Well, I have some wonderful news for you, dear friend. Do you believe on the Anointed One, the Son of Man, the Messiah of God?"

The man looked into the face of the Healer. He was new at this "looking business," but he could feel his heart thumping, and he answered, "Lord, who is He, tell me, so that I can believe on Him!"

Then came one of the outright declarations of the Son of God: "You have been LOOKING at him— it is the Person that is speaking to you right now!"

This was the moment of truth. This was when sight gave way to believing. It was a marvelous time. The official religious leaders had thrown him out, and as far as they were concerned, consigned him to hell. Jesus came along and took him in, and true worship began. You can count on it, the man born blind never felt shut away from God ever again, never, never!

Conclusion

We can learn a few things from this man born blind. Maybe, too, we can see the difference between what we can see and know with our God-given abilities, and what it means to have Jesus Himself slip up beside us and say "DO YOU BELIEVE IN THE SON OF GOD?"

Maybe we can start to distinguish between the blessings and benefits of a loving Father, a compassionate Jesus Christ, and the ultimate purpose of all that God does

for us in Christ, which is to hear Jesus say, "I THAT SPEAK TO YOU AM GOD! DO YOU BELIEVE?"

That is what the Gospel of John is all about! It is summed up in the confession of another man who was blind, in a different way, perhaps. He has been called Thomas the doubter, and he made his declarations: Unless God comes up with evidence that meets MY criteria I will NOT believe that there is Eternal Life, or that Jesus has literally risen from the grave!! Period!!

And Jesus found HIM! And Thomas did the very same thing this man born blind had done, Thomas fell at Jesus' feet and worshiped: "MY LORD AND MY GOD!" And that is the climax of the Gospel!

But that is NOT where this story ends. Not quite. The religious people had to have their last word. They came to the Light of the world, and they said, "Now we suppose that YOU think we are blind to spiritual truth!"

What did Jesus tell them?

Prayer

Summons to Life

March 28, 1993

Note: In reading/preaching this it will be best NOT to read the main points (headers.)

Ezekiel 37

John 11

Romans 6

Introduction

Come with me into the mind and heart of an ancient prophet.

I. AN ASTONISHING VISION OF REVIVAL IN THE PROPHETIC WORD OF GOD

It is easy to read snatches of the ancient prophet's message, The Book of Ezekiel, and be completely put off, and dismiss him as eccentric, negative, and hopelessly imbedded in a long-dead culture. Actually Ezekiel was sensitive, caring, full of hope; and above all, he was faithful.

In the message God gave Ezekiel for us he was given a vision, in which he was set down in a valley which was full of human bones, dry bones— bones of people more suited to pages of National Geographic and archeology than anything else. In this valley of dry bones God the LORD began a conversation with the prophet:

"Son of man," God addressed Ezekiel; "Can these bones live?"

Ezekiel was properly evasive. He had a prophet's lofty regard for the Almighty. But he saw that the bones were relics, very dead indeed.

"O LORD GOD, You know the answer to that!"

God continues. This time there is a command. No room for mistake. Ezekiel heard God say, "Preach over these bones!"

Then God even gave Ezekiel a text and a message. It was a message of promise and hope, even if there did not seem any one there to listen.

"Tell these bones," God said, "'O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!' (That is your text. Now here is your message:)

'Thus says the Lord God YHWH to you bones: 'Behold I will cause breath (Rhuach, spirit) to enter you that you may come back to life. And I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin, and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I AM the LORD.'"

So Ezekiel stood there, in the valley of dry bones. And he took his text that God had given him, and preached the word that God had said.

And then Ezekiel said, "In my vision, even as I preached there was a noise, and a rattling, and the bones came together, bone by bone."

Like trick photography there was suddenly an army of people- -well, at least, an army of bodies, for Ezekiel said, "There was nobreath in them."

Then Almighty God broke in again and spoke to his prophet: "Pray now to the Wind, Son of man! Pray to the Spirit, and say to the Rhuah, "Come, Holy Spirit, and blow over these dead bodies!"

What a vision! In his vision Ezekiel saw this great host of corpses come alive and stand on their feet, ready to take orders from God, ready to live!

And Ezekiel understood!

He took the message back to his discouraged, captive, nominally believing, dead fellowship by the River Kebar.

And we have this word from God today! His vision speaks to us of the evocative power of God's word.

Leave that thought for a moment. Ezekiel's is a vision of astonishing revival. Look now at a second passage, this time a story, a very true story, that is meant to climax the good news of our Savior's ministry before His passion.

II. A POWERFUL MIRACLE OF RETURN FROM PHYSICAL DEATH AT THE CALL OF THE INCARNATE WORD OF GOD

Lazarus was a real man, who lived and died in a small house two miles east of the city of Jerusalem. When he became ill, and it became apparent that he was close to death his sisters, Martha and Mary, sent for Jesus where he was in retreat beyond the Jordan River. Jesus received the communication, and then to everyone's surprise He stayed right where He was for two more days. Lazarus was already dead when the message reached Him.

When the two days had passed Jesus set out for Bethany, a day's journey away. On the fourth day after the death He came to the edge of the village, where He was met by Martha, the proactive member of the family.

"Lord," she said, "Why did You have to take some time off? If you had just been here, my brother would still be alive!"

"YOUR BROTHER WILL RISE AGAIN!"

"I know he will, in the final resurrection. But that is a long way off, and he is gone from our lives!"

Then came words that mean more than we can ever fully comprehend. Words that we say at the funeral of the saints. Words that go to the heart of our Christian faith.

"I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE!"

Only God Himself could say this and be truthful. Martha knew Jesus, and knew He could not, would not ever lie. Her heart pounded as she tried to grasp what Jesus was really saying, as He went on:

"THE PERSON WHO BELIEVES IN ME WILL LIVE EVEN IF THEY DIE; AND ANYONE WHO IS ALIVE AND BELIEVES IN ME WILL NEVER DIE!"

Then came a question:

"DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?"

For the moment Martha forgot the sorrow of the day and the fact that her brother was dead. She was struck by faith, struck full in the heart. She knew who Jesus really WAS and IS!

"Yes, Lord," she said, "I DO believe that You are the Anointed One the prophets all told about! I believe You are the Son of the living God!"

And she left to call her sister, the meditative religious of the family.

Mary repeated the same "if only" that her sister Martha had said minutes before. Jesus was deeply moved by their grief. He was not playing with their sorrow.

"TAKE ME TO THE GRAVE! OPEN IT, REMOVE THE STONE!" He commanded when they had reached the cave-tomb.

"It won't be good!" said Mary. Lazarus had been dead four days.

"HOLD STEADY, TRUST ME," said the Master.

Then Jesus called to the dead man, whose eyes were permanently blind, and whose ears were permanently stopped, and whose life-systems had shut down in the sleep of death. Jesus called him by name:

"LAZARUS! ELEAZAR! COME FORTH! COME TO ME!"

And in the tomb the man who had died came stumbling, wriggling, hopping out, bound all around with the peculiar wrappings with which bodies were then prepared for burial.

"LET HIM GO! UNBIND HIM!" said Jesus.

It was an astounding miracle. It set off the final countdown to the Cross.

Ezekiel's vision: astonishing revival; the raising of Lazarus: powerful miracle— but the theme, the message is the same— (do you hear it?) — the evocative power of the Word of God. When God speaks, He calls into being— when God speaks there is LIFE. Moses wrote, in Deuteronomy, "Man shall not live by bread alone, BUT BY EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD!" But that is not the end of our message this morning:

III. A GRACIOUS CHALLENGE TO LIFE THROUGH THE SPIRIT-BREATHED WORD

- A. We like to hear from the Bible that God's word can raise the dead. These passages give us hope for a future time when we shall have died, and when we shall hear the call to resurrection. And make no mistake, we shall all rise, not to re-incarnation, but to face the fact of the person we are now becoming.
- B. But there is a more pressing call to be heard here. The wind of the Spirit blows over our deadness, and calls us to life!

Certainly you and I are not the intended "target" of Ezekiel's vision? You and I could never think of ourselves as dead and dry ... could we?

The voice of the Savior calls us by name! "Come forth!"

Do you see it here, in this epistle passage?

"Don't you know that Jesus Christ died in your place on the cross?" You don't have to die any more! You don't have to be dead, dry bones!

So— hear the Spirit's breath blowing over and among us now!

So— hear the Savior's voice calling:

"Reckon yourself dead, yes, dead to sin— but alive indeed unto God!"

Conclusion

Suppose I hear God, or I think I do— calling me to life?

What do I have to do to come into this newness?

Lazarus was dead! He had nothing at all that he could do to bring the stir of life.

But when he heard the Christ calling his name, Lazarus could and did respond!

And so can we, you and I!

Prayer:

Summons to Life

Lord Jesus, If we hear what we think we hear today—You are calling our name! We want to come to life! O God, without You life is not really life at all! We hear You saying, "Come to Me!" Please, Jesus, help us take that next step into Your Presence, because knowing You is What Life is all about! Amen.

Sing (in EH) #54 *O Breath of Christ*, vv 1 and 3 only

The Mind of Christ

April 4, 1993

Our text urges "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus..." and usually evokes a devotional, rational, peaceful Bible study in which we may use the Beatitudes or the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit to see first (1) how they profile our Master; and then (2) how we are supposed to ask for grace to be like Him.

But on Palm Sunday? This is not your typical day in the life of the Teacher!

I. THE MIND OF CHRIST IN THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

- A. Why have a parade at all? Was it an accident? Did it just sort of "happen?" Doesn't it make seem ironic in the light of the crucifixion? Isn't it a mockery, a play-acting to hear "Hosanna!"

No, there was a definite purpose here; and that purpose ties in with "the mind of Christ."

1. This is a statement: JESUS IS LORD!
 2. He is the Creator! (The Rocks would cry out!)
 3. He is giving notice: I am in charge!
- B. Zechariah the prophet (9.9) foretold this, and in some sense explains it as well: Behold thy KING cometh unto thee, meek, and lowly . . .
1. The MEEKNESS of Jesus: strength under control, not weakness. No need to bluster or intimidate. (When He comes in conquest there will be no empty show, either! There will be no resistance able to stand before Him!)
 2. The LOWLINESS of Jesus: a king who has come all the way to where we are; the incarnation Jesus became LIKE us... it is THE miracle of the ages. In redemption Jesus is simply carrying through on the Plan—

II. WHAT, THEN, IS THE MIND OF CHRIST?

- A. The "peaceful study" approach has its place— (Beatitudes and Fruit of the Spirit and all ...
- B. But here we don't "study" about it— we SEE it. We grasp it- - as we watch Him ride past:

THE MIND OF JESUS IS LOVE!

1. LOVE FOR/OF THE FATHER

He is truly a king— one with the Father. LOVE OF THE FATHER CHARACTERIZES JESUS MORE THAN ANY OTHER ONE THING. The fellowship within the Godhead is mystery— but Jesus shows us the first great commandment: THOU SHALT LOVE THE LORD THY GOD WITH ALL THY HEART.

2. IDENTIFICATION WITH THE LEAST AND LOWLIEST

Jesus stopped the procession at one point — I think I was right there— and He wept over the city. The mind of Christ CARES!

3. FINALLY, A COMPLETE EMPTYING, OUTPOURING "What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!"

III. LET THIS MIND BE IN YOU

- A. How? Start a new "mind of Christ" study? Form a new class? THINK ABOUT IT? ... discuss ... these have their place! But

Paul tells us how:

- B. (12) "work out" the salvation God has given you. "WORK?" Better, express in obedience God's love BY DOING HIS WILL!

(13) We "work out" what God is working IN! The mind of Christ is realizing that God wants to be at work IN us! WE think that WE are so smart! WE have to think it all up! WE have to SAY it or it won't get said ... but NO! God works in those who LOVE Him!

(14) OMIT the complaining! OMIT the faultfinding .. too often we are "experts and analysis"— we can say what OUGHT to be done, rather than trying to be some part of God's LOVE in action.

[Dr. J. Glenn Gould brought in a red-penciled, corrected bulletin every Monday morning; the secretary and printer were often reduced to cold sweat and tears!]

(15) We are God's stars! We are to SHINE OUT HIS LOVE! "You shine as stars as you hold forth WHAT? As you hold forth the word of God! The WORD has "evocative power!"

[Dr. Sam Kameleson told Helen and me last Tuesday evening how his ministry began. His obedience was a beginning point that God could and did use to His glory!]

Conclusion

Many that were there to see the Triumphal Entry that day went on later to find "the mind of Christ." But however they started ... they arrived because of LOVE!

We preach about discipline, and about developing a prayer life, and about all the responsibilities and privileges of the Christian life. And all these have their place.

But the mind of Christ does not come by any of these! (If we find the mind of Christ, we will certainly want to pursue them all!)

NO- the mind of Christ comes for LOVE! — the mind of Christ comes with LOVE! — the mind of Christ comes AS WE LOVE HIM ENOUGH TO FOLLOW!

WORSHIP OUR GREAT KING! AND LET US SEEK TO BE LIKE HIM!

Jesus Last Prayer

Before his death on the cross

April 7, 1993

From Luke 22:

There are a number of prayers of Jesus recorded in the Gospels. The prayers of Jesus have direct impact on our daily lives even to this day. The "Lord's Prayer" which we pray is actually our prayer, our model for praying, given to us by Jesus to teach us to pray. The LORD's Prayer, perhaps properly so called, is the prayer Jesus prayed in the Upper Room, the High Priestly Prayer recorded in John 17. In that prayer Jesus prays for the unity of His church, and for the perseverance of the saints.

But the LAST prayer Jesus prayed before He went to the cross is a prayer almost beyond description. It is a prayer of indescribable courage. It is a prayer that on the surface of it was unanswered, or answered with a "No." But it is a prayer that set the course for the victory of the ages. If the life and death and resurrection of Jesus were expressed in dramatic terms, this prayer is the CRISIS, the turning point and the Cross, the work on Calvary is the CLIMAX, or the culmination. But the drama which began actually before the world was created, in the mind and heart of God, does not end with the Cross. There is an UNFOLDING, a CELEBRATION, a NEW ORDER BEGUN, which we celebrate next Sunday. But first we must address the AGONY, the conflict.

Jesus always prayed at crucial times, but never like this. He was NOT in any way in rebellion. But Jesus was PURE and CLEAN and GOOD and KIND and HOLY, and now He was going to (somehow) receive all the iniquity and hatred and shame and injustice and evil and selfishness and straying and SIN of the world— your sin and my sin. Jesus was the Paschal Lamb. The Passover, the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, all inform the sacrament we embrace, which sacrament is a figure of the true Sacrifice, the vortex of which Jesus was entering that very hour.

Every atom of His holy being was repelled by the task ahead.

"OH, MY FATHER! IF IT BE POSSIBLE, LET THIS CUP PASS FROM ME!" [This is more than I can bear! I will die before the time! I feel as though I should avert my eyes! But there it is in the scripture for us to see. And there is no pause, no break in the thought:]

"NEVERTHELESS, NOT MY WILL BUT YOUR WILL BE DONE!"

And the answer comes. It is not a "Yes!" to take away the heavy assignment. It is not a "No!" in rejection of the agony and grief. Rather it is encouragement. The Father calls a great archangel, and sends him on an assignment of unspeakable love. "Strengthen My Son! Encourage Him! Physically under-gird Him!"

But the Father Himself remains, as it were, silent. Not a sullen silence, or a silence of insensitivity. Oh, no— the Father is very much aware of what the Son is saying. But in the heart of the Fellowship that is our great Godhead there Plan has been formed in love, the Plan to redeem lost sinners. That Plan is on target. There will be no turning back. There is no substitute sacrifice for this Father and Son.

I think of the transition of power from Moses to Joshua as recorded both in Deuteronomy and in the opening pages of the book of Joshua. It is remarkable how many times either Moses, or God Himself, is recorded as saying to this 'Jesus' of the Old Testament, "Be strong! Have courage! Don't be discouraged! Whenever a battle rages, and the crisis time comes, there comes a time for sheer character to show itself! And this prayer of Jesus is the greatest example of courage ever recorded.

The battle that night continued over a period of time. How long exactly we do not know. In his humanity Jesus craved human comfort! Someone to come alongside! The disciples were tired; it had been a wonderful day, with the Seder and all. So much going on— and so much pressure. They slept— Jesus prayed on. Strengthened, sweating, sweating as it were great drops of blood. Agony— persisting, facing the anguish of evil He never once deserved. Right up until the time of the betrayal Jesus prays.

Then— something happens. As the traitor approaches and the actual pouring out of Jesus' life and blood is about to begin, there is a serenity and majesty that encompasses our Lord!

Look at Him! He looks at the sleeping disciples with pity: "Sleep on now, and take your rest! How you are going to need it! I would that you could have watched with Me just one hour!"

And then the lights of torches, and the sounds of people in a crowd trying to walk quietly, trying to surprise their intended captive. Jesus looks at them as they enter the Garden. He rouses the sleepers: "Get up now!" The Sacrifice of the Ages is about to begin.

They come closer, and are startled to see that their intended Victim is calmly watching them, looking into their eyes, into their very souls. The traitor calmly walks up to the Master, as though somehow this was all right. He give the customary Middle Eastern greeting- you have seen it many times, first on one cheek, then the other, then again. I wonder if he ever finished that mockery?

And Jesus goes with the High Priest's militia to begin a day we call Good Friday. On that day he carried my sins and yours all the way to the Abyss, where he hurled them from Himself! The injustice of the Cross was the end of sin and death and the everlasting defeat of hell.

Prayer -

Communion

A Story of Faith

April 11, 1993

Easter Sunday

John 20:9 *He saw and believed.*

The seeds of life had been sown. Wonderful, living words. Wonderful loving deeds. The seeds fell on warm hearts and cold hearts. They fell on good ground and stony ground. And there the seeds of life waited. Now the Sower was gone. All of a sudden it was winter, It was night, And it had never been this dark, this bleak, Ever, ever before. Then, suddenly the Sun came up, And it was springtime. Some of the seeds began to feel the stirrings of life. Some of the seeds knew they must respond. The WORD was calling them to LIFE!

I. BELIEVING WITHOUT WORDS

The first person to believe in the Risen Savior was John the Beloved. His coming to this living faith is stated in just four words. He saw and believed. (8)

John is modest to a fault. He never calls himself by name throughout the book. But he does not deny what happened in his heart when he looked into the empty tomb. He had not yet even seen the risen Jesus. That would come later, and John would meet Jesus again and again. John's vision of the glorified and risen Jesus would finally surpass every vision, at least until we all behold Him face to face.

But that first beginning is recorded so simply that it is easy to pass over as insignificant. John saw and John believed.

John saw what? The empty tomb. The empty grave clothes. And that was all John needed. He remembered Jesus had said, "I will rise again the third day!" He remembered Jesus had said, "I will not leave you comfortless!" The seed has been planted in pure and fertile soil, and a miracle took place: John believed! That was it! Mary's revelation is so much more dramatic. A sinner, a notorious sinner, she was the first to see the Savior! But John was good ground. The seed had lodged well.

John stands for millions of believers who have been implanted with the Good Seed of the Gospel before they ever came to rebellion, or before they knew enough to doubt.

John stands for many who know that Jesus is alive long before they reach the age of full understanding.

John stands for those who are so inclined to believe in Jesus that they know even before they know HOW they know! And never despise such faith! It will mature. It will be tested. It will have its revelations.

John was first!

II. FAITH IN THE GARDEN

The first person to see the risen Savior was a woman. She was without doubt a remarkable woman, with a strong character that had been refined and prepared for faith by the redeeming grace of Jesus. Her past keeps coming back to us; when she first met the Nazarene she had been possessed of seven devils. Jesus had set her free, and she had been a part of the faithful few that went all the way to the cross with Him.

But after the crucifixion Mary came to a dead stop. Her life was totally circumscribed by a visible, tangible Authority. She would gladly have died for Him, but she had not fully grasped how He had died for her! Her hope was in a living Messiah. And she had seen Him die on a cross.

She loved Him so much she wanted to go as far as she could in showing Him respect and honor. But all the words He had spoken, and all the things He had done were history now. Except that she still was free of the demons.

She went to honor a dead Jesus, but she went with love. And the hunger and cry and aching of her heart were answered in a way she never could have imagined. It is one of the most beautiful scenes in all holy writ.

Jesus, Himself, came to the Garden where she was. He came near and spoke her name. "Mary!" And within her the dormant seed of faith sprang to life!

"Master!"

Mary stands for the millions who have come to faith through love of a Christ they have been seeking. Perhaps we all have sought in the wrong places at times for Jesus. It may be that we have "supposed" and have almost mistaken the truth in the error of our suppositions. And then the living, risen Savior has spoken our name! I know you! And you know Me, too!

Mary stands for those who go looking with love for the Master.

III. FAITH THAT CAME IN TIME

It was a different kind of 'coming to faith' that John used for the very climax of his Gospel.

Thomas was a man who missed church on the first Easter Sunday. Perhaps if he had been there it might have been different. But it wouldn't have been so good for you and me if we didn't know this story of Thomas.

Thomas seemed to be that sort of person who is cursed with a gloomy outlook on life. But at the same time he seemed to be as honest as he knew how to be.

Remember how at a time late in Jesus' ministry when Jesus said He was going to Jerusalem, and the other disciples tried to tell Jesus not to go, that it was dangerous? Remember who spoke up, and what he said? It was Thomas who said, "Well, let's go with Him and die!" He loved Jesus enough to follow Him even when he, Thomas, thought He was probably wrong!

Anyway, Thomas didn't see, so he wouldn't believe. I get the idea that Thomas didn't dare to try to believe, because he didn't want to be disappointed again. And besides, Thomas couldn't see how things had changed. They were still a powerless little band of outsiders in their society.

Thomas represents honest doubt. Thomas stands for millions who have been persuaded that all religions are made of smoke and mirrors, and that believing in an unseen God probably is delusion. (Who was it that said an agnostic is a person with no invisible means of support?)

A Story of Faith

Thomas would like Jesus to prove to him personally that He is relevant in a hostile world.

One thing comes through in this story. Jesus really loved Thomas. He may have been stubborn. He may have been unable to join in the celebration because he couldn't believe what he hadn't seen. Jesus still loved Thomas.

And Jesus found Thomas. And when Jesus came to where Thomas was, the arguments Thomas had insisted he would make were never made!

"Come, put your hand in my side!", said the Savior. Thomas never did! Instead he fell to his knees. The seed of faith sprang to life!

"My Lord and my God!" said Thomas.

It is a wonderful thing to know the story of Jesus. It is a wonderful thing to come to love Him and to believe in Him as the Christ of the Bible. Jesus said that the Good News of the Gospel is the Seed of Life, and to know about Jesus is to receive that seed into the heart.

But it is an infinitely more wonderful thing to believe! To believe, to be persuaded deep in one's heart that Christ is alive, and to make Him our own personal Lord and Savior.

Believing, in this sense, does not come from knowing more and more. Believing does not come by winning arguments, or human understanding. Believing comes when people meet the risen Jesus!

A church where Jesus is alive can be a place where Jesus meets with people, and brings the seeds of faith to life. A heart where Jesus lives can take the risen Savior to neighbors at school or in the work place. God help you and me to let the living Savior shine through our lives!

Whether we are like John, or like Mary, or like Thomas, if we will let Him, Jesus will come to where we are. He will speak the word that calls our seeking to a living faith: we can believe!

Now the Sower was gone. All of a sudden it was winter, It was night, And it had never been this dark, this bleak, Ever, ever before. Then, suddenly the Sun came up, And it was springtime. Some of the seeds began to feel the stirrings of life. Some of the seeds knew they must respond. The WORD was calling them to LIFE!

EH #34 - *Christ is Risen, Christ is Living*

EH #35 - *Christ is Alive*

You Will Be with Me in Paradise

April 9, 1993

Preached at Fort Square Presbyterian Church

"YOU WILL BE WITH ME, IN PARADISE, TODAY!" Luke 23:32-43

A conversation involving three men is recorded in the Gospel of Luke (23). It was not by any means a casual conversation. Two men were dying on crosses on either side of our Savior.

One man chewed his tongue in agony and anger, and cursed the Man on the middle cross. Cursed Him for a fraud and an imposter.

"You said a lot of great-sounding things when the crowds were following," he groaned. "If you are not a fake do something!"

One man cried out in spite of his anguish, in rebuke of the blasphemy he was hearing. "Aren't you afraid to die with that kind of hatred coming out of your mouth?" he groaned. "You know we deserve what we are getting!"

Think about it. That is quite an admission of guilt.

But that was not all this dying thief we have come to call "Dismas" said that day. He continued, "This Man has done nothing wrong!"

Whether or not he fully realized what he was saying, he had made a correct theological statement. He had made a declaration of faith in the sinlessness of Jesus.

Then Dismas turned his head toward the middle cross and said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!"

Remember me! Don't forget me!

Just what does it take to get ready to die?

Here is a man with no time left at all. Whatever opportunity he has had to cultivate a relationship with God evidently has been wasted.

What is really necessary to be with Jesus wherever He is going?

- A. One thing is certain: only a fool would deliberately plan to wait until the day of his death to make his peace with God.

Presumption is the mortal enemy of genuine saving faith. Presumption is dictating terms to God— saying "I will do this, and then that, and then I will take advantage of Your grace." Presumption is assuming that because we know the facts of salvation, of the Bible, of the Plan of Salvation— because we may say the words of Four Spiritual Laws or a Roman Road to Salvation that now we are safe in the arms of Jesus.

Presumption is the mortal enemy of faith. We never dictate terms to Almighty God.

- B. There is always the mystery of calling involved in getting ready to die. I believe God has given us grace to accept Him, to "choose" to be saved. However there is always a mystery involved when people come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. We say in our arrogance, "I found God!" But in reality it is always God who finds us!
- C. Given that we are called to salvation, what elements are present in this conversation between Dismas and our Lord?
1. There is an awareness of sin, of unworthiness.
 2. There is a God-inspired faith in a Savior.
 3. There is a sincere cry for remembrance. "Remember me!"

And we shall be remembered! Not one sparrow falls, Jesus told us, but the Father knows. We don't have to wait until the crisis hour to cry for mercy! And when we answer the stirrings of faith deep within us— when we see Jesus standing outside our heart's door— perhaps at a summer camp for teens— perhaps in a children's Sunday School hour— maybe in the quiet of our living room— but whenever we say, with faith that knows our own sinfulness, but that looks to the spotless Lamb of God, "Lord, remember me!" we are heard!

Perhaps all humanity is represented in this conversation on Golgotha's hill. All of humanity is sinful, condemned, and justly so, to eternal separation from the holy. All

humanity apart from grace is headed for the oblivion of the lost and empty wastes of outer space darkness. This conversation marks a singular division.

Two thieves were crucified that day. One was saved so that none ever need despair. But only one was saved, and none ever dare presume. There will be an eternal division of humankind.

Jesus spoke of this division in another way at another time. He said that when Judgment Day finally comes two men will be working a field, one will be taken the other left; two people will be sleeping in a bed, one taken, one left; two women grinding at the mill, one taken, the other left.

Of all those who have prayed, with repentance, "Lord, remember me!" how many, do you suppose, Jesus will forget?

From my heart, I pray: "Lord, remember me when You come into your kingdom!"

A Plan for Your Prayer Life

April 18, 1993

Psalm 40

Anyone who claims to be an expert on prayer rouses my suspicion. We are all, as Christians, enrolled in the school of prayer. But at the same time, not one of us will ever really amount to a hill of beans unless and until we learn some measure of effective prayer.

The best pattern or outline I know is what we call "The Lord's Prayer." It is a beautiful outline for prayer.

But just now I look at this Psalm (40) of David; here I see a fantastic plan for an effective prayer life.

I. WE NEED TO FIND GOD'S TIMING.

AND WE DON'T HAVE TO TALK ALL THE TIME. SOMETIMES WE CALL IT 'OUR QUIET TIME' WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO "WAIT"?

One aspect of prayer that some people never do learn is waiting before the Lord. It takes time, sometimes, to be filled. (Thoughts at the gas station.) Two or three times a week, perhaps, we need to simply "get quiet" before the Lord. Henri Nouwen calls it "being useless." It may seem like a waste; your mind will not be used to silence.

Don't try to do too much here. Don't worry too much about intrusion. Just tell the Lord at the beginning you are going to sit in His Presence. Use a passage like Isaiah 40: "They that wait upon the Lord ..."

Every day have a token silence before you pray the Lord's Prayer.

II. WE NEED A PLACE TO STAND.

WE DON'T NEED TO REINVENT THE WHEEL EVERY TIME WE PRAY! WHAT ARE SOME FOUNDATIONS FOR FAITH?

It certainly helps to have a firm place to stand. We can trust the Word. In it God speaks to us; and by it we learn to speak to God.

Every day affirm your own personal "focus verses." My focus verses are:

HEBREWS 11:6 / JOHN 15:8 / EPHESIANS 4:32 and in recent years LUKE 11:13— I ask to be filled again with the Spirit!

III. WE NEED A SONG TO SING!

TOO OFTEN WE THINK WE HAVE TO WAIT UNTIL THE SUN SHINES TO PRAISE THE LORD AND REJOICE!

PRAISE AND JOY

Praise God FOR His blessings! Praise God FOR His LOVE! And praise God for His Promise, His Presence— when there doesn't seem to be any reason to praise!

The "sacrifice of praise" can be just that! An offering that almost hurts as we give it— but that pleases God! We affirm, "GOD IS GOOD!"

IV. WE NEED A JOB TO DO

God's people can be assured that they do not live in vain! You may have the most boring JOB in the world— but God's will for you includes something that matters for eternity!

I DELIGHT TO DO THY WILL, O LORD!

The last half of the Lord's Prayer is petition. We can ask boldly in terms of getting God's will done. And even though there will be storms, it is a wonderful thing to know that God's will cannot be frustrated. His will becomes our absolute delight!

Conclusion:

WE ARE ALL SEEKERS AFTER GOD'S HEART! AND THIS PSALM CLOSES WITH THE PETITION/PROMISE.

MAY ALL WHO SEEK YOU REJOICE AND BE GLAD IN YOU!

Prayer: Lord, Thank You for the access we have to You in prayer. Help us this very week as we wait before You. Amen.

#83 EH *He Touched Me*

Through Flood Through Fire

April 18, 1993

John 20:29 "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed"

Introduction

We who live along the seacoast know what a sobering thing it is to hear that a hurricane is coming. We do what we can, if we need to we go to a safer place, and then we simply have to ride it out. [Hurricane Bob in 1991]

The hideous and tragic events (of just this past week) sound like a hurricane warning to me. If we doubted it before, murder in our public schools shout out that challenging days are upon us. [Of course this is something our brothers and sisters in the inner city have been living with for a long time, now.]

Our scripture lessons today— all three of them— point to the fact that God's people can and will survive BY FAITH when the storm comes. One lesson is a reminder of the story of Noah. One lesson is a message from Peter, who is the prophet that predicted that the elements will melt with fervent heat, [Isn't that comforting?] And the text that holds it all together is a "post- Easter text" that closes with Jesus saying "Peace be with you!"

There is another thread that runs through all three scriptures as well: it is OBEDIENCE IN THE ABSENCE OF SIGHT, i.e., LIVING BY FAITH. [Look first at the lesson of Noah]

I. THE LESSON OF NOAH

- A. Jesus said (in Matthew 25 & Luke 17) that the world would come to resemble Noah's time before He came again. We cannot, of course, fully understand what that world was like, but in Genesis 6 we read: "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and full of violence..." In fact it was so corrupt, and so full of violence that God destroyed it.
- B. In that time of corruption, not everyone was corrupt and violent. In Genesis 6 we also read, "Noah was a righteous man— and he walked with God."

When judgment fell on the earth there was an escape. In the ark which Noah built to God's order he was spared along with his family. Noah's life was spared because he obeyed God in preparing for judgment day. The key to the story of Noah is faith and obedience. We miss the point if we get sidetracked on lesser points in the story. [Bill Cosby's version is nearer to the incredulity everyone may have felt than we like to admit!]

Noah certainly couldn't comprehend all that was involved in his task of building and preaching, preaching and building. But Noah could and did OBEY GOD to the saving of his soul. And even IN the ark there was need for continuing trust!

[Leave Noah for a moment now. The epistle lesson from Peter is the same message, only coming closer to where we live now:]

II. THE MESSAGE OF PETER

- A. In I Peter 1 there is an awareness of coming storm. He says "your faith- though tested with fire- will result in praise and glory and honor!" (1:7) Jesus told Peter at the lake side that when he (Peter) was old he would be carried where he did not want to go. Peter died a martyr's death. But Peter has a message of confidence.
- B. That confidence— that "ark of safety" to which Peter clings- - he calls being "born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1:3)
- C. That living hope is the love of a Jesus we have never seen! "(1:8) though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory."
- D. It is the people with this living hope that are TODAY'S "ARK BUILDERS!" Many people, not just believers, are concerned about the violence of our times. They want something to be done. It is a knee-jerk reaction to expect the government to do something about it. But strange as it may seem it is the "ark builders" and the people with the so-called "narrow view" that are making a difference in the face of a rising storm!

[The media have given some attention to some of the inner city leaders. What they have not addressed is the power behind the effective leaders, like Bruce Wahl, like John Borders, like Dr. Michael Haynes. That effective power is a focus on GOD!]

By the same witness, it is the families who have GOD at the center of their agenda that will stand the storm!

I hope you don't misunderstand me, or think I think I am "super-spiritual." I don't have the answers. But also I don't know how to address those who think it is wonderful when, say, a Nazarene makes it big in the Big Leagues. I still have the gnawing, nagging feeling that we have forgotten the Third Commandment, and don't really know how to keep a Christian Sabbath holy. If GOD is truly at the center, that is what really counts!

I can't put my finger on just what is right or wrong with the glamour and the excitement of Christian entertainment. I'm sure there is a place for great souls like Steve Green and Ken Medema and so forth. If I did not totally believe in Cross Walk I could not in good conscience be a part of the service this evening. It is necessary and good to worship God with the best we know, and to communicate the Gospel in a language people understand.

BUT WE HAVE TO SEE BEYOND THE GLAMOUR, BEYOND THE SO-CALLED 'POWER POSITIONS', BEYOND BEING ON T.V. AND ALL THAT. If we are trying to make Jesus accommodate to our goals and agenda, the storm will come and destroy us with all the others who have built on the sand.

IT IS THE ARK-BUILDERS, THE ONES WITH FAITH IN THE WORD OF GOD THAT WILL SAVE THEIR FAMILIES!

III. THE CONFESSION OF THOMAS

What do Peter's alarming words, and the story of Noah have to do with this closing passage from John 20 where Jesus appears to the assembled disciples?

Well, if the disciples had been able to see THE STORMS THAT LAY AHEAD FOR THEM they might have thought they needed detailed instruction in what they were to do.

(Those Instructions would come, later, as they needed the details.) But NOW Jesus came and simply assured them that He is very much alive!

Here is the very climax of the Gospel! - the entire purpose for which it was written. JESUS IS ALIVE TO MAKE US ADEQUATE IN THE STORMS OF LIFE! And this climax can be summed up in the words of a man who had trouble coming to faith, the man we call "doubting Thomas."

Thomas finally came to say, "My LORD, and my GOD!" And John writes, "THAT IS WHY THE BOOK WAS WRITTEN— SO THAT YOU MIGHT BELIEVE, TOO, AND BELIEVING YOU MIGHT HAVE LIFE IN JESUS' NAME!"

That living faith— "living HOPE, as Peter called it— is THE ONE THING THAT WILL HOLD US STEADY WHEN THE WORLD IS ON FIRE. And along with the inner assurance that Jesus is alive is the literal, constant Presence of the Risen Savior through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Receiving the Holy Spirit, and being filled and re-filled with His Presence is a completing part of the preparation every one of us needs so that we may live with joy in these threatening days. Being filled with the Spirit of the Risen Savior is both a crisis of trust (Romans 12:1,2) and an ongoing renewal (Luke 11:13.) And it works!

Conclusion

We are to be ark builders! Just what form the ark will take depends on obedience to God. The one thread that runs through all three of these scripture passages is OBEDIENCE EVEN WHEN WE CANNOT SEE! Noah had to believe even AFTER he was on board the ark! (Think of floating on endless waters day after day!)

If obedience to God is your sincere desire and prayer, God will help us find a way.

I think of such things as taking our children out of the public schools if they become untenable to our faith. I think, CERTAINLY, of EQUIPPING OUR CHILDREN TO SEE that some of what they will be taught is good and necessary; and at the same time that SOME OF WHAT THEY WILL BE TAUGHT IS CONTRARY TO WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS.

God's "ark of safety" needs to be offered to everyone who will listen. We are concerned about our children because they ARE ours. But God has children we do not know, and He will be using us to reach some of them, too. The plans for the ark of safety are not of our design.

Whatever plan God has for the ark (here in our corner of His kingdom)— it is His plan! Our first task is to KNOW HIM, and to STAY CLOSE TO HIM! And I am sure then, that God will enable us to have something of the spirit of the old spiritual that sings about the "Ark":

"Get on board, little children!
Get on board, little children!
Get on board, little children!
There's room for many-a more!"

Prayer:

O God, Our Refuge and Our Strength, our Very Present Help in Trouble, Help us to be ARK BUILDERS! Give us a spirit that trusts and obeys and that reaches out to our families and beyond— That prepares for the coming storm but does not fear. In Jesus' name, AMEN

EH 81 My Faith Has Found a Resting Place

Eternal Lamb of God Ever Present

April 25, 1993

Luke 24:13-35

1 Peter 1:17-23

Isaiah 43:1-12

Introduction

Our Scripture lessons for today have one encouraging theme:

GOD IS NEAR TO THOSE WHO SEEK HIM AND WHO WANT TO LIVE IN HIS PRESENCE AND TO DO HIS WILL.

The Lesson from Luke 24 brings us back to the beautiful story of the Emmaus Road. The children have read it again for us: As the disciples walked along, talking about the events of the day in the light of a faith that had been almost lost, Jesus was there, He went with them, they believed and they shared.

The text from I Peter says it in a profound, theological framework:

For He (the Lamb of God) was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God."

The vision of Isaiah gives us the word as from the very mouth of God Himself. And powerful, comforting, but challenging words they are!

I. GOD SAYS WHAT HE IS TO HIS PEOPLE

They have not been all they should be. In fact they have been in captivity because of their earlier rebellion, and the rebellion of their parents. But God still loves them. He has heard their hearts cry. And so God says these things:

- A. I HAVE FORMED YOU. I am Your Creator. I know what really makes you tick!

If we are self-made people, then God's words do not apply.

If our church is of our own efforts; if we in fact are not a living stone, built into the living structure of the One True Church that Jesus is building, then these words do not apply.

We are not "the only church." But by God's grace we are a part of God's church! We have life, we have an open door. We are God's because He has planted us here!

- B. I HAVE REDEEMED YOU. I have removed your sins; I have paid the price for you. I am the Suffering Servant as well as the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father. You do not have to continue in your unhappy condition.

If we have not sinned, we have never been redeemed.

If we are righteous in our own goodness, these words are meaningless.

But by the grace of God we have been washed in the blood of the everlasting sacrifice and been cleansed of our iniquity, and clothed in Christ's own righteousness. We have been redeemed.

- C. I HAVE NAMED YOU. I have called you by name. Not only do I know your name— the details of your life— but I have given you a new name. [Remember Jacob and the wrestling scene at Jabbok, and how in the course of the night the angel (Theophany) said, "What is your name?" "Jacob!" "No! Your name is Israel!"

- D. YOU ARE MINE! God-owned! That sounds so limiting, so confining to the un-believing mind, I suppose. But to my mind it is the most satisfying thing I can think of, to have the great God of heaven and earth unashamed to call ME His own!

I have seen children who were ashamed of their parents because they were out of style. I have seen parents ashamed of their children— and sometimes I may have wanted to pretend my children belonged to someone else (not really!!) But to have God say "You belong to me!" gives me great security. I would think twice before messing around with Almighty God's property!

II. GOD SAYS WHAT HIS PEOPLE ARE TO HIM

- A. A covenant is not "one-way;" it is in some way "reciprocal"

God has said, "I AM your God!" And in that statement are all the wonderful things God has done for us. But God is also saying, "You are mine!" The covenant is not just one sided, with nothing for us to be and do. God makes it plain; His statement is simple, it is repeated, it is clear:

YOU ARE MY WITNESSES!

"These are to be the conditions of our covenant relationship: I AM YOUR GOD! YOU ARE MY WITNESSES!"

- B. Witnessing involves: Talking about God! But this involves more than "speculation!" Everyone, it seems is an "expert" on God; God wouldn't do this; God isn't like that—

What is involved in our covenant? We are to be witnesses to what? To the fact that I AM God! And that the I AM God is the center of our lives! This acknowledgment of God in every facet of our lives sums up our duties as God's people, His servants, His witnesses.

- C. To WHOM do we talk about God?

1. We talk about God to God Himself! We tell GOD what He is to us! That is WORSHIP!
2. We talk about God to our selves! (Psalm 103) We tell ourselves what God IS to us: that is HUMILITY!
3. We talk about God to each other! We tell each other what God is: that is FELLOWSHIP IN WORSHIP! (The importance of what we used to call "testimony time.")
4. We tell everyone who will listen who God is TO US! We tell everyone who will listen who God is and that becomes EVANGELISM.

What do we tell them? (1) What we know for certain! (2) "God is GOOD!" And God has said He inhabits such God-talk! If God is in our God-talk He says (in this Isaiah passage:)

"I will bring your family together from the north and the south and from the east and from the west."

CONCLUSION

A résumé of the year is in your hands. God has helped us this year. Pastor Nielson has worked with ad hoc committees this year who have helped develop a ministry that is solid for our people from birth through teens; Mike Schutz has developed the College Sunday School class and has worked with Chaplain Mark Sanford in that area; I have mentioned some exciting things in the younger adults ministries in my report. It remains for us this year to continue to seek to develop opportunities for adult ministry and growth.

I asked church leaders, staff and board members and others, to share their best dreams for our church in a sentence or two. What I received could be summed up, for the most part, in a desire that every individual who worships here might be folded into a caring, sharing group— for prayer, Bible study, encouragement; and that every individual who worships here might be encouraged to discover, develop, and use gifts of the Spirit in service to God.

Last year ... "no vision"

Haddon W. Robinson, distinguished professor of preaching at Gordon Divinity quotes the 19th century poet/essayist John Ruskin as saying:

The greatest thing a human ever does in the world is to see something and tell others what he saw in a plain way. Hundreds can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly and tell others is poetry, prophecy, and religion all in one."

If that is anywhere near true, then the greatest thing we can do as individuals, and more importantly for this message today, the greatest thing we can possibly do as a church is to learn to see God and to talk about Him in a plain way to each other in encouragement, and to anyone who will listen in the sacrifice of praise, which really is the whole end and purpose of our being as a church— and encompasses all the tasks of worship, evangelism, education, service and fellowship as well.

We Are His People

THE SHEEP OF HIS PASTURE

May 2, 1993

John 10:1-10 - I Peter 2:19-25 - Nehemiah 9:6-15

The prayer from the book of Nehemiah, which we used for a call to worship today, is a powerful statement all by itself. But when we know the story of where it was prayed, and why, and by whom, it takes on an even deeper significance.

I. THE PRAYER AT THE SQUARE BEFORE THE WATER GATE

A. Context of the Prayer

When this prayer was first prayed, there were thousands of people, all the Jewish inhabitants of the Holy Land, standing in the open square which stood just inside the Water Gate to the City of Jerusalem.

Ezra the priest and scribe, and Zerubbabel the governor, in the years just before had rebuilt the temple, but the walls remained down, and the people had been at the mercy of very unfriendly neighbors.

But now Nehemiah has led them in rebuilding the wall around the Holy City. It is a miracle! And now they have been called together to worship.

For this gathering a high platform had been built. From early morning light until noon for one entire week the people stood, attentive, as the Word of God was read in their hearing.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD the great God. And all the people answered "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ... And they read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the

reading. (8:6 - 8) The people wept when they heard the law. Ezra said, "This day is holy to the LORD your God, do not mourn nor weep." Then he said, Go, eat of the fat, and drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our LORD. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." (8:9,10)

And after the seven days of reading of the word the people went home. But they returned three weeks later with the express purpose of renewing their covenant with God. This is the context of this prayer, a part of which was our call to worship this morning.

B. Content of the Prayer

1. This is a wonderful prayer. It is strikingly like our lesson from last Sunday morning, from Isaiah 43, for it recognizes God as
 - a. Great/Almighty
 - b. Creator of heaven and earth
 - c. The One who CHOOSES His people— He chose Abram;
 - d. The One who NAMES His people: changes their character (He changed Abram to Abraham!
 - e. The Redeeming God, who brought His people OUT (Exodus)
 - f. A Shepherding God— who led His people by a pillar of cloud/ a pillar of FIRE!
2. This prayer recognized God's willingness to lead His people:
 - a. The pillar of fire in the past, but also
 - b. The very walls that surrounded them were evidence of God's leading to the very present!

Nehemiah's "Miracle"

At a seemingly trivial moment Nehemiah's "opportunity" came.

(This is where we usually begin his story.) He was serving Ataxerxes, the most powerful king in the world, and the king simply mentioned that his face was downcast and sad. Nehemiah prayed a split-second prayer for guidance (2:4,5) "So I prayed to the God of heaven, and I said to the king:

"Send me to Jerusalem to rebuild the city of my fathers." It is important to see that this split-second prayer had been preceded by earnest and sincere intercession for genuine revival.

The king granted Nehemiah all he asked, because (2:8) "The good hand of my God was upon me."

Nehemiah went immediately to Jerusalem with authority from the king. With great wisdom from God Nehemiah faced ridicule, and anger and hatred and contempt and evil conspiracy and treachery and discouragement from 'friends.'

He rebuked profit at the expense of love and friendship, and he denounced greed... and he persisted and the wall was completed.

- C. SO NOW THE PEOPLE WERE GATHERED TOGETHER, THEY STOOD THERE AT THE WATERGATE BETWEEN THE MIRACLE OF GOD'S LEADING IN THE PAST — AND DECIDING IF THEY WOULD PUT GOD FIRST FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR CHILDREN!

II. THE DISCLOSURE OF THE GATE OF LIFE

- A. It seems quite a leap from the prayer in Nehemiah, recalling God's leading in the ancient past, to the words of Jesus to His disciples, and to us:

I AM the way to God! I AM the door for the sheep of God's pasture! I AM the Good Shepherd!"

The common thread in these passages is God's leading— His willingness to guide us.

The people who heard Jesus say these words: "I am the DOOR! I AM the Good Shepherd!" knew those same stories of the Exodus, and they believed them. They also had seen Jesus at work, and had come to know His spirit, and His Presence among them.

Now Jesus was saying to them:

"God still wants to lead people! He wants to lead YOU! And I AM the way God leads! I AM the doorway into life! I AM the Good Shepherd!"

- B. The comfort and the provision and the love of the Shepherd are directly connected with the willingness of the God's people to follow the Good Shepherd. The Psalmist says, "We are His people, and the sheep of His pasture! Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise! Be thankful unto Him and bless His name! For the Lord is GOOD! (from Psalm 100)

Don't make any mistake— there were decisions being made that day as Jesus spoke!

And every time these words really "come alive" decisions are made!

III. DECISION TIME AT THE GATE OF LIFE

- A. The people who stood near the Water Gate responded to the Word! They literally signed a renewed covenant that they would be God's people! That day they changed the way they were living to agree with God's revealed will to them:
1. They sought to put God at the center of their lives, by seeking to DO God's will. This is symbolized particularly in the matter of how they observed the Sabbath. They had been conducting business on the Lord's Day. Nehemiah shut the gates of the city at sundown on Friday evening. The caravans simply had to wait until Shabbat was over.

2. How do we translate this to our specific, present situation?

We simply ask ourselves this question: Who is really on the throne of our everyday living? Comfort? Ease? He that seeks to save his life will lose it, the Master has said!

3. These people also sought to put God at the center of their lives by refusing to serve idols. Serving God is not all "positive thinking!" There are times when we need to declare war on evil! It is not enough to do good things, and give good testimonies. This turning away from evil was represented by the people rejecting compromising relationships. They quit trying to worship both God and the gods of their neighboring cultures. They put away pagan partners who refused to worship Jehovah God.

4. Once again, how do we translate this to where we live just now?

- B. We are afraid to take a stand against anything for fear of offending! "Pluralism" and "tolerance" have become such shibboleths for virtue in our society that we have almost come to believe that Christians are their own Masters, that we do not have a LORD!

No question about it— we must renounce all sin in our lives! We cannot simply "add Jesus" to the life we choose to live! The idea that we can be Christian, God's children, and live exactly as we please, without regard to God's will, is abomination, and God cannot bless it!

There was a time when Nazarenes were almost "plain people;" they had rules and regulations that probably were, in many cases, a little bit of scripture and a lot of human scruples.

But it seems so much that we have swung way over through freedom, and I wonder if we have taught our young people and children to have no fear at all of displeasing God!

We now have people who claim to be serious about their relationship with God who are impure in their sexual lives; people who talk about loving Jesus, and yet who buy and sell and copy schoolwork that is supposed to be

their own; people who are Christian who can pad accounts and steal from employers.

Nehemiah and Ezra called for a reform based on the revealed will of God! Not only these people, but their children's lives, hung in the balance of how they would respond!

Conclusion

Our generation stands between a past of grace— unmistakably God has brought us to this hour— and a future of choice!

God stands ready to lead us!

The Gate of LIFE stands open before us!

The Shepherd of our souls is ready to guide us with His rod and His staff.

But we must decide whom we shall worship— and whom we shall obey!

Prayer O Great God Who formed us And redeemed us And who has called us by name and said, "You are mine!" We truly want to belong to You! We want You to lead us! Help us to be like You! In Jesus' Name. Amen

Hymn #161 *Children of the Heavenly Father*

When Your Children Ask You Questions

May 9, 1993

John 14

Deuteronomy 6:20

1 Peter 2:1-10

Introduction

One of the great joys of being a mother or a father is trying to learn how to answer questions. Questions start early, even before children can talk. Then we hear: "Do I have to go to bed now?" and "Are we almost there yet?"

The questions get more complicated later: "Can I stay over at the Wilson's house tonight?" "Can we go hang out at the mall?"

And then even more complicated even later: "Can I have the car this evening?"

Sometimes these questions are amazingly profound. My son John once asked, "If Sam Miller went to heaven, how come you stopped at the funeral home to see him?" Sometimes the questions seem to miss the point altogether. At my first attempt to "explain" something to a VBS class, a little girl raised her hand; I thought, "Here comes proof of the enlightenment!" Her problem: "I'm stuck in this seat!"

[Transition: Our scripture lessons for this morning deal with answering questions. Moses told the second generation Exodus nation that their children were going to be asking questions about their faith. And in John 14, Jesus' final, vital, very important talk with his disciples was interrupted at least three times with questions:]

I. JESUS' FINAL DISCOURSE INTERRUPTED WITH THREE QUESTIONS

A. This last discourse of Jesus is a message of wonderful assurance;

"Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe in Me ... I am going to prepare a place for you, and if I go I will come again and receive you unto

Myself that where I am there you may be also; and, furthermore, I am sending the Comforter to be with you so you will never be alone."

- B. The message was not un-appreciated; it was simply not fully comprehended. It was interrupted with at least these three questions:
 - 1. How can we know the way to life? (Thomas)
 - 2. How can we ever find out what God is like? (Philip)
 - 3. Why are we the favored ones? How come the Holy Spirit comes only to us, and not to the entire world? (Judas the Less)
- C. I'm deeply thankful for the Last Discourse. But I am grateful for the questions, too. And these three questions, in one form or other, are those we have asked our parents, and questions our children ask theirs!

II. JESUS' ANSWERS ARE A 'PRIMER' FOR CHRISTIAN PARENTS

- A. A. Each generation of Christians needs to know, deserves to know the answers to these vital questions: HOW TO FIND THE WAY TO LIFE! and WHAT IS GOD LIKE? and JUST WHO ARE WE, ANYWAY, THAT WE THINK WE HAVE A CORNER ON TRUTH?
- B. B. There are really TWO ways that Jesus answered these questions— or, if we look a different way, THREE:
 - 1. 1. BY THE FORCE OF HIS CHARACTER
We may learn from the example of Jesus when He was interrupted with question or disagreement: He was not bothered or turned aside by these questions at all; Jesus took the time to address them as they came; some with mild rebuke, some with assurance, all with love unmistakable.
 - 2. 2. BY THE SIMPLE TRUTH OF HIS WORDS (REVELATION)
We can pay particular attention to the answers Jesus gave to these specific questions: (and also)

3. 3. BY THE ASSURANCE OF HIS PRESENCE. Jesus stayed with His disciples; and gave them promise that He would always be there for them.

C. C. Look just now at Jesus' answers:

1. Question 1. How may we know the way to life?

Jesus answered this with

- integrity. Jesus reminded Thomas that he already knew the way! What could this mean? Thomas was saying, "I don't know the way!" But when we seek the Lord all the days of our lives, and walk with Him in honesty, we share that integrity with those we love. When we play games with what we know to be right, how can we expect our children to come to believe in God, or to find "the way"?

Jesus also (had) answered this question directly,

- with words, with a lesson. Doctrine IS important! In this pluralistic society, not all sincere faith is true faith! Jesus said, " I AM THE WAY... NO ONE COMES TO GOD EXCEPT BY ME!"

Jesus answered this question, also, a third way:

- Jesus was PRESENT to His disciples. I AM with you! I will NOT leave you! Stay in Jerusalem until I send the Spirit—the Spirit will actually make the Father and the Son "at home" in you!

We need this "presence" to answer the questions of life our children will ask!

2. Question 2. The second, profound question, was asked by Philip: How can we see the Father God? "Show us the Father and it will be all right!"

Once again the first answer was

- You see God when you look at Me! Jesus is the Word, the Incarnate God. God is revealed to all mankind in Him. No one else can say in the same way: "Look at me and see God!"

Jesus was God in Word, God in Deed, God in Spirit. "He that has seen ME has seen the Father!"

- Whether we like it or not, our children will get their first ideas of God from their parents! None of us can reflect God's glory as we might like. But if we know Him, it will show!

Some people have had bad experiences here; we can and must go beyond the vision of God our parents show to us. [Was it Martin Luther who had a hard time praying the Lord's Prayer ("Our Father...)??]

- We can, and we must point them to Jesus! HE reveals God! Even our little children can learn to pray, can learn to love God! God is GOOD!

III. THE PRIVILEGE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF KNOWING FATHER GOD

- A. The third question that interrupted Jesus in that discourse seems somehow of a different kind. Judas (not Iscariot— Judas the Less) asked it:

Question 3. Are we a privileged people? How come you will reveal these things to us, and not to the world?

Did you ever think that thought? I have— unprompted, when I was just a schoolboy, long before I studied philosophy or theology. "How come we think we have a corner on what is right?"

- B. What was Jesus' answer?

1. There IS an exclusive element in following Jesus: "No one comes to the Father except by Me!"

I didn't say that. Jesus did! But Jesus did NOT come to EXCLUDE anyone from God's Light and Presence! The Gospel says that Jesus is the light that shines in the world giving salvation's hope to every person!

2. The very reason that Jesus came was so that everyone who will may find life! The reason, then, that Jesus reveals God to His disciples is so that they can continue to tell people who God is— to carry on His work of love:

"As the Father has sent Me, so I am sending YOU!"

- C. This concept goes back to the reason God ever called out the nation of Israel. In Abraham "all nations of the earth will be blessed" was the promise. And in our lesson this morning Moses was reminding the people: "When your children ask you "Why these commandments..." "What good are God's laws??" remind them that God formed us, God called us into existence— that we exist for God!

Conclusion

This is what Peter is saying as he answers this third question: "Are we something special? Are we the holders of truth?"

Whether or not we are fathers or mothers with children at home, we share in this wonderful privilege of faith. Peter says: "By God's grace we are something special!" Listen to what Peter has written:

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God IN ORDER THAT YOU MAY DECLARE THE PRAISES OF HIM WHO CALLED YOU OUT OF DARKNESS INTO HIS WONDERFUL LIGHT." (I Peter 2:9,10)

Only God's grace can help us answer the vital questions our children ask us. God can help us know our true identity in Jesus Christ, that God has chosen us, and called us not so much to know the answers in detail as to live them.

Turn with me in your hymnal to #530. Read in unison with me the first nine verses (ending with the words "marvelous light".)

[here read the passage]

When Your Children Ask You Questions

God's call is an inclusive one, and we are to be a part in His plan to bring the world to Him— beginning with our own daughters and sons.

Prayer

Hymn # 338 *Lord, Speak to Me, That I May Speak*

I AM The Vine

May 16, 1993

John 15: 1-14

I AM the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes (cleanses) it, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I AM the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, And I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you. By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments, and abide in His love. These things have I spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full. This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends, if you do what I command you.

Some scripture passages are so simple and yet so deep that they become veritable fountains of life throughout all our spiritual journey. One such passage is the 15th of John, the "True Vine" passage.

How do I keep from 'jumping on my homiletical horse and riding off in all directions?' I want to be exceedingly simple:

I. JESUS CAME TO LIVE WITH US

- A. The essence of the Gospel story is, first, that Jesus came. Jesus was God made flesh, living among us. He only lived here 33 years. He was the eternal Son of God. But he became flesh.

John 1:14 says "The word was made flesh and dwelt among us." We beheld His glory, full of grace and truth. Jesus still identifies with us.

- B. There has been a commitment on God's part. The eternal love of God has been expressed.

1. Jesus came as God's SACRAMENTAL MIRACLE: (A sacrament is a visible sign that reveals spiritual truth)
 - a. Jesus reveals to us the invisible God; through Him we come to know God.
 - b. Jesus also shows us what humanity is supposed to be. The image of God in which we were created, marred in the separation of sin, is revealed to us in Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

2. JESUS FOREVER IDENTIFIES WITH YOU AND ME

- a. The word does not say, "He was flesh" (fruit) which would say that for a while Jesus was flesh as He dwelt among us, but now He has discarded that aspect of His being. No, the word is "He was made flesh" (factus est).

Hebrews 2:16 says: "(Jesus) took on Him (or assumed) the true human nature."

- b. All the creeds tell us that Jesus Christ is very God, very man.
- c. This permanent identification speaks to us of the NATURE OF FAITH. First of all, the faith God has in His Son to make us like Himself. It says that there is AN ABIDING QUALITY in faith! God came to LIVE with us!

[But the Gospel story is not just a "One-Way Street:"]

II. JESUS CAME SO THAT WE COULD COME TO LIVE WITH HIM

A. Right Here, Right Now

We think of this "Coming to live with God" as at some distant time in the future. [And I'm sure "then" will be wonderful.] But Jesus taught that eternal life, God's quality of life, begins when we receive HIM!

Just as He took our flesh, Jesus has made provision for us to receive His divine life, not in the distant future, after we die, but right here in this difficult, imperfect world of NOW!

Just as God came to live with us, God expects us to live with Him!

1. There is to be a permanence about the relationship we have with God. "Abide" "Remain!" "Be 'at home' in Me!"

Life in Christ must be much more than a moment of decision. No conversion, in and of itself, can make Jesus a life-long friend.

2. Friendships are the work of a lifetime! Real, genuine friendships grow. Loyalty are the soil in which they grow. Everything of lasting importance comes from this "abiding relationship!"

B. Jesus Tells Us 'How'

Jesus sums up the things that make for this mutual sharing of life:

1. Dependence on God. This opposes what the popular philosophies of life say: "Do YOUR OWN thing!"

But Jesus says, "Without ME you can do NOTHING!"

You cannot find a place in life that will really count for time and for eternity! You cannot make your marriage what it really ought to be! You cannot successfully rear your children! You cannot live and cannot die with confidence!

2. Fellowship in LOVE.

3. Prayer that is in Jesus' name:
 - a. the discipline of prayer (Matthew 7:7 "Ask and keep on asking!")
 - b. the focus of prayer (unlimited power/limited scope) (John 15:7 "Whatever you ask - IN MY NAME!")
 - c. the result of prayer - fruit
4. The Presence of God in our lives! The Comforter!

III. THE WORLD WILL SEE JESUS AS WE ABIDE IN HIM

[Our entire lives become "sacramental:"]

- A. Just as Jesus makes God "real" to us, we are to make God real to each other and to the world! (What does it mean, "sacramental living?")
 1. We know the two sacraments of the church: baptism/water; Eucharist/wine bread— and the different "sacramental religious things"— preaching, gathering together in God's house; obedience revealing God's sovereignty...
 2. But ABIDING — living together in Christ— potentially makes ALL our lives sacramental! If we abide in Christ as branches in the True Vine, then His life reaches into all aspects of our living.
- B. Sacramental living is LOVING as Christ loves:
 1. No transforming relationship can be "cold" and "objective". People are NOT "objects." We cannot "zap them with the gospel" and then leave. Like Jesus, we must commit to BEING a message, not just 'SAYING' A MESSAGE, and staying with the people God to whom sends us. The message is always LOVE! Not some sort of goofy-dust magic we sprinkle and then run back to our ghetto.
 2. Our "much fruit" may never be recognized as "great" except by God. But God knows! Mordecai Hamm won Billy Graham; one farmer and his wife sponsored a revival that won Roy T. Williams; Jim Fox discipled a teenager in his church in New Philadelphia, Ohio, named Randy Davies.

It may be that you will do something spectacular; chances are you may not— but what you do, if you abide in the True Vine, will have eternal significance.

3. You will save your loved ones!

And nothing you ever do will be more important than your faithful witness to the ones nearest and dearest to you. If you go out and become world-famous, and have thousands in your cathedral of the day after tomorrow, and you lose your loved ones, you are a loser!

Conclusion:

The most wonderful thing about this is that the burden of growth and fruit and success are not on us!

THIS WHOLE WONDERFUL THING IS GOD'S IDEA! (15:16)

YOU have not chosen ME— this is NOT YOUR "TEAM"

I AM ! I have chosen YOU

We have a God of loving-kindness. A God of tender mercy. A God whose joy is making His children happy. He doesn't make us happy by giving us what we think we need.

[Exhortation:] — When we make our life's highest goal "being happy" we are certain never to arrive. But when we understand the love of God, to that extent we have already arrived, even though we never arrive! The joy is in the journey!

Jesus Christ by His Spirit living in you and me, and people just like us in every race, tribe and nation, is the only hope of this world!

We must take Jesus into the work-place. We are training our young people to be "successes;" but are we defining "success" as Jesus does?

Jesus must have access to every part of our home life: Here is where the battle will be won or lost for our children!

The marriage relationship reflects the love of Christ and His church. The parent-child relationship reflects the relationship of God to His children. The brother-sister relationship reflects the fellowship of the Trinity.

—

I AM The Vine

Multiplied over and over again, the life of Jesus in His church is more powerful than any other force on earth!

We are not responsible to change the entire world all by ourselves. To make God visible in this world is too big an assignment for us alone; but we can begin by inviting Christ into our lives, and then by letting God's love be seen in the relationships where we are.

Prayer

#84 (EH)

*Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me;
All His wonderful passion and purity.
Oh, Thou Spirit divine,
All my nature refine,
Till the beauty of Jesus be seen in me.*

The Session of Jesus

May 23, 1993

Ascension Sunday

Wollaston Church of the Nazarene

John 17:1-11

Acts 1: Ye shall receive power ...

Hebrews 12: 2,3

Introduction

[We are just one week away from "the Third Great Day" in the church's yearly calendar— the Day of Pentecost. Pentecost is a day the secular world has not (yet) learned how to commercialize. And as a result, much of the worshipping church almost ignores it. After all, we follow the culture much, much more than we want to admit. So if Hallmark doesn't know what to do about celebrating the birthday of the church, well, then— neither do we!]

[What difference does it make whether or not Jesus actually, literally, bodily rose again from the dead? What difference does it make that Jesus literally, actually, in His glorified BODY ascended into heaven, there to sit at the right hand of God the Father? When I am under pressure, misunderstood, what difference does it make WHERE Jesus is?]

If we could get use of a Star Trek time warp and by some miracle take the place of that first little group of believers in the year that Jesus died and rose again if we could be that group that actually experienced the first outpouring of the Holy Spirit which was the baptism and the birth of the church, the body of Christ... .. we would just now be three days into an historic prayer meeting.

I. JESUS ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN

THE ASCENSION SEEN FROM BELOW AND FROM ABOVE

A. How WE saw it ...

"Just last Thursday we were on the mountain that rises east of Jerusalem, walking and talking with the risen Lord. We were getting used to the idea that He really has conquered death, and that He is Lord of Lords.

"But then this most awesome thing happened. Jesus had told us He was going to leave, and yet that He was not going to abandon us. There were angels there to explain it, but we still were pretty much amazed. For last Thursday there was a departure. Jesus said that we were to come back here to the Upper Room and wait, and pray, and that we would understand, would receive power to carry out His mission. Then while He was speaking He simply lifted off from the ground and a cloud of glory received Him and He was gone, out of sight.

"This would have devastated us a few weeks ago. But we have learned a little about trusting Him; we are here in this place in obedience to His command."

B. How HEAVEN may have seen it ...

Even if we had been part of that church-in-the-making there in the Upper Room, we could not have understood what was going on at the "other end of that Ascension Day journey" Jesus took that day.

We make a great deal of the coming of the son of God to this world as a Baby, and rightly so. Our imaginations have taken us to Bethlehem year after year. But we don't quite know how to deal with the return of the Son of God to his throne, to the glory he had before the worlds began.

This was a direct answer to the great High Priestly Prayer of John 17. Before Jesus prayed for the disciples or for us in that great prayer, He prayed that night for Himself. He said,

I have finished the work You sent me to do— now, O Father, GLORIFY ME WITH THE GLORY I HAD WITH YOU BEFORE THE WORLD WAS!

We need more poems like Christopher Wordsworth (1807-85)'s hymn;

*See the conqueror mounts in triumph,
See the King in royal state,
Riding on the clouds his chariot
To His heavenly palace gate!*

*Hark! the choir of angel voices
Joyful alleluias sing,
And the portals high are lifted
To receive the heavenly King.*

*Who is this that comes in glory
With the trump of jubilee?
Lord of battles, God of armies,
He has gained the victory*

*He who on the cross did suffer
He who from the grave arose
He has vanquished sin and Satan,
He by death has spoiled his foes.*

*Thou hast raised our human nature
On the clouds to thy right hand
There we sit in heavenly places
There with Thee in glory stand;*

*Jesus reigns, adored by angels;
Man with God is on the throne;
Mighty Lord, in thine Ascension
We by faith behold our own.*

*Glory be to God the Father;
Glory be to God the Son,
Dying, risen, ascending for us,
Who the heavenly realm has won;*

*Glory to the Holy spirit;
To One God, in Persons Three;
Glory both in earth and heaven,
Glory, endless glory, be.*

It is marvelous to catch glimpse of the joy in heaven that the Eternal Word has returned in Triumph.

II. JESUS IS SEATED AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD THE FATHER

THE SAVIOR AT THE THRONE OF GRACE

It is even more wonderful from our selfish perspective to realize what Jesus is doing there at the Throne.

1. Jesus is praying for YOU.
2. Jesus is sending His Spirit, by His Spirit He is Present with us
3. Jesus is "preparing a place" for His people. He came to earth to share our human frailty in order that through eternity we might share His eternal fellowship. Listen to the theology in that Christopher Wordsworth hymn again:

*Thou hast raised our human nature —
On the clouds to thy right hand —
There we sit in heavenly places —
There with Thee in glory stand; —

Jesus reigns, adored by angels; —
Man with God is on the throne; —
Mighty Lord, in thine Ascension —
We by faith behold our own.*

III. JESUS CONNECTS WITH YOU AND ME, WHERE WE ARE NOW!

OUR SOURCE OF HOPE AND JOY

- A. IF WE BELIEVE THIS, THEN WE CAN LIVE WITH PERSPECTIVE: It helps in life if we can look above the problems and burdens of the day and know where we are headed.

In the recent book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, author Steven Covey says:

"I value my children. I love them, I want to help them. I value my role as their father. But I don't always see those values. I get caught up in the "thick of thin things." What matters most gets buried under layers of pressing problems, immediate concerns, and outward behaviors. I become reactive. And the way I interact with my children every day often bears little resemblance to the way I deeply feel about them. (105)

Jesus, at the throne of grace, watching us, caring for us, praying for us helps us keep perspective on our goals, where we are headed. Even when we cannot see, we can trust that He can— and that he will "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

B. IF WE BELIEVE THIS, WE WILL SURVIVE LIFE'S BATTLES:

Look again at the familiar opening words of Hebrews 12, especially as they apply to the Ascension:

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, FIXING OUR EYES ON JESUS THE AUTHOR AND PERFECTER OF FAITH, WHO FOR THE JOY SET BEFORE HIM ENDURED THE CROSS, DESPISING THE SHAME AND HAS SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE THRONE OF GOD. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart.

When the little kids in my house are insufferable, or when the boss that controls my paycheck (if not my career) is impossible to understand and unfair or when the other people in my school act as if I did not even exist....these may not be classic martyr-type cases of suffering. But they

are suffering! They do represent pain! And when we experience pain and suffering and struggle, Jesus is THERE for us!

Suffering is the overlooked thread that runs through the scriptures. No one enjoys even thinking about the hard times, the opposition, the pain and the struggle.

The Ascension says several things to those of us who believe in the Christ when we come to the times of suffering and struggle. Jesus showed us how. He endured! Jesus cares, He prays for us NOW. Jesus assures us that suffering is temporary, but victory is permanent. [Finally,] (Conclusion)

C. IF WE BELIEVE THIS WE WILL DO AS THAT EARLY CHURCH DID:

We know we cannot find that time-machine and change places with the disciples in the pre-Pentecost prayer meeting. But we can and we will obey the Lord's same commands:

1. We can... and we will pray for the fullness of the Holy Spirit! Have YOU made that full and complete surrender to the will of God for your life? Have you asked and received the fullness of the Spirit?
2. We can... and we will do our best to let this world know that Jesus is alive. Even when we suffer, we will be faithful!

Peter says (in our epistle lesson); "Don't think it is strange when things are tough! That is the way life is! As a matter of fact, things are sometimes tougher for Christians!"

3. We can... and we will live with Christ's RETURN in mind!

The angels said, This same Jesus shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven! and Jesus Himself said, If I go I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am there ye may be also! So, if we are faithful in our pilgrimage there is an Ascension Day waiting for us, as well!

Prayer

Hymn *Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart*

A Door Standing Open

Trinity Sunday

June 6, 1993

Revelation 4:1

John speaks here of 'a door standing open in heaven.' John's own vision, his writing that we call The Revelation is for us just such a door into the reality that lies beyond our limited vision.

I. THE REALITY THAT IS OUR GOD

- A. The reality of God is reflected in all the human race. We human beings are made in the image of God, made to know and love and worship Him. That image has been marred, we believe; splintered, broken, but is still discernable, reflecting the spiritual reality that is God.

By far the overwhelming majority of people on the face of the earth have some kind of belief in deity, reflecting that craving we have for God. Some few people have a god that is "no god." We call them "atheists" because their faith system says there is no faith system. But most people are more deeply concerned than they themselves realize with coming to know just who or what God really IS.

- B. If God is truly God He must reveal Himself; He cannot be 'defined'. God's "definition", so far as we are concerned, begins and ends with revelation. That revelation is all of one piece; God does not contradict Himself. If we, unaided, could "figure out what God is" then we would in some measure have to be 'equal with' Him. The Bible tells us this when it says, "No one has seen God at any time."

We do not dare to presume to define God. Only God can do that.

CHRISTIANS BELIEVE THAT THE ALMIGHTY GOD WHO HAS REVEALED HIMSELF, first as the I AM THAT I AM, the loving and kind YHWH, proclaimed through prophets in sundry times and diverse manners, HAS IN THESE

LATTER DAYS SPOKEN THROUGH HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON, JESUS CHRIST.

- C. GOD IS WHO HE IS, regardless of what we or any person may declare Him to be. Modern culture strongly resists the idea that there is any definitive, objective revelation of God.

We are told often and in many ways that "religion is a private matter." When the secular culture dares, it denies God altogether. But the usual approach is to say that religion is valuable to each individual; that God is whatever and whomever each person thinks He or She may be. If God is no more than the figment of each individual's imagination, then worship is no more or no less than calming our inner resources through the power of meditation, or tuning in to some imagined harmony of the planets and spheres. If, however, God IS GOD, and of God is a Rewarder of those who diligently seek Him, then worship in spirit and truth, worship that truly engages God, becomes the most important single thing that human beings can do.

II. A DOOR OPEN IN HEAVEN

- A. We look into the MYSTERY that is God .

I like mystery! It leads my imagination to wonder. I am glad that when I was a small boy I read about castles and dragons and Aladdin's lamp. Children love mysteries. But what does that have to do with God?

Fundamentalists do not like mysteries. They need to have everything explained! And there ARE some things that need to be made as plain as possible. Reformers and evangelists through the years have sought to cut through sham and lies and vagueness to make the way of salvation crystal clear. Thank God for simple, understandable truth on how we may be saved. But sometimes evangelicals can fall into the trap of extending that simplicity into an explanation of the entire sphere of God's kingdom. Not content to be introduced and admitted into the fellowship of God, we feel that we have to explain what we cannot ever possibly fully comprehend.

John introduces us to MYSTERY! He sees things in heaven that are so very wonderful, so very true and holy and beautiful, that he cannot possibly begin to understand them. Words cannot describe the deepest realities of the human spirit, let alone the glory of our great God. Children's mystery stories pale as we see an emerald halo encircling the great throne, and thrones surrounding the glory where God sits enthroned and read of strange creatures and dragons and battles in the heavens. GOD, OUR FATHER AND FRIEND, DWELLS IN AWESOME MYSTERY!

B. We peer into the MAJESTY of God's Presence.

John describes a Throne which he saw through the open door into heaven. Throne denotes authority; this is no earthly, limited monarchy. This is the Throne of the Universe. Surrounding the throne of God are several wonderful concentric circles of wonder. The first thing John describes is the encircling rainbow. Not now an arc, or partial circle, with a will'o'wisp pot of gold forever promising something sometime somewhere, but the glory of light in all its radiance completely encircling the Great White Throne.

I have to leave it to those who are gifted both in science, higher mathematics, physics and the like to fully appreciate all that such glory of light might mean. The first commandment was "Let there be light!" Our scriptures tell us that God IS light, and in Him is no darkness at all. Jesus told us that He is the light of the world, and that we, reflecting that light, are to be the light of the world. But here, at the heart of all Holiness, is light in many-splendored glory encircling the I AM THAT I AM. Then John describes for us a circle of twenty-four thrones. Right there in God's holy Presence is that which suggests to us the faithful of all ages. The Patriarchs represent those who follow after God in the light before the Son was fully revealed; the Apostles represent the Church and all to whom the message of grace shall reach by the light of the rainbow of promise shining through the circles of the faithful.

The four living creatures are next described. It is impossible for us to say with certainty just how they are arranged. But they speak to us of the whole of divine creation, the fitness of good things, the harmony of truth, the rightness of giving to God the Creator the honor due His name. All of the Universe echoes with praise: THOU art worthy!

C. We see a glimpse of the MERCY that is God's love.

The praise for God's great Mystery and His Majesty takes on a different focus, one which even we can begin to understand as we continue reading John's vision through the open door into heaven on into the next brief chapter. For there the song "Worthy is the Creator!" becomes "Worthy is the LAMB!" Isn't it only appropriate and right that we, who have been invited to partake with God in His very life and in the fellowship of His saints should praise Him for the love that caused Him to give His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish? Doesn't it seem somehow right that heaven will be a place where we celebrate the Incarnation of the Son of God who brings about, finally, through the great plan of salvation, by His grace, through His blood, the Glorification of His Church? John gives us an insight into where our finite-ness, our humanity shall one day merge into God's great Infinity, and we shall live and reign with Jesus in the Presence of the Light that is God.

III. WHERE EARTH AND HEAVEN MEET

A. God has made, and does make contact with us.

God meets with us (1) IN THE HEART OF JESUS AT THE THRONE. And by His great grace, God also meets us (2) IN THE CALL TO SALVATION, WHEN WE ARE ENABLED TO RECEIVE THE LORD JESUS CHRIST AS SAVIOR. And then, when we are redeemed, God meets with us (3) IN THE MEANS OF GRACE... IN PRAYER...IN THE LIVING WORD OF GOD ... IN WORSHIP ... AND PARTICULARLY IN THE SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH.

B. The sacraments clarify and reveal spiritual truth to obedient hearts.

In their light we come to see more of who God is, and also we see who we are. 1. Communion cannot and does not forgive sin. The Christ who is the Host of communion can and does forgive sin. He gladly receives those who may acknowledge that they have gone astray. But to be forgiven, sin must be confessed. For sin to be forgiven we need to bring it to the Christ with a faith that not only says, "I'm sorry, please forgive me!" but also says without reservation, "Jesus is LORD!"

Sacraments can be observed with deceit. We can easily deceive others, and make them think we are humbly seeking to take part in the mysteries of faith when in fact we are covering known sin, or simply going through the motions with no desire for God's love. We can even deceive ourselves, and sweep real guilt and real sin under the rug of rationalization. But when we say "Lord, I am sorry for my sins; please be the Lord of all my life!" the grace of God is willing to meet us just there. It is a serious thing to partake of the body and blood of the Lord with an unrepentant, divided, selfish and deliberately sinful heart!

Those who arrested and brought our Savior to Pilate's hall were very much aware that the next day was Passover. They needed to be ceremonially clean. They would not be able to pray for their sins to be forgiven if they violated the ceremonial laws. So though they were desperately wicked and hateful, and though they lied against the Savior and sought His death, some people went to their Seder meal and ate with their families after they had delivered the Paschal Lamb to be killed on the cross of Calvary.

Certainly this is not to discourage anyone from coming to the Lord's table. It is to help us realize that the invitation to Communion is an invitation to share with God His very Presence and life.

Into the Sacrament itself:

Read (responsively) # 752 in Sing to the Lord

A Door Standing Open

Invitation: This is the LORD'S table; HE is the HOST! Wherever you are in your spiritual pilgrimage, you are welcome, if HE invites you. Only do not come irreverently!

Prayer: #750

The Sacrament of Baptism

June 6, 1993 pm

(see also 1/5/92 & 10/2/88p)

Baptismal service

Intro:

One of the difficult things for Protestants is fixing in their minds the relative importance of the sacraments of the church. Of all the means of grace, they are possibly understood the least.

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SACRAMENTS AS MEANS OF GRACE

- A. Grace is unmerited favor of God; grace is that which bestows God's great LOVE on us; grace is God's attitude of forgiveness toward the sinner; grace is a quickening and strengthening of life within the soul.
- B. AND MEANS OF GRACE ARE the channels by which God bestows His LOVE on our hearts. I submit seven:
 - 1. WORD OF GOD; and with this I include the faithful the preaching of the Word, as well as reading in order to obey God's will.
 - 2. PRAYER IS PROBABLY THE PRIMARY MEANS OF GRACE; and prayer combines with power with the use of the Word.
 - 3. THE FELLOWSHIP OF GOD'S PEOPLE is a significant and powerful means of grace. God never intends for us to make our way to heaven independent of other individuals, or of other families, or even other groups of believers. God intends that we bear one another's burdens.
 - 4. CORPORATE WORSHIP, in the large groups or celebrations, in the smaller groups united around a lesson or a ministry (congregations,) as well as in the accountability groups of prayer and sharing (cells,) is a means of grace.
 - 5. PERSONAL WORSHIP may be the same as #2, prayer; but it involves the carrying forward of life in the spirit of 'the living sacrifice.'

6. The good old Nazarene theologian, H. Orton Wiley, lists THE SABBATH AS A MEANS OF GRACE! It was introduced at the time of man's creation, and belongs to mankind generally and perpetually.

I am convinced that there is great spiritual power waiting to be released in the lives of the people who can tap the resources of the Lord's Day by observing it joyfully, not in bondage, but in rest and worship and refreshing.

7. But the last 'means of grace' I would mention are THE SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH THAT WERE INSTITUTED BY JESUS.

We use the term 'sacrament' to signify an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given to us, ordained by Christ Himself as a means of receiving that grace, and as a pledge or assurance of Christ's promise. From the earliest times, the sacraments have been understood by the church to be religious rites that carry the most solemn obligation of loyalty to Jesus Christ and His Church.

All Protestant churches recognize two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper.

C. SACRAMENTS ARE PLEDGES OF LOYALTY TO JESUS CHRIST; THEY ARE TESTIMONIES THAT MARK CHRISTIANS AS SEPARATE, DIFFERENT FROM THOSE WHO DO NOT BELIEVE.

1. The sacraments are for all Christians: John Wesley once said: (in 1736)

"I think the rock on which I had the nearest made shipwreck of the faith was the writings of the Mystics; under which term I comprehend all, and only those, who slight any of the means of grace." GFH, p541

2. In other words, Wesley said that even people who seem to be so very, very spiritual nearly led him astray when they picked out which means of grace they would adopt, and which they would avoid.

3. Wesley was saying 'I want to be faithful to God through Christ's church!' And if you wonder what John Wesley thought the 'true church' consisted of, here is a quote from H. Ray Dunning:

"There were two major means that Mr. Wesley seemed to identify as constitutive of the church: the pure Word of God preached, and the sacraments duly administered. This puts him squarely in the Reformation tradition." GFH p542]

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF BAPTISM AS A MEANS OF GRACE

- A. Baptism is clearly one of the sacraments of the church. It was instituted by the Lord Jesus, first by His example, and then by His unmistakable command (in the words of the text:)
- B. Baptism means three things for the believer:

1. BAPTISM MEANS IDENTIFYING WITH JESUS in His baptism.

John the Baptist baptized many people in the Jordan. This was not clearly outlined in Old Testament law, but it could have some meaning of preparation for the coming of a new order, in that just before the giving of the Law on Sinai, God told Moses to sanctify the people, and He specifically said: "Have them wash their garments!"

But the baptism of Jesus was unique. Jesus was identifying with sinners, even though He knew no sin. In coming with the sinners, JESUS TOOK THE ROLE OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT; and in the descent of the Holy Spirit HE CLEARLY EXEMPLIFIED THE ROLE OF THE ANOINTED ONE, THE MESSIAH.

No one else was sinless that day, or any other day. But Jesus identified with everyone who has failed; he came to bear our sins and sorrows to the Tree.

No one else could ever hear the Father say: "This is my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!" and have the Holy Spirit descend without measure.

But if Jesus identified with us, with sinful humanity that day of His baptism; then we, as His spiritual sons and daughters identify with Him.

We are not called on to die as the sinless sacrifice; but BAPTISM IS THE WAY OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT; and we identify with Jesus in death to sin (He died for sin.)

We cannot know the fullness of the Holy Spirit as Jesus knew Him, but WE ARE CALLED TO ACCEPT THE ANOINTING OF GOD, indwelling us, and live in the new life and power of that life the Holy Spirit brings.

2. BAPTISM MEANS INCORPORATION INTO THE CHURCH. The washing of baptism by John indicated a preparation for a new age of the Spirit of God. But Jesus transformed John's baptism, and made it the sacramental portion of His Great Commission: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
3. BAPTISM MEANS THE INITIAL RECEPTION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. The Holy Spirit is the gift of the Son, and of the Father. He comes to make Jesus real to us. He is the Spirit of Jesus. He does not testify of Himself, but is the fulfillment of the promise: "Lo, I AM with you always, even to the end of the age."

The connection of baptism with the reception of the Holy Spirit seems clear in the New Testament. Sometimes the people received the Spirit as, or after they were baptized; sometimes it was a witness or a seal after they had already been saved.

Acts 2:38 (Peter says:) "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, AND YE SHALL RECEIVE THE GIFT OF THE HOLY GHOST." Here, clearly, the people to be baptized did not yet have the Holy Spirit.

But later, at Caesarea, Cornelius and his household received the Holy Spirit as Peter was preaching to them. And the question there

was: "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, WHICH HAVE RECEIVED THE HOLY GHOST AS WELL AS WE?"

In obedience to the command of Christ, we can expect that the sacrament of baptism will be a confirmation of the promise of God the Father and God the Son to bestow the Holy Spirit, personally, and powerfully, into each believer's heart!

To the Candidates this service:

June 6, 1993 - To this class of young people being baptized:

We have talked together about Romans 10:9,10, and what confessing Christ and becoming a Christian means:

It is so very simple— and yet cannot be done without the life of God being breathed into us:

1. to truly believe that God has raise Jesus from the dead is in large part the work of the Spirit within;
2. to confess with the mouth that Jesus is Lord is something which we can do by God's help.

This act of baptism is one way that you confess, loud and clear, that Jesus is LORD!

In just a few moments as part of the ritual of Baptism I am going to ask you three questions. Your answer will be, in part, that second part of Romans 10:9,10— for you will be saying publicly that Jesus is YOUR Lord, that you love Him, and that by God's help you will serve Him and do His will!

The Sacrament Dearly Beloved: Baptism is the sign and seal of the new covenant of grace, the significance of which is attested by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans as follows:

(Romans 6:3-5) "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of His death, we shall

The Sacrament of Baptism

be also in the likeness of His resurrection."

The earliest statement of Christian faith, into which you come now to be baptized, is the Apostles' Creed. Shall we all affirm our faith as we read it together:

Congregation Read (with the candidates) the Nicene Creed: #13 in hymnal)

Question #1 - Will you be baptized into this faith?

(If so answer, "I WILL.")

Response: I WILL.

Question #2 - Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, and do you realize that he saves you now?

Response: I DO.

Question #3 - Will you obey God's holy will and keep His commandments, walking in them all the days of your life?

Response: I WILL.

IN THAT BAPTISMAL WATER

1. [OPTIONAL brief statement of testimony.]
2. [Y o u r n a m e], I baptize YOU in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Compassion of Jesus

June 13, 1993 am

Matthew 9:36-38

And seeing the multitudes, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd.

Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest."

Introduction

You have probably heard this scripture many times before. But what comes to your mind from these words? If we look carefully, the first thing we see is the compassion of Jesus.

I. THE COMPASSION OF JESUS

A. The primary motivation of Jesus is compassion. ([Com= "along side"] [passion= "feeling"].) Jesus comes alongside, feels with the multitude.

My primary motivation,[AS I LOOK AT 'THE MULTITUDES' TODAY] apart from divine intervention, is something else: fear, or intolerant judgment, or something else.

- Children who have been brought into the world unwanted, and who have not known tenderness, with the means to take lives... frightening prospects
- Haitian immigrants infected with AIDS, a burden to society, overloading welfare dollar availability...
- Vocal minorities, anti-Christian voices/forces

B. Who is right? Jesus? or me in my fear? But how can I help feeling what I feel?

II. THE COMMAND OF JESUS

- A. Perhaps this is why the first word of Jesus regarding "the multitude" is NOT to command direct human action. Jesus is afraid of what I might do or say in my own [best] attempts to do "what is right!"

It is NOT that Jesus approves of the sins of the multitudes. But He sees their need primarily as a LACK of a Shepherd before it is anything else.

- B. Christ's first command is: PRAY THE LORD OF THE HARVEST! SEND FORTH LABORERS!

Jesus did NOT say "You shall NOT go into the harvest!" and He did NOT say, "Don't volunteer!" But first Jesus DID say "PRAY!" This task is bigger, much bigger than we can know or understand.

But why "pray!"???

1. Prayer UNITES US WITH JESUS IN COMPASSION. It is difficult, if not impossible, to pray in the Spirit for a person and still hate or despise.
2. Prayer IS THE MEANS GOD HAS CHOSEN TO RELEASE THE POWER OF GOD'S LOVE: "Ye have not because ye ask not" James said.

If we really thought that loving intercession released tangible, vibrant, effective power in the lives of God's people, would we pray more, more pointedly, more effectively?

3. [Think about this:] Certainly a prayer which Jesus has told us to pray WILL BE ANSWERED!

- C. **Transition:** This compassionate challenge for us to pray was immediately followed by a commissioning of the disciples (in Matthew 10:)

III. THE CALLING / COMMISSION OF JESUS

(Exodus 19: A kingdom of priests, an holy nation) People who walk with God, and who represent the love of God (the compassion of Jesus) to an entire world!

A. GOD'S PEOPLE ARE "SPECIAL" TO HIM

BUT THAT "SPECIAL LOVE" IS ALSO A SACRED TRUST! Jehovah God chose the Jewish people to be SPECIAL! But that "special" included a love for the entire world. "All the world is MINE!" declared the Lord God.

Our "special" relationship with God is wonderful! But we never dare forget that COMPASSION that says

PRAY! for it will make us, in some measure then, among those who GO!

B. WE CAN AND WILL BEAR FRUIT IF ONLY WE WILL PRAY!

1. Most of us will not be like Dale and Pat Stotler who will be pioneering a work in Lesotho (lee-soo-too) where no one else has evangelized. But every one of us can PRAY! And as we do, the vision comes that this entire world belongs to God! And in some measure, we will want to GO!
2. God does not expect us to do what we CAN NOT do, but that does not mean our prayers are ineffectual!

This platform was filled to overflowing last Thursday evening with brand-new churches, and those planting them. Four of these churches represented were Haitian daughters of OUR Second Church.

Big things sometimes swing on "little hinges of prayer"... Dr. Brickley and Merritt Nielson talked; Merritt & I prayed as we circled Second Church... yes, Ruth Richardson ... and the transfer became reality.

The vision has not developed as I thought it might; our church is NOT as "hands on" as I might have hoped it would be. But the work is being done BETTER than we might have done it!

The work is being done because someone "prayed the Lord of the harvest!"

WHAT WILL OUR NEXT 'PRAYER' RESULT IN?

Conclusion

The Compassion of Jesus

Let me close with two thoughts that may seem a little disjointed— but they go together in my thinking:

1. This past week my heart was challenged as I thought of my assignment here in Wolleston. We were interviewing a young pastor about to take on his very first assignment. Dr. Manny Chavier asked him what he, the young man, thought success in the ministry might be?

"I want to produce holy people!" was the surprising reply; and it was given in all humility. I know no one can make people holy but God, but this young man may not have said it exactly right, but he was saying that through his ministry he wanted to cooperate with God in such a way that the people he pastored would be holy.

I thought: I have been pastoring 37 1/2 years and I couldn't have a better goal than that!

How I want to help YOU be a holy man! a holy woman! I want you to be comfortable in God's Presence! I want you to grow to your full spiritual potential in Jesus Christ!

2. I believe a holy people will be effective and fruitful in this harvest that Jesus tells us is so plentiful!
 - a. I am interested in the MEANS to that end: if it is small groups/ accountability covenants/ seasons of prayer and fasting— so be it!
 - b. I am convinced that if we will obey Jesus in His command to "Pray the Lord of the harvest," He will send out laborers! And I also believe that the end result will reach our own lives, and we will have the joy of sharing in that harvest.

The answer Jesus will do in our lives will boil down to THREE POWERFUL CHARACTERISTICS:

1. WE WILL GLORIFY GOD BY OUR INTEGRITY OF CHARACTER

We cannot labor in God's harvest fields if we are false in any relationship. We cannot do God's work if we have any reservations whatsoever about our love for Him, or our obedience to His will!

2. WE WILL GLORIFY GOD BY A CLEAR PRESENTATION OF THE WORD

It is not enough to have good intentions, or even to know the elementary things of the Word. We need to go into the Word for our food, our life, and study it to know Christ better than we know anyone else!

3. WE WILL GLORIFY GOD WITH OUR PRESENCE WHERE WE ARE NEEDED!

It is not quite enough to truly be GOOD, and to wonderfully be TRUE— but we have to love someone enough to stay with them in intercession and presence and caring— until they realize we love THEM, and not just their "souls!"

Prayer

Lord of the Harvest! Send forth laborers into your harvest fields! Amen!

Hymn 529 - God Whose Giving Knows No Ending

An Offer Too Good to Refuse

July 11, 1993 Isaiah 55:1-5; 10-13 (6 - 9)

Introduction

(Yesterday I received another "offer" in the mail that was) "Too good to be true!" We become cynical about such claims.

But God is the only Person
who can make us an offer
that is literally
too good to refuse.

I. THE THIRST! Hearing The Word!

Ho! Everyone that thirsteth! Come to the waters! The universal thirst!

If we Christians are right about anything at all, there is one craving deep in your heart and mine, and in the heart of every human being on God's earth, that underlies and precedes every other need. It is not a superficial or secondary craving. It is absolutely elementary and essential. (Jesus Himself said it: "Man shall not live by bread alone — but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Father!")

We are made in the image of God. We are God-craving creatures. That craving may be denied, it may be stuffed and crammed with artificial God-substitutes. But there is no substitute for God in the human heart. God and God alone can fill our hearts to complete satisfaction.

"Ho! Everyone who thirsts! Come to the waters! Come, buy wine to revive and heal! Come buy milk to nourish and sustain! Buy water to refresh and maintain life! And the cost is in the coming, and in the covenant! There is no charge! No price!" This, indeed, an offer too good to refuse!

II. THE SATISFYING DRINK! Refreshing From The Word!

(Isaiah gives a picture- a sketch really- of the satisfaction of those who have come to the waters— ((10-13)) —a veritable harvest of LIFE!)

- A. Lowest level: A harvest of freedom FROM sin and increasingly so: though never from sin's nearness or temptation
- B. Second level: A harvest of joy in coming TO God in the privileges of sonship
- C. Higher levels: A harvest of sharing in the divine plan and purpose visible, recognizable fruit, yes— but also assurance of pleasing Father God.

III. THE COVENANT! Receiving The Word!

(But this harvest is conditional upon receiving the word. We hear a lot about unconditional love, of "acceptance." But that must be balanced with the truth that even unconditional love must be acknowledged and received!)

The operative word here is "SEEK!" "Seek ye the Lord while He may be found!" We usually relegate "seekers" to the newcomers- - to those who do not know the Lord.

But seeking is a way of life for God's people! Thirst is an indication of life!

- A. The word here is THAT GOD IS WILLING, EVEN WAITING TO MEET OUR VERY DEEPEST HEART'S LONGING. And that thirst-quenching love of God is available on the basis of A "WHOSOEVER WILL" CALL far and near!

Available without cost:

- 1. One cannot "buy" his way
 - 2. One cannot "good works" his way
 - 3. This does not mean that this is "cheap"; there is a vast difference between "priceless" and "worthless"
- B. Hearing, listening is the first step in finding the God-thirst quenched. For hearing the word leads to the offer of A COVENANT WITH GOD.

The covenant is simply saying: IF YOU SPEAK, I WILL OBEY! YOU BE GOD, I'LL BE YOUR MAN, YOUR WOMAN! This is where it begins!

Remember Isaiah 43— which we looked at several weeks ago in a morning service. [You may have forgotten my sermon, but you may remember how Michael Ballard was inspired as he read this passage— and it was re-read at Baccalaureate for the college:]

In Isaiah 43 God says (in this covenant relationship, there are some things that I am doing for you:

1. First I made you
2. Second I have redeemed you
3. Third, I have called you by name and you are MINE!
4. I will be with you, through flood or fire!
5. for I AM the LORD your God!

and in return

1. You are to be MY witnesses!
2. You are to tell people what I have done for you!

That's it!

C. Seek on the level of your need.

1. Sin
2. Adoption
3. Adequacy for an assignment
4. Present need, whatever it may be!

Conclusion

Last Tuesday morning in the Glasgow Airport I saw (a minor drama of) a little (3-yr old) boy. His parents just left on holiday, his granny holding him while he was absolutely devastated! Crying so bitterly it hurt my heart!

By contrast:

Last night Jake (our 3 yr-old grandson) came in out of the (90+ degrees of) heat— he looked around- got up on his grandmother's lap— and went to sleep for the night!

An Offer Too Good to Refuse

We are made to be at home in God! That need is like a keen thirsting! (Psalm 43 "As the deer pants after the water brook!") Our text sounds too good to be true! But it says

Ho! Everyone that is thirsting in Spirit! ...

Hymn No. 324

(Reading is No. 325)

A Word to the Outcasts of Israel

July 18, 1993

Isaiah 56:8 "...the LORD GOD which gathereth the outcasts of Israel..."

Introduction

It is impossible to "explain" poetry, even when that poetry is the living Word of God. But that can not prevent poetry from speaking deep and true into our very innermost being. And when that poetry IS the Word of God, the message that it speaks kindles life itself.

This portion of Isaiah (found in the 56th chapter,) flowing out of the "Servant Passage," speaks particularly of how the great Jehovah God loves all mankind, is willing, desires to be everyone's God, even -and perhaps particularly- those who seem to be hopeless or somehow "inferior."

Rather than analyze and dissect this chapter, I would let Isaiah lift us up on poetic wings for an overview of his joyful, hopeful, confident, gracious portrait of the great God we love and serve.

I. A GOD OF GREAT COMPASSION

42:3 A bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish
God is in the life-saving, life-lifting business; not in the life-extinguishing, find-a-reason-to-kill-you business!

46:1-4 Bel, Nebo (Babylonian idols) ...the things that YOU carry, are burdensome, a load for the weary beasts... "Listen to Me..You who have been borne by Me from birth, and have been carried from the womb; even to your old age, I shall be the same, and even to your graying years I shall bear you!

The prophet contrasts His God with (and even makes FUN of) the idols of the nations. JHWH carries His loved ones!

God is not just interested in our "souls." He cares how we feel; His heart feels the good and the bad along with us.

I do not pretend to understand the apparent inequities of life; I do serve a God Who CARES about these inequities, and Who has promised that He would be with every one who calls on Him, and that His PRESENCE would give us REST.

II. A GOD OVER ALL THE EARTH

45:1 "The LORD says to Cyrus, His anointed ... "I will go before you and make the rough places smooth ...

I am the LORD and besides me there is no God I am the Lord and there is no other...

[God could and did take the king of Persia and subdue and chastise the king of Babylon, and in the doing (Romans 8:28) care for the Chosen, while establishing His name in all the earth.

And He can and shall do it again ... without (I might add) the frantic, sweaty help of those who think God NEEDS us! On the other hand, however, remember that God can and will use the human instruments that SUBMIT to Him!

The ancient world had pretty much divided itself into isolated armed camps, and each social group had its own version of deity. Most of these deities were pale reflections of human vices and virtues raised to the Nth power, and the concept of pure GOODNESS, or unfailing JUSTICE, or overarching HOLINESS seemed to be missing.

JWHW declared Himself to be concerned about ALL peoples!

The modern world creates its own gods in its own self-serving image, as well. There is really nothing new under the sun... and today God Almighty says:

I AM THE LORD! BESIDE ME THERE IS NO OTHER!

You Nazarenes do not own Me! You Roman Catholics did not create ME!

III. A GOD OF A SPECIFIC PEOPLE

- A. He chose Abraham, and then formed a Covenant People. THERE IS ALWAYS A HUMAN RESPONSE TO GOD'S CHOICE INVOLVED!

Our God chooses people by making covenant with them!

- B. But from the very beginning, God's plan has been that the CHOSEN, the "covenant people" always will share God's kindness and love to all the world:

49:5 And now, says the LORD, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant — My God is My Strength— He says, Is it too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel;

I will also make You a light to the nations So that My salvation may reach the end of the earth Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel, and its Holy One, To the Despised One To the One abhorred by the nation, To the Servant of Rulers, "Kings shall bow down Because of the LORD who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen you."

- C. (We believe that THE CHURCH carries on this covenant relationship! Instead of circumcision, now the covenant is baptism, and also the covenant of the Eucharist.) And...

God STILL chooses those who will listen to be HIS people! But He STILL chooses them in order to let the rest of the world know just what kind of God He IS! He still loves all people, everywhere!

IV. A GOD OF THE HOPELESS

[Which brings US/me to the passage for today... this great and gracious God speaks particularly to the disenfranchised, the minorities, the discriminated against, the "outcasts in Israel," the aliens, or, in our modern buzz-word jargon, the "victims."]

56:3 "Let NOT the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from His people" Neither let the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree."

MY house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples!

The Lord GOD who gathers the dispersed of Israel declares, "YET OTHERS I will gather... to those already gathered!"

NO one! is "shut out" from God's love! We are separated from each other at times ... we separate ourselves from each other— we think we are separated from God. That there are special "elite" called people! such as... The JEWS! Birthright Christians! Second generation Nazarenes! Gifted! Moneyed! Those "in the clique!"

SUMMARY:

THE GOD OF GRACE INTENDS THAT IN HIS RIGHTEOUS KINGDOM NO ONE WHO DESIRES TO HAVE LIFE SHALL BE SHUT OUT!

CONCLUSION

The ("bottom line") word that comes through loud and clear from this poet-preacher Isaiah is the fact that this great God wants very much to be YOUR God and YOUR Friend!

66:2 "To this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at (deeply reverences) my word." God wants a people He can love and that He can work with- - and who will be His witnesses: A GOD WHO WOULD BE YOUR GOD

(Exhortation:)

And just how important it is that you connect with the REALITY that is this great God!???

By "reality" I mean MORE than human thought, or human feelings, or human determination and will. To KNOW GOD is an exercise in TRUST, in FAITH that God IS! And that God is a Rewarder of those who seek to know HIM! God is as real a person as you are. Therefore you must not seek so much to know ABOUT Him as to know HIM!

JUST ONE FACET OF THIS "IMPORTANCE":

My highest priority as a pastor is to save the children of the church family from losing their faith and slipping into the maelstrom of the world and being lost in time and eternity.

The best, the only real prevention for the loss of our children is a personal relationship with Jesus as Savior, Lord and Friend.

The way this is most likely to happen is if they have a model or models who have a "real" working relationship both with Jesus and with them. This is not to say that people cannot work their own ways through to genuine salvation without a Christian family or network. But the usual pathway is role model and example.

This makes the following question one which should not be avoided. [My problem sometimes is that people think I am exaggerating when I'm serious, or think I'm serious when I am having fun and exaggerating. I want absolutely no confusion here: I am as serious as I know how to be!]

The question is: HOW REAL IS JESUS CHRIST TO YOU? If you, as parent, role model, leader, have a "get-by" or "mediocre" friendship with Jesus, and your prayer life is not an increasing push into the adventure of the mystery of knowing God in Jesus Christ, then it is likely that those watching you will not be excited about the faith that you may well hold dear.

We need to talk with Jesus. We need to walk with Jesus, and tell Him constantly how we are, what we are thinking. And then we need to put at the top of our intercessory prayer list the people we do not want to be separated from for all eternity!

#617 A Closer Walk with Thee

The People of God

Where God's Word Lives

July 29, 1993

Colossians 3:16

Introduction

"It has become a family story..."

Ben went to the doctor who lifted his shirt and listened to his heart with a stethoscope.

"What are you doing?" asked little Ben.

"I'm listening to your heart," was the reply.

"Jesus is in there, " said Ben, matter-of-factly.

"I think I hear Him," said the doctor with a smile.

My young grandson Ben's statement to the doctor: "God is in there!" Ben certainly did/does not know the ramifications of an indwelling Presence in the very soul of the believer. But his statement that God is in his heart comes close to summing up what genuine Christian faith can be: incarnational faith!

Paul says: Let the word dwell in you richly!

I. WHAT THE WORD OF GOD IS

- A. The Bible is God's WRITTEN Word. It is probably the first thing that comes to mind, especially for those of us brought up in the Christian church. We believe that the Bible is God's revealed Word on salvation. It is a great and good thing to have the words of the Bible hidden in our hearts.

But the Bible is the written Word that tells us of the WORD.

- B. Jesus Christ is God's WORD. He is the LIVING Word. John in the Prologue to his Gospel says, "In the beginning was the WORD!" The text says "Let the WORD dwell in you!" To have the WORD in us is more than Bible memorization: the living WORD can come and live within us! In Ephesians 3:17, a similar passage, instead of saying "Let the Word dwell in you.." Paul says "That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.."
- C. Then, with Jesus Christ LIVING— ALIVE in you and in me... WE the CHURCH— become THE WORD INCARNATE! Three great miracles of INCARNATION or INTER-FACING of God and Humanity— the Bible, the WORD, and the Church made up of born-again believers— speak to a world that is hungry for God.

It is our task to abide in Jesus, the WORD, and to let His WORDS abide in us— and then we can share in His mission to let the world come to know God:

II. A PARTICULAR, SPECIFIC REVELATION FROM THE 1993 GENERAL ASSEMBLY

A. World Mission Society

1. Thunderous media presentation— impressive! Scared little children almost out of their wits!
2. Winsome, genuinely spiritually alive singing groups from Korea, from Barbados, as well as outstanding orchestra, choir, organ and piano from US colleges were interspersed with pictures from many foreign fields.
3. And then "a still, small voice"—

Mel McCullough came out with a little Russian girl about 12 years old, all dressed in white, and she sang, very simply, with almost no accompaniment, "Da, Jesu loov meit"

Then Mel McCullough told about young Nazarenes, in Russia and in Romania, caring, loving, living out the message of God's love— THE WORD INCARNATE— in hospitals where people lay for months with no attention because they had no means to pay attendants— our young people cared, loved, took them out into the sunshine.

One of the translators assigned to the first group was so impressed (Galena) that she gave her life to Jesus Christ, and was there with the Nazarene delegation from Moscow.

4. This Friday night service closed with the challenge of pioneer missionaries standing at the front, and hundreds of teens responding with a willingness to do as God would have them, and hundreds of older people "standing back of them."

I was sitting with Joel Scott and Bob and Mike Johnston. I am proud of both Bob and Mike (having brought in unsaved school friends this year, who were won to the Lord.) Joel saw his mother and dad way down at the front, and he left us, made his way to the bottom of the upper arena area, jumped over the wall and I watched him make his way probably seventy yards more to the platform area to try to get near his parents.

B. SUNDAY SCHOOL MINISTRIES

The speaker Saturday evening was Donald Owens. His text was our text for this morning: "Let the WORD dwell in you richly..." The "guests of honor" were a thousand or more Sunday School teachers representing all those who teach in all the Nazarene churches around the world.

C. COMMUNION SERVICE

D. WORLD MISSION

Theme: That the World May Know 1- Jesus said: "I will build My church." 2- The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed 3- His truth is Marching On!

Twenty new countries entered in past four years:

Thailand Transkei Ghana Liberia Rawanda Tanzania Zaire Eritrea Lesuthu* (Stotlers) Angola Bangladesh Ethiopia Cambodia Romania* (Scotts/ Dorothy Tarrant/ ENC-ers) Russia Solomon Islands Sweden Ukraine Albania Madagascar (Galena) (China, not allowed to evangelize)*Reiders

- E. Monday's opening DR. GREATHOUSE brought the devotions from John 17, calling the church to personal holiness; to the consecration of all of life to the love and service of Jesus.
- F. EDUCATION SERVICE Donald Young honored.

Returning to Colossians 3

III. THE PEACE, THE WORD, THE NAME

- A. The PEACE to "rule:" (15) Let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which you are called in one body; and be ye thankful.
- B. The WORD to "abide" and give stability: (text 16) Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.
- C. The NAME to empower and authorize. (17) And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him.

Conclusion

We are called to be HOLY; not simply so that we can bask in our goodness, but so that Christ can indwell us, and speak of His love and righteousness and grace to a world that wants to know God!

We are given what is necessary for us to live this CHOSEN life: God's peace; His Word; and His great name— the name of Jesus!

Into the Ritual of Communion

Inviting the Living WORD to abide in us!

The Call of a Lifetime

September 8, 1993

Jesus: "Follow Me!" John 21:22

Introduction

It all began for Peter one day by the sea-side. Several boats were drawn up on the beach, and his brother and others were going about their business. Some were washing and mending nets; some were looking to their boats. Peter thought he saw the ripple of fish feeding along the shoreline, and he walked over and threw his round weighted casting net over the place where the ripples were.

Then he saw Him! This was the One called Jesus of Nazareth. He was a Man that was like no other man Peter had ever known. Peter felt a stirring deep down in his insides. And then he heard Jesus say, "Follow Me!"

And that is just what Peter did. He put aside everything, and began to follow Jesus. He could not have imagined that day where Jesus would take him. But Peter decided he would forsake everything else, and trust Jesus.

It is impossible to over-estimate the importance of who we walk with. Oh, I do not mean that we should not spend time with all kinds of people. But those people we follow, the people we call our special friends will have a profound effect on us.

If you follow some people around you might get rich. If you follow others you will almost certainly get into big trouble. One thing for sure— the one you walk with will make a big difference in your life.

Peter decided that he was going to go where Jesus went, and it took him into all sorts of situations. One time Peter even walked on water. No one, as far as I know, has done it since!

Has Jesus called YOU to follow Him? Really? I don't mean has some preacher told you Jesus was calling you— or YOU have decided to be a Christian... but has JESUS called you?

I. A CALL TO FOLLOW JESUS IS A CALL TO ABANDONMENT

- A. A call "Follow Me!" means leaving nets and all, and a definite change in life and living. It is a "turning."
- B. A call means a willingness to take orders. Training, discipline is a part of serving. [John Kauffman in OCS in Marines had to undergo "boot training;" being treated roughly, etc.] Rough edges need to be knocked off in any smooth-running relationship. [Marriage's first 365 days!]

Peter was of the "Let's just DO it!" "Shoot-from-the-LIP!" variety of people. They are good people— but do they ever need to learn to FOLLOW and to TAKE orders before they are commissioned to LEAD themselves, and to GIVE orders.

- C. Later Peter sort-of-complained: "Lord, we have left all, and have followed You." He was implying the question, perhaps, "Is it really worth it, this total abandonment to Jesus?"

Do you remember two key incidents in Peter's life: ONE was a real HIGH point, when Peter was inspired, and he said, "Thou art the Christ! The Son of the Living God!" And in reply Jesus said to him: "Blessed are you, Peter! I will build my Church on this Rock! I am giving you the keys to the kingdom!"

But the other was a LOW time, which Peter would have loved to forget. Peter had trusted his own strength, and said to Jesus, "Even if all these others forsake You, I won't!" And Jesus this time had gently said, "Peter, before morning comes you will deny Me three times!"

II. A CALL TO FOLLOW IS A CALL TO RESPONSIBILITY

- A. It is inescapable: God expects His people to take life to a higher and higher level! It will be true when we get to heaven: "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful over a few (earthly) things; I will make you RULER over many (cosmic) things! Enter into the JOY of your Lord!" But it is true right now here in the nitty gritty where we live between Sundays.
- B. Peter was far from ready, far from perfect. He was even a little bit two-faced at times through fear of confrontation (see Galatians 2.) Still Peter was challenged by Jesus: "I am

giving YOU the keys to the kingdom!" And every child of God can open or shut doors into the kingdom! What if, on a bad day, you were rude to a delivery person; then you discovered that the person was settling things about whether or not to become a Christian? And you told him Christians are just the same as everyone else!

- C. God challenges everyone He calls, every one of His children, to things that count. Jesus doesn't let us settle for trivial pursuits. Someone has scrambled all the price tags of our world. We pay much too much for money, and we value life-changing love so very little.; but Jesus gives the keys to the kingdom to those who will follow Him, and ONLY to those!

One last story about Peter: It was the first Easter evening. Jesus left a message: "Tell the disciples— and especially PETER, 'I'll meet them by the lake.'"

It was a 90-mile journey back to Galilee. The disciples must have made it back in record time, because less than a week later, back by the beautiful lake where Jesus had first called them, where they had once earned their living, Jesus met them.

Jesus took the big fisherman aside, and He tenderly renewed their broken relationship. "Do you still love Me?" He asked.

Peter was grieved that Jesus had to ask.

But the relationship was restored. Then Jesus said, "Whatever the others do, Peter, I want you to follow ME!"

And Peter followed Jesus to the death!

III. A CALL TO FOLLOW IS A CALL TO THE VERY DEATH

- A. It isn't very good sales technique, I guess. But if you follow Jesus you will live for Him and you will DIE for Him! It isn't that you will necessarily be tortured to death. Things aren't usually as simple and clear-cut as that.

["How sweet would be their children's fate; If they, like them, could DIE for Three!"]

Anyway, in THIS world, where, do you suppose, is the Christian faith the "healthiest" and the "strongest?"

- B. The most important aspect of our faith, TO SUPERFICIAL CHRISTIANS, is to have just enough of God to save our souls from hell, and at the same time save our skins from as much discomfort as possible.

"Give to the church— because you will GET MORE in return!" "Tithe the income you WISH you had— and you will get it!" Even "Seek ye first the kingdom of God—AND ALL THESE THINGS! will be added!" These half-truths are a perversion of a deeper truth about true riches!

- C. As a matter of fact, life as we see it with the natural eye is NOT fair! Jesus was crucified at 33 years of age! Every one of his followers since, up to the present generation, has died, too. Does it pay to follow Jesus even to the death? I wish I could beam Peter down here and ask him in person just now!

Conclusion

The common caricature of Peter is the Gate Keeper of heaven. There he stands with the keys, saying who shall and who shall not. but that is just a cartoon idea, of course.

Peter, just like you and me, had to come to God by faith, through grace. I am not saying that any one of us is equal to Peter's stature. But I am saying that God LOVES you just as much as He loves Peter, and has provided for YOU to follow Him to the death, too.

But Peter was faithful to the death! I wonder just how Jesus greeted Peter when Peter's great spirit left his martyred body and was escorted by the angels into the Presence? Whether or not there were words spoken, however it was expressed, I can only imagine! But in that "Well done, good and faithful servant!" that greeted Peter there had to be a flashback in both Peter's AND the Master's mind to that day along the lake shore when a number of boats were lined up on the sand and a Stranger came by with the holy light of heaven in His face and said to Peter and his brother Andrew, "Follow Me!"

Jesus is still stopping by where we are going about our daily routines, and He is still saying to people who will listen, "Follow Me!" You cannot know what you are getting

into, or where you will end up if you hear that voice and obey. But you DO know WHO will be walking with YOU!

Prayer

Hymn #468 I Have Decided to Follow Jesus

Reality in Spiritual Experience

September 26, 1993

2 Corinthians 5:15-17

" ... He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose on their behalf.

Therefore from now on we recognize no man (by what he is in the flesh;) even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer.

Therefore if any (person) is in Christ he/she is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."

Introductory Illustration

Mrs. "K____" called me at radio station (WFME) after a very popular prayer time. I met her at a street corner she designated, and took her to my home in Edison, New Jersey. She was "being shadowed by the F.B.I." She did have \$5,000 she wanted me to take and keep for her.

My wife can verify what I am telling you. She was CERTAIN! But she was certainly WRONG!"

How do we KNOW we are Christians? How do we KNOW that we KNOW GOD? Ask ten different people— you may just get ten different answers!

One will say: "God said it. I believe it. He said I should do certain things. I did them. I trust Him. And that is how I know I'm saved!" This is a covenant based on Scripture primarily.

Another will say, "The Bible became food and drink to me." Here appetites, in their changing, indicated a change of nature.

Another will say, "I don't put down these other ways, but Christ warmed my heart! I felt something!"

Another way we know— high up on MY list— is the testimony of a changed way of living. Show me someone who was lying and abusing substances and living selfishly and maybe sleeping around, but who has an encounter with the living, risen Christ and all of a sudden there is a 180 degree turn around, and he or she is honest and thoughtful and Christlike and begins to love the things of God, I don't know of a more convincing witness to the fact of Christian faith.

However it is that we KNOW, that KNOWING is important!

AND EVERY ONE OF US CAN KNOW GOD, AND WE CAN KNOW THAT WE KNOW HIM!

I. IT IS POSSIBLE TO HAVE A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF SALVATION

- A. A personal "experience with God" is the birthright privilege of every Christian believer! It was one of the great contributions of John Wesley that he taught the privilege of knowing that we are saved.

1. PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE UNSUPPORTED BY OTHER WITNESSES IS SUBJECT TO DELUSION

Illustration: Remember "Mrs. "K____" who called me at radio station... She was CERTAIN! But she was certainly WRONG!"

2. "Experiences" widely vary. They can not be used all by themselves, standing alone, as the "norm" for measuring either the quality or the validity of Christian life and faith.

B. THERE ARE AFFIRMATIONS THAT SUPPORT OUR KNOWLEDGE

1. A clear experience of salvation is always in harmony with the Christ of salvation! A clear experience of salvation will not contradict the clear teaching of the scriptures. We believe in the authority of the scriptures.

Illustration: A woman called her pastor and asked him to pray for her. She had "lost all the JOY out of her experience with God."

Her pastor asked her, wisely, if she wanted to talk about her concern. She replied that she did not want to discuss it, she just wanted him to pray for her. But as he gently probed he found she

was "living in" with her boyfriend in clear violation to what she knew God's Word would have her do.

She wanted to have a good, clear experience of salvation with no regard for what the Bible said, and no regard for what the clear scriptural teaching of her church might be. What she would not admit to understanding was that A CLEAR EXPERIENCE OF SALVATION IS ALWAYS IN HARMONY WITH THE CHRIST OF SALVATION!

2. The classical teaching about "witnesses" to faith is that there are three:
 - a. the witness of the Word;
 - b. the witness of my spirit (God said it, and I believe it):
 - c. the witness of the Spirit.
3. But there are other witnesses, too. There is the witness of life's changed directions and goals. (text "Old things passed away") There is the witness of life crying for nourishment. ("as newborn babes desire the sincere milk of the Word" 1 Peter 2:2) The Bible becomes an opening Book! There is the witness of life that simply cannot be contained, seeking to share its joy!

C. THE SECRET IS WHAT IS AT THE CENTER!

[Our text has the 'secret'] " There has been A GENUINE REPENTANCE: A TURNING FROM, A TURNING TO— AND NOW WE AGREE WITH GOD! (verse 15 He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves!") Christian faith is always Christ-centered. (Isn't THAT profound!)

EVEN IN THE MATTER OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE, self must not be the center and the focus. This is a 'given.' Christians do not any longer live for themselves! (And that certainly goes against "Grab for the Gusto!" doesn't it!!)

It is possible to be self-centered in every phase of our faith. (There is a kind of false Christian faith that is human centered. It says: How can this benefit ME? How may I be served?)

It is possible to seek to BELIEVE THE TRUTH UNTO OUR SELVES! To "control" what we believe, rather than putting our lives under the scrutiny and the authority of the Living Word.

It is even possible to OBEY THE TRUTH UNTO OURSELVES! To "control" how we serve the Lord. ("Though I give all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned ... and have not LOVE ... it profits me nothing!")

And it certainly is possible to SEEK RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE UNTO OURSELVES! When we put even the experience of salvation at the center (INSTEAD OF GOD HIMSELF) we get pulled 'off target.' "Get all excited! Tell everybody!" That is good, even necessary- - so long as Jesus is what we are excited about— as long as HE IS AT THE CENTER OF LIFE, and not 'feeling good' or even 'feeling we are doing important work' or 'feeling ANYTHING!'

II. LIVING LIFE FROM THE TRUE CENTER (TEXT)

- A. Real, lasting, satisfying EXPERIENCE springs from KEEPING GOD AT THE CENTER OF ALL WE ARE AND DO. It is THIS LIFE CENTERED IN CHRIST that is what the "new creation" is all about!

Illustration: Let me tell you another story: Some time ago I received a letter from a lady with a "delayed testimony" that stretches back now several years.

After spending her entire life in the church during some special meetings or studies she came to realize she didn't really know that she knew God! She talked with her pastor. She began to seek to be honest and open with God, herself, and her husband (with whom she had what I believe was and is a good marriage.)

She is writing to say that after spending all her (more than 40 years) in the church she has broken through into a new and glorious experience of spiritual reality.

She writes: "I had thought for years that I couldn't really be saved — and I had never really wanted to get away from God, but had never really let go of myself and really let God take control of my life.

"I have thought so many times since then as I look around me at others, "what are they really hanging on to? What was I hanging on to?" But God really and gloriously saved me and I gave Him my heart and life and He sanctified me wholly and I am really living and learning daily as I give myself to Him day by day.

"It took some fearful groping for the first few months and I went through a depressing period when I really didn't know where I was going. But I wanted to KNOW I was saved and although at the time I wondered if I'd ever be able to look back on this period and say 'Thank You, Lord,' I know I needed this test of faith.

"Richard (her husband) was so understanding— we both began to talk about things and fears that had haunted us since childhood. You know, we both grew up in Christian homes and are so very glad that we didn't taste of deep sin— but there was a very harsh and bitter attitude in the church during our impressionable years that had scarred us, and may I say, many other young people.

" ... God is blessing our home not in a big overwhelming way, but a quiet steady sureness that He is ours and we are His children. I think so many times of the song, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness, Lord Unto Me!"

" ... Not a service goes by without the blessedness of His Presence. ... We have many people with problems ... but we are really fasting and praying for them and I believe God will be faithful. ... I want you to know that I'm one of the fruits of your labor."

The letter is signed (Lenora Hinkle)

Do you think that the Hinkle family was an isolated case? Do you believe that there are other good, solid, even saved and believing Christians who aren't satisfied with the level of their ASSURANCE?

B. It is my deep conviction that EVERYONE can know spiritual reality!

THOSE BROUGHT UP IN THE CHURCH, familiar with holy things, practically inoculated by a "mild form of spiritual life" against ever getting the real thing, like [Lenora Hinkle] in this letter I just read can have a satisfying personal walk with God.

THOSE WHO HAVE LOVED JESUS SINCE THEY WERE LITTLE CHILDREN, but have been under the impression that He is far off, and not to be bothered with walking and talking with each one of us— these people can come to know Jesus and love Him.

THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN SELFISH AND LIVING UNTO THEMSELVES in every part of their lives— they can have spiritual reality!

C. HOW?

1. Mystery! Salvation is the work of an instant. And yet sometimes people go for years before it seems to dawn: I CAN really KNOW God!
2. INVITING God into your heart and life! This is NOT a 'week end project'! It is the surrender of the center of life— for time and for eternity! Seeking! Asking! Knocking!...as a way of life!
3. But if you want reality you may HAVE reality!

Conclusion

Begin just now, where you are. Walk in all the light that you have.

Romans 10: 9,10 says if we confess with our mouth the Lord Jesus; and, if we believe in our hearts that God has raised Him from the dead— we shall be saved.

This not a cut-and-dried formula. But it is the simple truth!

Prayer - Hymn of Invitation #343 Just As I Am

The Power of Gods Word

-A Story of Martin Luther-

-For Reformation Sunday Evening-

Preached first October 31, 1993

For: October 31, 1999

Falmouth Church of the Nazarene

Let me tell you a story this evening about a man who became a legend in his own time. This man, I sincerely believe, spent his life earnestly seeking after God, but he made at least as many enemies as he made friends. Five hundred and sixteen years after his birth (Nov 10, 1483) he is still a controversial figure in history.

The man's name, of course, is Martin, Martin Luther. He was the son of a peasant, Hans Luder, a working copper miner who was himself shrewd and ambitious and became an owner of mines. In a way it was a miracle that Martin should have gotten higher education, for few in his social level were recognized as worthy. But Martin was gifted, both scholastically and musically. He was permitted to attend the University of Erfurt, in Saxony, where he received his Bachelors of Arts in September 1502, and Master of Arts in January 1505. He began studies for law in May of that same year, 1505.

Like many young people Martin thought seriously about life and God and salvation. He was a seeker after truth and after God. In July of 1505, the year in which he began his law studies, Martin was caught in a thunderstorm, and a bolt of lightning struck so close to where he was that he was frightened half to death. He was certain that God Himself had spoken. In that moment Martin Luther said to God, "I will become a monk!" [cf. Acts 9/St. Paul] He was "shocked" into the most extreme action he knew how to take.

The Luders were devout Catholics, but they did not want their child to be too religious. A monk takes vows of poverty, and there would be no way Martin could

support them in their old age. And so it came as a shock to Hans Luder as well when Martin announced that he was entering religious orders. But enter he did, and he was ordained in 1507 and celebrated his first Mass just two years later.

So Martin Luther not only became a monk, but a priest, and an outstanding scholar. Highly respected, Martin was promoted to Doctor of Theology in October of 1512, and was appointed the cathedral lecturer there at Wittenberg.

About this time two things happened that sparked a great change in Martin Luther, and ultimately in the way many of us have come to understand God's plan for our salvation.

FIRST, in these early years as a scholar and lecturer Martin Luther was wrestling with the word of God as revealed in Holy Scripture— wrestling with it directly.

Often as he studied Martin actually lived in torment because his faith only brought him into conflict with a God that demanded righteousness but never satisfied those who sought after it. So along with his studies came a growing sense of his own inability to measure up to what he could see of God's demands that God's people be holy and righteous.

In 1513, the year after receiving his Doctorate and becoming lecturer, Martin began lecturing on the Psalms. When he arrived at Psalm 72, even as he was lecturing to the students he got a new grasp about "the righteousness of God." He began to see it as a quality which God was willing to give to believers, and which would make them acceptable in his Presence.

He was struggling to HEAR WHAT GOD'S WORD REALLY WAS SAYING to him. In 1515 he began lecturing on Romans, and soon his "LISTENING" centered Paul's statement that the righteous live by faith. Martin had always thought this said, "If you are RIGHTEOUS, then you will have the true faith." He knew that God was righteous, and that he, Martin Luther, was not.

But as Martin listened to the word of God with the ears of his soul he heard, he understood, finally, what we now take so much for granted, and what we need to hear again and again:

It is by God's gift of grace to us, by FAITH, that we are enabled to take hold of Christ's righteousness— and the righteous LIVE BY THIS FAITH.

Luther declared that we could not even understand that we are sinners apart from the gospel. He wrote:

"We must know that we are sinners by faith alone, for it is not manifest to us; rather we are more often not conscious of the fact.. Thus we must stand under the judgment of God and believe His words with which he has declared us unjust, for he himself cannot lie."

Luther discovered that he had had it all backwards: WE DO NOT ACHIEVE FAITH BY BEING RIGHTEOUS, BUT WE RECEIVE CHRIST'S

RIGHTEOUSNESS BY FAITH! This kernel of truth— this powerful portion of God's Word— was HEARD by Luther. He processed it— what could it mean? He RECEIVED IT AS GOD'S WORD. And Martin BELIEVED it! THE WORD OF GOD WENT TO WORK IN MARTIN LUTHER!

The SECOND THING that sparked change was: The mother church at Rome needed money, and was sending out special missions to collect it by the selling of indulgences. In Saxony, where Luther was, this conflict centered around an itinerant money collector named Johann Tetzel, who had the franchise on indulgences for that part of Germany.

Historian Walther Köhler has quoted Tetzel's sermon: "Do you not hear the voices of your dead relatives and others, crying out to you and saying, 'Pit us, pty us, for we are in dire punishment and torment from which you can release us for a pittance'?" And then the last exhortation in the form of a couplet:

"When the coin in the coffer rings,
the soul from purgatory heavenward springs!"

Luther may not have been opposed at that time on the idea of purgatory, or even perhaps on praying for the dead; but he knew and understood that the motivation behind Tetzel's money-raising was not the salvation of souls at all. So he vehemently

opposed the selling of indulgences, and he pretty well ruined Tetzel's business in his territory.

For it was on October 31, 1517, exactly 482 years ago this very day, Martin Luther nailed 95 Theses— 95 statements for debate on why the sale of indulgences were evil— on the Cathedral door in Wittenberg, Germany. He wrote these propositions for debate in Latin— the language of the church, and they began great debate, you may be certain. But the 95 theses were also translated into the common German, and printed, and spread far and wide. THAT is how Tetzel's business was ruined in that part of Saxony.

A whirlwind of things happened in the months and years following this revolt. The presenting problem had been sale of indulgence, but the underlying problem was where final authority for the church would rest. There were many communications and interviews, including a citation from Pope Leo X for Luther to come to Rome, which Elector Frederick of Saxony refused. Finally a Papal Bull in June of 1520 gave Luther 60 days to submit, and early in 1521 Luther was invited, under safe conduct, to the high court, or Diet of the Church at Worms, where he finally appeared in April, 1521.

Luther had hoped to engage in debate, but when he was admitted to the Diet on April 17, at about 4:00 p.m., before the Emperor Charles V and all the representatives of Rome the chancellor of the archbishop of Trier gave him no opportunity. Instead he gestured to a table in the middle of the impressive assembly, which was piled high with books. He told Martin Luther he had been called to the Diet of Worms to answer two questions: Had he written those books? Was there a part of them he would now choose to recant?

The monk and professor from little Wittenberg was given a chance to recant— not to debate. The judges had already made their decision. He spoke in a voice that could scarcely be heard: "The books are all mine— I have written more." But then, as he considered the second question: "This touches God and his Word. This affects the salvation of souls. I beg you, give me time." And so he was given one day. Back in his

quarters Luther wrote, "So long as Christ is merciful, I will not recant a single jot or tittle."

Luther was not admitted to the Diet the next day until nightfall, and he stood in the candle-lighted episcopal hall next to the great cathedral. After realizing again that there was no room for debate, Luther made this statement:

"Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds and reasoning— and my conscience is captive to the Word of God— then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience."

And then he added the famous words: "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen" And with those words Luther became an outlaw.

Even though he had been guaranteed safe passage his life was immediately in danger. [He made his way to the Castle Wartburg, where he allowed his hair to grow out, and he became "a knight" for the next few years. But much of Germany was responding to this concept of salvation by faith.]

Let it be said that it is clear from all records that Martin Luther loved his church, and never intended that he start a different movement of the church. He appealed to the Pope himself to stop the excess. But there were many factors that entered the picture, too many to put in one sermon. The political scene in Northern Europe, the threat and even invasion of the Turks up the Danube against Christendom— soon the lines were drawn, and the division became beyond repair.

But the entire Christian world was changed by this man who listened— who believed— who let the word work in him. We who call ourselves Wesleyan owe a great deal to Luther, for in May, 1738, while he was at a prayer meeting, John Wesley heard one reading Luther's Preface to the Book of Romans— and Wesley knew in a new way that he was saved— by faith— that his sins were forgiven through grace!

THIS ENTIRE REFORMATION MOVEMENT WAS SPARKED BY ONE THEME, ONE PHRASE, AS IT WERE, FROM THE WORD OF GOD.

The Power of Gods Word

LOOK AGAIN AT THE LESSON (in your worship folder) THAT IS OUR TEXT FOR THE MORNING: Paul says

1. I labored to give you the gospel of God; and
2. I am thankful when you heard it you received it and believed it, and
3. it is at work in YOU now!

Two thoughts:

1. HOW IMPORTANT IT IS THAT WE SHARE THE WORD OF GOD; (SHARE THE WORD AND NOT OUR IDEAS!) The ancient prophet Micah complained that false prophets were saying whatever got them the highest salary.
2. HOW POWERFUL GOD'S WORD IS WHEN IT IS HEARD AND TRUSTED.

Just what IS the "word of God?" It is revelation; it is given to us in the Bible, by the Spirit, by the foolishness of preaching, by God's great grace.

The word of God is that which we know to be God's will communicated to us with convicting power; the word of God is the transforming message of God's love in Christ. The Bible is all that. It is the word of God.

THE WORD OF GOD IS DYNAMIC: (1) The word of God needs to be communicated. Spoken. Proclaimed faithfully. Preaching is God's appointed means, method. (2) The word of needs to be received, heard, believed. The word of God is "not" the word of God for you, for me unless and until it is received!!

The word of God is powerful. The same word that called worlds into being is the power that calls LIFE into being within the person/church that hears, receives, and believes. The listening ear of the soul is the receiving organ of God's mighty holy power.

What happens when we hear the word of God? When we really listen to what God is saying?

- we can never stay the same. We either walk forward in the power of the word that transforms us— that is "at work in you who believe"— OR we fall forever behind what God wills for us to be.

To listen, to hear, is to be a part of God's Plan of salvation. Every true messenger of God has been energized, empowered, compelled by the WORD OF GOD. When evil attacks us, our families, our world— our first reaction is to march out with all our might against it. And if we do we are doomed to failure. But if, instead, we listen to what God is saying about the evil, the word of God at work in us will involve us effectively. The whole thing will be wrought of the Spirit.

461 Open My Eyes That I May See

Lesson:

Surely you remember, brothers(and sisters), our toil and hardship; we worked hard day and night in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.

You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of (mere humans), but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

I Thessalonians 2: 9-12

The Promise of His Coming

First Sunday in Advent

November 28, 1993

O That Thou wouldst rend the heavens... Isaiah 64:1

INTRODUCTION

THE CHURCH EXISTS ON THE STRENGTH OF A PROMISE.

Jesus said, "If I go away, I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am there you may be also." The ability to believe that promise is a gift of God's grace. We call that gift "hope."

We cannot live apart from God. St. Augustine's most famous words: "You have made us for Yourself, O God- and our souls are restless until they find their rest in You!" are anticipated here as Isaiah cries for his people: "Oh, that Thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down!" But sometimes it is hard to believe that Almighty God cares for our little world, let alone individual people like you and me. Hope tells us that it is true, God does care.

I. THE WONDER OF SUCH A PROMISE

[God is so great; we are so small]

David spent many lonely nights on the dark hills watching the sheep under what we call the Milky Way, and he said, "When I consider the heavens, the works of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars which Thou has ordained, what is man that Thou art mindful of Him!" (Psalm 8:1)

And from time to time that fact of our finiteness, our insignificance in the great scope of Creation becomes almost inescapable, and makes the wonder of Hope, the Promise, even more precious.

We Are Small on the Vast Scale of Earth

The Promise of His Coming

Much earlier in our ministry Helen and I led a delegation from Akron to International Institute in Colorado. There after leading a seminar each morning we drove up into Rocky Mountain National Park, to an overlook about 12,000 feet in altitude, where we parked and walked across the road and sat down on a precipice to a mountain view of 100 miles or more of range after range, peak after peak to the south. Now after more than 30 years the vividness of detail has faded, but I shall never get over the sheer majesty of what I could see and still not grasp of wonder and beauty and sheer size. To say we felt "small" hardly begins to express the scale. For example it was the second or even the third day before we noticed in the valleys below seven mountain lakes— there was just so very much to see, to take in, to absorb. When I consider the snow-capped mountains and the deep wooded valleys stretching on and on, what am I but an insignificant speck? And yet I also remember the thrill that I knew the God who made these things.

It is easy to see how people, apart from living HOPE, could wonder how God could ever find them on this big planet if He ever did come searching.

We are Individuals in a Vast Number of Humanity

Later that same year, 1962, Helen and I packed our four small children into that same beautiful aqua colored big Mercury and moved from a tiny Ohio rural town to the outskirts of the metropolitan New York City community and the corrupt influence of the liberal east. When I saw superhighways sixteen lanes wide moving at 65 miles an hour, or miles of traffic backed up and standing still, or when I walked the streets of Manhattan and saw people lying on the sidewalks with humanity streaming all around them; when I drove for miles and miles through dense population another kind of insignificance suggested itself. Among so many millions, what was one person more, or one person less?

It is easy for me to see how people, unless they know for themselves what Jesus said, could wonder how God would ever sort out which one they were among all the millions of earth.

We are a Tiny Planet in a Vast Universe

People who look through telescopes tell us that we are inhabitants of a planet circling a small-to-average star in an average galaxy in our Universe. There are, they tell us, about 200 billion such galaxies. That is the number two (2) followed by eleven zeroes, two hundred billion galaxies, or 30 or 40 for every man, woman, boy and girl on our tiny little planet!

Then, in our Milky Way there are, we are asked to believe, 500,000,000,000 stars like our own sun. That means if stars like our sun were being handed out from just our own galaxy there are enough for every man, woman, boy and girl to have almost 100 stars of their own.

So— when the prophet cries out to Jehovah "Oh that You would rend the heavens and come down!" he is asking quite a lot of God just to be able to sort out which galaxy and which star, to find him among the intricate and complex systems and dimensions of time and space that this great God has created.

It is not hard to see, apart from God's gift of HOPE, when we consider how great is this Creation, the heavens and the earth how that it is beyond our comprehension how or why God would care to come to us.

We Have Met Jesus: We Choose to Believe His Word

But Jesus has promised! He is with God in whatever dimensions of reality that lie beyond our present understanding. But Jesus is also WITH US even NOW in TIME and SPACE by the Holy Spirit. He is very NEAR! And Jesus is as good as His word. We can depend on his PROMISE. He will come again, we will see Him, and we will be like He is.

If we know Him NOW by His WORD, and by His SPIRIT'S PRESENCE, then this HOPE will keep us spiritually alive.

Remember: The church exists on the strength of one promise.

II. THE JOY OF SUCH A PROMISE

[The centrality of HOPE in Christian living]

This HOPE is not only WONDERFUL, but it is central to our Christian faith and life, It is much more important than we may realize.

1. It is HOPE that holds us safe in the storms of life. (Hebrews 6:19.) "Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both steadfast and sure."
2. It is HOPE that gives us comfort in any trial. (2 Thessalonians 2:16) "God has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace."
3. Hope is a force motivating us to purity (1 John 3:3) "He that has this hope in him purifies himself, even as He is pure."
4. It is HOPE that gives us BOLDNESS to witness to God's goodness and to give Him praise (2 Corinthians 3:12) "Having such a HOPE we use great boldness in our speech"

Hope begets hope.

III. THIS PROMISE - OF GOD'S COMING- HAS BEEN USED AS A THREAT MORE THAN A SOURCE OF JOY AND HOPE.

The coming of God the Son in glory is not a happy prospect to those who do not love Him. His coming will be an embarrassment to those who profess to love Him but do not live for Him. This is what Jesus is saying in our Gospel lesson.

It is true that when Jesus comes HE WILL SET THINGS RIGHT. There will be VINDICATION and JUSTICE. There will be A HOLY DISCRIMINATION BETWEEN RIGHT AND WRONG, GOOD AND EVIL, LOVE AND HATE, SHEEP AND GOATS. But the Second Coming has been used as some kind of Sword of Damocles to threaten us into good behavior:

You better watch out, you better not cry— better not pout I'm telling you why— He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness" sake!

It depends on how we think of God, what our relationship, our fellowship with Him is, how we think of the prospect of Him coming to seek us out!

Adam and Eve dreaded meeting God: They had disobeyed, and in their disobedience they had "become as gods to know good and evil" in a partial response to Serpent's lie. They knew they were evil, and they knew they were naked and they knew that

they did NOT want to see God face to face. So they hid themselves, with their fig leaf covers. The Presence of God was a source of fear and dread where it had been a comfort and companionship.

But Job did not dread meeting God. In all his distress he knew that he had not been perfect, he had spoken foolish words— but he also knew that he trusted God, and that he had been perfectly true and faithful— that he had lived for God and loved him. So Job did not dread seeing God, but wanted Him to come— even to show him (Job) where he had done wrong so he could confess it; Job was OPEN before God, and sought God's love and grace:

Job: O that I knew where I might find him! But HE knoweth that way that I take, and when I am tried I shall come forth as gold.

It is impossible for me to understand how Christ's people can be anything but happy at the prospect of being with the One they love the most! If we love Jesus why wouldn't we want to see Him?

IV. THE CHURCH MUST REFLECT THIS HOPE TO A HOPELESS WORLD

Can you imagine what it would be like to NOT have this HOPE? Can you imagine how people who do not know God's LOVE and His PROMISE may well feel lost in time and space and the crush of humanity?

If our total concern about Christ's Second Coming is worrying about how much or how little faith we need to be ready when He comes then perhaps we have missed the point altogether. Millions of people don't even know God cares, that He has sent His Son to love us, and die for us, and that He is coming again for those who love Him.

If we truly have this HOPE, then we, God's people, together become the means whereby a world in darkness and chaos can hear the story of Jesus and come to believe His Promise that He has conquered sin and death and that He is alive forevermore and that He will come and find us where we are so that we may be where He is for ever. How did YOU come to have hope? Who showed YOU the way?

The Promise of His Coming

—The total helplessness of being befogged in a calm at sea; and the trip we took (Bud, Bernie, Bill Taylor, I) from Kingston river around the Gurnet to Green Harbor in a pea soup fog... coming on channel markers, dead reckoning, looming in on Duxbury beach, sounds, magnified and distorted— joy of finding harbor...

If we have this hope, somehow we not only are finding that way ourselves, but we ourselves somehow become dependable. We show others the channel, the way through the mists, to hope, buoys or lower lights to bring others to this haven of hope.

Prayer

Song for the Nations #699

Call to Comfort

December 5, 1993 - Advent II

Isaiah 40:1 "Comfort ye My people . . . "

Introduction

This Christmas Season Handel's Messiah will be sung again in many places, part of the Christmas tradition along with Scrooge and roasted chestnuts. But wherever it is sung the story of Jesus is told again.

After the overture, the tenor soloist will step forward and begin: Comfort ye! Comfort ye! Comfort ye my people, saith your God! Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her that her warfare . . . her warfare is accomplished!

Is that the word that you or I would begin with, if we were telling people about Jesus? If the word "comfort" means...

I. GOD IS LOVE, GOD IS NEAR

WE ARE NOT ABANDONED, then I cannot imagine a better word!

- A. Handel had it exactly right! When we tell the story of Jesus, the place where we begin—and the place where we end, and everything between comes from the great heart of God, who intends that His people shall know real peace!
- B. The world desperately needs this message of comfort, the word that God KNOWS, and God CARES—that God IS NEAR TO THOSE WHO SEEK HIM!
 1. God asked his prophet Isaiah to tell his people. They had forgotten, if they ever knew, just how much God cares.
 2. God asks everyone who grasps this great grace to pass along the comfort. The word we hear is not: "Comfort yourselves! Be comfortable!" The word, instead, is "Comfort MY PEOPLE!"
 3. The church, in its role as prophet, is to carry this message that this great God of GRACE wants to live right down here where we live — we are to tell to all who

will believe and become God's people. THAT IS THE ESSENCE OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY!

But the message of comfort comes in what seems a strange package; it comes with the declaration that all other comforts are false comforts.

II. GOD'S WORD IS ALL THAT WE CAN TRUST!

- A. God's voice said to Isaiah, "Cry!" And with Isaiah, we ask, "Cry what?" What is this message of comfort to the people of God?
 - 1. And the reply comes back "All flesh is grass ... the grass withers, the flower fades!" We have to give up trying to stay young, to live forever on earth's terms, stop putting our faith in things that rust and decay. **ALONG WITH THE MESSAGE OF PEACE AND COMFORT IS THE MESSAGE THAT ALL OTHER COMFORTS ARE FALSE. TO FOLLOW GOD WE CANNOT CONTINUE OUR "BUSINESS AS USUAL"**
 - 2. Peter puts it in even stronger language in the epistle lesson: "The elements shall melt with fervent heat!" The greatest tragedy we can think about is the melting down of this material world, with all our securities and hard-earned retirement benefits. Isaiah said the grass would fade; Peter puts it a little more dramatically when he says this whole entire visible created universe is going to disappear, to melt down, to change or pass away. But Peter also has had Isaiah's promise of **COMFORT!** He has total confidence in this one thing: **GOD HAS MADE A PROMISE!** The promise of God is good enough to make Peter rejoice in the prospect of losing everything!
- B. The first "point" in the message of comfort, then, is that the world as we now see it will not last forever— in fact— it will not last very long at all! But the heart of the message is **NOT** a negative message; what this world needs to know is there is a place where you can stand that will not be blown away in the storm! "The grass withers .. the flower fades .. but the Word of the Lord stands forever!" **THE CHURCH EXISTS ON THE STRENGTH OF A PROMISE!** [My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge!]

If we really have grasped this— if we live in the HOPE of God's eternal PROMISE— then how can we stay silent about it? How do we begin telling our friends and neighbors?

III. GOD'S GREAT PEACE IS OURS TO SHARE!

- A. God's word to the prophet is God's word to His people; it is God's word to you and me: YOU comfort my people!

We begin the telling of the story of Messiah by sharing God's PEACE with each other. (Testimony? Yes! but more...) How seriously are we concerned with the welfare of our brothers and sisters in the church? And what does this have to do with the comfort of Messiah? What does telling the story to each other have to do with world evangelism? [Only everything!] The church is not simply a mutual admiration society. Far from it! But the church is, ought to be the family of God. To "comfort," that is, to seek the edification of the Body, is to begin making Messiah known. The story of Messiah begins with "Comfort ye!" Who would want to become a Christian, a part of Christ's Body, unless and until this comfort is manifested?

- B. When Christ's peace and love are manifest within the Body the message of a God who comes and a God who cares will have validity when we carry it outside the walls of the sanctuary.

[Exhortation:]

We can tell them IF WE BELIEVE OURSELVES that Jesus brings peace.

We can tell them IF WE OURSELVES ARE STANDING ON SOLID ROCK in our relationship with God.

And we can tell them IF WE ARE WHERE THEY ARE, NOT TURNING OUR BACKS ON OPPORTUNITIES TO SHARE God's love.

If we can tell them, and we don't tell them, then we miss the whole point of our faith, which is to make us like the One we love. If we aren't sharing God's peace there may be something wrong, Before we can tell them we may have to repent -to agree with

Call to Comfort

God in all things, even those pertaining to ourselves! The Psalmist chimes in here "Turn us, O Lord! Let your face shine on us!"

This of course is also an admission of our helplessness; even our repenting is of grace! Unless the Lord turns us, we shall not be turned! If we are willing to be turned, then we can pray for the Lord to turn us, and cooperate with Him in seeking His face. But His power is released with the story we tell.

Part of this "turning" process is LISTENING! (v8) I will hear what God the Lord will speak; AND WHAT DOES GOD SPEAK? GOD SPEAKS "PEACE!" Conclusion: God's call to comfort is a challenge to bring the love of God to people who need it. It is a challenge to say that there is a solid Rock to stand on that will never, ever pass away.

[Move now to Communion - Invitation:]

The Word is Prepare

December 5, 1993

Psalms 80

Isaiah 40:1-11

2 Peter 3:8-18

Mark 1:1-8

1. Prepare yourself for the coming of God.
2. Prepare a way for God to get to others; the voice said "Cry!"

What is the message we are to cry? That all flesh is grass? Is that supposed to be good news?

3. How does anyone "prepare" for God to come?

-the word is repent -to agree with God in all things, even those pertaining to myself

- A. The Psalm says "Turn us (repent) and we shall be saved; I will hear what the Lord will say; for he will speak peace unto his people, and to his saints."

The Psalmist has heard the stories of what God has done for His people in the past. He is longing for that blessing again. Then he asks a strange thing: He asks God to turn him around! "Turn us again, O Lord, and cause your face to shine on us!" is the way he expressed it in Psalm 80. Here he says, "Turn us, O God of our salvation, and cause Thine anger toward us to cease."

Why doesn't the Psalmist merely say, "Lord, WE are turning around! Look at us! We are repenting!"?

There is an admission of helplessness here; even our repenting is of grace! Unless the Lord turns us, we shall not be turned! If we are willing to be turned, then we can pray for the Lord to turn us, and cooperate with Him in seeking His face.

Part of this "turning" process is LISTENING! (8) I will hear what God the Lord will speak; AND WHAT DOES GOD SPEAK? GOD SPEAKS "PEACE!"

- B. Isaiah 40 says Comfort my people! The grass withers and the flower fades but the word of our God shall stand forever.

Picking up where the Psalmist leaves off, Isaiah quotes God directly. He hears God say: "COMFORT MY PEOPLE! SPEAK TO THEM OF PEACE ... THE WAR IS OVER AND WON!

Isaiah hears God speaking "Peace" but he also hears God saying TO HIS PEOPLE "CRY!" GOD SAYS YOU BE MY MESSENGERS!

And, again, what are God's messengers supposed to be saying?

There is an outline, here, of our message:

1. All flesh is grass. The grass withers, the flower fades. Is THIS supposed to be good news? You are going to grow old and die! That is news?
2. But the word of our God shall stand forever! There is something that will never fade! There is a country where there may be seasons, but there are no seasons of death!

This world that in so many ways is fatigued and frightened needs to hear God saying, "I am standing right here waiting to bring you comfort and peace and forgiveness for your sins and the fellowship of my Body the Church." And guess who God is asking to tell this good news? Do you have a pocket mirror? If you don't, then when you get home, go look in the bathroom mirror— take a good long look— because the person you see there has been asked to tell the message. And what is more, that person is asked to tell the message by being a part of the message! Don't be incongruent!

- C. Mark says: John the Baptist echoed Isaiah: Prepare the way of the Lord but also A PROMISE OF A MIGHTIER BAPTISM. John the Baptist was a messenger, one who was making a way for the coming of Immanuel.

- D. Peter says: the elements shall melt with fervent heat. What manner of persons should we be? God is long-suffering, not willing that any should perish, according to the promise. We look for a new heaven and a new earth. Be diligent that ye be found IN PEACE.

The greatest tragedy we can think about is the melting down of this material world, with all our securities and hard-earned retirement benefits. But I get a different slant when I read Peter. Isaiah said the grass would fade; Peter puts it a little more dramatically when he says this whole entire visible created universe is going to disappear, to melt down, to change or pass away.

But Peter also has confidence in one thing: God has made a promise! The promise of God is good enough to make Peter rejoice in the prospect of losing everything!

God has made a great promise. We, according to his promise, are looking for a new heaven and a new earth 2 Peter 3:13

Our message, then, is "Where you are standing may seem like rock, but it is less than an ice floe— it is going to melt away; come on over and stand on solid rock! Test the promise of a God who speaks to those who will listen.

Prayer

A Promise of Joy

December 12, 1993

Sometimes I wonder, since the Bible tells us that Jesus was born like a light shining into a darkened world, how much darker the world could have been then than it is right now! A hundred years ago optimistic Christians in this country were saying that with just a bit more education we would usher in the Millennium. And yet in this century more people have been killed in wars, and in religious persecution, and in so-called ethnic cleansing than in any other period in recorded history, and perhaps more than in all previous history combined. If ever we needed Messiah's Light, we need it just now!

Jesus has changed this world already. Many millions have found that He is as good as His word. It is impossible to imagine what this world would be today apart from the leavening influence of the Holy Spirit holding back the tides of evil and darkness through the Body of Christ on earth. But unless something like a new challenge to turn to the light is heard and heeded our civilization is headed for anarchy and chaos. I do not need to re-play the evening news; you did not come to church to be depressed. But what this world needs is the message of John the Baptist: Prepare the way for God to come!

I. (John 1:6-8) A MAN WITH A PROMISE

- A. He was a strange, mysterious figure, this man they call 'the Baptist.' His looks were odd; he might be called a "mountain man" in our day. His social skills were unorthodox to say the least— he spent most of his time in solitude, or at least with just a few disciples in the desert.

But this man was sent from God! He was a man! And he was sent! John the Baptist bridged the gap from Old Testament prophet to New Testament evangel. He had a rugged, uncompromising message. He called sin by name. He did not despise the poor; he even gave soldiers (fighting men) hope of salvation.

John the Baptist was remarkable for his humility. He had disciples, which indicates that people believed in his integrity. But John did not claim more grace than he had. And when Jesus came along John pointed the way to the Light. His testimony was "He must increase! I must decrease!"

John came for the purpose of proclaiming a PROMISE! "God has spoken," he declared. "One is coming after me who will baptize you with the very Spirit of God!"

- B. The church today needs to recover this same message: PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD!

We are bearers, like the herald angels, of a promise of great JOY! Like John, we may be voices crying in the wilderness. but if we will cry, the message will be heard! Only God knows what would need to take place for us to see one last Great Spiritual Awakening. We may not bring about Millennium. But we can tell the world they may trust God's Promise of GREAT JOY!

II. (Psalm 126) TEARS BEFORE HARVEST

- A. A hole where JOY should be

The world probably does not understand what JOY really is. There is a lot of laughter around, but not too many really happy people. There are many kinds of so-called "entertainment," but not very many people can say they are truly "fulfilled." And whatever JOY might be, there is an extraordinary amount of un-joy around. There are many refreshing exceptions, but a lot of what we are being taught is selfishness, hedonism, nihilism. The popular expression is "Take care of number one!"

So we have people bruising people. People hurting, and being hurt. Thank God in the Christian community sometimes we remember the admonition, "Bear one anothers' burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ!" But sometimes even we forget!

B. That HOLE is "God-shaped"

The seemingly logical answer to the need for joy is to seek after it. But it is not ever quite that simple. For JOY is not an obvious end in and of itself. That is, if we set out simply to please ourselves we can never quite make the speed that kicks us out of our self-bound orbit. Joy comes as the mighty by-product of delightful relationships! Joy is difficult to define, and there is a mysterious aspect of this "fruit of the Spirit." But we might say that JOY IS AN INNER HARMONY OF POWERFUL SATISFACTION THAT COMES AS A WITNESS TO RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS, AND THE PRIMARY RELATIONSHIP OF ALL IS VERTICAL!

C. (Psalm 126) The Psalm today gives two interesting aspects of this joy.

1. Surprisingly, the first is not our joy at all, but God's! See it there on the back of your worship folder:

I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in My people, the sound of weeping and crying will be heard in it no more.

It is thrilling to me to think that the very heart of God rejoices when we, His children, look to Him with love. It is a source of joy to any child to realize that he or she is bringing pleasure to a parent. [How long has it been since you sincerely took pleasure in your child, and expressed it?]

2. But the other aspect of joy is the deliberate investment that is demanded if we are to be able to rejoice in God and in His assignment for us.

Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy carrying sheaves with him.

If there is no sowing, there will be no harvest of joy. Joy is always the result of having faith in a dream or a vision or a promise— and then investing in that promise:

the JOY of a game well-played and won the JOY of V-J Day, when a great deal more was at stake the JOY of the last BAPTISM here in this sanctuary, as the candidates testified to DEATH TO SELFISH WAYS and to LIVING WITH AND FOR JESUS CHRIST!

D. (I Thessalonians 5) This is how Paul can urge us (in the epistle (see it there on the back of your worship folder:)

Be joyful always! Pray continually! Give thanks in all circumstances! This is God's will for you in Christ Jesus!

We may rejoice for the God who calls us to His holy fellowship is the God who makes us able. We become His new creation!

III. (Isaiah 65) CREATION NOW!

Isaiah 65:17-28 The promise of a new heaven and new earth; the call to rejoice in what God is creating; and His greatest creation is YOU!

The changed nature - "The wolf and the lamb shall graze together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox; and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not do evil or harm in all my holy mountain, says the Lord."

This is a return to the theme of Peace under the Rule of Messiah; the theme of what we sometimes call "The Millennium," as seen in Chapter 11. Prophecy literalists see only a time in the future when these beasts of such different and incompatible instincts get along and "a little child shall lead them."

Certainly this poetic prophecy speaks to us of God's ability to create that which He has promised. A new heavens, a new earth will be remarkable. But the kind of creation spoken of here is beyond belief, apart from the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

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When the shepherds finally came to announce the birth of Messiah, after the silence of centuries their first words were

Behold I bring you glad tidings of great joy which shall be to all people . . . Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of good will.

There was immediacy in that announcement. At that very time Jesus Christ had come! Immanuel was not just a promise any more, for in the very flesh here was God, bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, in the manger of the stable of the inn in Bethlehem.

There was also promise of that which was yet to be in that announcement. The angels sang of a joy which shall be to all people. The darkness had not yet been dispelled. The light was shining, small as it seemed. The promise was that the light would never be extinguished, and that in fact it would one day illumine the whole earth.

The Word is Hope

THE STORY IN MATTHEW

Matthew 2:21 "And (Joseph) arose and took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel."

For a very brief time in the beginning of the Gospels' story of Jesus, the focus of attention falls on Joseph. It is easy to pass over the importance of the part Joseph had in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. For Joseph was the guardian of hope.

Everything that we know about Joseph is good. But in his lifetime, so far as we know, Joseph never saw the full fruition of his faith and obedience. Still, his obedience kept HOPE alive for us all, and is still bearing fruit to this day.

Joseph is the guardian of hope. Before he ever SAW any of God's promises fulfilled Joseph was willing to obey and believe. First Joseph was confronted with misunderstanding and shame. He chose to take Mary into his home. Then Joseph had the privilege of naming the Holy Child "JESUS" in accordance with what the angel had told him.

His faith was rewarded, and there were visitors who came and confirmed what he already knew; there were shepherds that very first day; there were devout people in the Temple in Jerusalem, Anna and Simeon, who confirmed and assured his heart that the Child truly was Messiah.

Then came even greater surprises; kings, strange Gentile wise men from distant lands came paying homage to the Child, and bearing costly gifts, but at the same time speaking, perhaps in surprise, that the local authorities were unaware and probably hostile to this great HOPE of all the earth. Then that very evening Joseph had a vision of the angel again warning him: "Take the young child and his mother and go to Egypt. He is in danger!"

We see this story from the perspective of centuries; we read it like a drama. How could anything ever harm the Lord's Anointed One, even as a Baby? Would not the

angels keep watch over Him? If Jesus was truly God and the Son of God, why shouldn't he, Joseph, simply take the Baby to Jerusalem and proclaim Him before all the world?

But Joseph was living out his relationship with Jesus in the harsh reality of life. God's TIMING is impossible for us to figure. All Joseph knew was that precious LIFE must be protected at every and any cost! Whatever it took to keep the Baby alive and well Joseph would do! That very night, before dawn, Joseph was on the way to Egypt.

Where he stayed, what he saw— so pleasant for our speculation— the pyramids were already nearly 3,000 years old— did Joseph and Mary see them? What happened— the Bible is silent. Joseph stayed in Egypt until the angel sounded the "all clear." And then, with human fear and trembling, the Holy Family made its way back to the home town of Mary, to Nazareth, where Jesus spent the rest of his life until He began His ministry.

Joseph had the discernment of humility and obedience. He kept HOPE alive!

THE PRAYER IN EPHESIANS

What comes to us in a story in the Gospels Paul often packs into a lesson in the Letters. The connection between Joseph's obedience and this prayer in Ephesians 1 is not immediately apparent, but in both there is underscored the importance of keeping HOPE alive and well. Paul prays first of all for discernment, for enlightenment, so that believers can see what the essence of HOPE really IS.

Paul's world was dark and gullible; it was impressed with soothsayers and Caesars. Even believers were turned on by visible gifts more than they were by love and integrity; they were challenged by the show biz and glitz of their age, as we are by our own. And so Paul prayed: Lord, help my people to be able to see what is the HOPE of their calling, where the true POWER is to be found!

HOPE is not self centered! There is an element of risk involved. Hope is the confidence that God will carry through— in God's own good time.

Hope must be nurtured in obedience and faith.

Hope is related to what God can and will do.

Hope on our part has to do more with BEING than it does with DOING!

It is interesting just here how a best-selling book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, by Stephen R. Covey, interacts with the Christian concept of the importance of discernment and keeping genuine HOPE alive. In his book Covey says that:

For the first 150 years of our existence as a nation we were challenged along the lines of CHARACTER: the qualities that make for quality of life and relationships: integrity, honesty, fairness, congruence between profession and life-style.

For the last 50+ years the literature of practical life has swung to the emphasis on PERSONALITY: those attributes of human nature that make for success and the appearance of completeness. Techniques and short-cuts and seminars that bring about desired results without the outlay of personal development. He says that we have been taught that if we maintain (1) good public relations, and (2) keep a positive mental attitude we can accomplish "success," whatever that is. "Success" can be had by shortcuts, including cheating in school, being insincere in business relationships, and selfish in our own families.

Interestingly, Covey says this is NOT SO. He calls his readers back to the basics of CHARACTER FOUNDATIONS.

And really, that is what Paul is praying for: that we will discern how important it is to keep HOPE alive!

THE PROMISE IN JEREMIAH 31

The third seemingly unrelated passage in this morning's message comes from "the weeping prophet," Jeremiah; a man so burdened with the hardness of his generation and the shallowness of worship that he earned that pseudonym. "Weeping prophet!" But some of the most beautiful and sensitive passages in the Bible come from Jeremiah's heart! For all ages Jeremiah caught something of the extent of HOPE which shall be, through Jesus, for all people.

The Word is Hope

How important to "nurture the Babe" and let Him grow and become Lord on His terms! How important to seek the noble way, the way of integrity and honesty before God, and leave the timing up to Him! For, according to the promises of God through Jeremiah, HOPE opens up these realities of faith:

- I will gather my people
- I will lead them
- I will turn their mourning into joy [My people will be satisfied with My goodness]
- I will be their God; they will be My people [I will write My law in their hearts and they will KNOW Me!]

CONCLUSION

Hope is what makes life worth the living. All these great stories and promises are nothing if they are cut off from where we live and where we are just now.

But HOPE must be sustained by obedience. HOPE does not follow our agenda, nor does it follow a timetable which we set. We, like Joseph, may have to move to Egypt for a while, whatever that means. We WILL have to listen carefully for God's voice. If we think we hear Him saying exactly what we want Him to say we had better be very, very careful!

For God NEVER asks us to take short, cross-lot, cheap methods into "success." God never compromises His demand that we serve Him with excellence, with the best that we have. God never sacrifices CHARACTER on the altar of PERSONALITY!

If we have the precious LIFE of Jesus within, then that LIFE must be preserved at ALL costs!

CHARACTER OVER PERSONALITY INTEGRITY OVER IMAGE JESUS OVER ALL KINGS
AND GIFTS

The Church as Family

March 27, 1994 pm

Philippians 1:7 "I have you in my heart."

If you never guessed it before, "family" is pretty big with me. I hear a lot about the family under attack in our country, and I believe it. My family is far from perfect, and we made lots of mistakes in raising our four sons, I'm sure. There have been real hard times, and there have been real good times across the years. But the deepest human satisfaction I know is the love and belonging that comes with being "family."

One thing that has made our family relationships special has been the fact that while we are related by human blood, we have also very much been a part of a great family where the ties that run even deeper than blood. Not every member of our family has always been in the good graces of the church at all times, but every one of them has known that there is a real love that God's people know that lies deep.

As Bill Gaither has told us with his song, "I'm So Glad I'M a Part of the Family of God!" It is great to belong to God's family!

Every heart craves a sense of belonging. And every local church ought to foster that sense of belonging because in Father God's eyes, His church is family.

I. THE CHURCH IS FAMILY

Paul's letter to the Christians at Philippi is a "love letter" to the family of God. That idea of community in faith, of the church as family, of belonging, is more than coincidental to the lessons and commands of the letter.

Community in faith is central not only to Paul's letters, but to the entire New Testament. It is absolutely essential to any church that wants to carry out Christ's mission.

There are some places where people go to worship where the atmosphere is about as friendly and cordial as the "friendly supermarket." People are civil, even "nice" to one another, but the welfare or needs of each worshiper is no one else's business.

This is not the way vital Christians worship. Paul reminds us at the very beginning of the letter that God is our Father: ("Grace to you, and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ . . . " vv 1,2) Jesus taught it, this same emphasis, in the Pattern Prayer. When we come to Jesus for life, we are adopted into the family, and we are related to one another in Him. The people with whom we worship regularly become dear to us. Even more, there is a blood-relationship with every other born-again believer!

One way of fostering the sense of belonging, and the reality of "family" in the church is learning to pray for one another.

II. THE FAMILY WILL PRAY FOR ITSELF

We Christians are family by birth— but even in families love is never automatic. The most rewarding and passionate love will die unless it is nourished. God intends that we pray for one another! Paul writes " (v3-5) I thank my God in all my remembrance of you . . ." Paul wrote to remind the Philippian Christians, "I am praying for you!" And he asked the Ephesians (see the chapter just preceding) "Please pray for me!" (Ephesians 6:19)

If you need a deeper sense of "belonging" begin to pray for the Body! Pray like Paul says he prayed("I thank God for you every time I think of you") rather than first of all being critical or fault-finding. In verse eight Paul says: "When I think of you I get warm feelings in my insides!" Prayer enhances love. I question whether it is possible to pray consistently for someone and hate him/her at the same time.

III. THE FAMILY PRAYS SPECIFIC PRAYERS

HOW do we pray for each other? What really IS God's will for you? for me? Is it enough to mention a name and say, "Bless her!"? "Bless him!"? What do we mean by "bless"? Perhaps when we have prayer lists our mind passes along the list, we think

of those people with kindness— but then there are times when the Spirit draws and leads us to pray for a certain person, or a specific need.

Paul prayed specific prayers. He says (v 9-11) "And this I pray ."

1. For increasing love! We never dare to take love for granted at any level. We need to tell our family— our children, our wives our husbands often. We need to tell our little children with our faces and with hugs. And when they are not so cute or cuddly we need to tell them then, too. Especially then!

[I had a dear Christian father. But this week I recalled an incident when my dad was extra harsh with me when I was about sixteen— over a small thing like how I should wear my tie. It really hurt— because I thought— I knew he was more interested in what people would think of him than he was in how I felt. He never knew then— and he will never know now because I have forgiven him long ago. He didn't mean anything evil— but I still remember with some pain 48 years later!]

This is true in your family; it is also true of the family of God. We need to thank God for one another. Certainly we have our faults. We know each other's weaknesses. A good team covers and plays to strength. A group of individuals shows each other up so they will look better. But we are family! [Paul also prayed. . .]

2. For discernment to choose between good, better, and best. The pressure is always on to simply "settle" for what we can get away with. but Paul always had in his mind that he would give an account for his life to God. So in the light of judgment Paul prayed that the church family would have discernment to choose the very best! [Last, in this particular prayer Paul Prayed . . .]
3. For fruitfulness! Paul wanted the family of God to know the pure delight of pleasing God. "Fruit" is mentioned in at least two ways in the New Testament in reference to believers. One aspect is the fruit of the Spirit, and has to do with the quality of the inner life, as well as the love with which we fill out our relationships to God and to each other. Paul certainly wanted the family to be "quality people," with this fruit of the Spirit manifested in our daily lives.

IV. A CALL OF OUR CHURCH FAMILY TO PRAYER

{Ephesians 6:18,19 "Be on the alert for all the saints, with perseverance and petition..."}

I take liberty (homiletically) to move back into Ephesians to get the actual challenge from Paul in this final word on the church as family, which is a call to family prayer. Paul calls for prayer for the entire church— and then he humbly asks (6:19) "Pray for me, too, please!" The great apostle needed, asked for— even begged for prayer!

Maybe we already do pray for each other a lot. But with the pressures of springtime coming, and with the challenges the enemy would give us when we begin to see victory along some lines I wonder if you would accept a word of concern from your pastor?

1. I would ask you to become a committee of one to pray for the peace of our church family between now and when the work and witness team leaves for Holland in June. I would ask you to be a committee of one to pray for the small groups that are meeting to seek Christ-likeness— that they will be folded into the purpose of Christ for the entire church, and not just for their own spiritual satisfaction.

IF EVERY LAST ONE OF US DOES OUR VERY BEST BEFORE GOD WE WILL UTTERLY FAIL IN ACCOMPLISHING WHAT GOD HAS IN MIND FOR OUR CHURCH! The key in that surprising statement is "OUR very best!" For IF WE ALL SEEK GOD'S VERY BEST FOR THE CHURCH THEN TOGETHER WE CAN SEE VICTORY WE NEVER DREAMED POSSIBLE!

2. Pray in a specific way for:.. Anyone who is difficult for you to understand or love. I am not even suggesting that you go to her or him, for you might well be misunderstood. but I challenge you to pray God's very best will be done, that salvation and Christ-likeness may be hers or his!
3. Pray for Your immediate family, for loved ones and dear friends. Maybe someone that you love but don't usually think of as needing extra prayer.

4. Finally, pray for Yourself— for an opportunity to talk about Jesus— just the opportunity and the leading of the Spirit when it comes to take advantage of it in the Spirit of Jesus Himself.

Conclusion

The kind of prayer we need will not necessarily come in one great night of effort, although along the way there may be those extra pushes. But when the entire family of God begins to get in the habit of "Thank God every time we remember one another . . . " and when we "Pray that one another's love may abound in every good work . . . " God will answer those prayers in ways we never dreamed possible. It is HIS church, HIS family. If we will forget about individual glory and praise, and be His Body He will answer our prayers and equip us to carry forward as we have never done before!

Prayer

Hymn No. 512 *Take Time to Be Holy*

The Son of Consolation

May 8, 1994

A Brief Sketch of Barnabus

1 John 4:7 *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.*

The apostle, John, tradition tells us, was finally released from his exile on the Isle of Patmos, and lived to an extremely old age.

He is said to have been carried, very frail, to the services of worship where he would say from his pallet, "Little children, love one another!" I have always liked St. John. Long before I was ever a pastor I wanted to pattern my life and spirit after his.

The reason John is so attractive is that he wrote a lot about love. We feel more comfortable when we hear about the love of God than we do when we hear of His holiness. And yet the nearer we draw to the love of God the brighter it shines, and the more we are struck with a sense of holy wonder. God's love is an awesome thing to experience.

St. John says some very strong things in this text which I am using to introduce one of the truly loving persons of the Bible, Barnabus. John says (1) to truly love is to be born of God. Love is of the very essence of what it means to be Christian. Usually we accept that. But then John also says (2) the person who does NOT love not only is NOT born again, but he or she does not even KNOW God. Now THAT is strong language. John is saying, if I understand him correctly, that it doesn't take positive, evil acts to separate me from God— sins that I DO— - but he is clearly saying that something negative— the LACK of something— something I DO NOT DO— can prove I don't even know God at all.

John makes it clear that love is not an option, not the deluxe route to go after we are sure of heaven because we have said the right words at an altar somewhere. John

says that if we do not love one another we are NOT Christians and we do NOT know God.

But, you say, there are brothers and sisters that simply are not all that easy to love. What are we to do?

Like forgiveness, which is closely related to Christian love, the kind of love John is writing about here is as much for the person who loves as it is for those who are the objects of both love and forgiveness. You can go to heaven if people don't love you, but you can not go to heaven if you don't love people! You can get to heaven if people do not forgive you. But you can't get there if you are unwilling to forgive. I didn't say that. Guess who did? Jesus said, "If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will the heavenly Father forgive you your trespasses." (Matthew 6:15) So we find that forgiveness and love benefit most the one who forgives and loves. We should love if for no other reason than this fact: love transforms the one who learns to love like Jesus.

I. LOVE TRANSFORMS THE ONE WHO LOVES

- A. Barnabus is one of the most kindly, attractive people in the Bible. Every time he is mentioned he is helping, lifting, or encouraging. How, do you suppose, Barnabus got that way?
- B. Whenever we use the word "love," it is always necessary to give some kind of definition. Love, in one form or other, drives or motivates humankind. But much, no, most of the motivating love we see is curved around to look like greed (love of money) or lust (love of sensation apart from commitment) or racism (love of security) or selfishness (love of self to the exclusion of all else.) I am not now speaking about love that is centered in one's self, or even in one's ideas of what is good. We human beings are so mixed up that everything we do is complicated, along with the reasons why we do what we do.

This love of God, this "agapé" love I would speak about, is a love that is centered in a Higher Cause than self, that wills the good of another. It is more than filial love, that is centered in the human relationships and community, or to erotic love, which is based on the physical attraction God

built into us, and which is good, but which easily degenerates into selfishness and worse. The love John is writing about, the love which characterized and transformed Barnabus is a God-given, God-centered love that risks believing in others, and that sometimes takes the chance that possibly the one loved might go wrong. The love Barnabus manifested forgives others, because it knows it has been forgiven. That kind of "agapé" love reflects the love of God to others. I need that kind of love. And so do you!

II. LOVE TRANSFORMS THE ONE WHO IS LOVED

- A. Barnabus was probably responsible for more books of the Bible than anyone else! He had the gift of encouragement. When the church was desperate for money we see Barnabus (Acts: 4:37) selling property and laying the money at Peter's feet. He kept the wheels turning.

Then much later an older Barnabus sponsored and even championed a young man others thought was a failure. Paul said, "John Mark is not dependable, He is not to be trusted." [Translation: He is a flake!] But Barnabus stood by John Mark even when it meant looking like a rebel, breaking up the team. And Mark went on to write the oldest and most basic of the Gospels, many say with the help of Peter.

He never would have been there to write the gospel if Barnabus had let him be written off after he failed on Cyprus.

- B. But if Barnabus never did anything else, the transforming power and grace of his influence on St. Paul would have made his entire life worthwhile. Thirteen books of the New Testament came from Paul's quill pen or stylus, but who do you suppose was responsible for bringing him into prominence in the church?

1. Saul of Tarsus was arrested by Christ on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1-19) and a disciple named Ananias, of Damascus, was brave enough to pray with him and call him "brother." But when immediately the enemies of the church, Saul's former gang members, plotted to kill him as a traitor, and when Saul escaped Damascus and fled to Jerusalem, the Bible tells us, "he was trying to

associate with the disciples, and they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple." (Acts 9:28) Enter Barnabus! The scripture tells us that Barnabus took Saul in tow, brought him to the apostles, believed in him, sponsored him. And what did the apostles do? The brothers sent him away to Tarsus where he continued in obscurity for some time.

Possibly it was the three years when Paul spent time studying in the desert.

2. During this time the church enjoyed another brief respite from extreme persecution. They had been scattered after Stephen's death, but now after Saul's conversion there was another lull in the opposition, and the church continued to grow in numbers, now all over the Middle East and beyond. Barnabus was sent to Antioch (Acts 11:22) and while he was there he took a side trip to Tarsus especially to look up Saul. What Barnabus could not have known, nor the rest of the church, was that persecution was about to resume with a vengeance under Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:1-3 et al) But Barnabus found Saul, and asked him to join his gospel team, and encouraged him to get into missionary work. It was the beginning of the career of the world's greatest missionary.
3. Until this new persecution broke out, the Word has been proclaimed mostly to the Jews. God has made it clear that His grace in Christ is for all people. But no one could have anticipated that Barnabus, in his generous spirit of comfort and consolation, led by the Holy Spirit, had located and discovered and recruited the Church's great apostle to the Gentiles.
4. The pupil that Barnabus mentored soon left him behind, literally. They disagreed so sharply (Acts 15:36) that their group was broken up after one missionary journey. But even in this dispute my heart goes with Barnabus! He was sticking up for the underdog. And whatever Paul achieved in writing half the books in the New Testament, and defining a theology of grace, and in preaching from Asia to Spain, Barnabus had a share because of the love of a humble man who himself had been transformed, and who in turn dared to risk loving another with that same transforming love of God.

III. THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF GOD'S LOVE

- A. God's love enables us to love others. Believe me, it isn't always easy to love as God would have us to love. God's love may be unconditional, but it is not blind to sin, wrong, injustice, or the need for correction. Barnabus did not hesitate to tell Paul when he believed Paul was too harsh. Paul did not hesitate to get in Peter's face and tell him he was acting like a hypocrite (see Galatians 2). But before we can oppose people we had better be solemn sure that we love them.

God's love doesn't make us less human; it does help us incarnate what we believe. It (amazingly) does enable us to give up all bitterness and malice and anger and wrath and clamor. It does (amazingly) enable us to say with our Lord, "Father, forgive them!"

- B. God's love helps us to accept the transforming grace of God for ourselves.

We are changed when we understand how much Jesus loves us. That change is sanctification. We are transformed, and we are being transformed. Not one of us is absolutely like Jesus Christ, nor will we ever become God. But we are being transformed even now. And when the time comes that we see Jesus face to face we shall be glorified until even our bodies will be changed. We will be able to exist, to live in His Presence with exceeding great joy!

- C. Jesus loves YOU! Jesus has chosen YOU! If you will accept that fact humbly and simply, God will go to work on your very being. You will be changed the moment you can say, by the help of the Spirit, "Jesus is LORD!" And then that transformation will continue if you will allow the love of God to penetrate every corner of your life and living.

COMMUNION INVITATION

You have not chosen me. I have chosen you. Be a Barnabus! We cannot all be Pauls or Peters. We can all let God's love help us forgive. (Is there one soul on the face of God's earth you cannot forgive? Do you really know God?)

The God Questions

May 29, 1994

TRINITY SUNDAY

John 3:3 Jesus answered [Nicodemus:] "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

On a day called Trinity Sunday you might imagine that we ought to consider the deep and profound mystery of the Triune God. But when we begin asking deep and profound questions, as Nicodemus did one night to Jesus, we find that Jesus does not deal in abstract speculation. Instead He challenges us about life in the Spirit, and He asks us if we are ready to live by the very breath of the Spirit. We come to know God when we respond to His self-revelation. We come face to face with that revelation when we dare to ask what I call the God-questions.

To begin to think about God, as impertinent as it sounds, we have to ask at least three God-questions: (1) IS THERE A GOD? (2) WHAT IS GOD LIKE? (3) WHAT IS THIS GOD TO ME?

I. IS THERE A GOD?

It may seem sacrilegious to ask such a question from a Christian pulpit. Of course there is a God! As a church we certainly are not neutral in this matter. We believe it, we teach it. We certainly don't intend to leave to our children to decide for themselves when they turn eighteen. We have all been brought up on the (good) assumption that there is, indeed, a God.

And yet for most people God is not very "real." The fact is that many believers—even professing Christians—live from day to day as though God did not exist at all.

"IS there a God?" YES! And yet each one of us has to answer that question for ourselves! This is a God-question— a question that only God can finally answer by revealing Himself. There are what Morris Weigelt calls "intersections"— God-crossed moments in each of our lives when we KNOW we have encountered God.

Oh, we could speak of evidences: (1) We see God in His Creation: the heavens declare the glory of God! (2) We come up against the fact of God in The written word: "God at sundry times and divers manners has in the past spoken to us by His prophets! (3) The highest "proof" of God is The Living Word: Jesus said, "If you have seen ME you have seen the Father!"

But finally, God Himself must make Himself known to us. And He does, He will, if we are prepared to respond. He does this in many different ways.

[I think on this college-dominated weekend of the godly men and women who showed me God's face while they taught me here at E.N.C. I have a portrait of Bertha Munro on my study wall. God has spoken to us by their faith; faith revealed to faith. And I often wonder can OUR LIVES answer, begin to answer that question for those who may be seeking an answer?]

It is a question that cannot be satisfied by cold logic and facts, but God still does convince and assure us when we dare to look for Him (Hebrews 11:6.) We seek Him with the gift of faith, and He makes Himself known. Have you been thinking of intersections in YOUR life where this question has been answered beyond doubt for you?

But that brings us to a second question:

II. WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

There are plenty of people who are ready to answer this question for us if we will let them. Some of the answers are helpful, or even necessary.

We have our "official" definitions of God; the Manual of the Church of the Nazarene states:

"We believe in one eternally existent, infinite God, Sovereign of the Universe; that He only is God, creative and administrative, holy in nature, attributes, and purpose; that He, as God, is Triune in essential being, revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

Such definitions are both good and necessary. But they are not complete or exhaustive. And they don't leave us with a very warm feeling.

The Bible gives more light on the question of what God is like; there are names that are deeply significant. Names like Elohim (power;) and "the unspeakable name" which the ancient Hebrews would not speak— the name Moses heard as I AM THAT I AM, the name we call Jehovah and scholars usually call Yahweh. The Jews had compound names Jehovah-Jirah (the LORD will provide) and Jehovah-Nissi (the LORD my banner) and Jehovah-Shalom (the LORD send peace) and Jehovah-Shammah (the LORD is there) and Jehovah-Tsidkenu (the LORD our righteousness.) Another Hebrew name for God was "El Shaddai" (God our Nourisher) "Adonai" which means lord or master was usually spoken when the 'unspeakable name' was read with the eye.

Jesus told us a lot about God; He showed us that God is SPIRIT, and that God is LIGHT and God is LOVE and God is LIFE ETERNAL. Interpreted and illuminated by the other New Testament writers we learn to say that God is HOLY, God is ETERNAL, God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We say that God is OMNIPRESENT and OMNISCIENT and OMNIPOTENT.

And the very highest insight we can have into the question WHAT IS GOD LIKE? is Jesus Himself. It was E. Stanley Jones who was famous for saying, "We have a Christ-like God!"

But once again— this is a God-question. Many people are genuinely convinced that God exists. But all too many of them do not know for themselves that God is like Jesus, His Son— loving, full of grace and truth; and that God is present in this world by His Holy Spirit. In His great love, God reveals that He truly is like His Son, Jesus. In Jesus God has come all the way to where we live.

But there is a third God-question. And if we are open and honest before Him we will face the challenge:

III. WHAT IS THIS GOD TO ME?

God IS, and that's a fact which we may be convinced of. God is like Jesus, and we can believe that, too. But nothing really happens in the spiritual world until by grace we respond to God in a person-to-Person connection. The greatest question is not just what God is, or what He is like, as important as those questions are. But the important question for you and for me is Who is God to YOU?

Jesus put it to Nicodemus this way: You can't even SEE the kingdom of God until you are born again! The Spirit has to breathe life into your being! If you don't have a personal relationship with God you are window dressing in the kingdom of God, absolutely void of spiritual life and power.

Two-hundred-fifty-six years ago last Tuesday— although in 1738 it was a Wednesday- - an Anglican priest went half-heartedly to a small group Bible study and prayer meeting. The study was Romans. The leader read an introduction to the book by Martin Luther. The Anglican priest said later that as the leader was reading he felt his heart was strangely warmed, and he knew in his heart that he was a Christian, his sins forgiven, the assurance of his salvation certain.

Before that hour John Wesley had eloquently answered God-questions one and two both with word and with deed. He knew more about God then than most of us will ever know, perhaps. But after he answered the third question he did not just know about God, he knew that he KNEW GOD! And his Gospel message abruptly changed, and he began to go about his duties with a different emphasis. "You can KNOW God! You can KNOW YOU ARE SAVED!" And in the next 50 years John Wesley changed the course of history!

Jesus does not deal in abstract speculation. He asks us if we are ready to live by the very breath of the Spirit. He says to YOU "Are YOU born of the Spirit of God?" If you want to know more about God, let Him have your heart! God has made Himself known to you in many ways! You know that He is a God who loves you so much that He gave His only begotten Son so that you might have eternal life. But who is this God TO YOU just now?

Prayer: Great God, our Father, our Friend! Speak again to us today! Help us to know not only THAT You are, and WHAT You are— but help us to KNOW YOU! Help us to belong to YOU! Help us to return Your great love, and share it with a world that needs You. Amen

#42 (in Sing to the Lord) Praise, My Soul the King of Heaven

The Question

September 11, 1994

Mark 8:29 *But who do you say that I am?*

Jesus asked his disciples two questions as they walked into the hills north of Galilee. The pace of ministry had been fast and furious, but now they were alone on the road. Those two questions are still penetrating questions today.

Jesus said, "Who are people saying that I am?" And then he asked the question that came very close: "But who do you say that I am?"

The first question drew a variety of responses. The second question brought a response from Peter that Matthew tells us brought a blessing from the Master. Consider with me those two questions again:

I. WHO DO PEOPLE SAY JESUS IS ?

A. The fact is that there are a lot of different answers to this:

1. there are many "wrong answers;" that is, answers which contradict the clear teachings of the Bible. Some of these wrong answers are evil; Jesus has been attacked and vilified across the ages. Some of these wrong answers are simply ignorant or incomplete such as, "Jesus was a great teacher, or a martyr, or an Essene revolutionary."
2. there are probably many "right answers" as well. Every sermon, every good book, and in a sense, even what Matthew, Mark, Luke and John say about Jesus are right answers to this first question of Jesus.
 — I've been asking fellow Christians all week who Jesus is to them— and while I believe every one of them really knows Jesus I have gotten a variety of answers: Jesus is a "Listener ... a Shepherd ... a Guide ... our Intercessor."

B. The fact is that, apart from the inspired Scriptures, the answer that is given about who Jesus is tells more about the person answering the question than it does about Jesus

Himself. For this is a watershed question. Jesus is finally known by revelation; Jesus is known by faith; Jesus is the I AM, and what each one of us think about him does not change him, and yet every individual must know Jesus in a personal, unique relationship.

II. WHO DID PETER SAY JESUS IS ?

- A. Peter, of course, gave the right answer. He was like the kid that sat in the front seat right in front of the teacher with his hand up when you were in the fifth grade. Peter always had something to say. And this time he hit the nail on the head. "You are the Messiah!" Matthew tells us that Jesus said, "You are blessed, Simon, son of John! Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you. My Father, God in heaven, has given you this insight!"

And then Jesus went on to say that this confession of Peter is foundational to the kingdom of God.

- B. The great confession of Peter did not keep him from having mistaken ideas about the mission of Jesus. he still had a lot to learn, and a long way to go. But he was on his way. And that is the lesson from this chapter— if we are simply studying it as we would a history lesson.

But Jesus by his Spirit speaks through these pages and he asks you, and he asks me:

III. WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM ?

- A. A PERSONAL WITNESS CAN BE A POWERFUL WITNESS

Some time ago Pastor Martin Copenhaver, of Wellesley Congregational Church preached on this passage. He had been to a seminar where Michael Greene, a British scholar of the history of evangelism, had challenged a group of pastors with: "When was the last time you told your congregation what Jesus means to you?" Later he wrote in his study, "As a pastor I talk a good deal about Jesus, but do I say what Jesus means to me?" He decided he would try to do just that.

As a pastor in the UCC he said, "Our forebears in the faith worried that they might be seen as heretics. Today we (UCC people) seem to be more worried

about being taken for fundamentalists." So in personal, devotional terms Pastor Copenhaver tried to tell his people just what Jesus meant to him.

Evidently the sermon was quite a personal testimony. After the service Pastor Copenhaver noticed one dear lady whom he respected as one of the "saints of Zion" came through the line to shake his hand, and could not speak— and went around and got at the end of the line again to give herself time to compose herself. When she finally came the second time she simply said, "Why didn't you tell us this before?"

Copenhaver writes: "I did not know how to respond. Now her question, along with (Michael} Greene's, continues to haunt me."

B. A PERSONAL WITNESS CAN ALSO BE A CHALLENGE

I have wrestled with this question this week; what would I put into a sermon like Pastor Copenhaver's? Don't worry, I am not going to talk about myself and my relationship with God for a long time just now. But I assure you that the prospect of laying aside other people's correct answers— and even laying aside what the Bible says Jesus is supposed to be to me— and telling you truthfully who Jesus is to me has been a challenging experience!

I have been reminded again and again of Reuben Welch's sermon from this very pulpit (he is going to be with us for "Say Yes '95 in January, Lord willing!) when Reuben said, "I know Jesus! I want you to understand, I really do know Him! But sometimes I think I hardly know Jesus at all!" I understood then exactly what he was saying.

Who is Jesus to me?

Jesus is a Presence. I have never seen Him, but I cannot imagine life without Him. I talk to Him, and I listen for Him. I wish I could hear His voice, but He does speak from time to time, as I'm sure He does to you, too.

Jesus is a Friend, but a Friend with a capital "F." He is not my "peer," not someone I consult before I decide whether to do His will or not. There are many decisions that I

have to make, and Jesus lets me make them, along with my share of mistakes. But when I know—when Jesus makes known his will— there is no decision further. I have already decided many years ago that I will follow Jesus.

Jesus LOVES me! I confess that I don't understand why— and sometimes it is hard to believe. But I DO believe it! I learned "Jesus loves me this I know" before I can remember. I never knew a time when I didn't know that. But that love has been dawning on me, little by little, more and more, for all the years of my life! I really want to return that love ...

Conclusion:

I would seriously like to give you an assignment. (That is all you need: another assignment!) This is an assignment that can go along with or be a part of your quiet times for the next few days or weeks. The assignment is to think pointedly about who you really say that Jesus Christ is:

1. with your understanding; do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? Do you believe that Jesus IS God?
2. with your emotions; do you LOVE Jesus? Perhaps that is not altogether a proper way to frame it, for LOVE is more than feelings, that's for sure. But does your heart reach out to this Person who loves you so very, very much? Do you respond to his love? Paul says, "I plead with you by the great and tender love of God to present your bodies a living sacrifice ..."
3. with your will: do you accept Jesus as your Master? Will you report to him each morning and say, "I have given you my life back there at an altar, back there at camp... back there in revival.. I have given you my life— NOW HELP ME TO LIVE ONE DAY FOR YOU— TODAY— YOU SHOW ME WHAT TO DO AND I WILL DO IT!

And then, ask Jesus, your Friend, to help you share THAT reality with your friends, and with everyone who will listen.

God Our Home

October 9, 1994

Psalm 90:1 Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling place through all generations.

Hebrews 3:6 [Christ Jesus] whose house are we.. if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end ...

Ephesians 3: 14 - 21 That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith...

There is a recurring theme here of "home" or "dwelling" or "abiding." The Psalmist says, "Lord YOU have been our dwelling place." Then in Hebrews and again in Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3 God is spoken of as dwelling or living in us. Hebrews seems to say that together, as a body, Christ is building us into a house where he can dwell. Paul prays "that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith." And do you remember Jesus saying to us (John 15) "If you abide in ME, and my words abide in you . . . ask what you will!" We do not dare overlook this theme of abiding, dwelling, being "at home."

There is a deep longing built into your heart and mine for "home." What makes "home" is more than place (although that can be very important.) People—PERSONS - are really what "home" is all about.

God has made us for community. It is great when families love each other and trust each other. It is great when communities are more than just isolated individuals. Friends I made while in college are still as close to me or closer than some blood relatives. God has made us for lasting fellowship with Himself. Beyond human love (and what escapes us sometimes) is the lesson that God has also made us to be more and more at home with HIM.

He does not demand that we be hermits and give up human friendship to draw near to Him. He has made it clear that He certainly intends that we love one another. But

God does desire that we learn that He is the reason for that deep longing for "home." That ache in our hearts for God is the most important desire we will ever have.

We hesitate to call this God-hunger the most important quality of our faith. We think the most important thing is success, or productivity, or ministry. (The elder brother in the story of the Prodigal— was faithful in his chores— but the father wanted his affection, and wanted him to love his brother.) The most important thing in all the world is being "at home" with God. God our dwelling place; Christ "at home" in us.

Henri J. M. Nouwen, as reported in the most recent Christianity Today, once told a gathering of Baptist ministers these shocking words:

"Ministry is the least important thing. You cannot NOT minister if you are in communion with God and live in a community. A lot of people are always concerned about: 'How can I help people? Or help the youth come to Christ? Or preach well?' But these are all basically non-issues. If you are burning with the love of Jesus, don't worry: everyone will know. They will say, 'I want to get close to this person who is so full of God.'" CT, Oct 3, '94, 28

This strikes home to me as I read it, because drawing close to God, being filled with Him is demanding work. It begins when we decide that God's will is worth anything, that God's way is best even when we don't understand it. It begins in earnest with the "BREAKING" part of sacramental living. It seems sometimes that we are willing to do almost anything to avoid "being broken"!

"Who is Henri Nouwen?" "Does he do any ministering?" "Has he ever accomplished anything?" Many of you are "old friends" with Henri Nouwen, but others have yet to meet him. He is one of my favorite devotional authors, a Hollander who began studying to be a simple parish priest, but had such a brilliant mind he was almost pushed into academia. After years of what might only be termed "brilliant" successes, as a tenured professor at Yale, as the author of a score or more good books, and working in Latin America and spending time in a monastery in Genesee, New York, and teaching at Harvard University, for the last eight years Henri Nouwen

has been pastor of a community of mentally and physically handicapped persons, located just north of Toronto, Ontario.

As gifted and productive as Nouwen has been, he has always been restless, and to a certain extent rootless, but now he has found a sense of being at home in his ministry to the people who do not know him as "that famous holy man," but just Henri, who cares about them.

Nouwen wrote that the more "important" he became, the more empty he felt; until when he got to Harvard it was very difficult for him to maintain the simple contact of being at home with God (MY words of interpretation.) One big reason Nouwen feels at home is because he experiences God's love through people who love him for himself, and not because he is a celebrity. He says,

"If (handicapped people) express love for you, then it comes from God. It's not because you have accomplished anything. These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self— the self that can do things— and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of my accomplishments."

So Henri spends much of his routine days caring for people who cannot take care of themselves, and would be outcasts in the world at large. Just a few more words of wisdom from this modern day holy man:

"The evangelical movement has become just a bit victimized by a success-oriented culture, wanting the church— like the corporation— to be successful. On that level the mystical tradition of communion with Christ is important. 'I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain connected with me, then you will bear fruit.' The fruit is not success." CT, Oct 3, '94, 29

But strangely enough, to be "at home" or seeking to be at home in God, or to make God at home in us— does not lessen real spiritual accomplishment. Nouwen's spiritual journey is not over, and he continues to be a blessing through all the evangelical Christian world.

One other person who rejected "success" in favor of spending a life-time seeking to be "at home" with God was a man who once was a student at a sister holiness college. As a young man this young man, Stanley Jones, sought to be sanctified entirely, set apart for whatever God wanted in his life. I suppose there have been others who did what he did, but I never saw one in our own denomination: Stanley was offered- - elected— to the highest post in the United Methodist Church— elected a bishop. It is like being elected a General Superintendent. Certainly God's will! But Stanley Jones turned it down and instead went back to India where he was serving as a missionary. He was one of the great Christians of modern day times. Truly a holy man, Jones was at times controversial, outspoken. Let me tell you a little of the story of a man who was learning to be "at home" in God:

As a seventeen-year-old, he was converted under the hell-fire ministry of Evangelist Robert J. Bateman (who went down on the Titanic.) Stanley went on to seek and claim the experience of entire sanctification. He began to read Hanna Smith's book *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life*, and on page 42 the Holy Spirit said: "Now!" Stanley obeyed, and without any emotional surge he claimed the fullness. He testifies that it saved him from the extremes of emotionalism and of rationalism. Stanley was from that moment "all out" for God— with no holds barred.

He professed to be called to preach— but forgot his outline in his first sermon and left the pulpit, dumbfounded. But before he got to his seat, he felt he should give his testimony; and a young man came forward and was converted [— and later entered the ministry.]

Stanley did not take his crisis of being sanctified wholly to be a static, milestone in the past sort of thing. He wanted to be being filled with the Spirit! He told of how as a student at Asbury, in a dorm-room prayer meeting, the Holy Spirit moved in in a way that Stanley had never known before— and never knew quite the same way again.

He was "spirit (Spirit) intoxicated!" for three or four days. After a day or so the emotion almost totally wore off; but there was a sense of God's Presence that swept the entire community. Every student in that Christian college professed to a right relationship with the Lord, along with scores of people from the community.

And for Stanley, that filling became the touchstone for a life of living in the fullness— depending on the fullness— again and again breaking into the fullness of the Presence of the Lord. Whatever it took for Christ to be "at home" Stanley wanted that more than anything. He declares he did not live on "mountaintops" or speak in tongues— did not know extremes of emotions. He simply lived in the fullness of the Presence.

As we said at the beginning, he was elected a Bishop of his church— the highest honor that could be offered— and graciously declined so that he could continue a missionary in the poorest country of the world that he knew. He touched thousands of lives. He spoke here in 1949— and I still remember his text!

He was controversial. He was wrong many times. He said himself that there were times when he went on his own judgment and failed.

Stanley Jones learned to live in the dynamic of being filled with the Spirit. He knew his crisis of being sanctified. He had his mountaintop experience(s) of full assurance. And then he simply lived in the expectancy and the dependency and the obedience of the Spirit-filled, Spirit-dominated, Spirit-saturated life! When you looked at E. Stanley Jones you saw an ordinary man. When Stanley Jones spoke and acted, somehow Jesus was exalted! There is a deep longing built into your heart and mine for "home." HOW CAN YOU AND I FOLLOW THAT SPIRITUAL HOME-SICKNESS AND FIND OUR HOME IN GOD, AND MAKE GOD AT HOME IN US? I really believe that God wants to make his home in your heart; he wants to share every part of your life. (Revelation 3:21)

1. God has CHOSEN you— called you to himself. Have you responded to God's choice? Are you His child? You are already loved! But when God calls, we need to respond!
2. God has BLESSED you. If you have asked Him to save you, He has already give you his Spirit and increasingly wants you to have the full fruit of the Spirit. There are gifts and graces waiting for you. All the resources of God's storehouses of grace are available to make you all God wants you to become.
3. God needs to BREAK you! HERE IS WHERE THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD! God does not have servants who serve Him because of fear, or because they are trying to

save themselves, or any other selfish reason! God asks that we make our lives available to Him simply because we love Him and trust Him!

We cannot plumb the depths of being at home in God until we are willing to empty out the things that hinder, and set aside our own will and "die out!" (Holiness people may have said some pretty extravagant things here. The fact remains there needs to be a sacrifice made:) Romans 12: 1,2. We must renounce the sovereignty of self forever in favor of God's good will.

And then God will see to it that we are GIVEN where He says we are needed! There is where the JOY is! Wherever God's will and our loving obedience coincide there finally is the greatest joy we can know!

I want to minister well; I want to be a good preacher, or a good "do-er." But far, far more— I really want to be the kind of person Henri Nouwen was talking about— remember what he said:

If you are burning with the love of Jesus, don't worry: everyone will know. They will say, 'I want to get close to this person who is so full of God.'

THAT puts me under conviction! The world is waiting for people who are really at home with God, and in whom God is at home. The world will seek out a church where God is pleased to be "at home."

Prayer

Hymn #462 Sweet Will of God

Between Alpha and Omega

November 20, 1994

Christ the King Sunday

Did you ever sit at a window seat in an airplane and fly over your house, or over a part of the country you have lived in? I have... and I am usually amazed at how different it looks from the overview. I am always fascinated when I get the chance to fly at just how different everything looks when I am up above, and looking down on familiar scenes, seeing them in context.

GOD SEES THE END FROM THE BEGINNING, AND HE HAS PROMISED HE WILL NOT FORGET US, AND THAT HE WILL CARE FOR HIS CHILDREN

I. THE ETERNAL OVERVIEW: GOD IS SOVEREIGN - Daniel 7

Because of the gift of FAITH, we can end the year— and begin it again— with the certain knowledge that God IS, and that God is GOOD, and, as Hebrews tells us, God is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.

Actually that is a faith statement. The glory of the Eternal is beyond description. But Daniel, and John on Patmos, and Isaiah, and others have "cracked open the door just a little" into the vistas of eternity, and have given us a glimpse into the glory. They give us a picture of a holy God, a God of Light and glory.

Into this glory comes a person, a human, a son of man, and to him is given the kingdom which will never pass away

This is usually taken as a prediction, something which shall take place. If we can understand, this is a view into eternity; this is the way God sees it just now. It is a finished and completed fact: Jesus is Lord! From everlasting to everlasting, from before Creation as we know it the word of the Lord has been settled in heaven.

II. THE VIEW OF THE "SON OF MAN" ON ASSIGNMENT - John 18

[We skip over this title "Son of Man" when Jesus uses it, but do you see the significance? In Daniel's picture of eternity it is the "Son of man" who receives dominion and glory and a kingdom that is everlasting.]

- A. There are two passages that can be used for "Christ the King" Sunday. If we used the passage from Mark 11 we see there a king who enters Jerusalem on a little donkey. A crowd of very ordinary citizens are cheering, little children are waving palm branches and shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David!" In this one parade that Jesus ever permitted, it is hardly a state occasion. No brass band— no waving silken banners. Yet it does unsettle the authorities.
- B. In this passage (John 18) the scene seems even less "kingly," at least on the surface of it. There is some pomp and ceremony; Jesus does not have any of it. Pilate represents the conquering power of Rome; he cannot afford not to show his power. There is a palatial residence, and a royal, uniformed guard. A robed representative of the mightiest earthly kingdom in the world comes to the entrance of a courtyard where a solitary prisoner, obviously weary and bruised, stands bound.

How can this possibly be the scripture for "Christ the King?" How can we understand? Pilate is supposed to be making a judgment on whether or not Jesus is worthy of death.

You remember the outcome— the verdict was "Innocent! I find no fault in this man!" The sentence was death by crucifixion.

III. THE ETERNAL SON OF MAN AND THE CRUCIFIED JESUS IS THE SAME PERSON! - Philippians 2:5-11

It seems such a long, long way from the heavenly vision of Daniel, or Isaiah, or John's Revelation to this scene in Pilate's courtyard. And it IS a long way!

But believe me, it is the same Person! Paul tells us something of the road Jesus took so that we could know how much God loves us. WHY Jesus ever left the eternal glory is beyond my power to understand. But we know that Jesus came...

1. to show us God. He is the express image of God, the Word.
2. to show us God's LOVE: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."
3. to bring every one of us into His kingdom.

There is no question: Jesus is Lord! He is not "going to be Lord" for he is sovereign, and his glory will be revealed. That is what Daniel's scene tells us.

But that second scene, where Jesus stands before Pilate, tells us a great deal, too. We know now that Jesus was not on trial that day, but Pilate himself, and those who accused Jesus, and all his disciples— they were the ones who had to make a big decision. Where they stood is where we stand today; we think we are deciding who Jesus is. But Jesus IS who HE IS! Jesus is the great I AM THAT I AM. Our decision does not change who Jesus is. But it makes all the difference to us!

Jesus is standing in Pilate's hall Friendless, forsaken, betrayed by all Harken! What meaneth the sudden call, "What will you do with Jesus?"

What will you do with Jesus? Neutral you cannot be! One day your heart will be asking "What will He do with me?"

Voice from Eternity

November 27, 1994

Luke 21:25-28; Psalm 50:1

The Passage in Luke 21

We begin the Christmas watch with a word of HOPE from Jesus. He is speaking about the Second Coming. He is saying that even though there is distress, and bewilderment and troubles and people actually fainting and dying from fear, the last word to his people is "When these things begin to occur, stand up! Hold up your heads! Don't be afraid because I will be there for you!"

The Second Coming of Jesus isn't a large item in evangelistic circles any more, especially since all too often people that do preach about it either set dates and make fools out of themselves, or else they emphasize prophetic details that have no real spiritual value. But all the same, there it is: the word from eternity: this world will answer to ME!

Long before Jesus was born in Bethlehem prophets said they could hear God speaking. Sometimes it almost seems to us that they got mixed signals. Sometimes they said God said Messiah was coming in great pomp and glory with an army to establish peace by force. Sometimes they told of a Suffering Servant, a Branch, a Root out of dry ground that would be despised and rejected. But they were certain of one thing. God has something to say to all mankind. God cares very much about us, and how we treat each other, and how we respond to Him. The word from eternity is a summons for all mankind to come and stand before God. The Psalmist Asaph wrote:

The Mighty One, God, the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets.

This summons of God, ushered in by the Second Coming, has often been used as a threat. Like a baby-sitter saying to a child, "If you don't stop that when your parents

get home you'll be sorry!" We have used the threat of the Second Coming as a source of fear.

[I recall more than one afternoon coming home from grade school to an empty house and worrying just a little bit about whether or not I had been left behind. On at least one occasion I called Pastor Watkin, because I thought if he was still here I was safe. I wonder who I would call now?]

Certainly there are sobering aspects of this eternal summons of God. We ought to think very serious thoughts when we realize that God will call the earth to answer for their lives. But if we have learned to call God "Father," and if in any personal way we have come to know Jesus Christ, then the word we hear from eternity ought to be a great source of encouragement. Jesus tells us that when the going gets difficult, and the outlook is dark, we are to try the UP-LOOK. "I'm closer than you think!," He says.

Still, to hear God's word with HOPE requires the help of faith. In an utterly absurd way God looks at our pain, and not just yours and mine, but all the injustice and hatred and war and sin and death of all the ages of all time— and he sends us a Baby. It is the Baby that is his Word of HOPE.

We know the story of Bethlehem. We have heard it again and again, and we love it. What we need to remind ourselves again today is the power that is in this word from God. It is not only wonderful, and beautiful, but it is the word of God.

God's Word is an eternal word. The Baby is the Son of God, the Eternal Word. That means that our salvation is not an afterthought. It also means that while the Second Coming will be a particular event at a particular time, we are called to face the judgment of God on our sins when by the Holy Spirit we are brought to conviction for them.

It is possible to worry about a Rapture somewhere in the future, and put off getting right with God here and now until it is everlastingly too late. It is possible to worry about the "unpardonable sin" and forget that every sin is capable of separating us from God until it is under the precious blood of the Cross of Christ. With God the time

is always "NOW." From eternity God's voice reaches to where we are in time and space.

God's Word is a personal word. God makes covenant with men and women. He never breaks covenant. He honors those who seek him, and who make him the center of their living. He warns severely those who claim to know him but who are not fair to their brothers and sisters.

[In this Psalm God particularly zeroes in on the malicious use of the tongue:

You use your mouth for evil and harness your tongue to deceit. You speak continually against your brother and slander your own mother's son. These things you have done and I kept silent; you thought I was altogether like you. But I will rebuke you and accuse you to your face. (50:19-21)]

God cares how YOU respond to Him. If you will take time to listen, you will understand that God is not just summoning "the world" to Himself; God is speaking to YOU, and to ME! He is asking us to remember our covenant, or, if you have never made covenant with God, God is inviting you to hear His Word.

God's Word is an adequate word. It is all we need. Against all the bad memories, the loneliness and fears, the distress and fainting for fear and foreboding that Jesus tells about— against this dark background Jesus says:

"Now when these things begin to happen, stand up, and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near!"

Conclusion

What are the enemies of hope in our world today? What are the things that would destroy our faith and fellowship right here in the church, the Body of Christ? And how can this 'word from eternity' make any difference?

We are very much pressured by the culture in which we must live. We live at a dizzy speed; we are more and more efficient so that we can cram more and more activity into our days. The result is we are pushed until we feel ISOLATION. I am over-worked, and tired of the rat-race. No one really understands how I feel! I am

"unique" in my invisible isolation booth. ISOLATION AND LONELINESS are some of the devil's very prime weapons.

God's WORD calls his people to the place of worship. In the place of worship God listens for our cry for help. God warns us about thinking that we "pay our way" by our sacrifices, or our rituals. He says:

"If I needed food, would I tell you? I don't need the flesh of bulls, or the burnt offerings you give. What I want is your LOVE, your THANKS, and your LOVE. And when you CALL on me I promise I will deliver you, and you will honor me.

In the act of worship God's WORD makes it clear that we will see the salvation of God. The world will tell us that we are insane to put our HOPE in the integrity of a covenant we have made with an unseen God who says both that he is with us now, and that he is coming when we need Him the most.

And that integrity is all we have to rely on. Either we will believe God's Word, and live— or we will believe the words that come from the darkness and die. We begin the Christmas watch with a word of HOPE from Jesus. He is speaking about the Second Coming. He is saying that even though there is distress, and bewilderment and troubles and people actually fainting and dying from fear, the last word to his people is "When these things begin to occur, stand up! Hold up your heads! Don't be afraid because I will be there for you!"

The word from eternity, the word from God is I LOVE YOU!

Prayer

#289 - Soon and Very Soon

Life in the Spirit

April 2, 1995

Reflections on a Golden Chapter

This is not a sermon— but is a review of a major resource for personal spiritual victory— the treasure of Romans 8. There are a number of Golden Chapters that have truth we turn to nearly every day - some days we live in one Chapter, sometimes another - -

I've been referring to Psalm 107 a lot lately ... you may well have your favorite chapters. It is well to become acquainted with many of them, because we need the strength they give. Again and again I refer to John 15 and abiding in the Vine ... to Philippians 2:5, and Philippians 4, and to Galatians 5, the fruit of the Spirit, and Ephesians 6 and the whole armor .. and Ephesians 4, the "church chapter, and on and on.

Romans 8 is about LIFE as it can be lived in the Spirit, by the Spirit, through the Spirit of Christ living in us. It is, or ought to be, a chapter of great encouragement.

There are some statements of FACT— or the believer's STANDING in Christ because of the reality of life in the Spirit. Look at some of these statements:

If we are born again... WE ARE ALIVE IN CHRIST BY HIS SPIRIT

Verse 8: They that are "in the flesh" cannot please God. coupled with Verse 9: Christians are NOT in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in us.

If you are a Christian you have the Spirit living in you - - - - your STANDING is "in Christ"

Verse 9 "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ he does not belong to Him (also 14) All who ARE LED by the Spirit of God are children of God.

If we are born again... WE WILL HAVE ASSURANCE (FROM TIME TO TIME) THAT WE REALLY ARE GOD'S CHILDREN!

Verse 15 - 16 Something in us cries out "Father!" (John Borders calls it "DAD!")

If we are born again... WE ARE STILL NOT YET ALL WE WILL BE

Paul speaks about sharing in the SUFFERING with Jesus (verse 17) in order that we also may be glorified with Him.

Verse 18 The sufferings of this present time do not compare with the glory that shall be revealed in us.

Does that mean when we die by and bye? Yes. But it also means that we aren't perfect or worthy as we are just now.

Christians live by HOPE! There is a difference in our STANDING, that is our POSITIONAL UNITY WITH JESUS and our STATE, or the circumstances, understanding, imperfection of our situation in a very imperfect world:

Verse 23 Not just the creation at large is groaning with the childbirth-pains of being set free from corruption... BUT WE (PAUL AND YOU AND ME) WHO HAVE THE SPIRIT BEARING WITNESS THAT WE ARE GOD'S CHILDREN— WE ALSO GROAN FROM TIME TO TIME AS WE WAIT THE FULL REDEMPTION THAT WILL BE.

So we live by hope... Verse 24 For IN HOPE we have been saved—

Christians live stretched out... living by faith ... trusting a Father we cannot see ... reaching out in our infirmity to God. BUT

If we are born again... THE SPIRIT HELPS US IN OUR WEAKNESS

Verse 26 ...and a primary place the Spirit helps us is in our PRAYER LIFE.

The word says specifically that "we do not know how to pray as we ought .. but that the Spirit HIMSELF makes groanings for us which cannot be uttered.

The SPIRIT can "translate our hunger after God" — our desire for LOVE PEACE JOY .. to the God who will both hear and answer.

If we are born again... THERE IS NO SITUATION WHERE GOD WILL NOT WORK FOR OUR GOOD AND HIS GLORY

Verse 28 - it was true before it was written (Joseph) "You meant it to me for harm - God has used it for good!"

Some rhetorical questions for our encouragement from a Golden Chapter

1. Verse 31 IF GOD IS FOR US, WHO CAN BE AGAINST US?

Think about it; if you are honestly seeking to do God's will you have "Luther's THE RIGHT MAN ON OUR SIDE. THE MAN OF GOD'S OWN CHOOSING!" and all hell cannot keep you from doing God's will!

2. Verse 32 IF GOD SENT HIS SON, THEN DOES IT MAKE SENSE HE WILL DRAW BACK FROM FOLLOWING UP WITH WHATEVER ELSE IS NECESSARY TO SAVE US?

The question answers itself.

3. Verse 33 WHO CAN (SUCCESSFULLY) ACCUSE THE CHILD OF GOD?

God has justified you. He is the One who counts.

4. Verse 35 WHO SHALL EVER SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF GOD?

When God LOVES— it is forever!

During the Lenten Season it is a time to seek to go into the heart of fellowship with God. It is a time not so much for DOING good as it is to SEEK TO BE IN GOD'S PRESENCE and realize how much HE loves us.

Henri Nouwen told a group of Baptist ministers who came to find help in their work:

"Ministry is the least important thing. You cannot not minister if you are in communion with God and live in community. A lot of people are concerned about: how can I help people? Or help the youth to come to Christ? Or preach well? But these are all basically non-issues. If you are burning with the love of Jesus, don't worry: everyone will know. They will say, 'I want to get close to this person who is so full of God.'"

I really believe that if we learn to worship well— as a congregation— and as individuals— God will help us do the other vital and necessary work of His kingdom, and do it well.

Use this chapter in your personal worship; let it encourage you.+

#736 I Am So Glad that Jesus Loves Me

The Champion

Palm Sunday April 7, 1995

Zechariah 9:9 Behold your king is coming ...

Has there ever been a time in your life when you were afraid? Have you ever had something looming out ahead you didn't know quite how to face? I have.

Looking back it may not now seem as life-threatening as I thought it was then. But it stands for all the other times, even to this very moment, when I know I can't go on by myself, that I need Someone's help.

I dreaded going to school. School itself was fine— it was just getting there and getting home again— you see, I lived on Magnolia Avenue, and I had to watch out for the Hayford Street Gang.

Most of the time I walked to school with the Magnolia Avenue kids. As long as three or four of us were together we felt safe. But it could be seriously damaging to your health if you got caught all alone by the Hayford Street Gang.

And then one night it happened! I had to stay after school and the rest of the Magnolia Avenue kids for some reason or another couldn't wait. I had to walk home alone. I started down Kalamazoo Street with the sincere hope I wouldn't- - but I did! I had only gone about a block from the Allen Street School when I looked about another block down the street and there— there I saw—The Hayford Street Gang! I knew I was going to get beat up.

My mind began racing— in one split second I thought—" I'll run down this driveway and over the fence— no, I'm not sure what's in that back yard— I'll turn around and run back to the school— no, maybe its locked now— O God! What will I do? " Just then I saw HIM— a big kid from the Junior High School walking down Kalamazoo Street in the same direction as I was walking, catching up with me.

I smiled at him: "Hey, Can I walk along with you? See those kids up there? They're after me!" He said, "Sure— I don't care!"

The Champion

So I fell into step with him, just as if he was my big brother or something. I really didn't know him at all, but I kept smiling at him and talking as we came nearer and nearer to— the Hayford Street Gang! And when we came right to where they were they parted— just like the Red Sea— and WE walked through and on past— one block, two blocks— clear to my corner where I turned for home. And I said, "Thanks!" and ran down Magnolia Avenue where I was safe.

That day that big Junior High kid was my CHAMPION!

How many times since then I have faced situations where I was going to get beat up! There have been threats far more serious than the Hayford Street gang.

I. WHY THE PARADE ? BECAUSE THE CHAMPION WAS NOT AFRAID

There must have been an excitement— and a sense of the rightness of the moment— and yet it was humble— not at all militaristic.

The disciples did not know the real significance of it then. It was not until later when Jesus had been glorified that the real significance stood out. When we look at the over-view it is really remarkable.

John 12:16 These things the disciples did not understand at the time; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written (Zechariah 9:9) and that they had done them (Psalm 118:26.)

The Champion was declaring confidently who he was. He was not about to be taken by surprise, not to be simply a martyr for a cause. He was forcefully declaring that he is king and had the right to be declared the same and worshiped.

Jesus moved into the Temple courtyard and overturned the tables of the money-grubbers there.

II. WHY THE PARADE? THERE WOULD BE ANOTHER KIND OF PARADE BEFORE THE WEEK WAS OVER - A DIFFERENT SORT OF CROWN - - BUT THE SAME CHAMPION

Sometimes a champion can be a champion and it doesn't cost anything. The Big Kid that got me through my trouble when I was facing the Hayford Street Gang didn't even know he was a champion.

But sometimes it costs everything to be a true champion. I shrink back from talking about Christ's suffering; I am so afraid of intruding on holy ground. We see and hear so much of violence- - I'm not sure we understand the price Jesus paid for our salvation; I'm not sure we can speak about his passion without making "an event" out of it instead of standing in awe in the realization that Jesus became SIN for ME— Jesus who knew no sin- - in order that I might in HIM become righteous and able to become ONE with Him and share HIS life.

The Via Dolorosa - it had to be in the Champion's mind that Sunday morning as he wept over the city— wept not for himself, but for the tragedy of the result of his rejection.

III. WHY THE PARADE? THIS IS THE ROUTE OF THE KING OF PEACE

When Jesus ascended into heaven it was from this very same Mount of Olives which was the route of the parade on Palm Sunday. As he came from Bethany to the Eastern Gate of Zion the parade actually began with the descent from the top of the hill.

Tradition has it that the early church so strongly believed that Jesus literally would come this same route again that when the city was conquered centuries ago by the Muslims one of the rulers had the Eastern Gate walled shut so that if he, Jesus, did come back he couldn't enter the city.

Conclusion:

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A Prayer for Holy Week

April 9, 1995

Ephesians 3:14-21

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a manual on the healthiness of life in God as it is intended to be lived. Here we can read about how God's great POWER will be released in those who believe. We are introduced to mysteries of GRACE and wonders of God's KINDNESS and the joys of LIFE.

But perhaps the highest privilege is FULLNESS. The greatest imperative in the entire letter is 5:18: "Be filled with the Spirit!" And the prayer here (3:14-21) is the heart of Paul's concern for the Ephesians, as well as certainly God's will for you and me. FULLNESS! But what KIND of fullness?

I. THE QUESTION IS NOT 'SHALL WE BE FILLED' BUT RATHER 'WITH WHAT SHALL WE BE FILLED?'

- A. Each one of us is a vessel that is full, for there is no such thing as a spiritual vacuum. People are full of the stuff of life. People are full of their own importance or their own troubles. They are full of worry— they are full of advice— they are full of hot air— but they are FULL! In our culture it seems like the norm for people to be filled with the importance of self.

We are so near to our culture that we are often blind to how all-encompassing that the fullness of SELF-WORSHIP is the "accepted way to live." There is total occupation with what "I" want! There is obsession with being true to "me." To suggest otherwise is equal to LUNACY and TREASON combined.

IT SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE, A CONTRADICTION, BUT ONLY WHEN I AM FILLED WITH GOD MY REAL 'BEST SELF' CAN BE FORMED.

This is what Jesus was talking about when he said:

Mark 8:35 For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for My sake and the gospel's, the same shall find it.

B. Whatever we are filled with shows. We need to be looking at:

- RESERVOIRS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

What are the things that fill up our day? Not that we ever need to say "This is important" Or even that we ENJOY it... but what are we DOING WITH OUR DAYS? We need to look at:

- WELLSPRINGS OF ATTITUDES

The way we usually ARE to other people. The "habits of the heart" We let ourselves take on a "usual" way of looking at things. They said of Joseph: "Here comes the Dreamer" We look at some people and say "Here comes a Complaint!@" "Here comes trouble" "Here comes LOVE!"

We also need to look at:

- FOUNTAINS OF THE SPIRIT

The way we really ARE before God. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the seekers after God. Open, obedient, growing faith and love that is reflected in love for the Word, love for the place of prayer, love for the Church.

C. "Fullness" is not usually a conscious choice:

1. We "catch" the ways of society more than we deliberately choose. It isn't that we need to look for the devil under every rock ... the spirit of creeping secularism is much more subtle than that .. WE JUST NEED TO FORGET WHO WE ARE ... AND WHOSE WE ARE .. FOR A SHORT WHILE!
2. Being "filled" is not usually seen as moral questions— or as "serious." But things "take up space" in our souls (if we can think of spiritual things "spatially"); many things "take up space" that might be used for better things. Fill your mind with junk ... and when the crunch comes up will come ... junk!

- D. "Fullness" and "capacity" are two different things. Remember, even a small vessel can grow, and eventually take on surprising proportions.

Which brings us to the main idea:

II. THE IDEA OF BEING FILLED WITH GOD!

- A. "Filled with all the fullness of God." All that God has to offer— doesn't mean that we have all of God that there is. The Universe does not "contain" God but rather is sustained by His word. But being filled with God means that all of us is permeated with God's Spirit.
- B. This is not a phrase to be lightly dismissed. "Oh, yes— this means ... entire sanctification!" (Or, "This means speaking in tongues!" Or "This means a certain "experience." The sanctifying experience is true - but in OUR context we may be saying: "We Nazarene's OWN this! We are on familiar territory! Two trips to the altar and we "have God's fullness."

It is nice to have things packaged neatly, theologically— but God wants to relate to us in the reality of where we live and work— in the deep needs of our homes.

There is real truth in the MESSAGE OF HOLINESS . . a reality to being filled with the Spirit of God that, while it defies complete description, IT IS CRUCIAL TO OUR SUCCESS AS CHRISTIANS.

EITHER WE WILL SEEK TO BE FILLED WITH GOD, AND BELONG ENTIRELY TO HIM . . OR WE WILL FAIL!! And we

1. will fall into outward sin, and go away from the church, or we
2. will fall into the sin of pride - thinking that WE are the KEY .. that OUR WAY is a lock on salvation (a mass of legalism), or we
3. will fall into the sin of false humility (antinomianism) and say: everyone has to sin every day anyway... it really doesn't make any difference how we live— what we are filled with.

III. THIS IS NOT JUST THEORY (THIS PRAYER OF PAUL FOR YOU AND ME) THE KEY TO FULLNESS IS KNOWING JESUS CHRIST

- A. FULLNESS MEANS THE INDWELLING CHRIST Verse 17 - Jesus, welcome, at home in you/me just now!
- B. FULLNESS MEANS THE EMPOWERING CHRIST Verse 18 - Enabling us to grasp God's love
- C. FULLNESS MEANS the ALL-SURPASSING CHRIST Verse 19) Both in CRISIS and on-going SURRENDER ; a GRASPING FOR THE LOVE that enables us to make our bodies a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1,2)

CONCLUSION: You do not have the choice "Shall I be full?"

The question is: WILL YOU BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT OF JESUS CHRIST?

#335 - His Way with Thee...

Last Words First Concerns

April 13, 1995

John 17: 1 - 11

"Last words" are important to us. When someone leaves for a day they say "Don't forget to mail that letter . . ." When a son or daughter leaves to go to school away from home there are tears and we say "Don't forget to write every week ..." And when someone is dying we bend low and listen.

Wesley, dying, said "Best of all, God is with us!" Millard Porter, a sainted man I once pastored, said from his bed in a crowded ward "Thirty-Four! Thirty-Four!;" and even though he had a stroke I knew he meant Psalm 34:1 "I will bless the Lord at all times, his praise shall continually be in my mouth!" That episode in the hospital— those final words have meant a lot to me across many years.

But the final words of Jesus are in a completely different, incomparably higher category. Every word that Jesus spoke is important. But as Jesus came to the close of his earthly ministry he summed up the essentials again. The Gospel of John gives four full chapters to the final words of Jesus.

In those final hours Jesus not only spoke of the importance of caring, but demonstrated it. He washed his disciples' feet. And In those final hours Jesus gave a new commandment which actually sums up the Ten Commandments: "A NEW commandment I give you: that you have love one for another! Even as I have loved you— so you are to love one another!" (John 13:34)

But then Jesus closed his final remarks with a prayer. The High Priestly prayer is the Holy of Holies of prayers. A lifetime of study would not exhaust the truth and power it holds. It is a living prayer that Jesus prayed for you and me.

I bring two profound thoughts from that prayer for us to ponder as we come to the Table this evening:

1. Jesus greatly desires that we understand that God loves us. Jesus prayed first for Himself, that the glory and wonder of his unity with the Father would in fact take place. (See Philippians 2: 5 - 11) But in the same thought, Jesus asked the Father to bring the disciples into that circle of holy unity and love with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Again, and again Jesus prays that the believers might be in Christ and in God.
2. Jesus greatly desires that this love be not only vertical— that is between you and God, and me and God— but that this unity might be manifested horizontally— between you and me, and me and you— and you and you, and so forth.

It is as this unity is manifested— not just talked about or theorized— but as the supernatural, gracious, Spirit-breathed love of God is manifested in the church that the world will come to believe that Jesus really is sent from God Almighty to bring salvation to the world.

THIS IS OUR ONLY HOPE OF MAKING A SKEPTICAL WORLD BELIEVE. I don't know when we will believe this, and quit trying to evangelize over top of sin and selfishness and ambition. I don't know why we have relegated "spirit" to the "optional" category and elevated "techniques" and "corporate management" and "worship tricks" to the forefront in so-called "church growth" building.

The fact remains that OUR ONLY HOPE OF MAKING A SKEPTICAL WORLD BELIEVE THAT JESUS IS LORD IS WHEN HIS LOVE IS FIRST IN YOUR LIFE AND MINE.

This was Jesus' final prayer after His final words. How important do you think they are?

INTO THE SACRAMENT:

The Hand We can Trust

April 14, 1995

"Father, into thy hand I commend my spirit ..." Luke 23:46

On the Cross of Calvary we see both the deity and the humanity of our Lord. As our Savior and Redeemer we believe that he finished the work of salvation, and accomplished a work which we cannot ever comprehend. We weakly address the "what" and the "why" and the "how" of what Jesus did on the Cross, and we speak of substitution and redemption and ransom-- we say that "Jesus paid it all!" And certainly he did! but we will never understand fully how-- or even why. His love for us is wonderful, and totally undeserved. All we can hope to do is receive it, and let it begin to transform us, and try to return it as best we can.

But as a man Jesus gave us a Pattern and Example to follow. We cannot fully grasp this side of Jesus, either, perhaps. And we will not be able to do it quite as well as He did it. But Jesus in his humanity lived among us in dependance on the heavenly Father. He was God, and yet as man he lived by prayer. Jesus never made a decision without spending time in prayer. He was Almighty, and yet he asked his disciples to watch with him in his hour of agony. He responded with gratitude when favors were done for him. He resisted temptation, not by divine destruction of the tempter, but, by living by the written word of God: "It is written!" he said.

On the cross we saw his humanity as he cried out not only "It is finished!" but "I am thirsty!" And in the final moment of His death he not only said. "My God, WHY?" as the sin-sacrifice, but he said these wonderful words of trust:

"Father-- into your hand I commit my spirit!"

... and Jesus bowed his head and died.

As our Savior Jesus has opened a way for us to connect with God and receive eternal life. But as our Brother Jesus has shown us how to connect with God in trust for day-by-day living. Jesus has shown us that when temptation would overwhelm us we

have resources of scripture and prayer and fellowship. Jesus has shown us that it is all right to feel lonely, or tired, or even at times to wonder if anyone else is listening to the truth. And finally, Jesus has shown us that we die as we live. If we have put our lives into the Father's trust, then we can trust Him with our spirit when night falls, and we cannot go on. A few years ago my grandson, Ben, went to his first hockey game. His birthday is tomorrow, and he'll be nine years old; he is a Hockey Mite, and his name is in the Quincy Sun often as a scorer. (Granddad isn't too proud, I hope!)

But the Garden and the Bruins were a little much for a five year old. Tickets were courtesy of an uncle-- but they needed a parking space; Ben spontaneously began to pray for one-- immediately they saw a sign "Parking!" Just \$9.00!! Oh, well, Ben hadn't specified FREE parking.

Anyway, Ben and Steve, his dad, found their seats and Ben made friends with all the people around him. He thought the Garden was sort of like church, I guess. We should be friendly here, shouldn't we? He offered to share his popcorn-- and he even watch a little of the game.

But about the middle of the first period Ben began to flame out. The excitement ran its course and his eyelids began to droop. Finally he put his head in his dad's lap-- and his feet in the lap of the lady on the other side-- she didn't seem to mind-- and he was GONE! Somehow Steve thought he ought to go on home right about then, and there were two empty seats the rest of the game.

And Ben never woke up as his dad carried him out of the Garden and back to the \$9.00 parking lot and back home and to bed. When he opened his eyes again it was morning, and Ben was home. It is wonderful, a sort of miracle that little kids know and we only vaguely remember-- that wherever it is they happen to fall asleep if it is away from home-- they wake up where they belong, in their own beds.

And that is the trust a Christian can have. That is the trust that Jesus was manifesting that dreadful, wonderful day when as our Champion he won our eternal life, and defeated death and hell. For as our Brother Jesus was showing us that we can trust our dying into the hands of a loving Father.

We know that if we go to sleep before the ballgame is over, we will wake up at home.

The Other Witness

April 23, 1995

John 20: 19 - 31

Acts 5: 27 - 32

Text: Mark 5:32 "*We are witnesses .. and so is the Holy Spirit*"

In these scriptures read in our hearing this morning is a clear message about the church that Jesus founded, loves, and continues to build by his Spirit. On this Annual Meeting Sunday we bring this, our local church fellowship alongside the words of Jesus, and ask Him to show us how we can better know and do His will. Jesus is Lord of the Church!

In these passages we see first:

I. THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

John 20:21 As the Father has sent me, so I send you. When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit.

- A. Our mission is, first, TO CARRY OUT THE WORK OF JESUS IN WORSHIP, EDUCATION, FELLOWSHIP, SERVICE, AND EVANGELISM
- B. But, clearly, our mission also includes, (IN ORDER TO BE ABLE TO DO THIS WORK) the fact that WE, THE CHURCH, MUST RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT IN FULLNESS AND POWER

Jesus through the Scripture, by the Spirit is:

II. THE AUTHORITY OVER THE CHURCH

Acts 5:29 Peter and the apostles answered, We must obey God rather than any human authority.

- A. THERE IS NO QUESTION THAT HUMAN LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION IS NECESSARY; DEACONS, [EPHESIANS 4], PAUL'S CONSULTATION WITH THE LEADERS AT JERUSALEM

- B. BUT THERE ALSO IS NO QUESTION THAT ABOVE ALL HUMAN AUTHORITY IS THE WILL OF GOD AS REVEALED BY HIS SPIRIT, THROUGH THE WORD OF GOD, THROUGH THE MEN AND WOMEN OF GOD, THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD, AND THROUGH GOD-GIVEN INTELLIGENCE AND REASON

But being commanded to do something is one thing. To find the strength and power is another. We see here also the secret of:

III. THE POWER OF THE CHURCH

Acts 5:32 We are witnesses ... and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him,

- A. We have the POWER of knowing we have met the Risen Lord. WE ARE WITNESSES. A witness can tell what he/she knows. Anything less than first-hand is not witnessing, it is hearsay.

What do YOU know for yourself ?

1. about what the Bible says;
2. about what God has done in saving grace in your own heart;
3. about how to lead another spiritually hungry person into the Presence of God in Christ?

- B. We ALSO have ANOTHER WITNESS! "SO IS THE HOLY SPIRIT"!

There has to be another witness! (1) In one sense the Holy Spirit may well be at work long before you say anything. (2) But we need the right spirit in order to give our testimony life and authority. Both Spirit and spirit count!

Unless we have "the other witness" we will not be effective!

[What we have done this year in some ways seems remarkable; in other ways we wonder why didn't we do more. I need to be a specialist in appreciation— the work of the kingdom is always a team effort when it is what God intends for it to be. I am grateful for every dollar given, for every ounce of effort expended, for every prayer prayed, for every kindness and word of love expressed within this body. But rather

than speak of specific areas of victory or need I want to close this gospel message with a challenge for the new church year:]

IV. THE CHALLENGE TO OUR CHURCH

Hebrews 11:14 Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.

- A. We have the same mission that Jesus gave the first generation of believers. We have the same authority over us: Jesus is still the head of the church and commands us to obey him instead of any human authority. We have met Jesus, and we need to tell others what we know about Him. The Holy Spirit can and will come alongside us as we witness.
- B. These two important facts are self-evident: (1) WE MUST HAVE FIRST-HAND KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS TO WITNESS. Hear-say evidence is not admissible, even though it is used over and over again. If Jesus has changed your life, if Jesus is real to you, then you have something to witness about. But also (2) WE MUST HAVE THE RIGHT SPIRIT IN OUR WITNESSING. You can use a capital "S" and a lower case "s" here! The Holy Spirit needs to work on our spirit until we tell the truth in LOVE. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus!
- C. A CHALLENGE FOR THE COMING YEAR (Four-fold:)
 - 1. COMMIT TO JESUS THROUGH THE BODY

We come to Jesus one-by-one. Jesus calls us by name. He speaks to us, personally. But sooner or later we discover that we may not be God's favorite child— but that God has a whole lot of other "favorite children" as well. In fact God loves YOU as much as He loves ME. That is the normal pattern of growing up and maturing.
 - 2. FOCUS ON JESUS IN ALL THAT YOU DO

"Holiness" is not a "higher standard" of rules and regulations; there is no double standard in the kingdom— we cannot be partially alive. Holiness is God-given grace to be in God's Presence in fullness of fellowship through the deliberate surrender of our rights. It is Christ-likeness, Christ-centered living, Christ wholly owning,

possessing us, filling us with the Spirit of Christ. PRACTICE THE PRESENCE!

3. TITHE!

How can I say this after an impassioned plea to be holy? Talk about money? I challenge you to put God absolutely first in financial matters. Some of you are on tight budgets. If you tithe you will go under— or so it seems. Listen— I've been there— it doesn't work that way. I have no axe to grind, no possible way to profit from your tithing or not tithing. I simply say that when we are Christ's then all we are is his as well— and when we give him our assets he also takes on our liabilities.

4. (A HANDLE FOR ALL THIS:) LIVE IN HEBREWS 11:14

"Follow peace with all persons everywhere, and (follow) the holiness without which no one can see the Lord."

I challenge you to live in this verse. Super-impose it on whatever passage you are studying. Read it along with the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes.

1. 1. Get rid of whatever might cause the least cloud between you and any other human being on the face of this earth. If it is their fault, you cannot afford to have a bad spirit about it. I'm talking serious stuff here; I'm talking the difference between kidding ourselves and real, genuine spiritual break-through.

If that makes you uncomfortable— if you would rather simply draw back into your hurts and your self-righteousness— I ask you to read this verse on your knees— because holiness is linked with a willingness to be clean. And until we have forgiven as we have been forgiven we are not yet clean.

2. 2. Make certain that you have the sanctifying fullness of the Holy Spirit. This is not a "doctrinal" thing, now. Holiness is belonging to God without reservation. And when that is fact— we will never have to do the work of the church in our own puny human strength. We will have THE OTHER WITNESS!

THE OTHER WITNESS IS READY TO WORK WITH US THIS YEAR TO CARRY FORWARD THE GREAT MISSION OF CHRIST THAT HE HAS GIVEN US. PRAY WITH ME THAT WE WILL MEET THE CHALLENGE!

A Question about Love

April 30, 1995

John 21:1-19

A Beautiful Setting

It was a beautiful lake at sunrise. The wind had died as it usually does just before daybreak, and tired fishermen were rowing their boat the last quarter mile to shore through the rising mist. The sail hung limp, and the thump of the oars against the sides of the boat was the only sound to be heard.

It was at least two weeks after Easter. The crush of the Passover holiday had subsided, Jerusalem had gone back to its normal routines. The disciples from Galilee had walked the ninety or so miles back to their lakeside homes in Capernaum. Since the resurrection they had seen Jesus exactly twice- except for Thomas, who had seen him once.

Remember the confession Thomas had made. It is the climax of the Gospel of John. Thomas, who had had trouble believing good news, said to the risen Savior standing before him: "My Lord and my God!"

But that was then. That was there, in Jerusalem. Jesus had risen, the disciple's hopes had been re-established. Jesus had told them he would meet them in Galilee. But then for several long days— nothing.

Life had to go on. There were responsibilities. And they had to eat. There is nothing wrong with meeting the demands of life. So the big fisherman said what seemed the obvious thing to do: there were boats and nets on the beach at the foot of the street, there were mouths to feed and bills to pay. Peter said, "I am going fishing!"

I don't know what deep significance, if any, we should read into those words. I don't think Peter meant "I am giving up on following Jesus." It may have seemed longer, but just a little more than three years before Jesus had walked along that same beach and had said to these same fishermen, "Follow Me!" And those fishermen had

laid aside nets, and pulled their boats up onto the shore. Now, obviously, the "following" of Jesus was on hold— because Jesus was not physically with them.

So for whatever reason Peter and Thomas and Nathaniel and James and John and two others John doesn't name all piled into a fishing boat and pushed off into the evening shadows. They fished all night long. Seven people in one boat— tells me it was a pretty good sized vessel. At least three professional fishermen aboard— they knew the lake. They had the equipment. Still, with every trick in the trade they came up empty.

The sun was just coming up, the boat was nearing home, the beach was just looming through the rising mist. The tired men on board thought they saw a lone figure standing on the shore as though waiting for them.

"Children, you have no fish, have you?" the figure called. It could have been a stranger simply asking from curiosity— it could have been someone wanting to buy some fish from the fishing fleet. But at daybreak? On their part of the beach?

The disciples called back across the water, 100 yards or so, "No! No fish!"

Back came the call: "Cast your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." Amazingly the fishermen took this Stranger's advice. And even more amazingly their nets were instantly full. What a great story!

The Breakfast Together

The story gets even better. The disciples recognized Jesus through the mist, and Peter, impetuous Peter, could not even wait, or be bothered to help with the great catch of fish. As the rest of the men labored toward the shore dragging half a ton of fish, Peter swam and waded ashore. When he got there he really didn't know what to say.

— a really, really profitable night's work— they discover a fire of coals just right for cooking fish— actually some fish already cooking. Jesus says, "Bring along some more of that fresh fish— and come to breakfast!"

And so they secure the catch, pull up the boats, and gather round for an absolutely unforgettable celebration. More things race through their heads than they can

express. Will the itinerant ministry now begin again? Will Jesus now move to restore the kingdom of his ancestor David? But these and all other questions remain unasked— because they know this is the Master, and as long as He is here everything will fall into place in due time. It is hard to imagine this meal being eaten in total silence. It is a happy time. The fish were counted— big fish— 153 of them. There was good-natured kidding about the long night and empty nets.

But one person did not speak what was on his heart. I don't know if Peter was silent or not. Sometimes we talk a lot to cover up what we really would like to say but don't dare. We use small talk like a jab, jab, jab to keep away from the stuff that really matters. And Peter look across at Jesus and wondered if things ever could be like they were before he had cursed and sworn that he did not even know Him.

Then breakfast was over, and the men started to go about the tasks at hand— some to wash the nets, some to take the fish up to the marketplace of the sea-side Capernaum, some perhaps to drown and cover the fire. Jesus crooked his finger at Peter and started down the beach for the private conversation Peter was dreading.

It was— or seems it should have been— a very private conversation. Bt John tagged along. Taking notes. Jesus asked Peter some very tough questions about love. Three questions— yet all the same question. Jesus clearly knew what Peter needed. And because John took those notes it must be that I need to answer these questions too.

"Peter, do you love me more than these?"

OUR LOVE MUST BE BEYOND COMPARING WITH OTHERS

Before Peter denied his Lord and stumbled he "knew" that his love was stronger than anyone else's. But it is always the wrong approach to tell God we love Him in any comparison to others. "Lord, if all these deny you, I will still go to the death with you!" Or, "I could never love the Lord like that person!"

If our faith must be in comparison and in contrast to others the chances are it is on shaky ground. Some churches build their entire message and ministry on "coming out of the unbelievers."

Jesus is not the spirit that takes shots at other followers. Peter had to say "I love YOU, Lord, and not in relationship to THEM."

"Do you love me?"

OUR LOVE MUST BE BEYOND COMPETITION WITH OTHERS

Life is NOT fair— some will have glamorous assignments. Some will die young. Some will suffer while others seem to prosper. Jesus told Peter that hard times loomed ahead for him.

That didn't shake Peter— but he did say— "Look at HIM, Lord— the one taking notes— what about HIM?"

And Jesus had what seem like harsh words for Peter. But they are words that every one of us need to take to heart if we are to really tell Jesus we love HIM. "What is that to YOU? You follow ME!"

"Do you love me?"

OUR LOVE HAS TO GO BEYOND THE WORDS OF CONSECRATION

Each time in response to Peter's anguished answer: "Lord— you know I do! You know I love you..." Each time Jesus said: "Then you take care of my lambs, my sheep!" If we love we will put our lives where our mouths are.

Many years ago I remember watching a local newscast from a Cleveland TV station; a family tragedy had occurred, a family was in shock, grieving. A TV reporter [John (Bud) Dancy] stuck a microphone in a young mother's face and asked her personal questions while the camera took close-up pictures of her pain. Deep private feelings evidently make for good public interest. The reporter has since gone on from local reporting to network reporting to retirement. He never answered my letter of protest.

This story (in John 21) is one of those private, emotional, very personal scenes. But even though some scenes are so sensitive and private and holy that no one from outside should be included, evidently the apostle John either didn't know or didn't

care because he tagged along and listened in— and then he wrote the whole episode down for the whole world to see. Of course we believe that God intended for this private scene to become scripture— it is one of those absolutely specific and individual times that have universal application.

The Courage to Witness

April 30, 1995 pm

Acts 9:1-19

The conversion of the great apostle Paul came about through the witness of two Christian lay people. Without two men named Stephen and Ananias the story of St. Paul probably never would have happened.

Stephen's impact on Paul came first: it is found in the book of Acts, Chapter 7, at the unspeakably violent scene of a mob killing. A lay-person table-server, deacon, Stephen, was stoned to death. The thugs who were doing the actual killing did not want their clothes ruined with blood spatters, so they laid them at the feet of an arrogant young Pharisee. The young Pharisee was in full accord with what was going on, but was too proud to take part in the actual manual labor of lifting stones and throwing them.

The witness of Stephen was in two distinct parts. Stephen SAID some tremendous things about the nature of God and what it means to worship. He said that from the beginning of time human beings have made substitutions for God— they have worshiped creation instead of the creator. He also said that God Himself will speak to us if we will only listen. He said that finally the Word God speaks is not simply a lesson or a religion, but a Person. This Person Stephen declared to be Jesus Christ of Nazareth. He said that the proof of this truth is the fact that Jesus was crucified and died and was buried— and that he rose again from the dead.

[The power of the resurrection is the engine that drives the church of Jesus Christ. We have learned to harness many other kinds of power; it is hard to imagine a church without electric lights and amplification and copiers and faxes. And other powers are fine as long as they are not used to try to substitute for the power that gives life. But if the resurrection power is missing no amount of money or intelligence or entertaining media will ever save even one soul.]

Stephen knew Jesus was alive, and said so. The power of the resurrection is what gives our witness authority. The highly intellectual Pharisee heard that sermon— the one and only sermon Stephen ever preached. Perhaps it seemed then that it made no impression at all. But it made a powerful impact

But Stephen's witness was in two parts: what he said— AND THE SPIRIT IN WHICH HE SAID IT. The scripture says that the people there saw his face— like the face of an angel. They heard his last words, not now a sermon, but a prayer: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge!"

THE SPIRIT IS EQUALLY AS IMPORTANT AS THE WORDS.

Saul of Tarsus, who became the great missionary apostle Paul, heard this sermon and saw this dying spirit.

The word does not say how much time passed until chapter 9— but this haughty young Pharisee had had a taste of the thrill of persecuting the Christians, and he became an expert in it. He became the topic of conversation throughout the young church, and certainly was the last person Christians would want to meet in the street.

The church spread outward from Judea and Galilee, fueled by the threat of persecution that began with Stephen's martyrdom. It was as though the floodgates of anger and resistance broke and Acts 8:1 tells us that the whole church was scattered — except the apostles.

How it was that the church reached Damascus in Syria we don't know. Evidently there was a healthy church there because the anti-Christian forces in Jerusalem were sufficiently concerned to authorize an armed force to go and extradite them back to Jerusalem for trial, conviction, and execution. Saul of Tarsus had legal papers making him the equivalent of an ancient bounty-hunter. He set off to Syria and Damascus with a vengeance.

We are all well acquainted with Saul's dramatic conversion— aren't we? [Don't get me started on scriptural illiteracy! You can't grow in grace if your theology consists totally of just what you hear on WEZE or pop-Christian music.] Jesus the risen Lord

met Saul in the middle of the road to hell and knocked him off his feet with a challenge to turn his life around. Saul got up, groping, blinded, willing but bewildered. Who ARE You, Lord? But that is NOT Paul the Apostle speaking! He is still Saul of Tarsus— and still on the outside of the fellowship looking in!

Enter the second witness: Ananias of Damascus!

He was THERE. The Lord spoke to him "Ananias!" And Ananias answered: "Here I am, Lord!" It's a great way to begin every day! Not just "Here I am" location-wise, but "Here I am, reporting for duty! What do you want me to do today!" What if every one of us got up and sincerely reported to God for duty every day?

He was CONNECTED (vision unimpaired)

He was PRESENT for roll-call

On this day the "duty" was not routine: "Get up and go over to Straight Street to the house of Judas— and look for a man from Tarsus, whose name is Saul. He is praying right at this moment— and I told him a man named Ananias was on the way over to pray for him to get his sight back."

Ananias was no robot. He was HUMAN (God didn't FORCE Ananias without reasoning with him—) "Lord, I know about this man. He is the talk of the fellowship. He has legal authority to arrest Christians and take them back to Jerusalem." God gave Ananias assurance that this was really His will. And Ananias was OBEDIENT. But

I'm also sure he was BRAVE, too. The trip over to Straight Street must have been what athletes call a "gut-check."

But when Ananias got there, once again the SPIRIT OF JESUS shone through. Ananias was COMPASSIONATE "BROTHER Saul ..." As Ananias prayed Saul was healed. Saul was baptized— they didn't wait around in the New Testament church. And then Ananias of Damascus sort of fades out of the story. He was soon forgotten, out of the way— gone— but

WE know how vital a part Ananias played.

Actually, there was one other person that should get a share in Paul's ministry. His name was Barnabus, and he took up where Ananias left off. Later in the chapter when Paul, or rather Saul had come to Jerusalem (and that is another adventure story in itself) he tried to join the church there. But (26) they were all afraid of him. But Barnabus (27) took Saul, brought him to the apostles. The church enjoyed a time of peace but Saul/Paul was sent back to his home city, and actually went to the Arabian desert to study for three years. We don't see him again until Acts 11, when the church in Antioch had a revival and the Jerusalem people sent Barnabus there to lead. Barnabus went to Tarsus (11:25) to look for that keen young man that the others hadn't really trusted— Saul. Then in 13:2, in the Antioch church, the Holy Spirit said: "Set apart Barnabus and Saul for my work!"

During that first assignment Saul became Paul— and the team changed from Barnabus and Saul to Paul and Barnabus— and later on they split up over Barnabus's habit of siding with the underdog (Mark.) But if it had not been for Barnabus— a man willing to do whatever was necessary to encourage Saul— we would not have heard of the great Apostle to the Gentiles.

This hasn't been a sermon— it has been a sort of lesson.

We aren't all like PAUL. (Maybe Charles Coleson?)

We aren't all like STEPHEN (aren't you glad of that!) But when unfair things happen, how do (I) we respond? We can't all be like ANANIAS. But we can get up in the morning and say, "Here I am, Lord!" We can't all be like BARNABUS. But I sure do wish we had a few more like him around, don't you?

And we can have the same two dynamic elements of witness:

1. WE CAN KNOW THAT JESUS IS ALIVE. Not as a textbook fact- But we can KNOW Jesus. Nothing less will do, if we are to witness. And
2. WE CAN HAVE THE SPIRIT OF THE RISEN LORD. These men were not simply "nice people." They were HOLY people. They were people who had been filled with the Holy Spirit.

They were people who were living Hebrews 12:14 even before it had been written! When our words and our spirit unite with the mighty Spirit of God, then we can join the ranks of the Stephens and the Ananias and the Barnabuses. And Jesus will build His church. And there will be joy!

Prayer

Sing: # 552 O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee

1995-04-95 A Prayer for Holy Week

April 9, 1995

A PRAYER FOR HOLY WEEK

Ephesians 3:14-21

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a manual on the healthiness of life in God as it is intended to be lived. Here we can read about how God's great POWER will be released in those who believe. We are introduced to mysteries of GRACE and wonders of God's KINDNESS and the joys of LIFE.

But perhaps the highest privilege is FULLNESS. The greatest imperative in the entire letter is 5:18: "Be filled with the Spirit!" And the prayer here (3:14-21) is the heart of Paul's concern for the Ephesians, as well as certainly God's will for you and me. FULLNESS! But what KIND of fullness?

I. THE QUESTION IS NOT 'SHALL WE BE FILLED' BUT RATHER 'WITH WHAT SHALL WE BE FILLED?'

A. Each one of us is a vessel that is full, for there is no such thing as a spiritual vacuum. People are full of the stuff of life. People are full of their own importance or their own troubles. They are full of worry-- they are full of advice-- they are full of hot air-- but they are FULL! In our culture it seems like the norm for people to be filled with the importance of self.

We are so near to our culture that we are often blind to the pervasive, insidious, all-encompassing fullness of SELF-WORSHIP as the "accepted way to live." There is occupation with what "I" want! There is obsession with being true to "me." To suggest otherwise is equal to LUNACY and TREASON combined.

IT SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE, A CONTRADICTION, THAT ONLY WHEN I AM FILLED WITH GOD MY REAL 'BEST SELF' CAN BE FORMED. But this is what Jesus was talking about when he said:

Mark 8:35 For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for My sake and the gospel's, the same shall find it.

B. There are places where our fullness shows. We need to be looking at:

RESERVOIRS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

What are the things that fill up our day? Not that we ever need to say "This is important" Or even that we ENJOY it... but what are we DOING WITH OUR DAYS?

We need to look at:

WELLSPRINGS OF ATTITUDES

The way we usually ARE to other people. The "habits of the heart" We let ourselves take on a "usual" way of looking at things. They said of Joseph: "Here comes the Dreamer" We look at some people and say "Here comes a Complaint!@" "Here comes trouble" "Here comes LOVE!"

We also need to look at:

FOUNTAINS OF THE SPIRIT

The way we really ARE before God. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the seekers after God. Open, obedient, growing faith and love that is reflected in love for the Word, love for the place of prayer, love for the Church.

C. Our "fullness" is not usually a conscious choice:

1. We "catch" the ways of society more than we deliberately choose. It isn't that we need to look for the devil under every rock... the spirit of creeping secularism is much more subtle than that... WE JUST NEED TO FORGET WHO WE ARE... AND WHOSE WE ARE... FOR A SHORT WHILE!

2. Being "filled" is not necessarily seen as moral questions... or as "serious." But things "take up space" in our souls (if we can think of spiritual things "spatially"); many things "take up space" that might be used for better things. Fill your mind with junk... and when the crunch comes, up will come... junk!

D. "Fullness" and "capacity" are two different things. Remember, even a small vessel can grow, and eventually take on surprising proportions.

Which brings us to the main idea:

II. THE IDEA OF BEING FILLED WITH GOD!

A. "Filled with all the fullness of God." All that God has to offer-- doesn't mean that we have all of God that there is. The Universe does not "contain" God but rather is sustained by His word. But being filled with God means that all of us is permeated with God's Spirit.

B. This is not a phrase to be lightly dismissed. "Oh, yes-- this means ... entire sanctification!" (Or, "This means speaking in tongues!" Or "This means a certain "experience." The sanctifying experience is true - but in OUR context we may be saying: "We Nazarene's OWN this! We are on familiar territory! Two trips to the altar and we "have God's fullness."

It is nice to have things packaged neatly, theologically-- but God wants to relate to us in the reality of where we live and work-- in the deep needs of our homes.

There is real truth in the MESSAGE OF HOLINESS ... a reality to being filled with the Spirit of God that, while it defies complete description, IT IS CRUCIAL TO OUR SUCCESS AS CHRISTIANS.

EITHER WE WILL SEEK TO BE FILLED WITH GOD, AND BELONG ENTIRELY TO HIM ... OR WE WILL FAIL!!

1. And we will fall into outward sin, and go away from the church,

2. Or, we will fall into the sin of pride - thinking that WE are the KEY... that OUR WAY is a lock on salvation (a mass of legalism),

3. Or we will fall into the sin of false humility (antinomianism) and say: everyone has to sin every day anyway... it really doesn't make any difference how we live-- what we are filled with.

III. THIS IS NOT JUST THEORY (THIS PRAYER OF PAUL FOR YOU AND ME) THE KEY TO FULLNESS IS KNOWING JESUS CHRIST

a. FULLNESS MEANS THE INDWELLING CHRIST -- Verse 17 - Jesus, welcome, at home in you and me, just now!

b. FULLNESS MEANS THE EMPOWERING CHRIST Verse 18 ENABLING US TO GRASP GOD'S LOVE

c. FULLNESS MEANS the all-surpassing Christ (Verse 19) Both a crisis AND an on-going SURRENDER ; a grasping for the love that enables us to make our bodies a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1,2)

CONCLUSION:

You do not have the choice "Shall I be full?" The question is:

WILL YOU BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT OF JESUS CHRIST?

Hymn: His Way with Thee...

At Home with God

May 20, 1995

John 14:23

As you probably have heard me say before, when I was a little boy my parents were song evangelists. We literally lived out of suitcases, on the road at least 36 weeks a year. Our "home" was simply the address of an aunt and uncle in Lansing, Michigan.

I guess I didn't think of traveling all the time as strange because it was the only life I knew. I think I felt sorry for other kids who didn't get to see new things all the time. But at the same time I looked with great longing at houses, homes, permanent places to live. How I looked forward to coming back to Lansing to be with aunts and uncles and cousins by the dozens! How I valued that aunt and uncle's home!

Still I think I learned something very early in my life that applies to this scripture lesson today. It is good— best perhaps— to have a sense of place and permanence. But being "at home" finally is a people matter. When we did not have any permanent house whatsoever when I was with father and mother I was "at home." Their security was my security. Their peace was my peace. Occasionally, their discontent was mine, too— for while they were people of integrity they weren't perfect.

That first lesson, then, was where the people you love and trust are— there is home, at least in the sense of security for the child.

Later, when circumstances made it necessary for my parents to leave the itinerant ministry, our first-ever house of our own was a bungalow at 610 South Magnolia in Lansing— you know— two blocks over from Hayford Street. I had a room that was mine, and I slept in the same bed every night, and could have my own closet and my own pictures on the wall. It was far from heaven. But there I had my family, and I had a sense of permanence as well.

I know it is a stretch of imagination to apply this homely and personal understanding of what it means to be "at home" with God, but the facts somehow seem similar:

The reality is that we are not yet at home. [The choir has sung "I Feel Like Traveling On" because "This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through..."] The promise of Jesus early on in this great passage is that in the place where he lives are many dwelling places, and that he has gone to prepare a place for us so we can be where he is permanently. The passage from Revelation is not so much descriptive, to my literary understanding, as suggestive of a glorious reality that transcends everything we know now.

But the reality also is that God Almighty, YHWH— the Father, Son and Holy Spirit want to be "at home" with us while we travel towards home. This kind of being at home with God isn't the final word on glory or fulfillment or permanence. We are not yet what we are going to be. But if in fact God is wi-i-i-i-ith us!! as the choir sang last Sunday night and Tom Waltermire has been TRYING to sing all week— if God is with us on the road, and we are at home in him— then we need to make sure this has happened in a personal way in each of our lives.

"IF YOU LOVE ME," said Jesus, "YOU WILL OBEY ME, AND THE FATHER WILL LOVE YOU, AND WE WILL COME TO YOU AND TAKE UP PERMANENT RESIDENCE IN YOU."

God not only WITH us— God not only WATCHING OUT for us— God not only SAVING US FROM SIN— BUT GOD AT HOME IN US WHILE WE ARE ON THE WAY! A WORKING DESCRIPTION OF WHAT WE CALL "HOLINESS!" How do we go about making God at home in us??

Love is the key.

Love is not a feeling, but a centering, an act of will and covenant.

In the case of humans there is a submission to covenant.

In the case of divine-human relationship God is always right.

He accommodates our weakness but cannot compromise dishonesty or selfishness so he must be obeyed, but obeyed because of trust/love.

The everlasting "YEA" is the doorway to everything of significance in the kingdom of God. You know whether or not you have come to the place in your walk with God

where you have deliberately said "yes!!!!YES!!! Y E S!!!!!" to God for time and for eternity!

That is the place where God moves in to make Himself at home.

The Norm Pentecost

June 4, 1995

In the last days, God declares, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh. Acts 2:17

Today we celebrate one of the three great days of the entire church year. Everyone celebrates Christmas, and most people even know that it has to do with the birth of Jesus, whether or not they call Him God and Lord. Most people celebrate Easter, and some of them know that Easter, too, has to do with Jesus, and His victory over death and sin.

But then, at least in our country, comes Thanksgiving, (when we do have ecumenical services; and that is good, although most Americans are more tuned in to football and a big family reunion and meal), and then Super Bowl, and of course the Fourth of July.

But what is Pentecost? Why should anyone call it one of the "big three" Christian holy days? Do you know? To begin with:

PENTECOST IS (ANOTHER) TRANSFORMED JEWISH HOLY DAY

We say Pentecost is ANOTHER transformed Jewish holy day because Christians have seen Christ as the fulfillment behind just about all the Old Testament. Jesus is our Passover Lamb, and Jesus is our Seder Host, transforming the Passover Meal into the Communion we will share this morning. And so Passover, too, takes on fulfilling significance to Christians.

Pentecost was and is a Jewish feast day celebrating two things. Called "Pesach" or "Pentecost" because it follows fifty days after Passover and the High Holy Days, Pentecost was first a celebration of the first harvesting of summer fruits. It anticipates the later, greater harvest of the autumn season.

Pentecost also in later times came to be a commemoration of the giving of the law to Moses on Sinai. Devout Jews praised God for giving guidance to all mankind on how to live lives of order and righteousness. The giving of the Law can be contrasted with

the giving of confusion at Babel, when God confused those who were trying to reach heaven on their own wisdom; the giving of the Law is God's way of bringing order out of chaos.

WHAT HAPPENED THAT FIRST PENTECOST?

First of all, what happened on Pentecost was that the gathered disciples received the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the Church as Christ's body came into existence. It was the birthday of the church.

Christians believe that on the Jewish feast of Pentecost that came 50 days after Jesus rose from the dead, and ten days after He ascended to the Father, Jesus, **HAVING RECEIVED THE FULLNESS OF GLORY**, for which he prayed in John 17: 1, Jesus then poured that Spirit He had received out upon his beloved disciples.

This was **THE FIRST FRUITS** of a great harvest which was to come. As a matter of fact that **FIRST FRUIT CELEBRATION** that day netted 3,000 new believers in Jesus Christ! It is a celebration of **FIRST FRUITS**.

The Christian Pentecost might seem to have little to do with the second aspect of the Jewish celebration: the giving of the law to Moses on the mount. But actually, here was a fulfillment of the promise that God would pour out His Spirit on all flesh, and as Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 3:3 God wrote his law now not on tables of stone, but on fleshy tables of the human heart. And instead of confusion of languages, now everyone could hear God's plan of salvation in a language they could understand. In the words of a Sandi Patti song: "Fluent LOVE is spoken here!"

There were other, dramatic things that happened that day of Pentecost. There was mighty, shaking, fearsome sound of hurricane force wind. There were licking, flaming, forked tongues of fire. And there were languages spoken in order that every person who came to see what was happening could understand who Jesus is, and how he can deliver from sin.

Once again here was a direct contrast with Babel: where Babel had been confusion and misunderstanding, Pentecost was God's law in the hearts, God's law of LOVE,

and the opposite of confusion: interpretation: everyone heard in his own language the message of salvation.

We have been trained to think of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit only in the rushing wind, and the tongues of fire, and the exotic gifts of language or experience. But first of all the coming of the Spirit is God loving us, and coming to make his home in us so that we can be at home in him on our way home.

THE NEED FOR PENTECOST TODAY

This is the NORM for our Christian existence. The Holy Spirit IS the life of the Church. No Spirit- no life! The Spirit fills every believer to the extent of his/her capacity. There is a deeper life for those who will seek the fullness of the Spirit's blessing. There are wonderful benefits to be received from living the life of full surrender to God's will. But it begins with the Holy Spirit coming to live in you and me and together making us the Church. Welcome the Holy Spirit into your inner being this very day!

Pentecost, or the descent of the Holy Spirit into the human heart, is NOT a doctrine or belief system to defend, but a reality to know and live out. As humanly understood belief systems, even the precious doctrines of our church, even holiness doctrines, are fallible— they are subject to the shortcomings of human understanding that mark all human belief systems. But as a living encounter with God holiness, being filled with God Himself, transforms lives and changes the course of human history. Almighty God actually DOES come to live in His people, and together God's people ARE the Church.

Faith in God must permeate the whole of my being and yours, not simply logically exist in my thinking, or excitedly flood my emotions, or even determinedly rest in my human will. God must be made welcome at the center of all I am and all I do! As a Person God can make Himself known to me, and can dominate my living and your living. And together you and I are the living Church of Pentecost. That is what Pentecost is all about: that is why is a BIG DAY!

PETER'S SERMON

That day Peter stood up and declared the glory and love and power of Jesus Christ. He told the devout Jews assembled that they needed to change their direction: "Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, for the forgiveness of your sins!"

Then he told them: "This God-shared LOVE, this Holy Spirit is to every one of you who will believe!

Into Communion:

First "Preparing

Next: Choir (we ALL sing verse 4)

Then Creed #8

Then Prayers

Then #304 (Sweet, Sweet Spirit) leads into Offering

The Recovering of Hope

June 25, 1995

I Kings 19, Luke 8

If you go looking for strong personalities in the Bible, if you make any sort of list, you'll have to include Elijah the prophet. This man is the quintessential rugged individual. No one exceeds his reputation as a prophet, a man of God, and a fearless teller of the truth. But as strong as Elijah was, he was NOT super-human.

THE ROLLER-COASTER OF REAL LIFE EMOTIONS

In the story we've read, Elijah was coming off a world-class high, the greatest success he had ever seen, beyond fantastic. Elijah had exalted YHWH, God had answered his prayer by fire from heaven. Thousands of Israelites shouted their return to faith, and hundreds of false prophets, prophets of Baal, were put to death. Then Elijah prayed again, and again God answered with rain that ended a three-year drought. You would think that with an entire nation's attention and respect Elijah would have had some sense of accomplishment and joy.

But that is not how real life goes. The rugged prophet is mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausted. So when in the wake of that great victory the queen of Israel threatened Elijah's life, there wasn't anything more Elijah had to fight with. We might think a man who could call fire down from heaven would simply say: "Get in line, Jezebel— you're next on the hit list!" But that is not what really happened. Elijah didn't think, didn't pray— he just ran.

Maybe Elijah had thought everyone would love him now that God had vindicated his prayers, now that the rains had returned, now that the false prophets had been proven false. Maybe Elijah even thought Jezebel would come around. But when none of that happened, and Jezebel threatened to kill him, Elijah simply went south. He walked and ran and walked to the very end of the road. Then he kept on walking another day into the dry and barren wasteland of the Negev desert. Finally he found

himself lying exhausted under a broom tree, more depressed than he had ever been before in all his life. All he could think of was, "Let me die!"

"HE RESTORETH MY SOUL" - ELIJAH'S RE-ASSURANCE

What happened next might just make a difference in your life and mine. It is a classic example of how to deal with exhaustion and depression. We can't duplicate the exact circumstances. We wouldn't want to. But we can see how the God of a rugged prophet dealt with that prophet when he ran out of gas:

1. An angel touched him. He had fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion, but an angel gently touched him and said, "You've been sleeping for hours. Now get up and eat." There was a cake, fresh baked (angel food, of course) and a jug of water. Elijah ate and drank and stretched and turned around and lay back down and went out like a light once again. The process was repeated. The angel said, "Hey, you've slept around the clock! Get up and eat— you have a journey ahead of you."
2. Strengthened, but still certain that he was not appreciated, and certain that he was the last bastion of faith, Elijah set out to re-connect with God. God had never left Elijah, but Elijah needed to hear first hand that everything was all right. He set out for Sinai.

Finally he got to the mount of God, found a cave, and went in. A cave is a great place to hide. Unfortunately, a cave is also a bad place to try to live. And a cave is a frightening place to be trapped. Elijah spent the night in the cave. When he awoke he heard the word of the Lord asking him, "Elijah, what are you doing here?"

Elijah was ready— he began to tell God what he had done- as if God did not know. "I am alone! No one else is true!"

The word came to Elijah. "Get out of the cave, stand and wait before the Lord."

Elijah did as he was told. A great wind began to moan and shriek; the passage said it split mountains and broke rocks to pieces. That is some wind. But the Lord was not in the wind. Next came an earthquake. God was

not in the earthquake, either. Then came a desert storm of fire. God was not in the fire, either. Elijah waited. He needed to hear from God himself.

After the fire there was silence. One translation calls it "a sound of sheer silence." Elijah knew he was in contact with God Himself. And the question came again: "Elijah, what are you doing here?"

3. Elijah knew he was being heard. He poured out his complaint— he told God exactly how he felt. But Elijah was also ready to hear what God had to say. The grip of the depression was broken. Elijah was ready to move on. God said to him: "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus." There was still work for Elijah to do. There was a real connection with God.

LET ME BREAK OFF NARRATIVE HERE AND GO DIRECTLY TO APPLICATION:

HOW DOES THIS 'TRANSLATE' FOR PRACTICAL HELP?

1. Listen to your body. You are not superman, superwoman. You are not intended to be. There are times to work almost around the clock. There are other times when it is not optional, it is necessary to take time off, "down time," letting the soul catch up with the rest of us.
2. Listen for God. Listen to God's still, small voice. Listen, and be still, no matter if it takes a while. Listen. [If you wait, God will speak.]

People pay great sums, they travel long distances in order to hear what they believe are words of wisdom. God is waiting to reveal Himself to you, but what makes you think that God can or will speak as you think he should, or on your time-table? You do not understand ALL the reality involved, so seek to wait before God, in the confidence that he can and will speak to you.

FINDING GOD IN THE SILENCE - From Thomas Merton's "Thoughts in Solitude": If life is poured out in useless words we will never hear anything, we will never become anything, and in the end because we have said everything before we had anything to say we shall be left speechless at the moment of our greatest decision.

The Recovering of Hope

3. Listen for God's word on the Church

You will find strength and faith and support in the body of believers. There are yet 7,000 who have not bowed knee to Baal. You are NOT all alone.

4. Listen for God's will for you.

In the center of God's will, there is your peace. I'll guarantee: God is not done with you yet. (Ruth Cameron's mother at 90+ just took on a new assignment: to serve God in her nursing home; it has given her great peace! A miracle!)

5. Share God's goodness. Anoint others to serve.

In this story, after Elijah hears from God he is given a renewed assignment. That assignment is making kings— and choosing his successor. (By the way— Elijah finally ends on an "up.")

IN THE GOSPEL LESSON FOR TODAY Jesus delivered a man from the blackest of dark places.

Called "Legion" because he was the slave of thousands of demons, this man who terrorized a whole countryside was set free, brought to peace, clothed, and in his right mind after Jesus spoke to him.

Then the man who had been called Legion asked if he could go on the road with Jesus. Jesus rather gave him this assignment:

"Return to your home, and tell how much God has done for you." And so this man set free went away as Jesus had bid him do, and proclaimed through the city how much Jesus had done for him. (I remember a time or two when a person whose life turned around became a bright witness to an entire community! Walter Lahner!)

Those who have "been there" have the privilege of not only having their hope renewed, but of being God's instrument for bringing hope to those who have not yet been set free.

Prayer - Wherever we are today, Lord, we need You. We seek You. We listen, and we love You. Thank You that You love us. Amen

Hymn #101 He Giveth More Grace

Liberty Freedom Independence

July 2, 1995

Galatians 5:1 *For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*

As a schoolboy I lived for the sound of the afternoon bell when I would be free. My child's understanding of freedom was some period of time when no one was telling me what to do. I just took it for granted that all "grown-ups" were absolutely free. They didn't have to go to school (and hear Miss Stroud pronounce spelling words.) They had car keys. They could stay up as late as they wanted.

Of course I didn't know one thing about mortgage payments or utility bills or jobs where the boss might be just as stupid as Miss Stroud.

And as free as I might feel at 3 p.m., you can count on it— by 5:30 I was by the radio in our living room listening to Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy and waiting for my mother to call us to supper at 6. My freedom did not pretend to be independence. I had never thought much about it, but freedom and independence were two completely different things, and as a matter of fact, so they are.

On this weekend good Americans think about words like independence, and liberty, and freedom. For next Tuesday is the Glorious Fourth of July.

Of course, if you happen to be among the 95% of the world that is made up of people other than Americans these concepts are dear to you as well, even if your red letter days are different from ours. [George Lyons tells about enrolling his children in school in Australia on the 4th of July. The headmaster said, "Isn't this Thanksgiving or something in your country?" ... But you DO have a 4th of July in your country, too! Otherwise you wouldn't have anything between the 3rd and the 5th!]

Independence. Liberty. Freedom. Words that people have used to start revolutions. Words that have been counted worth dying for. "Give me liberty, or give me death!"

"Live free or die!" But also words that need to be taken seriously and understood. Perhaps no words are more misunderstood than independence, liberty, and freedom.

In the physical reality of our day-to-day world in which we live there is no such thing as independence, and no such things as absolute liberty, or freedom.

We depend on others to harvest food and bring it to the marketplace. We have all had mothers or mother-figures to change our diapers for us. We cannot live in this world apart from everyone and everything else. We are inter-dependant. Every one of us is circumscribed by limits of time, and of space, and of physical energy and endurance. We soon learn to live within the bounds of our physical reality.

We cannot be in two places at once. We cannot go backward in time. We cannot undo what we have done. We cannot jump over a house or run 50 miles an hour. We may not have any human laws prohibiting these things— simply the reality of physical and natural laws limit our freedom.

Probably no one here has any great problem with the fact that in everyday, practical living, freedom and liberty flow out of inter-dependence and trust, and that we need laws and we need each other.

But somehow, when we think of independence, liberty and freedom in the things of ultimate reality, what I would call the world of the spirit, the issues are much more difficult for us to perceive and understand.

We are like that schoolboy, waiting for the bell to ring, and thinking that all there is to life is getting out of as much responsibility as possible.

Sometimes we think we have the ultimate answers of life when we really haven't heard all the questions yet. We think we will be free if we can only declare our independence from the restrictions of God and religion, or we pick and choose between the many interpretations within the bounds of nominal Christianity. And believe me, you can pick and choose until you find people teaching what you want to hear.

But when we bump up against the realities of life and death— when the crunch times come as they will and as they do, we need to hear the voice of love saying, "It's supper time! Come to the table!"

In looking for liberty, real freedom, we can pick and choose what WE think is right, OR, we can trust a Person we have come to know. I am speaking, of course, of Jesus Christ!

This Person lived 2,000 years ago and taught many wise sayings. but so did Confucius and Buddha. This Person died for what He believed was the will of Father God. So have thousands of others. But this Person we are challenged to trust with defining liberty and freedom in the realm of the spirit is different from every other Person who ever lived.

This Person not only spoke truth, He said that He IS Truth. By a miracle of grace God gave us His word through prophets, and by sweet singers and Psalmists, and that Word told of One who would come and fulfill all truth. Jesus came, and lived and died, and sent His Spirit to breathe life into a Church. The Spirit inspired the evangelists and apostles to write, and through that New Testament as well as the Old the Spirit of God has introduced you and me to a living Person.

We have sat in Bible School and sung "Into my heart, into my heart, Come into my heart, Lord Jesus!" And you know what? The Lord Jesus Christ has humbled himself again and come into your heart and mine. We have come to a public altar at an invitation, and we have heard someone say to us: "Listen to this scripture, Revelation 3:20: 'Behold I stand at the door and knock! If any man/woman/boy/girl will hear my voice, and will open the door I will come in.' Do you believe this? Will you ask Jesus in?" And we have said, "Dear Jesus, please come in!"

And the Lord Jesus Christ, king of the Universe, has humbled Himself and has come into your life and mine to live in us by His Spirit.

Frankly, this world is moving so very fast that none of us can keep up with the explosion of information and keep his/her balance. Our freedom is limited by

boundaries we do not begin to understand. But we can trust a Person we have come to know in a personal and intimate and very real way.

But if we follow Jesus we must be prepared to obey Him. If we choose to follow Jesus we are free but we will not be independent. Following Jesus brings with it a freedom, but within a love that sets lesser loves aside. To follow Jesus is to find liberty to do the right, freedom to follow the best. But that is a far cry from doing as we please!

A correspondent of mine, a Methodist minister, Rev. David Miller, recently wrote:

Every time we had Bible study, Ray and I disagreed with each other. Almost every passage at which we looked would launch him into an explanation of why infant baptism was anti-biblical or some other criticism of official United Methodist theology or practice.

My sermons never seemed to click with him, either. I tend to use a lot of references from popular culture, and he didn't even own a TV. "Fanatic!" I thought to myself (and said to colleagues and friends.)

After being his pastor for a few months, I learned something about him that amazed me. When he became a Christian, he gave up his tobacco base. He didn't just quit growing tobacco; he didn't lease or sell his base. He gave it up completely. When he gained a new life, he gave up his livelihood.

In many important ways Ray was a follower of the way.

We might want to wriggle a bit on this challenge that Jesus confronts us with— "Will you come all the way with Me, will you be willing to go where I go, do what I ask of you, no matter what?"

We would like a more moderate sort of faith- a faith in good citizenship or strong family values (and they are worthy!). But Jesus calls us to the freedom that only comes from abandonment to the total will of God. That is something to think about over this Glorious Fourth of July Weekend.

Prayer

Chorus:

Sacrament of Communion

Assurance of Faith

August 13, 1995

Luke 12:32-40; Hebrews 11:1-3

One of the high privileges of being a pastor is being around God's people in the crises of life. It isn't always fun, and in fact it can be quite anguishing at times. But seeing faith at work, and seeing faith work is a reinforcement to my deepest convictions.

In talking with Esther Sanger these past weeks and days I was made to remember several things I thought I already knew. I remembered that

1. Death is an enemy. No matter what we say, we want to live in this life as long as we can. We fight for life and that is good and understandable. Death is not a friend. But death is not the end, either.
2. The sting of death is sin, which can be removed— indeed, it is removed for Christ's one. God's people die just as everyone else dies. But they don't die like everyone else, either. They die in peace with God, and with a sure hope.
3. The God-covenant is all-important, and goes deeper than we can explain or understand. This is not in any way to deny or invalidate being "saved." It does not set aside the truth of doctrine, of the works of grace. But being "saved" really involves a living connection with God, a relationship, or, even better, a working covenant.

Our scripture lessons today talk about confidence in this God- relationship. How important is it to you just now to know that you are right with Almighty God? I am not being in the least morbid when I tell you that one day it will be the absolutely most important question you will have to answer!

The scriptures (Hebrews 11: 1) tell us: "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen..." What do you know for sure about faith?

I. FAITH IS MYSTERIOUS

One thing you can be sure of: if you think you have God and salvation and the great questions of life all figured out, you don't even know all the questions!

ONE SIDE OF FAITH IS VERY, VERY SIMPLE.

I can tell you with confidence that you can trust the Bible when it says (Romans 10:9,10) "If you confess with your mouth, and believe with your heart you will be saved." or (John 3:16) "WHOSOEVER BELIEVES shall never perish" and (John 6:37) "He that comes to me I will in no way cast out!"

ANOTHER SIDE IS VERY PERSONAL.

It is making those great Bible promises my own. It is the dynamic assurance that I not only believe— but that this is true in my life.

FAITH IS GOD'S GIFT OF SOUL VISION. IT IS GOD'S RADAR. IT IS THE ABILITY TO "SEE" GRACE BEING OFFERED

Some things faith is definitely NOT: it is not "being in control" by exercising superior power. It is NOT getting MY way no matter what God wills. Faith does not change who God is.

II. FAITH IS RESPONSE TO A CALL - FAITH IS NOT TAKING THE INITIATIVE - AND THAT TAKES THE PRESSURE OFF . . . =

Salvation ALWAYS begins in God's heart— in God's LOVE for YOU- - and then it ALWAYS begins when God calls us away from selfishness to follow Him. Hebrews 11:6 God IS; God will be found of those who seek HIM!

The way we hear it sometimes— faith is a power that we can exercise to do whatever we think we ought to do— a power we can use to get God to do OUR will. There IS a certain amount of power in sheer "believing" I am sure. But that is a thousand miles from saving faith.

III. FAITH IS A CHALLENGE TO LIFE AND JOY

It seems that to be God-centered means an end to happiness. If I have to do what GOD says I can never really be happy! To get ready for eternity means I have to live a life of frustration here and now! Right? Wrong!

SO MANY "DON'T BE AFRAID!" AND "FEAR NOT!" God's Way is the most fulfilling way there is! It is THE ONLY truly fulfilling way!

IV. FAITH IS FOLLOWING A GOD WHO LEADS

There is always a dynamic aspect to faith. That is what Hebrews 11 is telling us. The greatest example of faith is Abraham.

Hebrews 11:8 -

Abraham OBEYED when he was CALLED

"Passive?" We cannot simply set out to follow unless and until we are called. Abraham did not know his destination; he only knew his Leader He followed - He believed - He obeyed - He became fruitful: So now we call Abraham 'father' It is making trips to an altar— but it is more... It is responding with feeling to a challenge— but more... [One thing you can be sure of: if you think you have God and salvation and the great questions of life all figured out, you don't even know all the questions!]

WHEN FAITH CALLS— WHEN GOD CALLS— It is always AWAY from the world's definitions of life, of love, of values:

WHEN FAITH CALLS. It is always A SENSITIZING TO THE FACT OF SIN! (sIn is spelled 's-(capital)I-n' The middle letter is the clue!)

WHEN FAITH CALLS It is TO OPEN OUR HANDS AND HEARTS

Jesus has been dealing in these chapters with the biggest single evidence of selfishness and self-centeredness which is GREED! It is getting more for ME! ("I'll build bigger barns for ME! etc.")

Jesus always leads AWAY FROM ACQUISITIVENESS AND GREED. Dare to be like me, Jesus says. He leads into radical trust.

DON'T BE POSSESSED BY POSSESSIONS where YOUR TREASURE IS, THERE IS YOUR HEART!

"Children more important than jobs" "Jobs get more respect than children!"
"Friendship more important than profit" "Profit gets higher priority than friendship"
[what we DO speaks louder than what we give lip service to]

Conclusion

So—how can we be assured at all? If it is true that "One thing you can be sure of: those who think they have God and salvation and the great questions of life all figured out, don't even know all the questions!" then HOW CAN WE KNOW ANYTHING AT ALL?

I used to belong to Squantum Yacht Club. There is a narrow channel dredged in to the mooring area that is always deep enough to bring a power boat through. At some tides it doesn't matter because there is 9' of water. At other tides the channel is visible because the mud flats come right up out of the water. But at half tides there can be trouble if you get out of the channel coming home.

So— how do you stay in the channel coming home? From a distance the Wollaston shore looks all the same. It is easy to get headed in the wrong direction.

First— I look for the church steeple. Then I watch for the first red buoy. I know that marks the outer end of the channel. Then as I head for that outer buoy, I watch for the next red buoy in the distance and finally line two or three up, keep them on the right, and I'm on my way in.

Faith is something like that. Faith is SIMPLE. But faith is also PERSONAL. First we see the great promises and know we're headed toward home. But then we watch for the channel marker, and God's WORD lines up with God's SPIRIT for our own personal relationship.

(Romans 8:16) "God's Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God."

WE HAVE THE BIBLE WE HAVE THE SPIRIT HIMSELF WE HAVE THE CLEAR CHANNEL HOME

This is NOT salvation by works. It IS a personal following Jesus that begins here and now— and never, ever ends. Faith is not simply "I was saved 10 years ago..." That is great! But faith is Abraham years later giving up Isaac— only to receive him back and become the father of nations.

Faith is Esther Sanger nailing posters to telephone poles around Wollaston "If you need help call xxx-xxxx" And I want you to know that Esther is still trying to keep in step with Jesus!

#489 Where He Leads Me

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

August 20, 1995

Sources of Strength

Hebrews 12:1,2

The Faith Chapter, Hebrews 11, is far more than just a Hall of Fame of heroes of the faith. The writer of Hebrews fully intended that it would be a help to YOU and ME in our own journey with God.

The words of introduction which lead into Hebrews 11 are a call to assurance:
[Hebrews 10:35]

"Cast not away therefore your confidence which has great recompense of reward.. you have need of patience that after you have done the will of God you might receive the promise... and then these great words which fired the imagination of Martin Luther, among many others: "THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH!"

[Then comes the roll call of the heroes of faith]

The words which summarize that great Roll Call are the words of our text this morning: [Hebrews 12:1,2] begin:

"Wherefore, seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with patience the race that is set before us ..."

The Faith Chapter is there to be a source of personal strength and encouragement to every one of us.

I. FAITH IS

- A. Last week we outlined a practical description of "faith" . We said, among other things, that
 - 1. A GIFT that makes
 - 2. COVENANT WITH GOD POSSIBLE; and even more, faith that brings us into

3. A PERSONAL, LOVING RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. There is no more wonderful verse in the Bible than Hebrews 11:6.

B. Today we add to that description the fact that true faith involves:

1. OBEDIENCE— putting obedience ahead of prolonged analysis (11:8 "By faith Abraham, when he was called ... obeyed ... and he went out not knowing where he was going")

Faith in God also always means

2. REFUSING TO COMPROMISE WITH SIN (11:24 - 26 "By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a little while")

And if we are willing to accept the Faith Chapter's description of faith, faith in God ultimately means

3. PUTTING DAY-BY-DAY FAITHFULNESS AHEAD OF PERSONAL SUCCESS (Hebrews 11:36 "And others ...")

Transition

This description of faith would seem to tell us that faith is dynamic, a relationship; it is not simply believing a list of propositions or accepting the statements of fact about God, salvation, and the Bible.

Faith ultimately is not simply what we know and what we believe, important as that is. The faith that saves and keeps and accomplishes the work of Christ is a matter of WHOM we know, and WHO is willing to walk with us into the good times and the hard times of life where it is really lived.

This kind of faith- living is not automatic. It takes courage. It requires strength— more strength than I have, or you. That is one main reason why the writer of Hebrews gave us this faith chapter. He began it with the admonition not to give up. He follows it immediately with the call to be encouraged and strengthened. I would close this sermon-lesson with several apparent sources of strength from this passage in Hebrews:

II. SOURCES OF STRENGTH TO OUR FAITH

A. There are important secondary sources:

1. The **EXAMPLE** of the ones who have gone before Stephen J. Gould once commented that "in the south transept of Chartes Cathedral the most stunning of all medieval windows depicts the four evangelists as dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of four Old Testament prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekeil, and Daniel." Gould went on to commend the humility of Isaac Newton, one of the fathers of modern science, I suppose, who was quoted as saying "If I have seen farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

2. The **EXPECTATIONS** of those who have finished their work

3. The **EYES** of those running and yet to run

(When I was young no one had ever run a four minute mile. For years the record was 4 minutes and 5 seconds. Then in May 6, 1954 Roger Bannister, a young physician, Oxford man, ran the mile in 3:59.4. It was astounding! Soon, however, later that summer, actually, that record was smashed. Now top runners regularly break 3.50. The last I heard the record was under 3:45, actually 3:44.39. It was shown as possible ...)

B. There is, of course, **ONE PRIMARY Source**: Jesus is the Source of all strength: "Looking to Jesus!"

1. The **AUTHOR**: he started the whole thing!
2. Jesus **ENDURED CONTRADICTION** The kind of things that hurt us are real— and yet not often are they directed pointedly at us to hurt us. When occasionally we face real persecution it is deeply painful. But Jesus endured the unleashed forces of darkness, directed specifically at Him because He represented total and complete victory for all who would look to Him.
3. Jesus **ENDURED!** He is the **FINISHER!** **JESUS ENDURED!** he carried through to the end of the race. He finished!

The Posture of Praise

August 27, 1995

Luke 13:13 When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

In the House of Worship on the Lord's Day is probably not the the first place we would be looking for people bent out of shape. But there she was, all bent over, looking down because she couldn't look up. Jesus was there in the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and when Jesus touched her, she stood up straight and tall for the first time in eighteen years!

At the very beginning of his ministry (Luke 4:18) Jesus declared that he came to preach good news to the poor and to set captives free. Here in the synagogue in Capernaum Jesus found a woman who was weighed down by a burden that had bent her over for eighteen years. True to his word, Jesus touched her and set her absolutely free, and she stood up straight and tall and began praising God..

If we could look around this sanctuary with spiritual vision, we might be surprised by the various kinds of burdens that bend us over, by the kinds of weights that make simply carrying on from day to day a near-impossible task. Every one of us will have to go through hard places, and carry heavy burdens. But is it possible that some of us carry unnecessary burdens? Are there spirits of heaviness that have any of us weighed down? Do you think it is still possible that Jesus is still in House of Worship ready to touch people who are bending under heavy loads?

THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENT KINDS OF BURDENS THAT SHOW UP EVEN IN THE PLACE OF WORSHIP.

There are legitimate burdens of care for elderly parents, or for wayward children. There are burdens of responding to God's call in spite of opposition.

Then there are burdens we have brought on ourselves through foolishness or sin. There are burdens of secret sin, of leading double lives. Burdens of envy and

jealousy, of hatred or malice. And there are burdens of unresolved hurt feelings, There are burdens of fear of the unknown. It sounds simplistic, and it is, to say 'Jesus is the answer' to all these kinds of burdens. Still, coming near to God, coming to where Jesus can touch us, is the beginning point, whatever your burden this morning may be. . . .

SO— WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT THE BURDENS THAT BEND US OUT OF SHAPE?

WE BRING THEM TO THE SANCTUARY IN HOPES OF MEETING JESUS WE LOOK FOR THE TOUCH OF JESUS REGARDLESS OF THE SOURCE OF THE BURDEN WE DO WHAT WE CAN DO . . . AND GOD WILL DO WHAT WE CAN NOT DO . . .

Look at some of the BURDENS OF LIFE The (complicated) burdens that involve others, relationships, damaged emotions can best be ministered to by counsel and community. But ministry which treats the whole person, including body, mind, and spirit, needs to begin with a prayer for help to Jesus. Jesus cares whatever our heartaches may be. He is not deaf. He said he came to make us free men and women. We may have to bear burdens, but we do not have to be slaves of our responsibilities and cares. If you are here this morning with a burden involving heartache and sorrow, don't avoid counselors and normal channels of help. But begin by laying out your sorrow before the Lord. He cares! He will help guide your path to freedom. Jesus does not want any of his people captive by anyone or anything except love to Him.

Do you realize that there are BURDENS OF FAITH ? It may sound strange coming from a pastor, but religion itself can be an unbearable burden. The spiritual burdens of doubt and faith and inner struggle are burdens that Jesus loves to remove.

The LAW, the Ten Commandments, the word from Sinai, is GOOD. But God's original Law has been "improved" and "interpreted" with ten thousand 'shalts' and 'shalt nots,' that are impossible to keep. I know that heavy burden of being told what is right and what is wrong, of seeing salvation supposedly reduced to a rigid code of conduct which is interpreted and re-interpreted until the juice of compassion and

grace is all but squeezed out of it, totally missing the heart of the joy and peace that knowing Jesus is all about.

The Ten Commandments are true and good. But God intends that we be able to keep them by loving Him, and loving each other. Being "religious" can be a burden. But true religion comes when we quit trying on our own to be Christians, and invite Jesus to live in us and forgive our sins, and when we start living to please HIM. I don't know any heavier burden than trying sincerely to live the Christian life apart from the indwelling Holy Spirit!

[Finally ...]

The teens coming back from Camp and testifying last Sunday night gave me food for thought. They were unanimous in saying "I need to witness! But I am afraid!" Do you ever think about

THE BURDEN OF GOD'S CALL [?]

The prophet Jeremiah was just a very young man when he felt this challenge to 'do something important' with his life. He seemed at the same time to be wrestling with one of the most common ailments known to modern human beings: the Low Self Image. (It is there in the first chapter of Jeremiah's prophecy:)

Jeremiah woke up one morning to find a great big burden ready to weigh him down to the ground. It was a burden he would carry for the rest of his life. But in carrying that burden Jeremiah was not bent down to the ground— he is one of the sweetest, kindest, most faithful prophets this world has seen.

Jeremiah heard God say: "I know you! I am calling you to be my special man!" He said, "Ah! Lord God! I am only a young person ... I can not possibly do this task! It needs someone great!"

But God answered back:

"Don't ever say 'I am ONLY! Never say I am ONLY anything!

"Because I AM has called you!

"Because I AM expects you to say ONLY what I tell you to say— and you can do that!

The Posture of Praise

"Because I AM expects you to go ONLY where I tell you to go...

"And not only that, I AM COMING ALONG WITH YOU EVERY STEP OF THE WAY!"

[I am a thousand miles from being Jeremiah— but this happened to me on the way to ENC: I discovered Isaiah 41:10! It is still mine. I need it right now!]

Coming full circle, back to where we began:

On the Lord's Day in the sanctuary of the Wollaston Church of the Nazarene might not be the first place we would go to look for people bent out of shape. Jesus is in the business of setting captives free— of taking away the burdens of sin and shame and selfishness, and as He did with Jeremiah, making burdens redemptive when they are burdens of the cross.

There will always be burdens as long as there is life. But Jesus is in the business of setting us free, so that we are not hostages to those burdens. When we bear the cross for Jesus, we do not have to be captives to anyone or any thing. Amen.

Prayer - #607 - Just a Closer Walk With Thee

September 3, 1995
Communion Sunday

Luke 14

The scripture doesn't tell us, and I can't imagine, why a leader of the Pharisees invited Jesus to a formal Sabbath dinner. I can't imagine why Jesus accepted the invitation. You'd better watch where you ask Jesus to come, because he just might take you up on it.

Be that as it may, Jesus was definitely out of His usual setting.

['Would you pleez pass th' jelly?']

He was a carpenter from the highlands of Galilee. These people were Politically Correct, heavy-duty Very Important People from the capital City of Religion. It is obvious that Jesus was invited to the dinner for less than friendly reasons. There were people there who simply wanted to find fault with him. He was definitely something of a curiosity as the invited guests began to take their places. The text says ""they watched him intently." They just might have thought they could "put down" Jesus, and put Him in His place.

Have you ever been "put down?" Have you ever, say in your younger days, ever gotten into a situation where you came to realize you just didn't belong? Have you ever thought that maybe people might laugh at you because you didn't know which knife or fork to use? I have. And I don't think I'm going to tell you about it just now. [I do remember spilling a cup of tea on the wallpaper a long time ago.]

But Jesus was watching them, too. You can be certain that Jesus was not nervous or ill at ease in the least. He watched as the guests jockeyed for the places of honor nearest the power at the head of the table. He watched as they smiled insincere smiles, and made their comments behind their hands. He saw things they did not see, or did not want to see. He saw a man who needed help, and he helped him. Ultimately, Jesus is never 'on trial.' He is Truth.

I. Jesus Exposed The Insincerity Of Relationships Built On Appearance Rather Than Substance.

Before he healed the man with swollen joints, Jesus watched the insincerity of people jockeying for importance and ego satisfaction. He confounded his critics by asking them whether or not he should heal on the Sabbath. "Is it right to heal this man, or isn't it?" he asked them. Of course, the Pharisees weaseled on their reply, and this made Jesus angry.

Jesus absolutely turned the situation upside down. Now the Pharisees were looking awkward. When people do not dare to be who they really are, they say what they think people want to hear, or what will make themselves look good, rather than what is right and true.

If you find yourself always having to say what you believe people expect to hear instead of what you know is true, then you are running around with the wrong kind of crowd.

God's people, of all people, should be able to speak the truth in love.

[This is certainly not to say it doesn't matter how we act so long as we are "ourselves" and sincere. There is a definite place for social graces and tradition. Remember the parable Jesus gave that balances this one, of the man who came to the (free grace) wedding banquet but did not bother to put on the wedding garment that was furnished, and who was bound hand and foot and cast into darkness.]

II. Jesus Explained That Hospitality Is A Hands On Attitude Instead Of Giving Alms At Long Range.

The Pharisees were big on PROGRAMMED ALMS-GIVING. They were tithers, and that is good. They believed in crossing the ocean if necessary to make a proselyte. But they weren't too good on simply being kind to someone they had invited home to dinner.

It may make you feel better to send \$20 to Sally Struthers when you see pictures of poor little children half way around the world somewhere. But that doesn't let you off

the hook if your next door neighbors, (who may even have a lot more money than you do,) need someone who will care about them and love them and tell them the truth instead of just passing the time of day. I've been impressed and deeply moved by the people who ministered to the desperately need in Bucharest. But you don't have to be in Romania to find elderly people who need to be ministered to. They might just be sitting next to you this morning.

Hospitality is having room in your heart for others. Hospitality is caring for the people where you live, not the people you are going to meet someday. Hospitality is loving people here and now. The "others" who desperately need the love of Jesus are not always far away.

What goes on INSIDE the church is the key to the quality of what will happen OUTSIDE!

NEVER despise the vital necessity of hospitality and fellowship by saying "Didn't Jesus say we need to get out into the streets and compel them to come in!"?? For before we can compel anyone there must be a climate of love into which to bring the lost. It is that very hospitality which the world doesn't understand but desperately needs. John put it this way: "They will say, "BEHOLD, HOW THEY LOVE ONE ANOTHER!"

Sometimes we are in the role of guests at the Lord's Table, responding to his invitation, and taking our place in the family meal. Sometimes we are called upon to be Christ's representatives as hosts, inviting others to the banquet. And Jesus has words here for us whether we are guests or hosts or both.

When we are guests at God's table we need the humility to realize we are not above our Lord, who washed his disciples feet. The epistle passage says "Let mutual love prevail!"

Our hope and prayer ought to be that our brothers and sisters have their burdens lightened, and not simply be concerned with our own.

When we are inviting others to Christ's banquet table, welcoming strangers into the friendship of the church, Jesus says our motive should be meeting their needs, and

not simply compiling a list of names to drop. If we open our eyes, as Jesus did that day, we will see people that He can help, and we will be able to introduce them to Him.

The Epistle lesson underscores this kind of hospitality. Listen to it again in the words of The

Message:

"Stay on good terms with each other, held together by love. Be ready with a meal or a bed when it's needed. Why, some have extended hospitality to angels without even knowing it!

Regard prisoners as if you were in prison with them. Look on victims of abuse as if what happened to them had happened to you. Honor marriage, and guard the sacredness of sexual intimacy between wife and husband. God draws a firm line against casual and illicit sex.

Don't be obsessed with getting more material things. be relaxed with what you have. Since God assured us, "I'll never let you down, never walk off and leave you," we can boldly quote, "God is there, ready to help; I'm fearless no matter what. Who or what can get to me?" (Hebrews 13: 1 - 5)

III. Jesus Demonstrates His Hospitality Here At His Table This Morning: He Has Invited All Who Will To Come, To Partake.

The hospitality Jesus expects of us is simply a reflection of the kind of hospitality He extends to us as He invites us to His table. Jesus does not exclude those of us who are weak, or sinful, or imperfect in our service. He does not invite those who can afford to pay their own way. He calls to you and to me.

Will you come if he asks you? Will you try to be more like Him?

Prayer - Interim Hymn/Chorus

September 3, 1995

THE HOLY COMMUNION

The Law Read and Confession Made

The Lord Jesus Christ has said to us: "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Shall we pray:

Search us, O God, and know our most private thoughts. Try us, and show unto us the deepest motives, the real state of our hearts. Forgive us where we have been selfish, or insensitive, or sinful in any way. We cannot keep the Great Commandment, and truly love You, O God, with all our heart, soul, and mind unless You in mercy grant to us the grace of Your indwelling Spirit. We cannot love each other as we should unless Your love is shed abroad in our hearts.

Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to draw us near to Himself so that we can come to his table with confidence.

We do not presume to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

Let us confess our faith:

The Nicene Creed (STL # 14)

The Informal Invitation ("This is not my table . . .")

Holy and gracious Father; in your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin, and were worthy of death and hell, you, in your mercy sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to You, the God and Father of all.

He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

The Words of Institution:

On the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had give thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat: THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

After supper he took the cup and when he had give thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me: Amen

We praise you for the mystery of our salvation! We truly believe
Christ has died!
Christ is risen!
Christ will come again!

Bless these emblems, O God, and make them to us the Body and Blood of your Son, spiritual food, and spiritual drink of new and unending life in Jesus Christ.

And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us:

Our Father which art in heaven . . .

Now, humbly we receive the Gifts of God for the People of God

Doing Lost Being Found

September 17, 1995

Luke 15:1-10

I Timothy 1: 12 - 17

It is important to know WHY Jesus told these stories here in Luke 15. The very religious Pharisees and scribes were critical because Jesus was spending time with "sinners." Jesus wanted them to know he came to seek and save the LOST. The ironic thing is, they probably never realized that THEY were lost and in danger of eternal loss.

This chapter is about what it means to be LOST.

Sometimes when I think of "lost" I remember the story of "Lady Be Good."

In the early years of World War II after the United States forces invaded northern Africa, crude airstrips were established on the desert, and bombing runs across the Mediterranean were begun on Axis targets in Italy.

"Lady Be Good" was a Flying Fortress, B-17 bomber, that was making these long and dangerous flights. The night this plane was tragically lost the crew had made it to Italy and was returning on a radio beam from the desert air strip. When the beam would come on the Lady be Good made certain it was on a straight line toward home.

The crew never knew until it was too late that they had a strong tail wind that brought them back much sooner than expected. With no visual point of reference they simply overflowed the directional signal and kept straight on until they ran out of gas and came down in the Libyan desert more than a hundred miles south of the coast and water. They were LOST. They simply disappeared off the face of the earth— no one knew they had overflowed their base into the heart of the desert.

Their plane has been almost perfectly preserved in the dryness— the men themselves survived the emergency landing only to die of thirst in the desert with no one knowing where they might be.

This story has always been a classic object lesson to me, personally, that doing MY best and following rules, even good rules, is not enough. These men were literally "on the beam." And perhaps the chilling part of this story is that people can be lost and not even know they are lost until it has ruined their lives or worse.

In order to find our way in this world there has to be a dependable point of reference, a point of personal contact with God. The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes and the guidance of scripture are all good, but they cannot save us, and we can keep them all so far as human effort is concerned and still be lost.

"Lost" is being where you're not supposed to be. "Lost" is not really knowing where you belong, or how to get there. "Lost" is having no valid point of reference outside of "self." A great proportion of society today is unaware that there is any reference point beyond what looks good, or feels good, or seems good at the moment. The worst kind of being lost is not having a clue that you are lost at all.

These Pharisees to whom Jesus addressed these stories about "lost" and "found" did not have a clue that they were themselves LOST. They were sure and certain they knew all about God and what God expects; they "knew" they didn't need Jesus or anything he could tell them. The Pharisees "knew" because they knew how to "do" religion. Whenever religion becomes a matter strictly of "doing" with no reference point for "being" we have people who are lost and don't even know they are lost.

One thing for sure, the Pharisees Jesus confronted are not the only people who ever thought they knew more than anyone else about being God's people. Anytime we think we know how to DO religion apart from that strong reference point of personal contact with God, and communion with His Spirit in Christ-likeness, we are on dangerous ground. The Pharisees are still with us, and sometimes I fear we could say, like Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he is US!"

In John Wesley's day the human nature was exactly the same as it is today. The saintly man John Wesley hand picked to be his successor, John Fletcher, was deeply concerned about people who DO religion apart from the SPIRIT, apart from the

REFERENCE point of accountability to Jesus. If you can try with me to "translate" two-hundred-year-old English, listen to John Fletcher's concern for his day:

TO CHRISTIAN PHARISEES:

I address you first, ye perfect Christian pharisees, because ye are most ready to profess Christian perfection, thought [sic], alas! ye stand at the greatest distance from perfect humility, the grace which is most essential to the perfect Christian's character; and because the enemies of our doctrine make use of you first, when they endeavor to root it up from the earth.

That ye may know whom I mean by "perfect Christian pharisees," give me leave to show you your own picture in the glass of a plain description. Ye have professedly entered into the fold where Christ's sheep, which are perfected in love, rest all at each other's feet, and at the feet of the Lamb of God. But how have ye entered? by Christ the door? or at the door of presumption? Not by Christ the door; for Christ is meekness and lowliness manifested in the flesh, but ye are still ungentle and fond of praise. When He pours out His soul as a divine prophet, He says, "Learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart: take My yoke upon you, and ye shall find rest unto your souls." But ye overlook this humble door; your proud, gigantic minds are above stooping low enough to follow Him who "made Himself of no reputation," that He might raise us to heavenly honours; and who, to pour just contempt upon human pride, had His first night's lodging in a stable, and spent His last night partly on the cold ground, in a storm of Divine wrath, and partly in an ignominious confinement, exposed to the greatest indignities which Jews and Gentiles could pour upon Him. He rested His infant head upon hay, His dying head upon thorns. A manger was His cradle, and a cross His death bed. Thirty years He traveled from the sordid stable to the accursed tree, unnoticed by His own peculiar people. In the brightest of His days, poor fishermen, some Galilean women, and a company of shouting children, formed all his retinue. Shepherds were His first attendants, and malefactors his last companions.

Fletcher was saying we cannot be Christian apart from Jesus and the Spirit of Jesus.

In a community that was concerned with its own salvation and success the Lord Jesus was out of step. The Pharisees then found fault with His actions and attitudes. The three stories about being "Lost and Found" in Luke 15 are an answer to those who simply DO RELIGION. Jesus is not in a defensive posture, but rather He is giving us a glimpse into the heart of God. He is trying to give a point of reference— to say that salvation— true religion— is GOD-CENTERED.

Jesus is exposing the self-centeredness that is at the very heart of all sin. (Don't forget, sin is spelled with an "I" in the middle!)

The McLandress Coefficient

When I was studying pastoral care many years ago I read about the "McLandress Coefficient;" Herschel McLandress was a professor of psychiatric measurement at Harvard Medical School, and he developed a way to measure a person's degree of self-absorption. In spoken and written material he measured the use of "I," "me," and "my" and the "Coefficient" was the longest span of time a person can remain diverted from himself. Eleanor Roosevelt was supposed to have a McLandress coefficient of two hours; John F. Kennedy's was twenty-nine minutes, and Elizabeth Taylor's was three minutes. The reason I don't make Jesus more at home at times is because I need to talk about me, when maybe he wants to talk about something else. How is your McLandress Coefficient?

How can we claim not to be LOST when everything we do and say revolves around US? Even in our worship and praying we cannot escape this selfish way of living. do we come to this "POINT OF REFERENCE?" How do we escape our "Self?" A clue to the answer probably lies in the question. "How do we DO? The answer is WE don't! [[[In GOD-CENTERED WORSHIP GOD IS THE SEEKER
GOD IS THE SPEAKER GOD IS THE CELEBRATOR]]]]

The stories of our Gospel lesson speak of one who seeks the lost— one who turns the house upside down looking for the lost.

If you even WANT to have a God-centered faith, you are a lot closer that you might think. The worst kind of "lost" is the one who has no idea he or she IS lost. If you

have an inkling that maybe you need to find and move closer to the Eternal Point of Reference, then you can be sure that grace is already at work in your life.

I remember a story of the sea from days gone by. A sailing vessel had become becalmed off the coast of South America and had drifted for days with not enough wind to go anywhere. Their supplies had been low when the wind had died, and now they were becoming desperate for drinking water. They prayed for rain, prayed for a wind, but just scorching sunshine. Then over the horizon came a coal-burning steamship.

They shouted and hoisted flags, and soon the ship turned and came toward the becalmed vessel.

They shouted as soon as they could make themselves heard "Do you have any water for us? We're dying of thirst?"

They thought they heard the reply "Let down your casks into the sea?" They asked again— and got the same strange answer. Anyone knows that to drink sea water doesn't quench thirst and is inviting death. "Let down your casks where you are right now!"

Someone threw over a bucket on a line and hoisted it on deck, and, amazingly, it was sweet and fresh. The reason— they had drifted into the mouth of the Amazon River, which is 100 miles wide when it flows into the ocean. They had been dying of thirst with water to drink all around them.

There are people not far from where we are right now who are drying up in spirit, and dying of spiritual thirst with the provisions of God all around them. We don't have to DO anything to bring God where we are. He is here, waiting for us to recognize Him and ask His help in putting him at the center of our lives. But we can and we must respond to a God that seeks us in our lost condition.

How, do you suppose, can we return to a God-centered life? How can we put God at the center of our worship and our everyday, walking-around lives? Could I suggest a couple of ways to begin with?

A. If you know you are a child of God, then begin again think about BEING, before DOING!

Ask God to help you give Him his rightful place at the very center of your life:

1. Sabbath day observance puts God in His rightful place. Is your Sunday in any way a day set apart for God and rest?
2. Value Being over Doing: Whatever we do, we must ask for the Spirit of Jesus. If we want to win people to the Christ we love, the first thing we need to do is NOT learn some sales speech, or some slick technique. The first thing we need to do is ask Jesus to help us LOVE people, and let that LOVE shine through all that we are. We are worried about whether or not we should sing this or that kind of music. But if we care about people they will understand that, and they might then just listen about the faith we claim. Value Person values, family values over thing values and career values reflects the Spirit of God who gave His only begotten Son so that we could share His life.

If we say we follow Jesus, and then make all our life decisions based on money and position and profit, or even on bigger and better ministry, will it be any wonder if we lose our children to the spirit of "Bigger and Better"? Don't sacrifice your children on the altar of ambition.

B. If you have never made a definite decision to make Jesus Lord of your life, and give your self over to Him, you do not have to wait one hour longer! You can let down your faith into His promises right now.

When our religion is a burden, when our so-called "faith" consists of what we DO, of how good WE are, we are like the Pharisees that day a long time ago that watched Jesus and criticized Him, to whom he told these stories. It doesn't have to be that way! God is seeking every one of us— to bring us to Himself— to give us His Spirit— to make us his own.

Pray with me:

Lord Jesus— I turn my life over to You. I don't want to be the center— I want YOU to be Lord. Forgive my self-centeredness. Forgive my trying to DO salvation. Help me to BE Your own dear child. I ask this according to Your own great promises. Amen.

Sing with me: Just a Closer Walk with Thee (#607 STL)

One God - One Mediator

September 24, 1995

I Timothy 2:1-7

Luke 16:1-13

The Gospel lesson for today is both very simple and very difficult. In our group study of this lesson last Wednesday Rev. Desmond Dixon, our guest from England, pointed out that the final message of the passage is simple: we cannot serve two masters. We must make up our minds to serve God, and that's that. But the story Luke tells before that bottom line is about a shrewd steward (say that three times fast) who has been dishonest, and who cheats his master as he gets ready for involuntary retirement. In that story the master actually admires the shrewdness of the servant. To me, at least, that is hard to understand.

When we are faced with difficult lessons it makes sense to begin with what we can understand for sure. The way of faith is both simple and profound. We will never be excluded from the kingdom if we respond in faith to what God has revealed.

Apprehending God's truth is more than grasping and understanding facts. Truth is always, finally, incarnate and not abstract.

The "plain part" of the gospel lesson tells us there is no such thing as insignificant dishonesty. If you cheat on an exam, it says, you will be dishonest in the big things of life as well. It is also clear that we cannot split our loyalty between God and our own vested interests.

The lesson from I Timothy (2: 1 - 7) sheds light on this gospel truth. It states three wonderful facts:

1. God, the High God of heaven, desires that everyone shall be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.
2. There is (only) One God.
3. There is (only) One Mediator between this High God of heaven and all of humankind; Jesus Christ, who is himself a man, very human.

(Think with me first about the statement:)

I. THERE IS ONE GOD

I DO NOT OWN GOD. (God IS! Hebrews 11:6) You do not own him. No one group, large or small, has exclusive rights to access to God. I cannot "define" Him. No one can say with authority, "We know, we tell you who God is and what he is like."

Of course we do believe that God does reveal Himself. We have based our entire faith on the fact that Jesus came to tell us who God is, what he is like. But we must listen to Jesus, revealed through the Holy Scriptures, inspired by the Holy Spirit both in the speaking/writing and the reading/hearing in order to be able to say with any assurance "I know God!"

By saying "I do not own God" I mean that God is NOT who I think He is subjectively— God IS WHO GOD IS! God IS!

The PRIVATIZATION of faith has "subjectivized" the very idea of God. We are patronizingly encouraged to "worship at the church of our choice" or to pray "to the God of our choice— our Higher Power." But there are not many Gods. There is ONE God. God is who God IS! The privatization of faith has sought to destroy the "otherness" of God in our understanding.

The EGALITARIANISM of culture has served to trivialize the majesty of God. Our heroes are often mediocrity amplified and celebrated. We have lost sight of a God before whom glorious angelic beings of great power and light fall prostrate. We have never stopped to learn about a Great White Throne before which all the multitudes of earth will one day stand in silence while our most private thoughts are known and judged.

The SOUNDS AND PICTURES AND WORDS of a media culture have all but drowned out the still, small voice of grace and peace. We need retreats, and we need time alone with God. No— I NEED RETREATS! etc.!

We may not own God, but it is true that

- GOD REVEALS HIMSELF TO THOSE WHO SEEK HIM
- This God is GOOD.
- God defines what GOOD means!
- This God is HOLY.

Everything and anything that can be termed "holy" is holy ONLY in relationship to God!

What is HIS is holy. What has nothing to do with God can not be holy.

- This God is LIGHT and LIFE.

"This is LIFE," Jesus prayed (John 17), "They they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."

- THERE IS ONE GOD!

(Now think with me about this:)

II. THERE IS ONE MEDIATOR BETWEEN GOD AND YOU / ME

It is wonderful to believe in God. It is a give of faith to be able to say with conviction that I believe God IS, and God is GOOD and HOLY, and LIGHT and LIFE. But it is another thing to approach God— to draw near to Him— to get to know Him, and find his tender love and compassion. We are so small! God is so Immense! But there IS a Mediator!

THERE IS ONE MEDIATOR

"What about the billions who have never heard?" I can tell you what I truly believe. But the MYSTERY of those billions does not apply to you and me. We HAVE heard! Jesus is more than an ancient figure in history to you! We have been introduced to Him! He is real to us! HE IS AT WORK IN YOUR LIFE JUST NOW!

THIS MEDIATOR IS TO BE TRUSTED

RETURNING TO THE 'SHREWD STEWARD' STORY

Whatever else that story means, Jesus is certainly saying we need to be serious about preparing for eternity. There is more to this life than seventy or eighty years and money and property and worldly fame and success.

We are fools if we do not think, and think seriously, about where our lives are going. We are worse than fools if we let someone OTHER THAN JESUS CHRIST try to tell us who God is, or what God expects of us. We are lost fools if we think we can get by without the Mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ.

We need to give our full attention to the one thing that matters more than any other thing to us; OUR ETERNAL DESTINY.

I guarantee that eternity will be a surprise to you! I guarantee that you and I will be shocked by the way things really ARE when the veil is removed and we see things in the light of God's eternity. (Like I told Esther before she died (that she wouldn't be missing us!))

Our perceptions here and now can be shaped by other, lesser things. But the fact of God's Word remains:

- IS YOUR FAITH ANCHORED IN THE GOD WHO IS?
- IS YOUR FAITH BASED ON THE LIVING WORD OF GOD?
- IS YOUR FAITH A LIVING, BREATHING, INCARNATE REALITY?

Would you like to be sure?

Pray this prayer with me:

Lord Jesus! You have said in your word that no one who comes to you would be cast out. In faith I come to you. I ask you to reveal the truth of God to me. I ask you to be Lord of my life from this time forward. I give You the right to throw down all idols, all false gods.

I ask you to re-arrange my life, and make me a child of God. Come into my life, forgive all my sins, and I will confess You as Lord and follow you. May God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit make it so, I ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Sing: (Just a Closer Walk) OR ??

At the Lords Table

October 1, 1995

Luke 16:19-31

We come again this morning to the Table of the Lord. The family gathers for food and fellowship. When a family eats together, and there is love, one word that can be used to describe what happens is communion.

A lot of Jesus' teaching and miracles seemed to happen around tables. Jesus very evidently enjoyed eating with people. He loved to go to the house of Mary and Martha and Lazarus in Bethany. It was while Jesus was at table that a woman came and anointed his feet with expensive perfume. It was while Jesus was eating in a Pharisee's house that he healed a paralytic man. Jesus taught that when are invited to dinner you should not seek to push your way to the head of the table. At a table Jesus pushed back his own couch and got up and washed his disciples' feet. And so it is that Jesus has taken this most common and wonderful thing families do— eating together— and has made it the special way that he meets with his family, the church.

In this story Jesus pictures a rich man, dressed lavishly, sitting at table. It is not a table of fellowship and communion, but of selfish extravagance. Some of the scraps got snapped up by the dogs, and some few got to the beggar Jesus named Lazarus. It is certainly a story of contrast. But what Jesus is teaching may not be what we think we see at first.

We love poetic justice, and a lot of people think that in the story Dives went to hell because he was rich and wouldn't share, and Lazarus went to heaven because he was poor, and so God was making it up to him. But Jesus wasn't saying that at all. Jesus never said that all rich people go to hell, or that all beggars go to heaven. What Jesus was saying is that rich people can't buy what is really the most important in life, and that the poorest of the poor do not have to be without it. That most important thing is: Communion.

The story of the rich man going to hell lends itself to preaching about social justice, and the need for sharing our wealth with the poor. Christians ought to be leading the way in caring about people, and caring for people. But the rich man's selfishness flowed out of the poverty of his spirit; it was an indicator of his spiritual bankruptcy. Dives didn't go to hell simply because of his sins— he went to hell because he was an unrepentant sinner. His world began and ended with himself.

In the lesson from Timothy we heard a verse that is very often misquoted: "MONEY IS THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL!" Does it say that? NO! It says, "The LOVE of money is A root of ALL (kinds of) evil!" There is a world of difference in the two.

Money is not evil. Money is merely condensed life. Money is a tool with which we can help or hinder ourselves and others. But the LOVE of money is an entirely different thing! If we LOVE money we will learn to USE people! If we LOVE people we will learn to USE money to help them!

This story makes me think of the difference between the words communion and communism. The two words have similar root word meanings. Maybe some might think they are interchangeable. But one word focuses on who and what we are when we come together. The other word is primarily concerned with what we possess, what material circumstances are ours.

Human solutions to all the problems of society is all of material and outward effort: if we can just elect the right people, and if we can just mount enough protests we can right the wrongs of our society. God's solution never ignores suffering and material need- "Inasmuch as you have given to the least of the needy, you have given to Me," Jesus said. But God's solution never stops short of communion. God's solution never stops short of the family gathering around the table, in love— love for the Father- love of Christ— love in the Spirit— but also love for every other human being!

What Jesus was saying was that rich people can't buy what is really the most important in life, and that the poorest of the poor do not have to be without it. That most important thing is: Communion.

We can't tell by looking at people whether they are rich or poor as God counts true wealth. Some of the people most to be pitied are those who have more money than they need. Some people who have very little still are people who know love, love of God, and love of family and church, who care about people.

Robert Coles, the famous Harvard teacher who wrote the book, *The Spirituality of Children*, began his career working with understanding the moral development of children when he met a six-year-old black girl in New Orleans, named Ruby Bridges. I have preached a number of times about the faith of this remarkable Bridges family.

[A little girl stopped and prayed for the people who were shouting obscenities at her. "God, please forgive them; they don't know what they are doing!"]

I saw that incident on film last Sunday night: Last Sunday night on PBS Robert Coles was featured in a special in which he interviewed several children aged from about 9 to 11 or 12. He interviewed a true cross-section of America, racially, economically, geographically. [I hope that I can get a video of that special, and if I do and am allowed I would like to show it to you.]

Some of the children came from obviously very wealthy homes. Some were single parent homes in what we might call ghetto housing. And you might be surprised at which were truly rich and which were truly poor.

Of one wealthy home Cole said (as he looked at the crayon drawing the little girl had made of her family) "This is a house of strangers!" And the warmest sense of security and love came from a family of twin girls and a single mother with very modest surroundings, but with a well-worn Bible and love and prayer and joy and caring.

Communion is when a family comes together to eat and love each other. For us, our love begins here— at the Table of the Lord— and carries through into everything we are, and everything we do. Welcome to the Table of the Lord:

TO: THE HOLY COMMUNION

The Jesus Prayer

October 29, 1995

Luke 18:9-14

Two men went up to the temple to pray to the one true God. One man stood by himself in his shining goodness. The other man stood afar off in consciousness of his sinfulness.

This is a pointed story. Jesus told it to some people who were trusting in themselves for salvation, and were actively putting down other seekers after God.

In this story the first character, THE PHARISEE, was the sort of fellow you think of as the pillar of society. He was regular in paying his bills, he belonged to the Rotary Club, he drove a Cadillac, he tithed a pretty hefty income.

The second character, THE TAX COLLECTOR, was different. He was far down the social scale. He had a shady reputation. He had business dealings with unbelievers. He would not deny being a sinner.

The PHARISEE had a LOAD of righteousness— self-righteousness. It was a comparative righteousness. He compared himself to people he despised: "I thank You God that I am not as others are — thieves, rogues, adulterers, or, God forbid, even like this tax collector standing there!" And he measured his religion in adding up the good things he did. "Add these things up," he said to God. "I fast twice in the week, I give a tenth of all my income, I'm really quite a valuable addition to your temple, God!"

The TAX COLLECTOR, on the other hand, stood far off, away from the altar. His head was down. He smote his breast. He acknowledged his sin.

It is not acceptable in polite society today to talk about "sin" and "guilt." We deserve a break today! Remember rights, and entitlement! Guilt is always bad— always unhealthy.

The Jesus Prayer

I agree that guilt is something we do not have to live with. But I do not agree that all guilt is either inappropriate or bad. There is a kind of acknowledging of guilt which is actually healthy, because it accepts responsibility. Facing real guilt is the first step to real forgiveness and real peace with God. "IF WE CONFESS OUR SINS," is the promise, "GOD IS FAITHFUL AND JUST TO FORGIVE US OUR SINS, AND TO CLEANSE US FROM ALL UNRIGHTEOUSNESS." (I John 1:9) [We like the "all unrighteousness" part— we don't always hear the "If we confess" part!]

The Bible says that whether we are up-and-outers like the Pharisee, or down- and-outers like the tax collector, "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) We are all sinners by birth, and every one of us have sinned by choice. Sin is putting anything or anyone ahead of God.

Two men went up the hill to pray. The PHARISEE went up the hill to the temple knowing that he was better than most people. The TAX COLLECTOR went up the hill to the temple knowing that he had come short of God's glory. He didn't try to fool either God or himself for even a minute. He prayed this prayer: "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner."

Two men went down the hill from the temple that day. Jesus said the tax collector went back home justified. The Pharisee just went back home.

The simplicity of the prayer the tax collector prayed all too often escapes us. We know that following Jesus involves doing as well as being. Being Christian takes discipline and prayer. So we forget how simple and how basic it is to say from the heart, "Jesus is Lord!" We memorize Romans 10:9,10, but we forget the impact of that short prayer.

When we get away from the simplicity of the faith we start building our own righteousness. We begin to THINK like the Pharisee, even if we don't actually put his prayer into our own words.

THIS IS REFORMATION SUNDAY - On this particular Sunday of the year we recall one man in history who re-discovered the power of the Jesus prayer and changed the course of history

Let me just mention again a few facts from Luther's life that underscore this story Jesus told:

Martin Luther was born in 1483, and as a young man started out to study law. About the time he finished law studies, in 1505, a lightning bolt scared the wits out of him, and he promised God he would become a monk— went on to become a priest— was a brilliant but not-very-happy seeker after salvation.

The church of Luther's day was often guilty of praying the prayer of the Pharisee. Like every human institution, our own included, there was a strong incentive to preserve the machinery and to forget the spirit of Christ— to legalize and legislate, and forget the simple truth of grace. Luther was frustrated, unsatisfied in his own heart.

In 1513, the year after receiving his Doctorate and becoming teacher/preacher at Wittenberg, Martin began lecturing on the Psalms. When he arrived at Psalm 72, as he was lecturing to the students he got new insight concerning "the righteousness of God." (Have you read Psalm 72 lately? I had to re-read it again to see what was so revolutionary as to catch Martin Luther's imagination:

(Psalm 72:12) For (God) will deliver the needy when he cries for help, the humble also, and him who has no helper. (13) He will have compassion on the poor and needy, and the souls of the needy he will save....)

Martin Luther began to see the compassion of God. Up until this time Luther had only feared God, as a tyrant judge. He began to see God's righteousness as a quality which God was willing to give to believers, and which would make them acceptable in his Presence.

Then in his study of Romans Luther re-discovered "The Just shall live by faith!" Luther discovered that he had had it all backwards: WE DO NOT ACHIEVE FAITH BY BEING RIGHTEOUS, BUT WE RECEIVE CHRIST'S RIGHTEOUSNESS BY FAITH! Still Luther asked questions of himself, recorded in his works, such as:

"Are you alone wise? Can it be that everyone else is in error and has been in error for so long? What if you are wrong and lead into error so many people who might then be eternally damned?

But Luther could not remain quiet forever. Things came to a head when fund raisers came through Saxony selling coupons to get people out of purgatory. It was just three years after Psalm 72 had spoken to him, and after he had re-discovered the great truth in Romans "The just shall live by faith!" that the crisis came.

On October 31, 1517, exactly 478 years ago this very week, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses, 95 statements for debate on, among other things, why the sale of indulgences were evil- on the Cathedral door in Wittenberg, Germany. He wrote these propositions for debate in Latin— but the 95 theses were also translated into the common German, and printed, and spread far and wide. The business of indulgences, salvation from purgatory by works, was ruined in that part of Saxony. The Reformation was under way.

Nearly four years later, in April of 1521, Luther was summoned to Worms to defend his position before a Diet of the clergy and secular rulers. On the first day of his appearance Luther saw that he would not be permitted to make a speech, and he begged for a day to think of his answer.

Luther was not admitted to the Diet the next day until nightfall, and he stood in the candle-lighted Episcopal hall next to the great cathedral. After realizing again that there was no room for debate, Luther made this statement:

"Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds and reasoning— and my conscience is captive to the Word of God— then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience."

And then he added the famous words: "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen" And with those words Luther became an outlaw.

Thus endeth the "history lesson" this Reformation Sunday!

The "two ways of justification" are still with us today.

If we are honest— there are times when we have stood in the place where the Pharisee stood in the story. We have compared ourselves to other mortals instead of seeing a holy God. We have added up our good and hoped it outweighed the bad.

But there are NOT two ways to find peace with God. There ARE NO human beings who can justify themselves in God's holy eyes. There are NONE of us who dare to despise others, and compare our holiness with other sinners.

In our Wesleyan tradition we need to learn to live in the healthy tension between the call of God to holiness and the humility of knowing that our performance often comes short of God's glory. Our Savior can give us grace to live above willful sin in word thought and deed. Our Savior also taught us to pray every day, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors!" Can we live with the paradox of not sinning and confession our sins? Can we seek to be God's instruments and NOT seek to use God selfishly?

There is a prayer, an ancient prayer, actually, that came out of this passage, no doubt. It is called The Jesus Prayer. I'm sure that a number of Nazarenes would not want to pray this prayer because we have been forgiven and are no longer in active, willful, outbroken sin, no longer in rebellion against God. . . .

I can still hear the wisdom of my elders saying "If we start calling mistakes 'sin,' it won't be long until we are calling sin 'mistakes.'" In other words we cannot excuse any willful sin in our lives.

Still the fact remains that Jesus has given us the Lord's Prayer— and also he has given us this story to keep us from trusting in our own righteousness, and comparing it with others. That ancient prayer, the Jesus Prayer simply goes like this:

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

It is a powerful prayer when it becomes a way of life! Shall WE pray?

#435 vv 1,2,3 -My Faith has Found a Resting Place

Enter His Gates with Thanksgiving

November 19, 1995

Psalm 100

Philippians 4

John 6

I have just two simple thoughts for you this morning, thoughts to take with you into our American Thanksgiving week.

Thanksgiving is a great holiday, with a great theme— and it brings up a pretty complex response in most of us that includes Pilgrims and football on TV and pumpkin pie and some familiar songs like we are singing this morning. Next Wednesday will be the busiest day of the year at Logan International Airport, even busier than Christmas week. We go "home" wherever that may be if we can. Thanksgiving is a good time, when people of good will can get together to thank God for life itself. Thanksgiving, you already know, was not invented by the Pilgrims. Thanksgiving is a central theme of the Bible.

Two simple thoughts for thanksgiving: (first)

THINK OF THANKSGIVING AS A FOCUS FOR LIFE

We enter the sanctuary of God's Presence in the act of thanksgiving. "Enter God's gates with thanksgiving, and come into his courts with praise!"

We begin to understand faith itself through returning God's love. There is tremendous power released by deliberately acknowledging God as the Source of all that is good.

Just this week I was reading an essay about the Christian apologist (and mystery writer) G.K. Chesterton by a scholar named Kent Hill. He wrote "For Chesterton the origin of theology was gratitude. Near the end of his life he described his youth as a troubled time when he hung on to religion 'by one thin thread of thanks.'"

Enter His Gates with Thanksgiving

Life as we must live it is complex and at times chaotic. The good is often the enemy of the better and the best. Life is not always fair. But by faith we can affirm that God is good! We Christians have a simple trust at the very heart of our faith. It is the simple trust that God IS, and that God is GOOD! True thanksgiving helps us focus in on what is really important, really vital in life and living.

The ability to be grateful is itself a gift from God. Praise and thanksgiving are Creation's way of staying in tune with its Creator. "All nature sings, and round me ring the music of the spheres." This is my father's world.

There is something powerful about deliberately acknowledging God as the Source of good.

There is power in simply, from our hearts, giving God thanks and praise. Thomas a Kempis, in *The Imitation of Christ*, wrote: *Simplicity and purity are the two wings by which a person is lifted up above all earthly things. Simplicity is in the intention, purity is in the affection. Simplicity (looks) to God, purity (joins with) - "tastes" Him.*

He went on: *Nothing can hinder you if you are inwardly free from inordinate affection. If you intend and seek nothing but the will of God and the good of your neighbor, you will enjoy eternal liberty...*

In a dirty and often chaotic world God gives us the gifts of simplicity and purity; simplicity to see God as the source of all good, and by His indwelling Spirit, purity of love to join with God by his grace

It sounds too simplistic to say that all these good things of faith begin with thanksgiving. But humbly bow and praise God for Himself. Thank Him for the great gift of grace. As the Psalmist tells us— this is how God's people enter the place of worship. This comes at the beginning! "Enter His gates with thanksgiving, come into His courts with Praise! be thankful unto Him and bless His name!" The second thought for thanksgiving is just as simple. That is that thanksgiving is a choice we need to make deliberately.

REALIZE THAT THANKSGIVING IS A CHOICE

Bundle up your deepest hurts, your greatest frustrations, your hidden sins, your inmost fears— and give them to a loving Father in prayer with thanksgiving. (Look at it again, there in your worship folder:

"In the act of giving thanks God can release His peace in us!") Giving thanks becomes sacrament— that is, it becomes an outward sign that validates an inward, spiritual reality. Giving thanks as we bring our concerns to God, is a lightning rod for peace— a means of grace!

We really don't have a great deal of choice about important things in this chaotic world. We did not choose to be born, nor to be born white or black or brown or rich or poor. We do not really guide the destinies of our nation or world, usually. All the same God does give us the power to choose not only our eternal destiny, but the spirit in which we shall journey through time toward eternity.

God gives us the gift of praise and thanksgiving to enter his courts .

We can fret, complain or we can praise and be aligned with God's peace

Conclusion - IN THE SIXTH CHAPTER OF JOHN Jesus talked about bread— and selfishness— and choices. Some took his bread and followed Him selfishly. They did not understand His LOVE. They never made the vital connection of the blessings with the Blessor. They were offended when Jesus demanded they share His very life. (6:66)

Jesus said to the disciples—"Are you going away, too?" Their choice then, is ours, now. Peter spoke for us all: "Lord— we CHOOSE You! YOU have all that we want or need!" (In closing let us read again Phil 4, etc. -worship folder) Re-read "Act of Worship" -Hymn Response 773 For the Fruit of All Creation

Children of the King

November 25, 1995

Christ the King Sunday, 1995

Colossians 1, Luke 23

One thing I love about the stories of C.S. Lewis is that he can challenge old clichés with fresh ways to look at familiar words and concepts. He helps me, when I come to 'Christ the King Sunday,' to realize that I cannot 'predict' or 'define' the word "king" as it is applied to the Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son.

In the first *Chronicle of Narnia, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the battle between good and evil is underway. Already Mr. Tumnus, a friendly faun, has been captured and is in imminent danger of being turned into stone. Peter and Edmund and Susan and Lucy are desperate to get him back. We break into the dialogue right there:

(Peter is speaking) "We can't just leave him to be to be to have that done to him."

"It's no good, Son of Adam, " said Mr.Beaver, "no good your trying, of all people. But now that Aslan is on the move "

"Oh, yes! Tell us about Aslan!" said several voices at once; for once again that strange feeling like the first signs of spring, like good news, had come over them.

"Who is Aslan?" asked Susan.

"Aslan?" said Mr. Beaver, "Why don't you know? He's the King. He's the Lord of the whole wood, not often here, you understand. Never in my time or my father's time. But the word has reached us that he has come back. He is in Narnia at this moment. He'll settle the White Queen all right. It is he, not you, that will save Mr. Tumnus."

"She won't turn him into stone, too?" said Edmund.

"Lord love you, Son of Adam, what a simple thing to say!" answered Mr. Beaver with a great laugh. "Turn him into stone? If she can stand on her two feet and look him in

the face it'll be the most she can do and more than I expect of her. No, no. He'll put all to rights as it says in an old rhyme in these parts:

*Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.*

You'll understand when you see him."

"But shall we see him?" asked Lucy.

"Why Daughter of Eve, that's what I brought you here for. I'm to lead you where you shall meet him," said Mr. Beaver.

"Is is he a man?" asked Lucy.

"Aslan a man!" said Mr. Beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor Beyond the Sea. Don't you know who is the King of the Beasts? Aslan is a lion the Lion, the great Lion."

"Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver, "if there's anyone can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

"I'm longing to meet him," said Peter, "even if I do feel frightened when it comes to the point."

EXPECTATIONS OF A KING

One reason we love to read C.S. Lewis is the way he makes us look in fresh ways at familiar ideas. To make the King of Narnia a Lion, to invent Aslan, reminds us that we don't begin to understand all the glory and power and sheer wonder of our Christ. Of course it isn't that Lewis is saying Jesus is like Aslan, although the Bible calls him The Lion of the Tribe of Judah. But in Aslan we see a little glimpse of the King we can never control, but who loves his own with a fierce loyal love even to the death. We have to lay aside our own limitations of what kind of king Jesus might be.

In Jesus' time there were those who expected a king to be decked out in all the trappings, a wealthy monarch like Herod or Caesar. There were others who had a political agenda and expected a zealot leader to strike for justice. Still others were ready to take up arms and fight, while maybe others saw the loaves and fishes and wanted a magic wand to take them out of hard times.

Instead, Jesus came saying, " Love your neighbors— and love your enemies! Forgive your enemies! He walked away from every attempt to use Him. Most people simply rejected any notion that this King could ever rule over them. He finally was lifted up above the earth— but his throne was a cross!

THE TRIUMPH OF A KING

It is hard for us to put the two thoughts together— "king" and "cross." We sing that song, "He could have called ten thousand angels!" and we really sing it like "He SHOULD have called ten thousand angels!" or "I wish he HAD called ten thousand angels!" Or, we say, well, when he comes again He will really kill everyone in sight that disagrees with US! How, really, do we follow such a KING?

[Returning briefly to C S Lewis's story, Aslan is so great and powerful that nothing or no one can defeat him. But then there comes that spell binding scene where Aslan goes to die in Edmund's place; there is a celebration of the evil forces of the cold, white winter only to have the Stone Altar split in two evil put to flight— because LOVE has triumphed over everything else because Aslan was absolutely pure!]

It was from the cross that the greatest power of this great King began to be displayed. Luke 23 is a strange scripture to use to glorify a King. Naked, beaten, bruise, bleeding, dying— mocked with cries of "If you are the King save yourself!"— Jesus calmly turned to the criminal who said, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom" and said, "Today you will be with Me in paradise!" For Jesus is king— eternally. He was never MORE king than he was that day on the cross.

It is because of the cross that Paul could exult (Colossians 1:)

"He has rescued us from the power of darkness ... in him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins ... in Him all the fullness of the Godhead is pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile all things to himself on heaven and earth by making peace through the blood of his cross."

And what is even more amazing in the next chapter (Colossians 2:9) this assertion is repeated and we are brought into the picture: "In Christ all the fullness of the Godhead dwells in bodily form and ye (you, plural) are complete in HIM!"

Because Jesus is King sin and death and hell are defeated, and the church has everything it needs to carry on the work of Jesus here on earth.

THE GIFTS TO US OF OUR KING

The people of Jesus' day— at least most of them— missed the point of why Jesus came, and what it meant that Jesus is King. But what about us? We know better, don't we?

We know that Christ the King can and does forgive sin, and give Gifts of the Spirit. We know that Christ the King has opened the way to heaven and eternity with God. But I am afraid that all too often we are not too different from religious people in Jesus day that wanted to use Him to help them get important things done for them. (We know so much better now that we have 2,000 years of perspective— don't we?)

We want a King who knows the way to heaven, and who promises to forgive our sins past, present and future and who won't interfere with OUR agenda! We want a King who validates OUR ideas of what is right and wrong. We get emotional when we think

of our King who was willing to die for us— we don't mind putting crosses in our church and wearing them around our neck.

But what if Jesus asked us to change our life-style, to give up something dear to us? What if Jesus asked us to do something downright distasteful?

(I talked yesterday to Janine Tartaglia Metcalf, who is now living in San Diego. When she first was saved she was an anchor for a major TV outlet in L.A. and she gave it up to follow a call to preach. When she went to her pastor for an assignment he said, "I have some old people that need a hand's on touch!" Janine was thinking of something a bit more glamorous. As she changed bedpans and scrubbed kitchen floors she was wondering? How does this make sense? Then old Mrs. Krutcher told her she needed to "Die out!" Janine began to get a glimpse of the Servant King. It changed her entire spirit.]

When we are serious about calling Jesus "Lord," making him KING— the cross becomes our way of life! Our KING loves enough to give himself for those he loves, and he dares to ask us to take up his way of love as our own. We enter into Christ's very spirit, that validates what we celebrate this Christ the King Sunday a faith that believes God IS and that God is GOOD as seen in Jesus Christ

- JESUS CHRIST CAME
- JESUS CHRIST DIED
- JESUS CHRIST ROSE AGAIN FROM THE DEAD
- JESUS CHRIST IS COMING, KING OF KINGS ALMIGHTY!

(In closing)

As children of the King we have all that we need to follow him and be like him. We are royalty and all the fullness of our King is manifested in his body, the church (Colossians 2:9.) The kingdom is manifested when Christ's people follow their king in spirit, and dare to show the love of God as Jesus did Himself on the cross.

In the 1950's our nation was involved in a war in Korea. Thousands of Americans were killed and wounded in what was supposed to be a United Nations police action.

During the height of that conflict the great evangelist Billy Graham went to Korea to minister and preach to the American troops (as well as anyone else he could reach.) We've all seen Billy Graham preach, and have watched the hundreds step forward as God blesses his ministry.

But on this trip Billy Graham went through a military hospital that had been set up there in Korea. He came to one young man who had been wounded in the spine, and who was lying face down on a canvas sling, looking through a hole in the canvas at the floor. Without fanfare, Billy Graham lay down on his back on the floor and slid under that bed so that the two men could look each other in the face.

I happen to believe in Billy Graham. I thank God for his integrity, and his faithfulness to the "Thus says the Lord!" and "The Bible says...!" I believe that Billy Graham has been highly honored as a man of the throngs, a Prince of the Pulpit. But on that cold day in Korea, on his back in that make shift hospital, looking one wounded soldier in the face, Billy Graham showed that he had caught the spirit of our great King.

As the poet has written:

*His were the planets and stars in the sky
His were the valleys and mountains so high
His all earth's kingdoms from pole unto pole,
But he became poor, to ransom my soul.*

In Christ our King is all God's fullness. You and I are called to that kind of fullness of love!

Prayer

124 All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name (Coronation)

People of Hope

December 3, 1995 - Advent I - Romans 13 - Matthew 24

The Promise of Light in a Dark World

Did you ever in your life get up at four o'clock in the morning because you were going somewhere exciting that day? I have— a good many times in my life! When we lived in the wall-to-wall cement in New Jersey we would start out on our vacation to Maine so early that we were at Hogan Pond by noon eight hours later! By the time the sun came up we were over the Hudson River and well on our way. That is a little of what Advent is like. That is what the epistle lesson this morning is shouting: The day is breaking! Exciting things are going to happen! Get out of bed! Put on the garments of light! Lay aside the darkness!

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. Advent is getting ready for Christmas— but it is even more. Advent is getting ready for Christ!

Advent also is the beginning of a new church year.

It is the time of the prophet calling: "Get right with God!" It is the time of prophecy of the seventh angel of the Revelation(11:5): "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever."

God is calling us to be people of the Light! If we could begin to understand what it means to be "people of Hope"— if we could see what God wants to do even here in this congregation— if we could catch a glimpse of His vision for us— I believe it would literally take our breath away! I thank God for what he has done, and what he is doing. Still, the challenge of Advent is to more yet than we have seen. We are a church called to a mission.

The mission statement of this church is simple— perhaps deceptively simple: TO KNOW GOD, AND TO PROVIDE A CLIMATE IN WHICH EACH PERSON CAN COME TO FULL SPIRITUAL POTENTIAL IN JESUS CHRIST.

TO KNOW GOD!

So simple! You say, I know God! He knows me! What else is there? Yet when you stop to think of it, this is an eternity challenge! God is our Friend right NOW! But getting to know God is the most wonderful adventure there can ever be!

IT IS PRESENT REALITY! You can know God in Jesus Christ right now! I am sure that many of our little children are friends with Jesus. (I think of Kara Nichols inviting Jesus to her birthday party when she was about five!) But knowing God is ALWAYS BECOMING, ALWAYS DYNAMIC, ALWAYS GROWING

As a church— this is our highest priority. Our worship reaches out for God! Our evangelism introduces God! Our education is more than learning "about" it seeks to introduce people to God! Our fellowship is in God! Our cup of cold water is given as unto God!

KNOWING GOD IS PERSONAL.

You have to know him for yourself. But whether or not you will believe it— knowing God is ALWAYS IN COMMUNITY AS WELL! We help each other SEE God. We are never saved selfishly. We do not come to know a God who plays favorites— unless we can realize that the one who is most obnoxious to us is just as much loved by God as WE are! We are ALL God's "favorites!"

Knowing God is SATISFYING! There is nothing as deeply satisfying as obeying God and sensing that in some small way he is pleased. But knowing God is always HUNGERING AND THIRSTING FOR MORE!

Will you make this part of our mission statement your own? Will you make it your life's personal mission to know God? And will you join with us here in a conscious, deliberate effort to make everything we do as a church bend to this mission statement? If it does not enhance our pursuit of knowing God— we simply don't do it!

But "to know God" is just the first half— and the last half is like the second half of the Ten Commandments— it is horizontal—

TO PROVIDE A CLIMATE IN WHICH EACH PERSON CAN COME TO FULL SPIRITUAL POTENTIAL IN JESUS CHRIST.

Jesus said the first, great commandment is Thou shalt love ... and the second is like unto it: THOU SHALT LOVE THY NEIGHBOR AS THYSELF. What does it mean to have a mission statement that declares we want to enhance the spiritual growth of every last person in our community?

It means that WE SHALL BE A COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT.

That happens! It will continue to happen! It doesn't mean we don't fail at times— but God helping us— we shall care when the crises come!

It means that WE SHALL BE A COMMUNITY OF HONESTY. I have seen some kinds of spirituality that had very little to do with the real world. I have seen holiness that never got its feelings hurt— never needed to say "I'm sorry!" —- but I don't know anything about that in the way life is lived.

In our community we need to ask God to help us disagree at times and still have a genuine love for each other. In our community in particular, the one thing that stands out is how many different kinds of people and tastes we have— differences that could and will tear us apart if we let them. We have "depression babies" that have their cellars full of old magazines— because "we might need them sometime"— and Baby Boomers— who throw away good clothes when they get dirty— we have Baby Boppers who go to concerts so loud I couldn't stand them— and body surf!! But do you know what? We really do LOVE each other! And we CARE when we hurt, and we want each other to be like Jesus!

It means, finally, that WE SHALL BE A COMMUNITY OF WITNESS.

There will be the witness of "Behold hoe they love one another!" We will be a community of witness in our homes to those we love the most! And wherever we go in our weekday world we will witness, first in our spirit— then in our actions— and finally as the Holy Spirit leads us, we will witness in a confrontational witness of words.

IT IS SIMPLE, ISN'T IT? TO KNOW GOD! TO HELP EACH OTHER GROW IN CHRIST? BUT WHAT IF WE TOOK IT SERIOUSLY? WHAT IF WE MADE EVERY SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASS— EVERY PARTY— EVERY BIBLE STUDY— EVERY MEAL FOR THE QUINCY CRISIS CENTER— IN THE LIGHT OF THIS MISSION?

Conclusion

We believe in Jesus a new day is dawning that will never have an end. The life we have found in Jesus will become a never-ending day.

Until that sunrise is complete we must be children of light. It may seem that our world is dark and growing darker, but that is not what the scripture says. Let's get out of bed, get dressed, and get on the road! In the darkness we light the candle of faith, and watch the horizon. The night is far spent; the day is at hand— our King is on his way!

Prayer

Into communion

THE HOLY COMMUNION

The Law Read and Confession Made

The Lord Jesus Christ has said to us: "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Shall we pray:

Search us, O God, and know our most private thoughts. Try us, and show unto us the deepest motives, the real state of our hearts. Forgive us where we have been selfish, or insensitive, or sinful in any way. We cannot keep the Great Commandment, and truly love

You, O God, with all our heart, soul, and mind unless You in mercy grant to us the grace of Your indwelling Spirit. We cannot love each other as we should unless Your love is shed abroad in our hearts.

Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to draw us near to Himself so that we can come to his table with confidence.

We do not presume to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

Let us confess our faith:

The Nicene Creed (STL # 14)

The Informal Invitation ("This is not my table . . .")

Holy and gracious Father; in your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin, and were worthy of death and hell, you, in your mercy sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to You, the God and Father of all.

He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

The Words of Institution:

On the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had give thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat: THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me. After supper he took the cup and when he had give thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me: Amen

We praise you for the mystery of our salvation! We truly believe

People of Hope

- Christ has died!
- Christ is risen!
- Christ will come again!

Bless these emblems, O God, and make them to us the Body and Blood of your Son, spiritual food, and spiritual drink of new and unending life in Jesus Christ. And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us:

Our Father which art in heaven . . .

Now, humbly we receive the Gifts of God for the People of God

Good News in Strange Places

Advent III

December 17, 1995

(cf [12/13/98](#))

Isaiah 35; Luke 1:47-55; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

I ENJOY CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS. Especially those having to do with children. Last Sunday at the dinner table Jake asked his cousin Miranda if she was coming to church next Sunday night (which is this evening now.) She said "Why are you asking?" Jake said, "Because I'm in the play."

"Do you want me to come?" Mandy went on with the conversation.

"I don't care," was Jake's response. But of course he cared or he wouldn't have asked. And Mandy told him she'd be here. Another generation is getting into Christmas tradition.

I remember well when our children first were old enough to "say pieces." (I'm looking forward to this evening at 6 o'clock.)

CHRISTMAS IS A BEAUTIFUL TIME

What is "the ideal children's Christmas?" Do you have a romanticized picture of what Christmas ought to be? Or what it once was? Did you ever have a "perfect Christmas?" Some elements I can think of that make a Christmas wonderful for children are (1) TRUST and (2) a sense of SECURITY, as well as (3) ANTICIPATION.

CHRISTMAS TRUTH IS MORE THAN TRADITION

I hope I've made it clear that I love all the lights and traditions and children's pieces and good stuff that comes along with Christmas. But behind the traditions are some very real and very wonderful facts. I don't think I'm a compromiser when I say I can live with Santa and toys and Christmas Trees and still not forget the heart of what

Christmas is about. There is a beauty, and a Good News that goes far deeper than even the most warm and wonderful of our Christmas traditions: Christmas really comes to challenge our faith! God comes to where we are. In the situations where we find ourselves, God makes Himself known, and the circumstances may not change immediately, but the Presence is everything.

1. GOD REACHED OUT AND TOUCHED OUR WORLD
2. JESUS DOESN'T COME TO FULFILL OUR EXPECTATIONS

Mary's song is beautiful: "My soul magnifies the Lord!" But we can only imagine what a challenge to faith the reality of Mary's situation was. She certainly had to TRUST that God's Word was trustworthy. Her visit to her cousin Elizabeth boosted her faith. Mary's Christmas had little SECURITY as we know it— but Joseph was there to support. And Mary's HOPE was not what she might have expected— but has blessed every generation as she was promised.

John the Baptist was once certain that what he was preaching was absolutely true. He was "on the inside track" with God— and the message was flowing to those outsiders. But now the action had gone past— he was on the inside of a prison, and on the outside of what was really happening. He did not ask with the voice of unbelief. Some have called John's question "A Friday voice of faith." Sometimes we need to make room for honest doubt— and confront God with our questions— or doubt will turn to skepticism and become a permanent fixture in our spirits. John addressed his questions as best he could to Jesus Himself. The answer is worth studying: we cannot simply cling to what we remember of Jesus— what we THINK he OUGHT to be. We need to be open to what HE SAYS— to what HE wants to be doing with us. He is always challenging us to go beyond what we think we know of Him. The moment we think we have Jesus all figured out He does something we never expected.

But we can be certain: Jesus is to be trusted. He came to save sinners. He came to make bad people good, and good people nice.

3. JESUS DOES COME WHERE HE IS INVITED

CHRISTMAS IS A CONTEMPORARY REALITY

Like John the Baptist, many people are looking at the promise that God cares, and God is with us, that God's name is Emmanuel— from prisons just as real as the one he was in. There are prisons of childhood memories— prisons of abuse— prisons of addictions— prisons of depression. There are prisons of bereavement and sorrow because loved ones aren't here at a family time. It might be neater and nicer not to even mention these— but if you aren't in one of these prisons, you know someone who is. What do we say to them when they say: "What can Jesus Christ do for ME? Are we supposed to believe in HIM, or do we look for someone else?" If we try to tell them about a Jesus we THINK we know— or a Jesus we remember dimly from some Christmas a long time ago we won't be much help to them. If we introduce Jesus by letting Him make us men and women of God— by loving people and not just saving souls— JESUS WILL MAKE HIMSELF REAL TO THEM— and bring HIS JOY.

How do we reconcile the JOY of Christmas with the sorrows of life? How does Christ align with faith when crunch time comes? Two examples come to mind:

One is the common but real burden of getting old. [Mrs. Allen, Ruth Cameron's mother— in a "prison" which has actually become a place of ministry and joy!]

Another is facing the prospect of separation and death. [I recommend "Shadowlands" — either or both of two movies now out in video about CS and Joy LEWIS.] What about Amy Porter who was supposed to be married next week, and instead was buried a couple of weeks ago?

A couple that you don't know— and I know only through correspondence in Bible study, and minister and his wife names Mark and Elaine Forrester, in Nashville, Tennessee, are facing a battle with cancer. With his permission I share his thoughts with you. He writes:

"My wife, Elaine, relapsed with leukemia after being in remission for almost eight years. After five years of remission we were told, "you're cured." We believed it, and

were happy as could be. As it turned out, we were under the spell of an illusion. Now that we've been disillusioned— stripped of false assumptions— does that make us blessed? Quite honestly the answer is both no and yes. No, we are anything but fully blessed— because we are broken. As people of faith we still affirm God's abiding love, but seriously question God's power. (When well-meaning people tell us, "don't worry, God's in control of all things and is allowing this to happen for a reason," I want to say, "thank you for your concern, but keep your illusions to yourself.") But finally I must say that our bitter disappointment has created an emptiness that can only be filled by God. And in that regard we are blessed and graced with the ability to discard false expectations while giving root to new seeds of hope and life that permeate this Advent season. In this hour of discontent— as our Friday voice of faith begins to stutter with uncertainty, we are invited to hear the words often sung and believed on Christmas Eve: "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." May we all be disturbed by God's unexpected joy! Amen." [Pray for Mark and Elaine Forrester of Vanderbilt and Nashville.]

Isaiah tells us that in the desert there is a highway to Zion. He promises us that the dry place will become verdant and blossom. It is not always as simple or as stylized as the ideal Children's Christmas. We don't find a Christ who we can use, or who changes life to the pattern we lay out for Him. But this highway is a highway of hope, and a way of real JOY! For Jesus comes and walks with us on the journey.

As Jesus comes, and He does come!, we find TRUST, and we find SECURITY— and we have great ANTICIPATION.

We can enter into our children's traditions in good faith. We may smile at Santa and Rudolph and tinsel and lights, but the Christ of Christmas still is the Prince of Peace. We don't smile at Mary's Song— we worship! And you and I can walk with Her Great Son, Our Savior, along that highway that leads into spring. Let us pray: (Segue chorus: Jesus, Name above all names!)

Closing Story:

Barbara Brown Taylor in a recent *Christian Century* told of taking a big van load of rich kids to Appalachia to acquaint them first hand with how a lot of the rest of the world lives.

There they met some very real and wonderful people, among whom was a boy named . He soon became one with them, and they prayed together. But

God So Loved the World

December 24, 1995

John 1:1-15

One summer afternoon we were in Westminster Abbey (where kings and queens have been crowned and buried— one of the most fascinating of places—) when an announcement was made that worship was to begin. All other activities were to cease. Tourists could become worshipers, or they could leave. Some of the people showed obvious displeasure at losing half an hour in their exploration of the chapels and mausoleums and crypts and all the history of that great church. Some simply left.

Helen and I found seats in the nave. The great organ began to play. The choir sang praise to God. The scriptures were read. Our hearts were lifted. We worshiped. We were refreshed in spirit. We were reminded that the Abbey is first of all a house of prayer, a church. Then we went back to being tourists.

Christmas has become almost like a great cathedral.

It has enough to fascinate and inspire for a lifetime. Christmas, like a cathedral, is full of beauty and wonder. The Old Testament poets and prophets laid the great foundation stones and began the soaring arches. Matthew and Luke have given us the great picture windows of Bethlehem and the Star and Wise Men and Angels and the Annunciation and much, much more. Down through the centuries writers and musicians and peasants and kings have added carols and stories and oratorios and pageants that fill the cathedral that is Christmas full of wonder. Even the little lights on your Christmas tree and ours are part of the great Cathedral of Christmas. There is more than we can ever hope to see. (What a "Gift Shop" this cathedral has! And what a "lunch room"!)

But still, Christmas is a place of worship!

John's contribution to Christmas is a little like that call to worship in the abbey. He calls us to the center of the cathedral, and goes to the very heart of what Christmas is all about. John says not a word about Bethlehem and the manger and the shepherds and the wise men. As a matter of fact, in his entire Gospel John never once mentions Mary, Jesus' mother, by name. Joseph, his step-father is mentioned only once. But John comes immediately to the heart of Christmas. The opening words of John's Gospel are absolutely packed with wonder.

I. JESUS IS GOD ALMIGHTY

John wrote: 1:1. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 The same was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made 4 In him was life; and the life was the light of mankind. 5. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

- At Christmas remember:

The Baby of Bethlehem, as the creed tells us, is:

"God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made ..." This is revelation truth! When you really can believe this it is revelation time! Just words and human wisdom cannot get the truth across. If you believe that, count yourself truly fortunate. As Jesus told Peter: "Flesh and blood has not revealed this unto you, but my Father which is in heaven!"

God Himself came down to earth!

II. JESUS IS REALLY ONE WITH US, OUR BROTHER

John wrote 1:14. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

- At Christmas dare to believe:

"The Lord Jesus Christ... came down from heaven and was made incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man," the Creed continues. Here is THE miracle of miracles. Here is the very heart of our faith. The INCARNATION. Jesus is one with us! He came here to bring us salvation. he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate. The cross itself is only tragedy if in fact Jesus is not very God and very man.

Do you really believe that? If you do it is a miracle! Jesus is not only God— he is our BROTHER! To believe that is a gift of faith from God!

III. "JESUS CHRIST IS LORD!"

John wrote 1:12 But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the children of God, [even] to them that believe on his name : 13 Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. - Best of all, at Christmas, say from your heart, "Jesus Christ is Lord!"

There is MYSTERY here! Not everyone receives Jesus. Not everyone knows Jesus. Not everyone is willing to believe that He is God and that He is human. But if YOU have met him, and if you believe, then you are invited into the family of God! Jesus makes it possible for you and me to be men and women of God. "Jesus is the light that lights every person in the world."

This is not MY family (although I have been adopted, too)— not the property of this church or any church. But the simple promise is there: if you receive the Christ you have the power— the right— the privilege and promise to be God's child.

~ * ~ * ~

How do you and I "receive Christ" and be/become children of God? The answer is both simple and profound. It has to do with believing and confessing.

First, believing: God doesn't ask us to believe in magic, or profess to believe something totally and obviously false. Still, the basic facts of Christmas are pretty hard for human minds to grasp. But by the help of God

God So Loved the World

1. We can believe that Jesus is God
2. We can believe that Jesus came and lived among us, and that somehow he took our sins to the cross forever.

This faith is a gift of God. It is a persuasion that comes as you open your heart to God. It is revealed from faith to faith.

Then comes confessing:

You may think I am speaking about confessing your sins and asking forgiveness. Forgiveness of sins is a pretty important part of being a Christian, but it is not the very heart of the matter. The very heart of the matter is WHY we sin— it is WHO or WHAT is at the center of our lives. Being saved is not just having our sins forgiven so we can have a clean slate and live a clean life on our own terms. Rather being saved, or born again, is saying that we will make the Christ of Christmas our Lord, and follow Him.

3. We can confess "Jesus is Lord!" and by that confession renounce every other life allegiance, every other pretender to the throne of our lives. Do you even now believe? Really and truly in your heart do you believe Jesus is God? That Jesus is Savior because he took our sins to the cross? Do you say with your mouth, and with your mind— and with your will— JESUS IS LORD! ??

~ * ~ * ~

We are ALL in the Cathedral that is Christmas!

I sometimes wish I could be back in that great Abbey. I LOVE almost everything about a cathedral. I can't do that. but that essence of what the cathedral stands for, the worship and praise of God, is not limited to the great churches.

How many times have you heard people say: wouldn't it be nice to have Christmas all year— I don't know about that. But the essence of Christmas is first of all a time of worship and wonder. And we CAN have that because Christmas is TRUE! Jesus, God's Son, is Lord! He is ONE WITH US forever!!

Lift up your hearts! Worship the Christ! Then carry on with the carols and stories and being happy tourists in the Cathedral called Christmas!.

Prayer - #152 Fairest Lord Jesus - Verses 1 & 4 [then # 164 ??]

Starlight Sonlight

December 31, 1995

Matthew 2:1-12 *When they saw the star they were overjoyed ...*

Ephesians 3:1-12 (sel) *Although I am the very least of all saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ . . . so that through the church the wisdom of God ... might now be made known ..."*

The story of the Magi is a reminder to God's people that the Good News is for all the world. The Jews are God's chosen people, but they were chosen for the purpose of telling the nations about a God that loves them and wants them included in His family. This was not hidden in their scriptures: Isaiah 60 says "Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawning."

It is pretty heady stuff, being God's chosen people, and knowing that you have the truth. It is easy to slip into the comfortable notion that you are not only chosen, but favorite, that God exists to meet your needs, instead of God's people being God's servants. That is why it is so significant that at the very beginning of Jesus' life Matthew tells about important Gentiles that came and found Jesus, and worshiped him as their king, and gave him gifts. Matthew, that most Jewish of the Jews, is telling the world that Messiah is for all nations.

The New Testament expands the concept of chosen people to include the church. Galatians 3: 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. We are God's family; it feels good to belong. It is great to believe that we know God in Christ. But the 'other side' of the message is there, also: we don't have a monopoly on God's love. We can be called God's people, but we have been given the light in order that we may tell others where to find the Christ.

The story of the Magi tells us that God's salvation is revealed to those who will seek Him. Following the STAR is an illustration of the truth found in Hebrews 11:6, that the Lord God is a Rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. The Magi didn't seem to have too much to go on when they started out. Just the light of a star. But they

persisted, and were rewarded with Epiphany. God takes notice when people start seeking him. If they will keep at it, they will not be disappointed.

We all have to come to Bethlehem by following the light we have been given. Every story is different. Many of us have been brought into this world with open Bibles in our homes, and simple, straightforward Bible doctrine preached in our churches, and we cannot remember when we didn't believe the basics about Jesus coming, and dying for our sins. That's good. Many remember how the light hit them in the darkness, and they became seekers and finders of the Christ, like my own father, who was never once in a gospel service before he was 21 years of age. There are as many stories of how we came to know Jesus as there are people. Still, the promise is there: if you want to find God, you have a gift (faith) that will enable you, by diligent seeking, to come into His Presence.

Finally, the story of the Magi challenges God's people to be like the star— and try to point everyone we can to the Christ we know. Coming to Bethlehem was evidently a long journey for the Wise Men. First they were afar off, and the light was dim, but there it was. "...they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star " -Matthew 2:9 People need light when they are "far off."

We Can Begin With Simple Kindness.

Maybe sometimes the most important thing we can do will seem like a very small thing— but it will be like a star on the horizon, starting someone on the road to Bethlehem. The journey to salvation may begin with a little kindness together with a prayer.

(Sue Sylvester saw a boy reading a Testament on a school bus— and said a word of encouragement with an invitation to fellowship. She herself had miles and miles to go yet. But years later she saw that boy, now a young man, in that church in Beverly where she attended as a teenager, and he told her that her word of encouragement on the school bus had nudged him forward— was a contributing factor in his finding the God in the church.)

The "far off" witness is not to be despised. Arm yourself with God's Spirit every morning. Fill your quiver with arrows of God's love and concern. Then shoot those arrows every place you go, all day long. The "arrow" may just be a smile. It may be an encouragement or thanks. There may be times when you can give a word about Jesus Christ to a perfect stranger— but usually that privilege has to be earned or opened by previous work of the Spirit. But we can all be engaged in the first line of spiritual warfare which is seeking to let love overcome indifference, and light overcome darkness.

God Will Bless His Word, The Bible.

The Magi sought and found guidance from the Revelation of Holy Scripture. Even though the Herod and the scribes weren't sympathetic with their search, the scriptures themselves were not to be denied. Once again, the three wise men set off with what light they had.

If we take that next step in introducing people to Christ we will have to be people who let God's Word abide in us.

God Will Do What We Cannot Do.

'The star they had seen ... stopped over the place where the child was' and they entered the house 'they saw the child, and knelt down and worshiped and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.' This has to be a special revelation, a miracle. No heavenly body could ever single out one house on earth— it is impossible. But when the star had done all it could, and the scriptures got them into the neighborhood, then God took over and brought them the rest of the way.

Our sharing the Good News is like that. People hunger after God. Then they hear a Gospel Message— perhaps Billy Graham preaching a simple Gospel message. But then the Holy Spirit says "YOU need to say "Yes!" to Jesus! YOU need to come and confess Jesus as Lord!" [I have been accused a few times of singling out individuals in a gospel message. I never have— but that "feeling" illustrates the final step of the miracle of personal Epiphany.

Just a couple more thoughts in closing:

There are times every one of US are seekers, like "The Wise Men"— we are seekers— following the light! Remember Hebrews 11:6. Find someone who knows the Bible. Listen for the Holy Spirit's guidance.

There are other times when the entire CHURCH is called to be like the STAR of Bethlehem. Paul understood that when (in the epistle passage he says - Ephesians 3:8 "Although I am the least of all saints, I have this high privilege: to tell the Gentiles they can get in on God's fabulous riches." Fabulous riches!!

[He almost makes evangelism sound like Publisher's Clearing House and Ed McMahon, doesn't he. But if you think about it, it is BETTER than any amount of money.

[You know— you've seen the ads that feed all out avarice— a van pulls up and some poor man in his undershirt is told: "You now have \$10,000,000!!" Actually, telling people about God's riches doesn't ALWAYS get such a great reception because people don't yet have the capacity to believe. As wonderful as God's riches are, the great mystery involved made Paul's reception a little different from Ed McMahon's.]

Paul's privilege has come down US, to the CHURCH, to you and me. Do you ever feel like "the very least of all saints"? So do I! But you and I together have a share in the grace of bringing the news of God's riches to people outside our religious and ethnic family. Let's begin where we are. Don't start BIG— start where you ARE now! We all are able to love people and pray for them as we go through our daily routine. In so doing who knows what STAR may rise on their horizon!

Jesus said (and with these words I close:) Matthew 5: 14 YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD! A CITY THAT IS SET ON AN HILL CANNOT BE HID, NEITHER DO PEOPLE LIGHT A CANDLE AND PUT IT UNDER A BUSHEL. LET YOUR LIGHT SO SHINE BEFORE 'THE GENTILES' THAT THEY MAY SEE YOUR GOOD WORKS, AND GLORIFY YOUR FATHER WHICH IS IN HEAVEN." Amen.

Prayer - Hymn #429 *The Light of the World is Jesus*

Say Yes

A Vision for Giving

January 7, 1996

I Corinthians 13:3

In a famous poem by James Russell Lowell, a Knight of King Arthur's Round Table, Launfel, set out as a young man to give his life to a high and noble service of the Lord Jesus Christ. Sir Launfel spent his life in a search the world over for the Holy Grail, the cup that Jesus used during the Last Supper.

Though he searched the world over, Sir Launfel never found the Grail. In bitter disappointment, as he was coming to the conclusion that he would never find the Holy Grail, he was confronted by a hungry man asking for alms. Launfel shared what food he had with the beggar, and gave him a drink from his own cup. And then, to his amazement, that beggar became the Lord Jesus Himself.

The last few lines of Lowell's poem:

*"Lo, it is I, be not afraid:
In many climes without avail,
Thou hast spent thy life for the Holy Grail;
Behold it is here— the cup which thou
Didst fill at this streamlet for me but now;
This crust is my body broken for thee,
The water his blood that died on the tree;
The holy supper is kept, indeed,
In whatso we share with another's need;
Not what we give but what we share,
For the gift without the giver is bare;
Who gives himself with his alms feeds three—
Himself, his hungering neighbor, and Me."
-James Russell Lowell*

Giving is important. This month we begin an emphasis on giving. But there is something more important than giving. More important than giving itself is WHY we give.

Giving is good. But just giving is not quite enough. God's kind of giving means putting LOVE into our gift. God so loved that he gave. We, too, can give because we love. I am speaking now of God's kind of love, agape' love.

I. A LIFE-CENTERING LOVE

- A. Life-centering commitment is a requisite for world-class success in any endeavor: When people FOCUS their lives and living THINGS HAPPEN! People can "AGAPE" ANY NUMBER OF OPTIONS: I John 2:15— this warning:

"Love (agape') not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any one love (agape') the world, the love (agape') of the Father is not in that person!"

The same word for love, "agape"— but different life-centers.

Winners, people going for success in any field will have this life-centering kind of drive. Most people simply live from paycheck to paycheck.

- B. World-class Christians have a life-centering commitment to Jesus! It is as simple as that! Life-changing Christians— are people who build their lives around ONE center— a love totally abandoned to God in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. These are the kinds of GIVERS that make a real DIFFERENCE in their world.

Transition: I am assuming that YOU are with me— in that we want to be the best Christians we know how to be. We want to have this AGAPE' love for God— and have it working:

II. UPGRADING OUR LOVE — BETTER REASONS TO GIVE

- A. Giving for any reason but love simply does not impress God. It certainly can and does impress me! I might not be able to tell the difference. I am simply amazed at any kind of sacrifice. But the Bible tells us people can make amazing sacrifices that in God's eyes are totally wasted. Nothing!

"Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love (agape'), it profits me nothing." -I Cor 13:3

B. Agape' love for God keeps seeking the best ways to LOVE, and to GIVE:

Did you know that the Bible shows there are "good" and "better" and "best" ways to love?

1. There is the Old Testament standard of love: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thy enemy" Do not do to anyone else what you would not want them to do to you. This world would be a better place if just that level of love were put into effect.
2. There is the Golden Rule, from the New Testament: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Most people think that this is the very best we can ever hope to do.

But did you know that Jesus has called his disciples to even an higher standard?

3. The Great Commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you!" Beyond doing as we would have others do— we are to love as Jesus loved! Can we ever begin to come close? HOW?

Dorothy Day is considered a major "force" in shaping Christian, particularly Catholic, social work in our country. But she was well into her adult years before she became a Christian. She had been active in social concerns in an almost atheistic, certainly a non-religious way. She had an AGAPE', certainly— but God was not in the equation. The story of her conversion is dramatic— too long to tell here. But in the last 40 or so years of her life she GAVE out of sheer LOVE. She saw individual needy people as persons of great worth— she saw them as God sees them.

Her testimony has had an impact on ME! I want to spend the remaining years of my life GIVING— not just CONSERVING, HOARDING ENERGY to make life last as long as possible!

Esther Sanger is hardly recognized on a national scale, as is Dorothy Day. But in a very similar way Esther became a "force" in helping shape caring concerns right here

Say Yes

on the South Shore! {Just this week I heard father Bill McCarthy speak of Esther as a founding force in father Bill's place beginnings.} Esther was past 50 years old before her AGAPE' found its center in God. She was human, with faults as big as yours or mine. But she decided she would GIVE herself to God, or to "others" through her love for God.

And Esther's life has had an impact on ME! I want to give what I have, and not hold it back to see how safe I can be!

I wonder if churches can catch new vision for giving as well as individuals? I wonder if a church like ours— that gives already to missions and home missions and Christian education and local needs— might not seek new ways to give our love along with our gifts? We could think of giving just in terms of dollars, and praying for the overseas missionaries— and that is important and we have to keep it up.

But can we give ourselves more— along with our giving?

The answer of HOW may be answered in specific ways this month of "Say Yes" as we hear from different kinds of people serving God in different kinds of ways. But if we go to a new vision for giving it will begin with the willingness to let God have all our hearts!

I say let's not hoard our strength! I believe we are a LOVING CHURCH. Let's give ourselves along with our giving. Could I dare say, " ASK NOT "What can God do for me?" but instead LET'S DARE TO PRAY TO GOD "What WILL YOU GIVE THROUGH me?"! THROUGH US! I challenge US to give ourselves, our young people as well as our money to see God's kingdom come and His will be done in earth as it is in heaven! Amen! This is my vision for giving!

It may not rank up there with the world's greatest poetry, but it says it pretty well, doesn't it:

"Not what we give but what we share, For the gift without the giver is bare; Who gives himself with his alms feeds three— Himself, his hungering neighbor, and Me." - James Russell Lowell

As we share at the Lord's Table this morning— will you ask God to make YOU truly WISE? Will you invite HIM to be the center of your life, and make YOU His kind of GIVER?

Let us pray:

January 7, 1996

THE HOLY COMMUNION

[THE TABLE THAT TRANSFORMS: Lord, let no one come to this Table today and not be changed!]

The Law Read and Confession Made

WE HAVE READ OUR CONFESSION OF FAITH Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to draw us near to Himself so that we can come to his table with confidence. Shall we pray:

Search us, O God, and know our most private thoughts. Try us, and show unto us the deepest motives, the real state of our hearts. Forgive us where we have been selfish, or insensitive, or sinful in any way. We cannot keep the Great Commandment, and truly love You, O God, with all our heart, soul, and mind unless You in mercy grant to us the grace of Your indwelling Spirit. We cannot love each other as we should unless Your love is shed abroad in our hearts.

We do not presume to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

The Informal Invitation ("This is not my table . . . ")

The Words of Institution:

We praise you for the mystery of our salvation! We truly believe Christ has died!
Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

Say Yes

Bless these emblems, O God, and make them to us the Body and Blood of your Son, spiritual food, and spiritual drink of new and unending life in Jesus Christ. And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us:

Our Father which art in heaven AMEN

[Now receive the sacrament - wait and partake together - be in prayer for yourself, and intercession for others ...] HERE LET THE ELEMENTS BE DISTRIBUTED, PRAYERS OFFERED, (MUSIC PLAYED/SUNG) Partaking Together:

Holy and gracious Father; in your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin, and were worthy of death and hell, you, in your mercy sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to You, the God and Father of all.

He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

On the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had give thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat: THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

After supper he took the cup and when he had give thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me: Amen

Now, humbly we receive the Gifts of God for the People of God

With Jesus on the Mountain

With Jesus Series 1 of 7

- **With Jesus on the Mountain**
- With Jesus in the Wilderness
- With Jesus at the Well of Sychar
- With Jesus into the Light
- With Jesus at the Cemetery
- With Jesus into Holy Week
- With Jesus into Resurrection Life

February 18, 1996 AM

Matthew 17:1-9

The Transfiguration "*This is my Son ...listen to him!*"

Mountains as Points of Reference

One Sunday afternoon, a long time ago, instead of taking the usual Nazarene nap, I took my four sons on a hike up Mount Beacon above the majestic Hudson River in Beacon, New York. We lived in Poughkeepsie where I was pastor at Vassar Road Church.

It was sultry and hot, and the thought of climbing in shady, cooler woods sounded like fun.

It was a twenty minute drive to a place where we could leave the wagon as far up the mountain as it could go. Then it was just over an hour's walk to the top where you could look up and down the river for miles.

On the way up the trail we heard the sound of a brook off to one side, and followed the sound and found a beautiful place where the water was falling through a U shaped place in a big rock into a shallow pool like a basin underneath it. It was hot, and the water was very cool.

The four boys stripped down to their shorts and into the water they went.

One of them would sit in the cleft in the rock and dam up the water it was that narrow until it spilled over his shoulders then he'd jump into the basin below with the wave gushing after him.

We stayed at that pool half an hour or less that hot Sunday afternoon and that was thirty years ago. I drove back to Vassar Road and preached and led the evening service. I haven't a clue as to what I preached it has been long forgotten. But every one of those four boys, now grown men with families of their own, remembers that day we climbed Mount Beacon. And somehow it has a good place in our family history. It was one of those defining moments that help give life direction.

We've all had those times, those defining moments, that we remember as we look back across the landscape of our lives to those mountains, literal or figurative, that show us where we've been, and to some extent, who we are and where we're going. Perhaps the day the story in our Gospel lesson began started out like just any other day for the disciples. But it was going to turn out to be a day they would never, ever forget.

Jesus called to Peter, James, and John. He often went apart to pray, and a prayer time was all they really were expecting. Up and up the mountain trail they went, until they reached the top. And there they stopped. Luke's Gospel says that Jesus began to pray, and he also tells us that the three disciples became very sleepy.

Peter, James and John were not expecting what came next. While they watched in awe something wonderful beyond description began to happen. The kindly face of the Galilean carpenter began to change in ways the evangelist has found difficult to describe. Later the three men tried to find words to express what they had seen: "Light streamed from his face, as bright as the sun. His clothes became whiter than white they shone with light."

These men knew Jesus well. They had been with him three years and had heard him speak, and heal, and raise the dead. They had even confessed their faith that He is

the Son of God, the Messiah. But they were NOT prepared for this display of dazzling glory. They knew Jesus. But they also realized they hardly knew him at all!

(Our doctrines are good/necessary; they try to explain the mysteries of faith: Jesus is very God and very man, the Son of God and the Son of Mary. The Father in heaven helps us to confess our faith with Peter, and say with conviction: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God!" But NOTHING is as convincing and satisfying and thoroughly frightening as a mountaintop glimpse of Christ's glory!)

Then, as they watched, the three disciples became aware that two other people were present, talking with Jesus in the cloud of light. In some mysterious and wonderful way, they knew that these two glorious figures were Moses and Elijah, the Lawgiver, and the greatest of Old Testament prophets.

Moses on a mountain long before this great giant of faith, the meekest man who ever lived, had talked with God face to face, and had received the Ten Commandments, the holy Law of God by which all mankind is supposed to live, but especially the people of God.

Elijah on another mountain years later, but still a long time before, this rugged prophet had prayed fire down from heaven, and had defeated the false prophets and brought God's people back to Him.

Here were the Law and the Prophets in conversation with the Living Gospel, the Good News of Salvation. Here was a vision of the Law fulfilled, and of Truth triumphant, the whole Plan of Salvation, the whole Word of God represented in one glorious conversation.

Luke tells us something of what Moses and Elijah were discussing with their glorious Lord that mountaintop day. They were talking about another mountain yet to be climbed. They were talking about the hill we call Calvary.

Peter, James and John may not have understood the full implication in the dazzling light of the moment, but they were dramatically seeing portrayed before their eyes

With Jesus on the Mountain

- Jesus as fulfilling the Law (Moses), completing the truth of Torah; and
- Jesus as Champion over evil (Elijah), making sinners right with God, completing the Plan of Salvation.

The disciples were uncomfortable. Don't ever think that when God is manifested in power it is a comfortable, easy time. This was gut wrenching, frightening to the limit! Peter began to 'prattle' a bit. "Lord, let's build succoth booths right here on top of the mountain! We'll build three one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for You!"

Then came a majestic, thundering, authoritative voice from heaven. The Father put things into perspective. He said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to HIM!"

The heart of faith is not Jesus AND Law, or Jesus AND Proclamation, or Jesus AND anything else.

The heart of faith is Jesus. That is the message this mountain top experience carried home to Peter James and John. Then it was over. Just like that.

As soon as they came down the mountain actually before they got to the bottom they were back at nitty gritty work. As far as we know they never had another Transfiguration type opportunity. (Oh, yes, John saw the glorified Savior during his exile on Patmos you can read about it in the first chapter of the Revelation.) But these men never forgot what they saw on that mountain that day.

They needed it in just a few weeks when their Master was taken from them and mocked and beaten and killed on a Cross. It looked like defeat. It looked like weakness. (But) They had been to the mountain. They had seen the glory. They could believe when the Resurrection came.

They needed it after Jesus ascended to heaven, and their own crosses became heavy, and they were tempted to wonder if it was worth it. But they had seen a glimpse of the glory. They knew that their Master was Lord of Moses and Elijah who are very much alive. They had been on the mountain. They could trust that God would not waste their sacrifice.

James was killed by the sword early in the first wave of persecution. Had the vision been wasted on him? I don't think so. Peter led the church in Jerusalem, and then Antioch and Ephesus and Rome. The vision sustained him, and he passed it on to Luke. John the Beloved outlived all the other apostles. As long as he lived the memory of that day of Transfiguration on a mountain in the north of Israel was a blessing and a hope.

We cannot live on mountain tops, or even live FOR that kind of experience. Don't forget, eight perfectly good apostles got word of this day second hand, just like you and I have.

What we can do is live in confession of faith in our Master. If truly the faith has been granted us to believe that Jesus is the Christ we can say with Peter, six days BEFORE this glory time, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!"

What we can do if we have that faith is affirm from our hearts, "Jesus is LORD!" We can ask Him if we can follow Him around day after day. We can listen to Him pray. We can ask Him if we can come along when he cares for people who hurt. That is what we can do. And sometime when we least expect it there will be those loving times those tender times when Jesus lets us know He's pleased with us. Not Transfigurations, maybe. But mountain experiences. Defining moments. Moments we never forget.

And who's to say Oh well

Let's pray

Hymn No.66 *Thou Art Worthy*

With Jesus in the Wilderness

With Jesus Series 2 of 7

- [With Jesus on the Mountain](#)
- **With Jesus in the Wilderness**
- [With Jesus at the Well of Sychar](#)
- [With Jesus into the Light](#)
- [With Jesus at the Cemetery](#)
- [With Jesus into Holy Week](#)
- [With Jesus into Resurrection Life](#)

February 25, 1996

Preface

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Six weeks from today is Easter Sunday. I would like to give you a verse to use during these weeks and days before Easter as we join together in seeking to draw nearer to God. (Let me read the first few words in Hebrews 12:)

"Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him who endured such hostility from sinners against himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls." (Hebrews 12: 1 -3)

I especially underscore those three words: "looking unto Jesus..." All through Lent let's make that the key to our Bible reading and prayer. I ask you to look to Jesus "in all his offices," as John Wesley would urge us. By that I mean remember that Jesus is always our Prophet, our Priest, and our King.

Jesus is our Prophet, who calls us to turn from any selfish ways and be right with God. Jesus is our Priest, who by the sacrifice of his life on Calvary forgives our sins, and brings us with Himself to God by his blood. Jesus is our King, who leads us in the way we should go— our Shepherd who loves us and cares for us— our Physician who heals us, makes us whole.

Will you try to do this? to remember all through the time between now and Easter to be "looking unto Jesus— our Prophet, our Priest, our King!"?? (With that introduction to Lent (as a six week journey) we look at today's lessons:)

I. AT THE BEGINNING OF LENT WE LOOK AT TWO BEGINNINGS

We look back to the Garden where it all started— and to the Desert where Christ's battle with evil began in earnest. The two "beginnings" are very much connected.

You remember the story of what happened in the Garden.

One writer called it "the Big Mistake made by the father and mother of us all before they had really gotten the hang of being human." In a Reader's Digest version:

God said, "Don't eat the fruit!"

They ate the fruit anyway. And the rest is history.

And so we have our first parents to thank, or to blame, for what we call "original sin," however it is that we have been tainted with it. We are all sons and daughters of an Adam and Eve who were tempted, and who gave in to their temptation. Every son and daughter ever since has had some version or other of a repeat of that loss of innocence. We know that story pretty well:

- God said it.
- We heard it.
- We thought about it.
- And we went ahead and did it anyway. Every son and daughter has sinned— except One.

But we also remember another story. This story took place in the desert.

The first Adam, and Eve, came into a Garden. When they failed in their test of obedience they were expelled, and the earth was cursed. The Second Adam, Jesus Christ, was tempted in a Wilderness.

Fresh from the baptism, from the glory of God the Father's wonderful words: "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased!," Jesus is brought into confrontation with raw evil. The ordeal in the desert lasted forty days.

That is one big reason why Christians have taken the forty days before Easter to unite in spirit with our Lord.

The temptations of both Adam and Eve, and Jesus were across the whole spectrum of human needs and desires. There was the level of physical hunger, which could be understood as the drives or appetites of our bodies. There was the level of emotional need and the desire for acceptance, the cravings of our souls. There was the highest level, of choosing, of deciding who will say what is right and wrong, the statement of what it ultimately means to be human.

Jesus was asked to prove he is God's Son by making stones into bread. He was asked to prove he trusted God's Word by throwing himself off the temple so angels will catch him. He was asked to compromise "just once" and avoid all the agony of the cross.

In every case, of course, Jesus refused to argue or reason with Satan. He had taken the role of Servant of his Father— and he used the written Word as his guide.

By his triumph over sin, both there in the desert, and then on the cross, Jesus gave us the right and privilege of getting in on a new race of human beings. (John 1:12 As many as received Him, to them gave he power to become the children of God, even to those who believe on His name.")

We all carry Adam's genes. we know what it is to fail. Every one of us has lost innocence before God. But if we will, we can be sons and daughters of this new Adam. We can be born of the Spirit. We can all carry Jesus' genes— and we can know what it is to overcome temptation.

II. BOTH STORIES SAY TWO BASIC THINGS ABOUT TEMPTATION

All temptations begin with a question of God's Word, of one kind or other.

"Has God really said THAT?" That's the first approach of the wily serpent. In the desert Satan's opener was "IF you are (really) the Son of God all weak and hungry and wretched like this..."

The first line of attack will be to blur the lines— to confuse the difference between right and wrong— to question the Word of God Himself. (God HAS spoken!)

Treasure the Word of God! Listen when God wants to speak— even by humble means. Be careful how you handle the Bible! It is a very human book, and has been translated by very human people. But somehow the same Spirit who inspired it— and inspired it in ways no liberal OR fundamentalist can prove or disprove by merely humanistic means— somehow the Spirit is able to preserve that message of salvation so we don't need to err if we will listen.

The serpent is still saying "Has God SAID?" Ask your heart! You KNOW God has said!

All temptation, ultimately, is temptation to try to take God's place.

The second aspect of temptation is to say— even if God HAS spoken, HE IS NOT TO BE TRUSTED! I WILL MAKE MY OWN DECISION ABOUT RIGHT AND WRONG!

Adam and Eve fell for Satan's promise "You will be like gods to know right from wrong." Jesus, in His mission as God's Servant, remained totally obedient to the Father's will.

In Adam, Paul tells us, we all died. In Jesus— in his victory— we all (potentially) were made alive.

In Adam something was LOST— the secret of what we were supposed to be/become. In Jesus for the first time we get a picture of perfect humanity.

Humanity was recovered!

When Adam sinned all the earth was cursed. When Jesus, the Perfect Man, submitted wholly to the Father's will, and resisted temptation He was ministered to by angels, and all the earth was blessed.

But the message is more than just history— more than true stories: the message is as we look to Jesus we find help in our temptation:

III. TEMPTATION AND OUR PROPHET, PRIEST, AND KING

Jesus did not just TELL us how to defeat Satan. He showed us.

He did not argue or reason with temptation. In every instance he fell back on the written word of God.

Jesus refused to do the right things for the wrong reasons. Later Jesus would feed 5,000 people in the wilderness. After all, he had provided manna for the thousands in the wilderness during the Exodus. Making bread, or showing his power, becoming sovereign over all the earth was never in question, nor were those items the issue. Jesus refused to do the tempter's bidding, refused to step outside the plan God had for His ministry.

He was tempted in all points as we are, yet without sin.

Look to Jesus in his offices:

As Prophet Jesus calls us to choose God's Word, His will, His way over our own. All of us have failed in the past. All of us have faced temptations great and small hundreds of times. Our Prophet calls us to recognize the Tempter in matters of the will— and to choose God's Word! God has spoken!

As Priest Jesus overcomes the sin that does so easily beset us. By His sacrifice on the Cross he has given us power to receive Him and become sons and daughters (John 1:12) of God. He is praying for you and me right NOW! We can overcome as we plead the merits of the blood of Calvary! God has stooped to lift us!

With Jesus in the Wilderness

As King Jesus comes alongside us by His Spirit to "lead us not into temptation, but (to) deliver us from evil." Our King is a Shepherd King—a Physician King— a Presence! God is WITH us right now!

Prayer: You have taught us to pray— "Lead us NOT into temptation, but DELIVER US from evil! Thank You for answering that prayer— for showing how we can flee to You in our need. Amen

Hymn: 636 *Jesus Lover of My Soul*

With Jesus at the Well of Sychar

With Jesus Series 3 of 7

- [With Jesus on the Mountain](#)
- [With Jesus in the Wilderness](#)
- **With Jesus at the Well of Sychar**
- [With Jesus into the Light](#)
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March 10, 1996 - Lent 3

John 4:5-42

If ever anyone lived on a dead end street this was the person. And by dead end I don't mean a nice cul de sac where the kids can play and the traffic can turn around. I mean dead end like going nowhere, like abandon all hope. I don't know how, but she had run through five marriages. Five separate stories of tragedy.

It could have been tremendously bad luck, and her husbands had all died. It could have been simply the result of a kind of society where wives were throw-away items, where certainly all women were second class citizens. But anyone who has been married that many times has become very well acquainted with loss and failure.

Maybe the biggest loss of all was this person's loss of any sense of self esteem.

This passage has been studied so thoroughly that we all know, or think we know, how women in the middle east always went for their water early in the day, together, in a community time of fellowship. While the little children played and the latest village gossip was passed, the women carried home their water from the well in the cool of the morning. The scene here is in the blazing light of high noon, when there was usually no one at the well and she could come and go in her loneliness without the added pain of feeling she was part of the gossip being passed along.

I don't know that she was a greater sinner than any of the other men and women of her village. But in her isolation she certainly had to be right up there among the greatest in terms of her pain and needs.

When she arrived at the well she was annoyed just a bit. For there on the curbing of the well sat a stranger. By his dress and his bearing she knew him to be a Jew. She had no idea that her life was about to change and that this man would be the most important person she would ever meet.

She had deliberately chosen this time to come to the well so she could stay away from people. This was a low time in her life. It was a time that she least expected to meet anyone, let alone someone very, very important. She certainly did not have in mind a challenge to her faith that would change her forever. She paused, not quite sure what to expect of this stranger.

The stranger surprised her by asking her for a drink. He looked a little tired, and he evidently was thirsty. The woman was not afraid to voice her surprise. "How come you even speak to me?" she asked.

Social rules were stronger then than we can understand in our society. Some things simply were not done. Jewish men would sooner suffer great thirst than ask a strange woman for a drink.

She let her water jar down and down into the deep well and watched it turn on its side and fill and sink. Then she hauled it hand over hand back to the well curb, and poured the cool water into the stranger's cupped hands. She was amazed that this Jew not only would speak to her, but drink from her water jar— she was ceremonially untouchable, and she made the jar ceremonially unclean. The stranger drank and drank, and then wiped his mouth.

Before he said another word this stranger had said a tremendous amount. He had said 'You are not worthless. You are someone who can help me. You are worth talking to.' He had said "I am not afraid to cross over barriers of gender and race that put people down.' He had even said 'It is all right to ask favors, and reach out to help and

be helped by others.' And he said a lot more beside before he ever opened his mouth again.

But then Jesus DID open his mouth and say a whole lot. As a matter of fact, a part of this story is the longest conversation that is recorded that Jesus ever had with any one individual. And even though I hate to interrupt the flow of the drama, we do have to look at what Jesus told this one shunned and rejected woman. Actually he told her two things that stand out to me, and a third thing than was stunning!

1. He told her something about how people worship. Whenever sincere people seek after God they come under one of the ways Jesus described to this one woman. I'd love to say more about this— but there is more there than I can say now.

Jesus simply said "You Samaritans don't know ... we Jews have heard God's revelation and do know— but there is coming— and now is a higher, deeper way to worship!"

2. And then Jesus spoke some of the most profound words that have ever been spoken on the subject of true worship, of worship as God intends it shall be— the kind of worship, Jesus said, that the heavenly Father goes looking for. Maybe I can address that best by reading a short paragraph of Eugene H. Peterson's translation, *The Message*:

"It's who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That's the kind of people the Father is out looking for; those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration."

The longest conversation on record— with a woman who lived on a dead end street, going nowhere! The most profound words about worship— to a person who had probably never heard of philosophy or knew much about Torah.

3. Then- most stunning of all— the first declaration of his Messiahship recorded in the Gospel—She says, "Well— these are wonderful words— and when Messiah comes I'm

sure HE will make them plain!" And the amazing, head-spinning reply she got, and that she believed, were the words: "I that speak unto you— am HE!"

Well, that may not have been the end of our woman's hard times in life, but it certainly shattered her isolation. She left her precious water pot right where it was and headed into the village looking for the people she had been afraid of, the people who had scorned her. And they listened to her! There was something absolutely fascinating to the village people about the genuine faith that had been kindled in this woman many of them knew had been a loser in so many ways. The village emptied at noonday, and streamed out to the edge of town to the well of Sychar, the well of Jacob their forefather. They heard for themselves. They believed. A genuine turning to God of a whole town began.

The transformation of a hopeless woman into a kind of evangel, the transformation of a Samaritan town into a worshiping community began when Jesus asked someone, someone on a dead end street, for a drink.

It makes me think there are no really dead end streets if Jesus is really there. We've probably all been to the well at one time or other. It makes me believe that in the least expected places, and in the strangest times Jesus shows up in the most unexpected ways. He treats us like people of worth— for he values us. He asks us for our help if he needs it.

And then he offers us in return the kind of grace the rich and famous can never buy with all their wealth, and the keenest scholars can never figure out with all their fabulous IQ, and the most powerful politicians cannot legislate with all their hot air. He offers us up the knowledge of who we are, and the hope of who we can be. He helps us look Him in the face and see his purity— and then look ourselves in the mirror and see our possibilities. And before we know it we are even looking our neighbors in the face, whether they are rich or poor, and telling them about a Man who makes us more alive than we ever thought we ever could be.

Prayer - Hymn Closer - 458 *Fill My Cup, Lord*

With Jesus into the Light

With Jesus Series 4 of 7

- With Jesus on the Mountain
- With Jesus in the Wilderness
- With Jesus at the Well of Sychar
- **With Jesus into the Light**
- With Jesus at the Cemetery
- With Jesus into Holy Week
- With Jesus into Resurrection Life

March 17, 1996

20/20 BLINDNESS

John 9:1-41

Did you ever hear the old saying about college students:

*Freshmen know not, and know that they know not;
Sophomores know not, and know not that they know not;
Juniors know, and know not that they know;
Seniors know, and know that they know?*

I don't quite know what to say about that, except I'm not sure I ever met a "pure" freshman who knew that he/she didn't know— and I'm not sure which I am more ashamed of— that I still catch myself being like a sophomore, who doesn't know how much I don't know— or even like a senior who is wise beyond all understanding.

The story today is about knowing; about knowing the most important things in the world. It is a story about the healing of physical blindness. Before the story is over we see there are worse things than not having physical sight. At the end of the story one big question is asked: "ARE WE BLIND?" That is a question we all might want to

dare to ask Jesus. Because NO ONE IS QUITE AS BLIND AS THOSE WHO ARE SURE THEY CAN SEE CLEARLY.

[To the story: John 9:1-14]

You might not think it would be hard to imagine what it would be like never to have seen— to be blind from birth. You could just shut your eyes, you might think. But of course you know that is not the same.

The man in this story got on in the world as best he could, using his other senses. Blindness was a severe handicap, but he made a living, such as it was. Then one day the blind man met Jesus. He didn't know, really, who Jesus was. We are not told how much he had heard about Jesus. By what he told the authorities after he received his sight, the blind man didn't know very much about Him at all.

We have to wonder what in the world inspired such hope and faith in him that he would even listen to Jesus. Then when Jesus did what he did, and told the blind man to do what he was supposed to do— - this man simply went and did as he was told. [What Jesus did: made mud, sent the blind man off in his darkness to wash in the Pool of Siloam}]

I like to think that something warm happened inside the man when Jesus spoke to him. I like to think that grace began to work in him to begin the miracle of faith. That beginning faith might have been as small as simply saying "What do I have to lose!?" Or it may have been inspired by what he had heard of other miracles.

Whatever it was, this man did not deserve to be blind because he had sinned— and he did not deserve to be made well because he was good. We know he was made to see because Jesus took compassion on him; not because he believed in Jesus as Messiah or savior or because he was especially religious or deserving. He simply obeyed, and a miracle took place: He could see!

We have to speculate a bit on what it must have been to experience sight for the first time. To live in a dark world of sounds and smells and jostling, and suddenly to see a donkey for the first time, or a pigeon, or the crowded streets of Jerusalem, or the Temple mount looming above the pool?

Did the blind man have to have help getting home? Did he have to shut his eyes so he could remember where he was?

Finally he got home— and found that he was now quite a celebrity. If he lived now he would certainly make at least the local talk shows on the radio— he might even make Good Morning Israel! on nationwide TV. People began to take notice. It isn't every day a person born blind can see with 20/20 vision by a miracle of God.

So now the people who know everything about everything— who have a faith of rules and regulations that exist to maintain their traditions, rather than traditions that nurture and maintain their faith— these people said, "This is outside OUR control! This is too dangerous!" They moved in.

1. "Number one— nobody does anything or goes anywhere on the Sabbath unless WE say so." [The healing had taken place on the Sabbath.] Of course there were ways to get around Sabbath rules— but they were sure Jesus hadn't bothered to worry his head about that.
2. Number two— this Jesus was the object of grave concern because he had been teaching SPIRITUAL worship— that God must be worshiped by placing HIM at the center of life— instead of by just keeping rigid rules and regulations.
3. Number three— they had to show this man who was really in control of spiritual matters— so they found him and began their interrogation.

This is one of the funniest stories in the Bible, in one way. The interchange between the big shots and the blind man becomes actually almost hilarious.

"Tell us about what happened," they say.

He does.

"Well, this man couldn't be good and do what he did not the Sabbath."

"I think it's pretty good, what he did," says the blind man. "I'm learning to read at 35 years of age!"

"Don't get smart with us," they say. "Maybe you are twin brothers or something." Then, "Let's go and ask his mom and dad."

Mom and Dad don't need trouble with the authorities. They don't want to make any waves.

"No," they say, "we only have the one blind son— he was blind all his life— that's him— he's 35 years old— he can speak for himself." The big shots look the poor man up again.

"Tell us what happened," they say.

"I have already told you about six times," he says. " Are you considering joining the Church of the Nazarene?" Oooh, that one burned!

"Don't be smart with us! We know this man is bad news."

"Bad news, good news—," our friend is getting testy. "All I know is this: I was blind. I can now see 20/20! That is the sum and total of it!"

For his veracity and tenacity the blind man succeeded in getting the high-up people very angry. On the spot they officially excommunicated him. His last hope of heaven, supposedly, was out the window. Their rage must have been a bit sobering even for the ex-blind man, and I'm sure his parents, who didn't want to make trouble, were devastated.

But then comes the best part of the story: Remember, this man had never ever even once seen Jesus. I'm sure Jesus planned it that way. He could have healed him on the spot and when he opened his eyes to see for the first time the first thing he would have seen would have been Jesus instead of that donkey by the pool of Siloam. But Jesus had sent him away to wash.

The blind man didn't know what Jesus looked like— but Jesus looked him up. The disciples said, "Jesus, Master, you know that man you healed last Sabbath day? The authorities have cast him out! His whole neighborhood is buzzing about three visits in one day by the long black robes and all the commotion." So Jesus went looking for him.

And Jesus found him. "Do you believe in Messiah?" Jesus asked.

"Who is Messiah?" answered the man. "I'd like to be able to believe." And then here it came again! Last week to a Samaritan woman, this week to an excommunicated ex-beggar blind man. Jesus reveals to one person the fact that He is the Messiah.

"You're looking at him!" said Jesus.

"Lord, I believe!" said the blind man who now could see in more ways than one. Down on his knees before the Son of God he went.

Then Jesus said one of those enigmatic statements that aren't too difficult to understand if you really want to understand them: "I've come, he said, to help blind people see, and to make those who see become as blind as bats."

Some Pharisees heard him — and they got really upset because they thought they knew what Jesus meant. It was then they asked the question I began this sermon with: "YOU'RE NOT TELLING US THAT WE'RE BLIND, ARE YOU? ARE WE BLIND?"

And Jesus said: "THERE ISN'T ANYONE QUITE AS BLIND AS THE ONE WHO THINKS HE KNOWS EVERYTHING!"

AM I BLIND, JESUS?

If I am a know-it-all, yes!

But if I am in a living connection with Jesus I can say No! I am not blind! The LORD is my Shepherd!

With Jesus as prophet, priest, and king I can see: If my life is centered in Him ('looking unto Jesus'— Hebrews 12:3)

As Prophet he helps me see clearly what is his will,

As Priest he shows me that the cross and the empty tomb are my salvation, and

As King he is the shepherd who leads me even through the (Glen Coe) dark valleys of shadow.

In Chapter 8:12 Jesus said these words: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

With Jesus into the Light

Prayer & Hymn 424 *The Song of the Soul Set Free*

Thoughts on Isolation and Reunion

The Story of 'The Prodigal' in Luke 15:11-32

March 24 (pm), 1996

There are three characters in this drama. The drama itself is about the sadness of separation, and the joy of reunion, and about what it means to really be a part of a loving family.

There are three kinds of sadness represented, which really come from the very same source. That source, as we have already said, is separation, isolation, being shut away in one's time of need.

First Separation

The First separation is obvious. The sadness and pain is that of a person in a corner, at the end of things. It is the sadness of a person who perhaps has been selfish and thoughtless and now is out of luck. He comes to himself when he comes to the very bottom.

We know that this man, the Prodigal, comes home, and there is finally a "happy ending." But at the same time we cannot gloss over the pain this man felt. We can only imagine the wreck and ruin which his descent into the abuse of his gifts brought on his head. The fact that he was saved in the end is wonderful— and it tells us a great deal about the mercies of God. But there was terrible pain involved along the way.

Some time ago the Reader's Digest had a story about a Prodigal. Rev. Gordon Weekly was a highly successful Baptist minister who became addicted to drugs, first through prescriptions, and then through alcoholism and worse. He let his story be told so others might have hope, but also so others might not presume on God's grace.

This man who was at times a co-worker with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Team in South America and other places found himself separated from all spiritual reality in

Christ. He lost his great church, he lost his marriage, he ended up on skid row and nearly lost his life before Rev. Grady Wilson challenged him to give himself and his failure to Jesus. He did. God restored him. But God did not go back and change history! Gordon Weekly is doing God's work now— but don't deny the pain that was there before he came back.

Second Separation

The Second separation is obvious also. The older brother's pain is that of a person who harbors bitterness of spirit in the presence of other people's good fortune. It is the overwhelming gloom and sadness of an unforgiving spirit. It is a sadness that is twisted in on itself, that says "Let the sinner suffer! Sinners deserve hell!"

We don't know how the separation began in this father-son relationship, but it was not in the lack of love of the father. It was in the heart, the selfish heart, of the older brother. "You never gave me so much as a scrawny goat to party with!" The son exploded at the father. He was angry because the older man's heart was still warm toward his prodigal brother.

It is hard to feel sorry for the elder brother. But his pain is real. And the danger is real that he probably will never really be happy! He almost seems to hold on to his misery like he holds on to his self-righteousness. He is right and everyone else—even GOD Himself is wrong!

Third Separation

The Third separation is that which the great father in the story experienced, separation from both of his sons.. His sadness and pain is undeserved. Think about it: this man suffered the loss of his younger son for a period of time. But he kept watch, and when he got the chance he ran out to meet him. I can understand that kind of love a little bit.

But this good man also had suffered the alienation of his older son. In separating himself from his brother and from his father he caused his dad as much grief as the younger man had done in his wastrel sin!

This third great sadness is the sadness of God the Father when we, His children, separate ourselves from His great love!

We Don't Know how the story ends. After all it was just a story, and all the more true for it. But it almost seems that Jesus is saying it is easier for down-and-outers to repent and find peace and happiness than it is for bitter-of-spirit and self-righteous Christians to ever really find peace.

I feel sorry for those who experience the isolation of sin. No one can suffer entirely to himself/herself. Every sad story is the story of multiple heart-ache.

I feel sorry for those who experience the isolation of bitterness and an un-forgiving spirit. Hell has already begun on earth for them. Those who cannot forgive are doomed to shut themselves away from forgiveness. It is a sad thing to be right, to be where you ought to be— and be terribly wrong in spirit.

It may well be that many of us don't need to worry too much about being taken for Prodigals. But we are all in danger of being judgmental "older brother" types, apart from the love of Christ.

It is sobering to think of the great sorrow that God feels as He watches his children go on in isolation and sorrow. I believe God the Father doesn't just want us to be "good." He wants to welcome them into the warmth and fellowship of his great home! The lights are on! The band is playing! The table is groaning! There are children returning, and the father is rejoicing. But he is also watching for others to come— and he is surprised and saddened that some who never went away to the far country refuse to really come into the house!

We all experience times of stress and sorrow— even times of isolation and loneliness in this world. But there is an isolation and a sadness and a loneliness which we do NOT need to experience. God loves every one of us! He wants us to share His home, His house, be a part of His family!

God is ACTIVELY SEEKING to break into your isolation— He wants, He waits— to welcome you home! to bring you INSIDE!

Prayer

Thoughts on Isolation and Reunion

Hymn No. 607 *Just a Closer Walk with Thee*

OR

No. 337 (Sing to the Lord) - *Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling*

With Jesus at the Cemetery

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March 24, 1996

Ezekiel 37 - The Valley of Bones

John 11 - The Raising of Lazarus

"I am the resurrection and the life . . ." - John 11

The prophet Ezekiel is not the usual fare for devotional Bible reading. Ezekiel is sort of the surrealistic painter of the Bible, who gives us word pictures we could compare with Salvador Dali, or even Picasso. When we think of Ezekiel, if we think of him at all, we wonder where he got the strange visions of wheels within wheels, and descriptions of strange creatures that appear again only in the Book of Revelation. But absolutely none of Ezekiel's visions are more graphic— and yet more absolutely TRUE— than the virtual reality of The Valley of Dry Bones.

EZEKIEL'S VISION

GOD takes the prophet "in the spirit (Spirit)" to a valley. The valley was full of bones. Why the bones were lying on the surface of the ground Ezekiel does not say. he does say that in his vision they were very dry. They would be very unclean to a kosher Israelite.

GOD then asks a "silly" question of the prophet. In spite of the hopelessness of the scene God asks: "Son of man, can these bones live?"

In his vision Ezekiel answers very well indeed: "O Lord God, YOU know!"

GOD then gives a direct command, with promise: Give these bone THE WORD OF THE LORD— tell them there is HOPE— tell them God CARES—

Then in his vision the bones come together— they become bodies—But there still was no breath in the re-created host; so the Spirit spoke again and said, "Call for the WIND— the RUACH— the Spirit—" and the Spirit came into the assembled host. The resurrection was complete. They were hale and healthy before his eyes. This is the vision of The Valley of Dry Bones.

GOD EXPLAINS THE VISION to Ezekiel— this valley of dead, dry bones is where my people are right now— and I am sending you to tell them "I will put my Spirit in you and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own place, your own possession— the place I want you to be!"

This is a story about HOPE, and about GOD, and about the power of God's WORD: THE RAISING OF LAZARUS FROM THE DEAD

John 11 repeats the message. There is HOPE when God speaks! Only this is no vision. Jesus demonstrated his authority over life and death. That miracle carried His disciples into what lay ahead. The raising of Lazarus is about HOPE and about GOD and about the power of God's WORD: it is our reminder in these days before Good Friday and Easter that Jesus is Lord, and that He is in charge even on His way to the Cross.

DRY BONES AND GOD'S WORD TODAY

So how do these two stories apply to us on March 24, 1996? What do they tell us to help us where we are on our spiritual journey right now? I SEE TWO POWERFUL POSSIBILITIES:

1. Sometimes we may have to identify with the BONES! Or maybe with Martha or Mary. Or even good old Thomas, who said "I'll go along with Jesus but I can't see anything good..."

Like the people of God in Ezekiel's time there may be times we think our situation is hopeless, or that God has forgotten. Yes, MAYBE there are times when WE ARE THE DRY BONES. We identify with the sisters, or even Lazarus.. waiting for the word of God to penetrate— listening— responding. And I believe the word of God still moves in darkness and chaos and dryness and death.

2. But sometimes GOD may call on us to identify with Ezekiel himself! There are times when God lets us get into the valley of dry bones because He needs a prophet who can speak His word.

ILLUSTRATION:

It must have been 15 years or more, during prayer meeting, a recent E.N.C. grad who was doing Social Work in the toughest sections of inner city Boston stood to testify. Her name was Cindy Knox, and I had a lot of confidence in her character and her walk with God. She gave a testimony that night that in my mind has become a classic.

She was in a particularly unpleasant, unhealthy situation, where children were neglected or abused. She said she actually said half aloud, "Oh God! Where are YOU!" And she almost had anger in her voice in the prayer,

But then Cindy said immediately she had the answer, almost as if God had spoken audibly. He said, "I'm in YOU, Cindy!"

"I AM IN YOU, CINDY!" God challenged Cindy to bring His Presence where she went, and through that challenge, which I never forgot, God challenged those of us who heard her testimony as well.

ILLUSTRATION

Three weeks ago Helen and I were in Florida for a week's rest. During that week I saw posters all over the place— in Sarasota, Bradenton, the Sun Coast— about an interdenominational evangelistic campaign with an evangelist, Steve Wingfield. As I was dressing on Sunday morning we turned on the TV and in the broadcast service of Sarasota First Baptist worship, there was this Steve Wingfield preaching from the

book of Joshua. Then we ate breakfast and went to Bradenton First Nazarene , and guess who was the speaker that morning? Steve Wingfield.

I thought Steve Wingfield preached a good sermon that day. But what I remember was his personal testimony. I spoke later with Bradenton pastor Thurl Mann about Evangelist Wingfield. He was just as impressed as I was. It reminded me of this challenge God gave to Cindy Knox. God called Steve Wingfield to a valley of dry bones, too:

Steve Wingfield told about his own conversion, which interested me, because he was the son of a minister (Methodist.) He rebelled quite a while, and was saved in his early 20's.

He told of how when he was saved he worked for an ambulance service in Virginia; and told how he hoped God would help him get a different job before he went away to seminary because he had been one of the gang that was pretty rough in words and actions...

God challenged him to go back and witness to every one of the 18 employees. It must have been like Ezekiel felt, being told to preach to a valley of dry bones.

The toughest one for Steve was his partner. They were good friends, but he got an awful hard time from him. Then one night shift when they were on call his partner shook him awake and said, "I have been troubled. i want what you have been talking about." The Spirit of the Lord was blowing over the dry bones. (ALL 18 GAVE THEIR HEARTS TO THE LORD BEFORE A YEAR WAS OVER...)

I wish I knew all the details of Steve Wingfield's story. Maybe sometime you can get to meet him yourself.

There is great POWER in the word of the Lord.

God's WORD called this world into being. God's WORD brought Lazarus from his tomb.

God's WORD is in your heart— and in your mouth it can bring HOPE where you are!

IF IN OUR WORLD WE WONDER, LIKE CINDY KNOX, "WHERE IS GOD?" IT MAY BE WE WILL HEAR HIM SAY TO US "I'M IN YOU! SPEAK MY WORD TO THESE DRY BONES!"

Prayer: 543 *Let Your Heart Be Broken* or No 572 *He Hideth My Soul*

With Jesus into Holy Week

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- [With Jesus into Resurrection Life](#)

March 31, 1996

Matthew 21:1-11

We have followed Jesus during this Lenten Season as he sat by a well and talked with a Samaritan woman about living water and about worship. We have listened in the night hours on the housetop as he told Nicodemus, "You must be born again."

We have watched him search out the man born blind who had been excommunicated by the religious authorities after he had been healed and would not say Jesus was evil. We heard him tell him his Messiah knew and cared, and that it would be all right. We began the Lenten journey in the desert of temptation, and in the last week have gone with Jesus to the tomb of his friend Lazarus, and we have seen the power of the Word of God to rebuke the tempter, and when spoken from Christ's lips, to bring a dead man back from the grave.

There remains just one more week to complete the journey, and celebrate the Resurrection, that day in which all human hope centers. But what a tremendous week this will be! What a journey, through the Last Supper, and the Garden, and Calvary and the Grave!

With the Passion staring Him in the face, we might ask, why should there be a parade? Why the waving of palms and shouting of hosannas? Didn't Jesus know what was going to happen?

The answer is of course Jesus knew. On this last journey to Jerusalem (Matthew 20:18) Jesus told the disciples "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day he will rise again."

SO, WHY THE PARADE AT ALL? Matthew records the crowds in Jerusalem that day as being "moved." They asked the question, "WHO IS THIS?" And the people in the parade answered back: "THIS IS JESUS, THE PROPHET FROM NAZARETH OF GALILEE." Which (statement) was true as far as it went.

WHY THE PARADE? We remember a chorus we learned as children: "Everybody ought to know who Jesus is!" And the people themselves really didn't know if Jesus was a prophet, or a deluded pretender— or an unwitting victim of what was going to come that week of Passover. But Jesus knew! And this parade was a statement of His authority.

The Triumphal Entry was a Necessary Part of the Plan

The parade was a deliberate statement that Jesus was not a martyr, taken by surprise and afterward made into a hero by his followers. Rather, Jesus was telling them then, so they could understand later— and telling us now, so we can see with the 20/20 vision of hindsight, that the Cross was a battle, not an execution, and that sin and death and hell were being squarely faced, not merely accepted as inevitable.

The triumphant Entry tells us:

I AM THE KING OF PEACE

Jesus was making no mistake. He was declaring that he was the fulfillment of prophecy. Jesus arranged himself for the donkey and the colt. It was a festive time, with people on hand for the high holy days. They were ready for celebration. But

Jesus was also fulfilling scripture. (Zechariah 14:4) He knew where the week would take him, and yet he encouraged the cries of "Hosanna!" When the authorities told him he was on an ego trip Jesus replied with the self-knowledge of the Son of God "If these do not praise me on my way to the Cross, the very rocks and stones in the streets will cry out. Their Creator is passing!"

The Triumphant Entry begins the Pascal Procession:

I AM THE LAMB OF GOD

The words of the Psalm that closes the "hallel" portion of the Psalter, the hymn that Jesus no doubt sang the night he transformed the Passover into the Eucharist, Holy Communion, come to mind— the words we heard that opened the service and began the procession into the sanctuary today:

"This is the day!

"The stone the builders rejected— is to become the chief stone of the corner"

"Bind the festal sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar!"

The procession to the high altar had begun! The sacrifice was willingly on its way!

The Triumphal Entry says Love Can and Will Triumph

I AM HE THAT HAVE THE KEYS OF DEATH AND OF HELL

Luke is the evangelist that records that this joyous parade was interrupted as Jesus paused on the hillside overlooking the temple mount and wept over the city of Jerusalem. There was sorrow there— but it was not for himself that Jesus wept.

Closing words:

There remains just one more week to complete the journey, and celebrate the Resurrection, that day in which all human hope centers. What a tremendous week this will be! What a journey, through the Last Supper, and the Garden, and Calvary and the Grave! With the Battle for Our Souls just ahead, the story this morning is not a complete one. It will be next Sunday. Until then I challenge you to watch and wait with me— in worship and praise for what our Lord has done!

With Jesus into Holy Week

Closing prayer - Dexter sings "Too High a Price"

IF NOT - (232 Lead Me to Calvary)

Maundy Thursday Communion

April 4, 1996

I woke up this morning with the music of that song in my head:

*"Precious Lamb of glory—
Love's most wondrous story,
Heart of God's redemption of man—
Worship the Lamb of glory."*

At the Passover meal which Jesus ate with his disciples the evening of Good Friday, as the Jews counted their days, they sang from the Psalms of their love for God who had delivered them from Egyptian bondage.

They sang "I love the Lord, for He has heard my voice!" They sang, "What shall I give to the Lord for all His mercies to me?" And they sang the answer, all from Psalm 116, "I will lift up the cup of salvation! I will offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving!"

At the Passover meal which Jesus transformed into what we call Communion, Jesus told the disciples, "I am giving you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also must love one another." The room was full of love that evening. I think of another song we sing once in a while, a song that has a marching cadence that may rush us past some of the wonder that is expressed:

*"I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus, the Nazarene,
And wonder how He could love me . . .
He took my sins and my sorrows and made them his own,
He bore the burden to Calvary . . ."*

And that night He took off his outer garment— in our language, he took off his jacket— poured water into a basin, and washed the disciples' feet. The Prince of Peace, the Creator, the Savior of the world, washed OUR feet.

Jesus cared! That night the room was full of love, and of forgiveness even for the cowardice and abandonment that lay just ahead. And it was then that Jesus said, "As I have loved you, so you love one another!"

That Great Commandment of Jesus is the hope of the church. If we determine that with God's help we will care for one another we will not only survive, but we will be the most attractive thing in the world. The Great Commandment of Jesus actually is the hope of the world. For if the church were to succeed in fulfilling the Great Commission to go into all the world and make disciples, and the entire world was compelled to become Christian— but we forgot to love one another, we would not be the church, but some other human organization. The only reason people would want to be a part of the church is if in fact we try to obey the Great Commandment Jesus gave that Thursday evening, that first Good Friday Eve before he was betrayed.

In our little corner of the Church of Jesus Christ we have the opportunity to either take seriously and obey the Great Commandment, or, to let it go by as just another impractical and impossible Quixotic goal. In the small community where we live we hurt and bruise each other. If we wait for the one who is to blame to initiate the love we may wait a long time because probably no one intends to wound his brother, or her sister— it just happens along the way.

So what shall we do with the Commandment?

As we come to the Table of the Lord, by faith— by the grace of Jesus Himself— we are at an extension of that Passover of nearly 2,000 years ago. The very same Savior, by the Presence of His Holy Spirit, is with us this evening. The very same Commandment is our challenge this evening. It is a challenge for me, I will confess! There is something in me that clings to hurt and pain and says, "This isn't fair!" It is not easy to let go and say, "God helping me I will simply love my brothers and sisters without assigning blame to anyone! God helping me, I will accept the free grace of Jesus for my own shortcomings, and ask Him to help me pray the Lord's Prayer all the way through and mean it!

Invitation to Communion

April 4, 1996 - Continuation from meditation:

Scripture (I Corinthians 11:23 - 30)

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Whoever, therefore, eat the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. [NRSV]

Apostles' Creed (#8)

Invitation to the Table of the Lord:

Jesus Himself is the Host.

Examine your heart. If He bids you come, you are welcome.

Prayer of Confession/Forgiveness

The "holiest" among us needs every moment the grace of God; we are not holy in and of ourselves. We come short of the perfect will of God in performance, and all too often, we lag in spirit, are insensitive in our relationships, and act more to our own self interest than for the kingdom of God and the salvation of others.

For this we ask your forgiveness— purchase of your blood on Calvary.

We claim your promise: (I John 1:7,9) If we confess our sin, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Prayer of Dedication

Maundy Thursday Communion

We ask that we may have your ASSURANCE that we have been CHOSEN of you to be your sons and daughters.

We ask that you will give us our ASSIGNMENT, not just our "big" assignment for life's career, but our day-by-day assignment of introducing You to those we know.

We ask that You will help us ACCEPT Your revealed will, and put you at the center of our lives, in all we do.

We ask that as we partake of these emblems of bread and the cup they may be for us true means of grace, by faith may we partake of your body and blood to our soul's life and health.

Lord's Prayer - (Instructions. Come, receive, and hold the bread and the cup and we will partake together.)

At the moment of partaking: The BODY of the Lord Jesus Christ: (may it) Preserve you blameless to life everlasting.

Again, with the cup: The BLOOD of the Lord Jesus Christ: Preserve you blameless to life everlasting.

#220 Lamb of Glory - Into Tennebrae -

With Jesus into Resurrection Life

With Jesus Series 7 of 7

- [With Jesus on the Mountain](#)
- [With Jesus in the Wilderness](#)
- [With Jesus at the Well of Sychar](#)
- [With Jesus into the Light](#)
- [With Jesus at the Cemetery](#)
- [With Jesus into Holy Week](#)
- **With Jesus into Resurrection Life**

April 7, 1996

What Easter REALLY Means

Revelation 1:17 Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and of Hades.

MY EARLIEST RECOLLECTIONS of Easter are in the Great Depression, when, although I don't recall being "poor," I do recall how often we were literally "penniless." And yet somehow Easter was special— Easter we boiled eggs and colored them— Easter my mother somehow always took us to church looking fresh and scrubbed and greased and creased— and usually wearing something brand new— even in the Depression.

I got the idea that Easter was important— and of course that the Resurrection was the central thing about Easter.

EASTER REALLY MEANS RESURRECTION

ALL MY YEARS as a Christian pastor I have seen Easter as important, and have seen the Resurrection as the center of what Easter stands for. But I think there has been a subtle change as I have been growing older. I no longer see the Resurrection as the most important part of Easter. I see the Resurrection of Jesus Christ as the heart and

soul of all our faith, and Easter is an important part of the Resurrection, and not the other way around. As Paul wrote some twenty years or so after the Crucifixion, in 1 Corinthians 15: 14 "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." It is as simple as that.

HOW MANY TIMES have we heard this Resurrection Day story? How can we hear it again as for the first time? J. B. Phillips was a translator of the scriptures. I remember when his translation seemed very modern indeed, and his words still carry a freshness. I came again recently across his words about translating the resurrection passages in Corinthians. He wrote:

For me, the translator, this fifteenth chapter seemed alive and vibrant, not with pious hope, but with inspired certainty. Quite suddenly I realized that NO MAN HAD EVER WRITTEN SUCH WORDS BEFORE. As I pressed on with the task of translation I came to feel utterly convinced of the truth of the Resurrection. Something of literally life-and-death importance had happened in mortal history, and I was reading the actual words of the people who had seen Christ after his resurrection and had seen men and women deeply changed by his living power. Previously, although I had known something of the "comfort of the scriptures" and had never thought them to be false, I must have been insulated from their reality simply because they were known as "Scripture." Now I was compelled to come to the closest possible terms with this writing, and I was enormously impressed, and still am. On the one hand these letters (of Paul) were written over quite a period of years, but there is not the slightest discernible diminution of faith. And on the other hand, it was borne in upon me with irresistible force that these letters could never have been written at all if there had been no Jesus Christ, no Crucifixion, and no Resurrection.

Easter IS Resurrection— and specifically, the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the grave. So actually Easter means specifically JESUS IS ALIVE—

EASTER REALLY MEANS A LIVING SAVIOR

JESUS LIVES AS OUR PROPHET OF THE ETERNAL WORD

When Jesus appeared to the eleven that same evening of the day he rose from the dead he said these words (Luke 24:44) "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." In other words the Risen Savior was making the flat statement that the Old Testament Scriptures existed to help us know who Jesus is, in order that we might come to understand what God wants us to know of Himself. When Jesus appeared to the two on the Road to Emmaus (in that same chapter in the Gospel) he warms their hearts, and enlightens their understanding by beginning with Moses and the Prophets and speaking to them from the scriptures the things concerning Himself.

JESUS LIVES AS OUR HIGH PRIEST IN GOD'S PRESENCE

When Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene (in the passage in John read this morning) he made it clear where he was heading. "Do not hold on to me," he said (John 20:17), "for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' " The Prophet awakens us to the truth of God, and to our need to be holy so we can walk with God in fellowship, as God intended in Creation. But the Priest makes a way for us to come to God. He bears the sacrifice of his own life into the Holy of Holies for our sins and infirmities, so that he can assure us we may call His Father OUR Father, and His God OUR God!

JESUS LIVES AS OUR OMNIPOTENT KING FOREVER

Jesus rose from the Tomb as the Sovereign of an entirely NEW WAY OF LIFE. He never "LOST" His life— Our KING LAID IT DOWN as a sacrifice to take it again forever as the Conqueror of death and evil.

Because the Risen Savior could say, (Matthew 28:18) "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always,

to the very end of the age."— because He could say THAT— we are citizens of a NEW KIND OF KINGDOM— A NEW WAY OF LIVING.

Other kings have kingdoms that pass away. Jesus says His kingdom will not pass away. Eternal life is not just this life patched up and going on forever and ever. It is beyond the bounds we know as time and space— more real than we can now understand. In a beautiful passage in *The Everlasting Man*, in a chapter called "The Strangest Story Ever Told" G. K. Chesterton wrote these powerful words:

On the third day the friends of Christ coming at daybreak to the place found the grave empty and the stone rolled away. In varying ways they realized the new wonder; but even they hardly realized the world had died in the night. What they were looking at was the first day of a new creation, with a new heaven and a new earth; and in the semblance of the gardener God walked again in the garden, in the cool not of the evening but the dawn.

Easter is Resurrection, and Easter is a Living Savior. But Easter is of absolutely no lasting worth to you and me until Easter becomes very personal. And I am happy to tell you on the authority of God's Word this Easter Sunday that

EASTER REALLY MEANS THE GIFT OF LIFE BY GOD'S GRACE

ROMANS 10:9,10 tells how simple, really, it is to become a part of Christ's kingdom. "Confess with the mouth— believe with the heart that God has raised Him from the dead..." IF YOU TRULY BELIEVE JESUS IS ALIVE, YOU ARE BLESSED. Do you believe? 2 CORINTHIANS 5:16,17 indicates that even we, who have not seen the glorified, risen Lord can know Him. If you truly want to believe ask Jesus to walk with you in your seeking. He is nearer just now than you may imagine.

INVITATION TO CONFESS JESUS AS LORD!

Prayer "He is Lord, He is Lord...He is Risen from the Dead and He is Lord.."

The Path of Life

Faith in the Presence of Fear

April 14, 1996

John 20:19-31; Psalm 16

Psalm 16 begins, "Protect me, O Lord God, for I am trusting in you!" The Psalmist, David, is using what seems to me the language of fear. He probably had good reason to fear, for his life was often in danger.

Do you ever feel fear? Is it a sin to feel negative emotions? Is it evil to have questions or even doubts when it seems everyone else is so certain about so many things? In the very last chapter of the last book in the Bible (Revelation 21) is a list that sometimes bothers me. It is a list of people who are not going to enter the New Jerusalem. In fact John, the writer of Revelation, says they will have part in "the second death."

Now part of that list I can understand would not fit in heaven: "the abominable, murderers, whoremongers, sorcerers, and all liars" is how the list ends. But the part that bothers me is how the list begins. The list of those who miss heaven begins: "But the fearful and the unbelieving . . . will have their place in the lake of fire." What does this mean? Sometimes I feel like the Cowardly Lion, and I admit there are a lot of questions I cannot honestly answer.

Can the feeling of FEAR keep me out of heaven? [Before I go any farther, let me say I believe the answer is NO FEELING will keep you or me out of heaven. Feelings are emotions— feelings are results, not causes— and God is not seeking reasons to exclude, but to INCLUDE. He is not willing that ANY should perish. In the Gospel Thomas is afraid to believe and Jesus comes to him— in the Psalm David is afraid, and he cries out "O God help me!"] No the feeling will not exclude you.

Still, there IS a fear that can keep us from taking hold of the gift of LIFE. And there is an unbelief that is not of the mind but of the heart that says, "I will not submit to God

even when He speaks clearly to me." This passage from John helps us understand how we can dare trust the Risen Savior.

I. THE DISCIPLES WERE AFRAID TO BELIEVE HOW MUCH GOD LOVED THEM

They thought: "It is too good to be true!" Jesus came and dispelled their fears somewhat— it took a while. But Thomas wasn't there. He said, "I have to SEE for myself." He was afraid to let himself get built up just to be let down again.

Looking again to Psalm 16, David prays for God's mercy, but even as he prays he recognizes how audacious it is to talk to God. He says, "MY GOODNESS EXTENDETH NOT TO THEE." In another place (Psalm 8) David says, "WHEN I CONSIDER THE HEAVENS, WHAT IS MAN THAT YOU ARE MINDFUL OF HIM?"

Many of the theologians of our day (whether post-modern, or process, or deconstructionist, or whatever— I'm probably ten years behind in labels) seem to be saying, "You common people have no idea of how big God really is— and so you can never speak about Him with any kind of certainty!" And some of them carry it so far they are saying 'GOD'S LOVE, IF IT IS THERE, IS TOO BIG, TOO MYSTERIOUS FOR US TO KNOW AND BE SURE ABOUT.' It is almost a blocking FEAR before the mystery of God's love.

BUT THE GOD OF THE BIBLE— WHO TRULY IS BIGGER THAN WE CAN IMAGINE— HAS SPOKEN TO US IN THE LIFE AND DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF HIS SON JESUS CHRIST!

That message is understandable even though we can never understand WHY God should love us! That message IS: GOD LOVES YOU!

Jesus said: "Thomas, I'll help you believe! Blessed are those who have NOT seen, and still believe! FAITH WITHIN US SAYS: Jesus really DOES know and care about ME!

But even after the disciples began to grasp the fact that Jesus was alive, and that He was with them again, there was a hesitation to dare to believe what Jesus was asking them to do (commanding them, actually).

II. THE DISCIPLES COULD NOT BELIEVE WHAT GOD EXPECTED OF THEM

Jesus began outlining his assignment for the church that very night. First, he BREATHED ON THEM, and said: RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT!

I'm sure they did not grasp it fully then— nor even fifty days later at Pentecost— but the disciples— and you and I— are to be the place where God lives on this earth.

We are God's housing!

Do YOU think of yourself as a tabernacle of God? Is God welcome in YOUR body? In your relationships? is that a new thought to you? Is it a bit frightening?

As if that was not enough, Jesus also began assigning them a role in telling the world that their sins had been forgiven on Calvary. This is mysterious, and not easy to understand: "Those whose sins you forgive they will be forgiven..those whose sins you don't forgive they will remain..?" We can stop and get hung up on the translation of words here— OR we can understand that WE have a part in sharing the Good News of Salvation.

FEAR said, that night, "Lord Jesus we have all been afraid! We have all forsaken you and run away! How can WE ever accept such an assignment?"

But FAITH SAID: "YOU CAN SHOW ME HOW TO BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT! YOU CAN HELP ME SHARE THE MESSAGE OF SINS FORGIVEN!" And that is exactly what happened.

That is all well and good for the disciples..then..and for the worship times in church. But what about the everyday fears that come— AND WHAT ABOUT THE REALLY DARK PLACES IN LIFE THAT COME TO US ALL? Can fear defeat us when we face the worst life can offer?

III. WE ALL FACE FEAR'S CHALLENGE IN OUR DARK HOURS OF THE SOUL

Faith's victory over fear is NOT just doctrine or theory. We cannot help at times FEELING overwhelmed— even pushed toward despair.

In the Garden of Gethsemene Jesus Himself prayed like one who hated, even dreaded what lay out ahead. He prayed, "O MY FATHER, IF IT BE POSSIBLE, LET THIS CUP PASS FROM ME!"

In the Psalm (16) David wrote the script for the Messiah's hope even though it was 800 years or so before the time— he wrote for Jesus— and for all who follow Jesus— "THOU WILT NOT LEAVE MY SOUL IN HELL, NOR SUFFER YOUR OWN TO SEE CORRUPTION" Our souls somehow become the battlefield of fear versus faith. For insight into that aspect of the emotions of fear and temptation to unbelief there is no better book than The Book of Job. Job loved God— and refused to believe God was anything but GOOD! He certainly did not understand what was going on. But Job said, "GOD KNOWS! I WILL TRUST HIM!" Faith went beyond what it could see, and even what it could NOT see— and reached for the hand of God.

In some of Britain's darkest hours in WW II, the people listened by their radios on New Year's Eve as their king, King George VI, gave his annual greeting to his people over BBC. It was truly a fearsome time. The very existence of their nation was at risk. And the king that night quoted words that have since become famous. he said: "I said to the man who stands at the Gate of the Year, 'Give me light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied, 'Step into the darkness, put your hand into the hand of God, and that will be to you better than a light and safer than a known way.'"

David said, "In your Presence is joy! If I can just BE WITH YOU I will be all right!" We do not have to wait until we die and go to heaven to know God's Presence. he is near, He is with us today. If we will let Him he will live within us, and walk with us. We may not know all about Him, but we may know Him. He loves us, and his perfect love cast out fear.

Prayer - Hymn (Chorus) #626 *Gentle Shepherd Come and Lead Us*

Moments of Recognition

April 21, 1996

Luke 24:13-35

The Walk to Emmaus is one of my very favorite stories in all the world. It brings the story of the earthly life of Jesus to a close in a way that is really a launching pad for a sequel that is still unfolding. Whatever it was that happened on that road the first Easter evening is still taking place.

There are a number of other stories of encounters with God in the Bible. Moses turned aside from his flock of sheep to see why a bush would burn and not be consumed. Jacob laid his head on a stone while he was running away from his troubles, and saw a stairway to heaven, and then, years later, he wrestled all night with a manifestation of God in the flesh. Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up in the Temple. But still I love the story of the Road to Emmaus perhaps best of all.

The Emmaus Road story contrasts with another famous encounter with the risen Savior. Saul of Tarsus first met Jesus on another road, going in another direction. On the Road to Damascus Jesus got Saul's attention by knocking him to the ground. In this story Jesus walked along with the disciples, warming their hearts with scripture, and would have walked on if they had not asked him to come in.

Perhaps those two encounters are examples of the ways some of us here today came to meet the risen Lord. Saul was not at all acquainted with Jesus before he met him on the Damascus Road. Paul was very much NOT a part of the followers of Jesus. But Jesus found Saul, and stunned him with conviction. His conversion story has all the subtlety of a whack on the head with a stick! Saul was blinded for three days, and his life turned around 180 degrees.

No one here has had a conversion exactly like Saul/Paul. But all the same, that confrontation, that shock, is the way some people need to find God if they ever find him at all. My own father never heard of being born again until he was 21 years old. His conversion was night and day, black and white, dramatic change, a break with

everything old in his life. Maybe you were not brought up in the fellowship of Jesus, or with the followers of Christ. But God spoke to you, the Holy Spirit showed you where you were wrong— and you repented and surrendered and Jesus became your Lord and Savior. There was a dramatic meeting with Christ you couldn't miss.

But the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus had an altogether different problem. If Jesus was the last person Saul would have wanted to meet— these two disciples were mourning because they loved Jesus so much, but believed they could never know him again. These were people who had spent time with Jesus, and with the friends of Jesus. Maybe they had heard the Sermon on the Mount— maybe they even knew the Lord's Prayer by heart, and had been taught to pray by Jesus Himself. When they met Jesus on their road, there was no light from heaven— at least not the kind that knocked them to the ground. There was no persuasion from being against Christ to calling Him 'Lord.'

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THE STORY ITSELF is deceptively simple:

The disciples were SAD

They were DISCOURAGED- Their faith was in the past tense (If only it could be like it used to be)

Jesus described them as sinful, or at least "slow of heart to believe" UNBELIEVING: even sinful in their inability to believe

The Savior was A COMPANION even as they walked the road

The walk to the hamburger stand??? [story]

A FEW times since— YOU have had them, too ??

AN INTERPRETER OF SCRIPTURE

Jesus demonstrated how we should read the Bible— Jesus is the reason for the Scriptures!

REVEALED IN THE BREAKING OF BREAD

Their faith brought THAWING HEART (like John Wesley's testimony!) as they walked (Can it be that when WE talk about Jesus to others their hearts are "thawed"??) CERTAINTY! Their faith immediately came back into the PRESENT TENSE!!

And the fact that Jesus immediately disappeared was not the least discomfiting; the fact that he was very much alive, very real, totally satisfied their hearts. They would have to walk by faith for years— they may never have such vivid assurance again— but they knew what they had experienced.

Irresistible urge to share the good news!

AN IRRESISTIBLE URGE TO SHARE THE GOOD NEWS!

They got up from the table and started back the seven miles to Jerusalem to tell the other friends of Jesus!!

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The Emmaus Road is the way some of us found the Lord. But the reason I love the story is that the Emmaus Road happens again and again.

This is not just a story about conversion— it is a story of the re-kindling of faith, of assurance. Even Saul had one Damascus Road experience, but then he went on to have many more encounters much more like the Emmaus Road. The day his ship was wrecked, and strong men were failing with fear it was Paul who said, "Don't be afraid! God stood by me last night and said we are all going to be all right!"

Where ever you may be on your spiritual journey, Jesus is not very far away! He wants to make sense of the Bible for you. He wants to get to know you in the breaking of bread. he wants to bring your faith into the present tense.

Where do you suppose Jesus is right now?

Prayer

Hymn #606 (one or two vs) *In the Garden*

The Marvelous Light of Gods Grace

Communion Meditation

May 5, 1996

1 Peter 2:9; John 14:1-14; Acts 7:55-60

1. Who Peter tells us that we are, and
2. What such names or titles imply:
 - We belong to a New Creation that begins with the Second Adam (chosen race)
 - We have the assignment of saying "God is GOOD!" (a royal priesthood)
 - We have great dignity/authority in this work (holy nation, God's own people - ambassadors of Christ)

3. Like Thomas and Judas, not Iscariot, (in John 14) we do not always know what we know!
This is profound stuff!

"Where I go ye know, and the way ye know!"

(Significance to me of "ye" as opposed to "you.")

"No we don't!"

"Yes you do!"

"Show us God!"

(God is TOO big to be seen— no one has seen him)

"Look at ME!"

4. LOOK AT JESUS - WHAT WE SEEK TO DO IN WORSHIP

Particularly in the sacraments -

But also particularly in letting the New Creation/Risen Lord live in us!

"offer spiritual sacrifices"= saying "No" to the way this world thinks/does,
and saying "YES" to the Holy Spirit within...

5. TWO WAYS TO THINK OF GOD'S GRACE

- as over and above— to be reached for on special occasions in need— to keep us alive in a hostile environment
- as permeating all of creation and life: to be aware of Christ's Presence and to celebrate. Worship as reminder in liturgy and fellowship that grace "goes before"

6. Stephen's LIFE (confronting) and DEATH were demonstration of his RACE, and his PRIESTHOOD (sacrifice/intercession) and AUTHORITY (God's own people) — in that with great power God used Stephen's life to reach Paul and reach even us today. Consider using all or part of the following quote (courtesy of an Australian pastor studying this same lectionary this week:)

TS Eliot, preface to Part II, 'Interlude', "Murder in the Cathedral".

Apologies for the sexist language.

"Consider also one thing of which you have probably never thought. Not only do we at the feast of Christmas celebrate at once Our Lord's Birth and His Death but on the next day we celebrate the martyrdom of His first martyr, the blessed Stephen. Is it an accident, do you think, that the day of the first martyr follows immediately the day of the Birth of Christ? By no means. Just as we rejoice and mourn at once, in the Birth and in the Passion of Our Lord, so also, in a smaller figure, we both rejoice and mourn in the death of martyrs. We mourn, for the sins of the world that has martyred them; we rejoice, that another soul is numbered among the Saints in Heaven, for the glory of God and for the salvation of men.

Beloved, we do not think of a martyr simply as a good Christian who has been killed because he is a Christian; for that would be solely to mourn. We do not think of him simply as a good Christian who has been elevated to the company of the Saints: for that would be simply to rejoice: and neither our mourning nor our rejoicing is as the world's is. A Christian martyrdom is never an accident, for Saints are not made by accident. Still less is a Christian martyrdom the effect of a man's will to become a Saint,

as a man willing and contriving may become a ruler of men. A martyrdom is always the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways.

It is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr. So this as on earth the Church mourns and rejoices at once, in a fashion that the world cannot understand, so in Heaven the Saints are most high, having made themselves most low, and are seen, not as we see them, but in the light of the Godhead from which they draw their being."

A Reason for Our Hope

May 12, 1996

1 Peter 3: 13-22

John 14:15-22

1 Peter 3:15

The word I have been getting this Easter season has been fresh and new to me. It is two-part; (1) first, you and I are privileged to share in Christ's resurrection life. (2) Second, we are called to be people of hope, to tell this world that God is good, and that He loves them.

(I recall last week's text, 1 Peter 2:9. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, God's own people— that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.")

Today, here it is again— Peter says "Be always ready to give a reason for the hope that is in you."

I. TELLING PEOPLE GOD IS GOOD

There is no question that God's people are supposed to tell the world that God is good. The code-word in the church is "witnessing." All my life I've been told I need to "witness." And usually I feel vaguely guilty about it because I know I don't do it very well. Right here I want to tell you I am not going to put guilt on you if you are not high pressuring people about spiritual things. But how do we tell others that God is good? Peter gives some clear directives for telling people about our hope. He says

1. Sanctify the Lord God in your heart. Make certain that Jesus is Lord.
2. Be ready where people are. Be prepared. If someone asked you who Jesus is to you, are you prepared to tell him or her?
3. Do it with extreme gentleness and courtesy, respect for the person to whom you are speaking. We will not win people to Jesus without the spirit of Jesus.

Our spirit must be congruent with the love of God. (Yes, Jesus got angry at times—but those people he drove OUT of the temple, not IN!)

Illustration: Verne Ward, missionary to Papua New Guinea, who was here with his wife Natalie a few years ago for "Say Yes!" worked for several years in some of the most primitive culture on earth. Every bush, rock, tree has "spirits" and the people were ruled by what we would call "witch doctors."

One day Verne saw a witch doctor talking with one of his Christian people and it made him angry. He came up and bid the man be off in no uncertain tones. He was protecting his little flock. But then as he walked away along the trail it seemed that God spoke to him about the way he had spoken to the witch doctor.

Verne made his way back along the trail until he located the man. According to the custom of that culture, which Verne had learned, Verne sat down on the ground silently and waited for the man to recognize his presence. When finally the man spoke, Verne asked him, asked the witch doctor to forgive him for being rude. He made it clear that the God he served was not unkind, and that he loves everyone.

Then he went on his way.

The story of that witch doctor's conversion is too long to tell here. God spoke clearly to him, almost like he did to Saul of Tarsus on the Road to Damascus. But it began with simple gentleness and courtesy, and the humanness of an American missionary who was big enough to ask a New Guinea Witch doctor for pardon.

Our spirit must be in harmony with the words we speak. We cannot tell people about a God who loves them when we don't love them. We can't simply throw money at the world's problems. We can't simply buy the latest games and clothes for our children, and leave them for the television to educate and call that giving a reason for the hope that lies in us.

We cannot really LOVE by 'remote control.' We say our love with words— and that is important. But we really say our love with our spirit— with our time and with our presence.

Illustration: There is an old country tear-jerker ballad called Roses for Mama that tells the story of a going into the florist to order flowers sent to his mother for Mother's Day— he is going elsewhere. A little boy comes in with just a little money to buy for his mother. I think the first man helps the little boy buy a few more flowers, but anyway the next verse takes our flower order-er past the cemetery where he see the boy laying flowers on his mother's grave— Whereupon he turns around and goes back to the florist— asks if the flowers have been delivered yet— and then delivers them himself.

Our spirits must say the same things that our words say. We may not even be able to say the absolutely correct thing— but if we care, and if we are there— God will help us get the word of HOPE where it belongs.

Peter's word is not the final one on this matter. Jesus himself says, "If you love me you will love each other, as I have commanded you." He tells us that if we will love him and love each other we will never be alone.

II. TELLING PEOPLE GOD IS GOOD ACTUALLY BRINGS GOD NEAR

It may have been my fault, the way I heard it. But I thought that witnessing was trying to persuade hostile people to become something they didn't really want to become. All Jesus asks us to do is to love Him, and love people, and then let them know we care and God cares. This is saying, "GOD IS GOOD!"

Illustration: The great Russian Count Leo Tolstoy wrote a short story called "Where Love Is, There is God," that actually is a beautiful picture of what Jesus was telling us when he said "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." It told of a humble cobbler, a shoemaker, named Martin Avdeich, a widower who worked in a basement shop that had but one window at street level. From that lowly position Martin could only see the boots of people passing by in the street outside his shop. After the loss of his wife and the tragic death of his only son, he became despondent and hopeless. He wished to die.

"How shall we live for God?" he asked a visiting countryman who had just returned from a eight years of pilgrimage. The old holy man reminded him "Christ has shown

us how to live for God. Do you know how to read? If so, buy yourself a Gospel and read it, and you will learn from it how to live for God. It tells all about it."

So after the man departed, Martin did what he had been instructed to do: he began to study scripture. His heart was lifted. His life began to change. He was happy simply in the seeking. But one night as he was reading late into the night he put his head down on the table and not knowing if he was asleep or awake he heard a voice which he believed to be that of Christ: "Tomorrow I will come to the street!" And so, expecting a miraculous appearance, he began the next day to look for a visit from Jesus.

As he waited, expecting a knock at his door, he attended to the needs of those passing by his window an old man who had come to shovel the snow from his sidewalk whom he invited in for hot tea; a poor woman with her infant child, whom he fed and offered his cloak; and, finally, a young boy caught in the act of theft, whom he spared from a beating reconciled with his intended victim.

Finally, the cobbler realized that the day had drawn to a close, and he searched his mind to interpret the voice he had heard and make sense of the absence of his promised visitor. In the growing darkness, he heard a voice calling to him: "Martin, oh Martin, have you not recognized me?" One by one, those whom he had helped during the day appeared to him in a dream. After the last of them departed, he opened his Bible and his eyes fell upon the text from Matthew twenty five: "Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of these, the least of mine, my brothers, you have done it unto me."

Tolstoy concludes: "And Martin Avdeich understood that his dream come true, that the Savior had really come to him on that day, and that he had received Him."

We think "To know Christ is to love Him." We think "If Jesus makes himself known to me then i will surely give him all my love." But the fact is we will see Jesus when we love Him; we will come to know Christ when we learn to serve one another in love. To love him is to know him.

III. TELLING PEOPLE 'GOD IS GOOD' IS REDEPTIVE

(Finally) When we incarnate love to others— when we express to them the fact that God cares and we do, too— we may do more than save a soul— we may redeem a life. Every one of us has had a teacher or a Sunday School teacher or a camp counsellor along the way that has made a lasting impression on us. Sometimes that impression may be negative. Sometimes that word of hope goes far beyond what that person dreams of.

Illustration:

Bertha Munro prayed for me. (Hector Hawkins was mean to me!)

Charlie and Gladys Caldwell sponsored junior high kids years and years ago. Many of them are old enough to have their own kids in junior high now and more. But they still remember the love they got at church from their junior high sponsors!

R. C. Sproul is one of the leading evangelical Presbyterian theologian-writers. I have heard him tell in person about what it was that first gave him courage to become a scholar. A second grade teacher pinned one of his papers on the bulletin board at school and said, "R. C, you can write!"

Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts— and then gently, and with great respect— this week be ready to tell people that God is good. If we get ready to tell them, we'll certainly have a chance to say it: "GOD IS GOOD!" And if we have a chance, and if we tell them— who knows !!!

Prayer -

Hymn - (Prayer Chorus, actually) *Open Our Eyes* #459

Waiting for Pentecost

God's Spirit where we live...

May 19, 1996

John 17:1-11; Acts 1:1-11

Have you ever come to church on a Sunday saying to yourself 'I really want God to speak to me today?' Have you ever keenly sensed a need for God? Do you have concerns right NOW that you would like God to step in and solve?

Believe me, I have been there. Recently. Maybe even today. And I have been disappointed sometimes. But often as I have listened, almost desperately at times, the sense of God's care has come through. I hope this is a Sunday when God meets you at your point of need.

Next Sunday is Pentecost Sunday. Today is the last week of Eastertide. What can that possibly have to do with your need this morning? How can words that Jesus said to a few women and some fishermen that lived and died nearly 2,000 years ago possibly connect with your life and mine in this high-tech computer age? We have problems their wildest dreams could not imagine.

Believe me— these words do reach into our world today. Trust me—Jesus DOES connect with where we are right now! God wants to speak to your home, to your heartache— to your decisions that need making. Listen to Jesus carefully. Listen with your heart and you will hear what you need.

I. JESUS PRAYED FOR YOU

The last words Jesus spoke to the disciples before he went to trial and the cross were beautiful and wonderful. But then Jesus quit talking to the disciples and started talking to God the Father.

He prayed for himself— and they listened as he spoke of a glory shared in the Godhead before the creation.

Then Jesus prayed for them. His prayer was wonderful. He prayed for their security—that God would KEEP them. He prayed for their JOY, that their lives would never be wasted. He prayed for their UNITY, not just with one another, which is vital, but actually a union with God Himself— that they might have Easter life, resurrection life, eternal life forever.

Then Jesus prayed for you and me. (Verse 20 "I pray not for them alone, but for everyone who WILL believe on me because of their witness.") Because Jesus is God his prayer that last night of earthly ministry was when Jesus prayed for you and me. That WE might be secure, saved, preserved to everlasting life. That WE might have JOY, and our lives count for something. That WE might never be alone, but be in union with God and Christ and the Church. (Is it beginning to "connect" yet?) - Jesus' prayer "connects" with you/me at the point of your/my need! He knows! He cares!

(But Jesus not only prayed for the disciples...)

II. JESUS GAVE DIRECTIONS

The very last words Jesus spoke, not now before the cross, but before finally ascending to the glory he prayed about in the prayer (John 17) were directions for receiving the benefits of the prayer he had prayed some 40 days before. He was very specific about what the disciples were supposed to do.

- (v 5) They were to expect the Holy Spirit as He had promised. They were not supposed to begin working for God on the strength simply of what they had been taught. They were God's people, and He was going to go with them wherever they went or they were not supposed to go.
- (v 7) They were not to worry about times and dates. The details of God's plan are best left in His hands. Our task is to obey as best we know how.
- (v 4) They were to receive the Spirit where they were. They were not to leave Jerusalem until they had been filled with the Holy Spirit.

There you have it: the two aspects leading to Pentecost:

1. A PROMISE : Jesus had prayed that it would take place. They were to expect nothing less than God's Presence with them to the end of the age. His prayer is powerful, and reaches even to where we are today.
2. A COMMAND : Jesus had commanded them to receive the Spirit where they lived, and to wait as long as it took for the Spirit to come before they went anywhere.

III. THE PROMISE AND THE COMMAND ARE STILL VALID TODAY

The church of Jesus Christ still has that High Priestly PRAYER, with its PROMISE , and we still have Christ's final COMMAND ringing in our ears to this very day!

- It is a promise of adequacy for our needs. "You will receive POWER when the Holy Spirit fills you!" THAT connects!

Wherever you are on your spiritual journey— the God of heaven loves you and has promised to meet you and help you toward eternal life. "Ho! Everyone that is thirsty in spirit! Ho! Everyone that is weary and sad! Child of the world, are you tired of your bondage! Child of the Kingdom— be filled with the Spirit!"

If we lack in power, or in a sense of God's Presence— if we need more of God the place to begin is right here with the Promise and the Command. If we want to "become" who we really are— a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people— we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit! That adequacy is for you and me! We've established that (John 17:20.)

- IT IS A COMMAND TO RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT WHERE WE LIVE— before we can begin to tell anyone who Jesus is. We can't tell the world if we can't tell our own family— our children— our wives, our husbands know if we are Spirit-filled! We need God's Spirit in a new way in our homes and families. The disciples went back to Jerusalem from the mount of Olivet and did what Jesus told them. They waited for the Spirit to come. They did not know they would wait ten days or ten minutes. But they waited. And while they waited they prayed and talked and talked and prayed.

They settled some problems. They made up some disagreements. How do I know? because when the Promise finally came the Bible says they (already) WERE IN ONE ACCORD!

- We need God's PRESENCE WITH US more than anything else!

WE may have to wait expectantly. GOD MAY HAVE TO REVEAL SOME THINGS TO US: Would there have to be some FORGIVING done on your part? Maybe there would have to be some heart-searching done. If we want the Holy Spirit to come we will become sensitive to the things that make Him at home in us— and those things that are not in accord with the spirit of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit simply is NOT going to fill a Christian who is disobedient to the command of Jesus to expect Him, to wait for Him— to prepare for Him.

IV. A VISION OF A COMMUNITY WHERE GOD'S LOVE HAS COME

Next Sunday is Pentecost Sunday. The Spirit has come, and we will remember and celebrate again the fact that God is with us.

But what would happen if we prepared like the disciples— if we decided that we would EXPECT God to fill us full of His Spirit, and He did it again next Sunday?

What do you think might happen if we remembered Jesus' prayer and His promise and his commandment in each of our personal lives this week? What if we said "We won't go on without God's Spirit leading the way!"?? "We won't leave home without God!"??

What would happen in your home? What would happen in my own?

We have our set ideas of what a Pentecost visitation of the Holy Spirit is supposed to be like. We think there will be an exciting emotion, and people filling the church seeking God. And wouldn't that be great?

But maybe, just maybe Pentecost could begin when we tell God we want Him to step into our homes, and into our lives and do whatever HE wants to do. God wants to "connect" with every one of us, and he will if we will learn to listen.

Maybe our Pentecost would begin this day we told the Lord that those concerns we brought to church are HIS, and we will do whatever HE says. This is where it just might begin.

Prayer

#324 (STL) Come, Every One Who is Thirsty in Spirit

Movings of the Spirit

May 26, 1996

Numbers 11 - John 20

-Pentecost Sunday-

Fairly early on in the 40-year Exodus saga Moses faces a crisis. . . he needed help. God told Moses to bring his leaders to the Tent of Covenant. Seventy-two men were on the list of leaders. God miraculously poured out his Spirit on the seventy who actually came. They were "chrismed" — they began to prophecy.

But Eldad and Medad— I'm sure that means a lot to you— good old Eldad and Medad couldn't make it to the meeting. But God poured out his Spirit on them back in the camp, where they were. They were "chrismed", too—and good old Eldad and Medad began to prophecy just like the 70 out in front of the Tabernacle.

A young man came running to tell Moses. the established leadership was concerned. They loved and respected Moses.

But Moses— that great and meek man with great wisdom said, "ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT ME? DON'T BOTHER! I WOULD THAT NOT JUST ELDAD AND MEDAD WERE PROPHETS— BUT THAT ALL GOD'S PEOPLE WOULD BE PROPHETS, AND THAT GOD WOULD PUT HIS SPIRIT ON ALL HIS PEOPLE!"

Now that is some concept— that all God's people might be prophets. It sounds like the prophecy of Joel, centuries later (2:28)"It shall come to pass in the latter days, says God, that i will pour out my Spirit on all flesh!" It sounds like what Peter had in mind when he wrote, "You, all God's people, are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, God's own people!" This is in fact what happened when God's Spirit fell on the church at Pentecost. And today is Pentecost Sunday!!

I. WHAT PENTECOST IS ABOUT: ALL GOD'S PEOPLE BEING FILLED!

HOW SHALL WE OBSERVE PENTECOST SUNDAY??

Pentecost means that Moses' dream is our possible reality! Pentecost means that God lives in all His people! in ALL His people! So— how do we observe Pentecost properly??

- **PENTECOST IS HISTORY**

...and we can sing "Happy Birthday" to the Church. About 1965 years ago today or thereabouts the Spirit of God fell on 120 believers in an Upper Room in Jerusalem, and together they became the living Body of Christ. And that Body, the church lives right down to this present moment. There have been failures and excesses and human errors by the million. But the fact is that Pentecost is history, and the Spirit has come and that's a fact. But Pentecost is more than a historical fact.

- **PENTECOST IS PRESENT FACT.**

God lives in His church today. We here are a small part of a great and wonderful thing. Whether we like it or not-- whether we can define it or understand it or not, we are part of ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC, APOSTOLIC CHURCH that Jesus Himself founded, and Jesus Himself is building. We may at times be miserable representatives of the unity of the Body, BUT WE ARE IN FACT CHRIST'S OWN BODY! Because you and I have the Spirit that came at Pentecost if in fact we say "Jesus is Lord!" and if in fact we in any wise belong to Him.

But Pentecost is even more than present Reality, as good as that may be.

- **PENTECOST IS DYNAMIC CHALLENGE!**

Jesus is still breathing on His church saying: 'YOU RECEIVE THE SPIRIT!' I don't know how else to put it— but Pentecost— the promise of the Holy Spirit— is that God wants to take us where we have never been before, and do with us what we cannot even dream of doing by ourselves! Young men see visions! Old men dream dreams! Handmaidens prophecy! All God's people prophets! All God's people manifesting Christ's Spirit!

But this is really like our individual walk with God— the way each one of us has had contact with God the Holy Spirit.

II. THAT'S HOW YOUR SALVATION WORKS, TOO—

- **YOUR SALVATION IS HISTORY**

You WERE SANCTIFIED when we first came to God for pardon. We were sanctified in that the Spirit came with LIFE and with PARDON and with ADOPTION into God's family.

- **YOUR SALVATION IS PRESENT REALITY**

You ARE SANCTIFIED— (aren't you?) You gave your all to God, didn't you? We surrendered our redeemed lives to God and the Spirit came in cleansing response to our sacrifice (Romans 12: 1,2).

But that is not all..

- **YOUR SALVATION IS ONGOING CHALLENGE**

You/WE are BEING SANCTIFIED as we carry out the challenge of living in obedience to God's unfolding will. We can handle salvation as history. We can even take salvation as present reality, if we can somehow keep a handle on it— keep it somewhat static. But when it starts to "get outside the lines" it gets a bit scary. What does a person who was sanctified and is sanctified and is being sanctified look like? How does he act?

III. CHALLENGE TO BE BEING FILLED!

So, what does Pentecost in action "look like"? What does it "DO"??

- His name wasn't Eldad or Medad— it was KEN. He was here with us just a year ago. He HAD BEEN sanctified. In fact he WAS sanctified. But Ken Sullivan was also BEING FILLED with God's Spirit, and never shrank back from the challenge. What an impact he has had on this community!
 - after 60 he wrote his first book
 - to his final illness he reached out in love

- in his last hours he could say, "It's ALL right!" x 3

That is what this Pentecost reality looks like. It looks like LOVE!

- HER name wasn't Eldad or Medad, either But she got outside the normal lines at times. Her name was Esther— and she was with us a year ago, also. Although her body was often weak, and her health was ebbing away, Esther Sanger was one of those people who kept on being filled with the Spirit. She was past fifty years old when she really began to break through beyond a hold-the-line sort of experience, and began adventuring into uncharted waters with the Holy Spirit.

Esther began small, where she was— sharing compassion, often tough love. She tacked up little signs on telephone posts: "Do you need help? Call xxx-xxxx" The phone started ringing— and never stopped. The Quincy Crisis Center came into existence— then the Mary Martha Learning Center.

Esther explored the depths of prayer, and yet remained very human, exemplifying Nouwen's *The Wounded Healer*. She died in a room full of angels last August— but not before she showed us what true Pentecost really looks like. It looks like LOVE!

Now God doesn't expect you or me to be a Ken or an Esther. There were only one each of them (thank God!) But do you know—Jesus is here this morning— saying "PEACE BE TO YOU!" AND SAYING "receive the spirit!" Not necessarily in any spectacular way do YOU dare to go on being filled— where the Spirit leads you!???

I HAVE A VISION OF A COMMUNITY WHERE GOD'S LOVE IS AT WORK— AND THAT IS WHAT PENTECOST IS SUPPOSED TO LOOK LIKE!

Prayer: O great God, our Father! We dare to ask You this morning: Let Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, BREATHE on us again today! Help us hear Him say "RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT!" Amen

#732 - *I Then Shall Live*

Majesty Mystery Mercy*Trinity Sunday - Holy Communion*

June 2, 1996

Isaiah 6:1-8

Isaiah was in the temple when it happened. That was not unusual; Isaiah was a prophet in good standing. He had stood before King Uzziah many times and proclaimed his vision for God's people. He was in the mainstream of the best in Israel's faithful people. Isaiah had come for the usual reasons: He needed renewal and refreshing. He always felt better after he had worshiped. But somehow on this day the focus swung around from Isaiah's hopes and Isaiah's expectations— and all of a sudden Isaiah got a glimpse of the majesty and the mystery that is Almighty God!

I. GOD'S REVELATION OF HIMSELF TO ISAIAH:

THERE WAS MAJESTY - When God Almighty reveals Himself any measure there is also a corresponding sense of awe or reverence. The temple in which Isaiah was worshiping was beautiful; but God's Presence was a majesty of a different quality altogether. Cathedral or store-front, Gregorian chant or swaying gospel choir, all these can be instruments of the human spirit reaching after God. But when God reveals Himself no human efforts add to His majesty! No, God's Presence is a majesty of a different, incomparable quality. It was unmistakably God!

THERE WAS MYSTERY - When God draws near it is more than a "good time." There was an awesome, almost eerie sense of God the "other" in Isaiah's vision. God does have a problem with us, you know! If He wishes to draw near He has "to be careful" on two important counts: (1) we are finite, and cannot really comprehend the dimensions of eternity; and (2) we are sinful, and cannot really understand the utter potency, the sheer white-hot energy of pure holiness!

II. GOD'S PRESENCE REVEALED ISAIAH TO HIMSELF AS WELL

The central issue in your life and mine is the nature of our God and our relationship to Him.

The nearness of God,— when we recognize that the Living God is near— and the MYSTERY involved, is always validated by the (paradox) that when we begin to see God in His glory, we begin to get the true picture of ourselves!

This is a MYSTERY that illuminates! Like shafts of sunlight filtering into a darkened parlor, making it hard to breathe because of all the little tiny swirling particles of dust revealed. ISAIAH CRIED OUT WITH THE REVELATION: "WOE IS ME!" The painful thing to Isaiah was the fact that he was a GOOD man, and yet as he began to draw near to God, instead of being affirmed, and having his PERCEIVED NEEDS met, Isaiah began to see himself as sinful and needy!

Every time God draws near, and it is a genuine THEOPHANY, the central focus is NOT on how great "I" am, but how great THOU ART! Peter: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man!" John: "And I fell at His feet as if I were a dead man!"

[[But that was NOT the end of the vision of God!]]

III. GOD'S VISION INCLUDED EXACTLY WHAT ISAIAH REALIZED HE NEEDED

THERE WAS MERCY - With the revelation of his need, and with his cry of "Woe is me!" Isaiah found a new dimension to God: God expressed his grace and mercy to Isaiah! He did it in (what seemed to me as a boy contemplating this vision) a "strange" way: with a live coal from off the altar!

This was NOT to torment Isaiah, to sear his lips so he could not speak; it was a cleansing, purifying, illuminating FIRE! Isaiah began to experience the greatest luxury, perhaps, that mortals may know: HE WAS CLEAN, IN GOD'S PRESENCE (7)!!

...AND THE END RESULT OF ISAIAH'S VISION WAS THAT HE WAS ENABLED TO ENTER INTO GOD'S OWN ACTIVITY/ACTION FELLOWSHIP IN A WAY HE HAD NOT KNOW BEFORE!

Conclusion: THE UNIQUE AND UNIVERSAL DIMENSIONS OF ISAIAH'S VISION Who was Isaiah? He was NOT a casual worshiper. Why "the year that Uzziah died"? A removal of a royal "prop"? Isaiah was probably related to the royal family . . .

To whom does God reveal Himself? - Hebrews 11:6 The central issue in your life and mine is the nature of our God and our relationship to Him.

Chances are we won't have a vision exactly like Isaiah's. But the promise is there—that if we are seekers after God, at whatever level of our journey into faith— IF WE ARE SEEKERS, GOD WILL REWARD US WITH HIMSELF!

But there is a great difference in TALKING about seeking God— and actually putting God at the center of our lives and SEEKING HIM! So many of us are experts on doctrine— we know what this man or that woman has said—

— but not many of us are very well acquainted with this great God who is so great he makes Temples shake— and so holy He needs to cleanse us so we can live in his presence— and yet so loving he has come all the way down to where we are and has asked us to help spread the word that He is GOOD!

Talking about seeing God— ABOUT THE MAJESTY THAT IS GOD THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT... about the MYSTERY THAT IS GOD THE SPIRIT, FATHER AND SON... about the MERCY THAT IS GOD THE SON, AND GOD THE SPIRIT, PROCEEDING FROM GOD THE FATHER — talking about the vision is pretty "tame" compared to a trip to Disney World or even a gospel concert of one kind or another— UNTIL!! one day as we earnestly seek, God comes!

I was eighteen years old before I saw the ocean. I had read about it, I understood intellectually that it was vast. But since I first saw it— here at the end of this street, then out at Nantasket Beach— then flying over it— then in hurricane force waves— I realize that I could never "know" the ocean just by reading about it. And I also realize that there is a sense in which I don't know the ocean very much at all.

I could say the same for all the great wonders of God's creation— the mountains— the seas, the skies. And they are just handiwork that points to the great God beyond. As David said, "When I consider the heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and

the stars which thou hast ordained, who am I, that thou art mindful of me, or the children of mankind that you visit us?"

Today we think of the Trinity, of the God who is OVER us, and who is WITH us, and who is IN us. The doctrine of the Trinity is not a fascinating puzzle for our amusement, but in some wonderful way it is God's own revelation to us of His love. God so great as to be totally unspeakable in His glory, yet so condescending as to take our nature and speak our own language and show us how we may live, and God so very near that He is HERE with us as we worship!

Prayer - INTO COMMUNION - Continuation from meditation:

Scripture (I Corinthians 11:23 - 30)

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Whoever, therefore, eat the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. [NRSV]

Apostles' Creed (#8)

Invitation to the Table of the Lord:

Jesus Himself is the Host. Wherever you are in your spiritual journey God loves you. If you have a desire for God— if you are willing to turn toward Him, He invites you to come. Examine your heart. If He bids you come, you are welcome.

Prayer of Confession/Forgiveness

O Great God, the very best among us needs every moment the grace of God; we are not holy in and of ourselves. We come short of the perfect will of God in performance, and all too often, we lag in spirit, are insensitive in our relationships, and act more to our own self interest than for the kingdom of God and the salvation of others.

For this we ask your forgiveness— purchase of your blood on Calvary.

We claim your promise: (I John 1:7,9) If we confess our sin, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Prayer of Dedication

We ask You to help us know You better. We ask that we may have a fresh vision of Your great holiness and love, as well as your ASSURANCE that we have been CHOSEN of you to be your sons and daughters. We ask that you will give us our ASSIGNMENT, not just our "big" assignment for life's career, but our day-by-day assignment of introducing You to those we know. We ask that You will help us ACCEPT Your revealed will, and put you at the center of our lives, in all we do. We ask You to bless this sacrament of Holy Communion, that these emblems of bread and the cup may be for us true means of grace, by faith may we partake of your body and blood to our soul's life and health. Lord's Prayer - (Instructions. Come, receive, and hold the bread and the cup and we will partake together.)

At the moment of partaking: The BODY of the Lord Jesus Christ: (may it) Preserve you blameless to life everlasting.

Again, with the cup: The BLOOD of the Lord Jesus Christ: Preserve you blameless to life everlasting.

#210 (First and Last verses) *One Day*

Benediction

The Risk Takers

THE CALL

June 9, 1996

Genesis 12:1-9; Matthew 9:9-13

- A. Once upon a time there was a good man. He had a good family. He had good connections. He was living in a reasonably comfortable manner. He was abreast of the latest modern technology. His life was not in crisis. But deep in his heart there was the nagging uncertainty, the question he could not put into words:

"IS THIS ALL THERE IS TO LIFE?"
- B. Then one day this good man became aware that Almighty God was talking to him. Just how this awareness came about I cannot tell you. But God was saying, "Well, no, as a matter of fact THIS isn't all there is to life! And if you are willing and obedient, I will show you exactly what your heart is seeking!"
- C. That day Abraham had a decision to make. He had to decide what one thing was absolutely the most important thing in his life. The way the story puts it: God said, "I want you to LEAVE...your country...your people...your father's relatives...and above all LEAVE your right to say what is right and wrong!" I want YOU to come and walk with ME! And if you DO, I'll bless you far beyond anything you can possibly imagine!"

SOME QUESTIONS

Does God Still Call People Like He Did Abraham?

- A. My 'message' is "yes:" I am convinced that Abraham's call represents a basic theme of the whole Bible! The story of Noah the Exodus right through the whole Bible to Jesus calling the disciples the message is DARE TO LEAVE WHAT UNSPIRITUAL, UNGODLY, UNBELIEVING SELFISH WAYS TELL YOU "Leave the prison of your self made gods come away from a Scripture that YOU edit and cut and pick and choose and stand in judgment over leave the bondage of "what so called sophisticates might think," AND STEP OUT ON A JOURNEY OF FAITH WITH ME!

- B. My personal testimony is "yes:" I know you would expect an evangelical Christian minister to answer in the affirmative. I am certain, convinced, sure, that God spoke to me when I was living selfishly and out of fellowship with Him. He spoke to me by both love and fear; by what I might call "Behold the goodness and the severity of God" (Romans 11:22)

How Would God Get Your Attention If He Wanted To Speak To You?

- A. To hear God speak, we might just have to be listening! God can't teach us anything if we already know it all! Wes Tracy wrote these words a few years ago:

Aren't you tired of trying to be a classy sophisticate who knows all about things timely progressive education, career enhancement, political correctness, next season's fashions, and the done thing? . . . Some who take the name of Christ seem owned by their ambitions, chained to a success formula, enslaved by the hunger for prestige diseases they have caught from our sinful culture. They fill up the ranks of the Christian jet set.

Visit any important Christian conference and you will see them "dressed alike, talking alike, smiling alike, looking over the shoulders of the people to whom they are speaking in order to see who else has come into the room."

- B. To hear God speak there must be faith an element of TRUST. in WHO is speaking is ALL IMPORTANT!

In every purely human decision we consider very carefully all the factors and then decide which way to go. And that is only common sense. But when it comes to the deep satisfaction of the heart, and we hear God begin speaking, we have to choose make a decision on just HOW important God is to us.

Abraham started out not knowing at first where he was going only Who he was going with (see Hebrews 11:8.) The "common sense" thing is to say, "God let me see what You have in mind, then I'll say yes or no" That works for everything and everyone except God.

Romans 12: 1,2 says "Present yourselves to God for His service and then He will let you know what is his good and acceptable and perfect will!"

So to really hear God speak is a matter of trust!

- C. To hear God speak we may well have to go against the current of what is accepted as Christian by many evangelicals. We have to choose to take SELF off the throne, and seek God's face for Himself alone!

Spirituality is MORE than self fulfillment. God's way is what we are made for but it is a way of spiritual discipline that does not have happiness or deliverance or becoming fully human as its final goal though these may well be by products. Spiritual fulfillment begins when we realize GOD ALMIGHTY WANTS US TO COME AND WALK WITH HIM ON A JOURNEY WHERE ONLY HE KNOWS THE WAY!

How Can We Respond To A Call From God?

WE HAVE TO CHOOSE WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT IN OUR LIVES. I BELIEVE GOD STILL SPEAKS, AND THAT HE HONORS THOSE WHO WILL STEP OUT IN FAITH AS ABRAHAM DID.

Yesterday morning I opened my Bible to read and get ready to pray. The passage was I Kings 3, and I got as far as verse five (5) where God is speaking to the newly crowned Solomon. He, God, tells Solomon "Ask for whatever you want me to give you."

I stopped. I thought. Honestly, now, what one thing would I ask of God if I knew for certain that He would grant me that one thing, and I did not know if He would grant me anything else. What one thing is most important to me?

First I thought "You, Lord, You tell me! You decide for me!" That sounds very pious, but somehow it did not let me off the hook. I felt prodded. No what really is the most important thing?

I was pleased that I didn't think about big bucks, or a palatial retirement home or material things at least not "up front," but only after a long reflection reflection that

these were "way down the list." I confess I did think of things like not ever wanting to come down to old age and be a burden to myself and others. I thought of what a pleasure it would be to be able to write and speak and teach for years to come.

Do you know what I finally decided was most important?

When I was about six years old this scripture from I Kings brought back a memory I hadn't thought of for a long, long time when I was about six a little boy evangelistic singer traveling almost year round a store owner I can still dimly see the store a sort of hardware or Western Auto type store with wide aisles anyway, the owner took us Mother, Dad, and me to this store after church one night opened the store, turned on the lights and said to me, maybe six years old "You can have any one thing you want in this store!"

I walked up and down the aisles looking at bicycles and lawn mowers and garden furniture and clocks and house supplies and car radios, items big and small expensive and relatively cheap. I never would have such an opportunity again although at that time I was totally unaware of the values, unaware of what my dad might need, or my mother.

This is a true story. I picked up a little wind up toy car, a little painted car, made in Japan, worth less than a dollar in 1937. I'm not even sure why I remember so well except I think my father was so disappointed I didn't at least pick out a scooter or a bike but as I recall I was thinking it wouldn't fit in the car anyway. I could have had any one thing up to many times the value of the thing I chose. But that was that and what would you expect from a six year old?

Do you know what I finally decided was most important? IF WE ANSWER GOD'S QUESTION: WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU IN ANY LESSER WAY THAN SAYING FROM OUR HEARTS "I WANT TO BE WHERE YOU ARE! I WANT TO WALK WITH YOU!" WE ARE LIKE THAT SIX YEAR OLD BOY IN THE TOY STORE. WE WALK OUT WITH STUFF WHEN GOD WANTS US TO HAVE IT ALL!

The Gospel (Matthew 9:9-13) for today is the same story different century different character same God same call. Matthew, sitting at his tax booth has asked himself

the question many times over "IS THIS ALL THERE IS TO LIFE?" We might begin again: Once upon a time there was a good man. He had a good family. He had good connections. He was living in a reasonably comfortable manner. He was abreast of the latest modern technology. But along came Jesus and said, simply, 'FOLLOW ME!'

And Matthew simply got up and followed Jesus!

The journey won't be easy. It never is. Shallow spirituality, and greed and lusts and cheap grace will try to take us off the track. But they lead only to emptiness. Until we have God we are empty if we are millionaires! And if we are in God's company we have everything if we are shipwrecked or in prison or going through family trauma or whatever!

As Thomas Kelley wrote in his great little book, *A Testament of Devotion: About God's way*, he says,

Its joys are ravishing, its peace profound, its humility the deepest, its power world shaking, its love enveloping, its simplicity that of a trusting child ... It is the life and power of Jesus of Nazareth.

Prayer

Hymn #552 *O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee*

What Price Peace

June 23, 1996

Background lesson: Genesis 21(also Galatians 4:6-9;22-24;28-31)

Text: Matthew 10:34-39 (38 -39 Paraphrased:) *If you do not take up your cross and follow after me you are not worthy of me. If you grasp selfishly after life you will lose it; if you lose your life for my sake you will find it.*

The words of Jesus here in Matthew 10 seem somehow different that we expect to hear from him. They do not seem to be the mission of his life; isn't he the prince of peace? Here he is saying, "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword! The members of one's own household will be divided!" What can this mean?

Certainly it does NOT mean that Jesus does not bring peace to those who seek him as Lord and Savior. But what Jesus is saying is that following him will not be easy. When we start out to follow Jesus and do God's will you can count on it, you will be opposed.

What are some of the hard times you have faced because you are trying to follow Jesus?

What do you suppose are some of the challenges that oppose God's people? Can you think of any?

There are many external challenges

Surely many people will say right off: the devil will oppose those who seek to follow Jesus. I believe there is evil in this world that hates God and seeks to fight God through discouraging his people.

There are people in this world that hate religion, and who ridicule and oppose and would persecute where they can. More people have been martyred in this century for their faith than any other century in history!

There are (even) Christians who let us down, who may betray our confidence— who may turn back. All these external challenges are serious, and real, and can cause pain. But they are to be expected— and by God's grace they can be overcome.

Much harder to face are the challenges closer to home. A divided home is always a challenge to faith. When people we love and are bound to by ties of blood and ties of covenant do not share our faith, we have challenges that are harder to face than external challenges.

People who love us and whom we love have the power to hurt us the most! Jesus never asks us to "hate" loved ones. That is not what this language means. But a divided home may cause us to have to change course— but we can still seek to follow Jesus, and we can show those closest to us His Spirit of love. Sometimes that may have to be very tough love. Only the Spirit can give us wisdom to know how to carry forward.

But the hardest challenge of all is not a divided HOME— but

A DIVIDED HEART IS THE HARDEST CHALLENGE OF ALL!

There is something inside every human being- until it is dealt with scripturally- something that is not willing to trust God and simply obey Him. Is it possible to have victory over a divided heart?

Here is where the ancient story of Abraham 'connects' with us here this morning at the end of the 20th century! I love Abraham because his story is your story and my story— the story of everyone who has ever tried to leave old ways and start following God's will.

The New Testament writers used Abraham over and over as a living allegory of the Pilgrim's Progress. It FITS!

Abraham on his pilgrimage of faith faced this opposition Jesus was talking about. He faced external opposition. He struggled in Egypt with enemies of faith— and finally overcame. He struggled with his nephew Lot and was generous and prayerful and he overcame.

But the very hardest thing Abraham ever had to do was settling the division in his own heart and mind. The heart of his struggle was his love; love for his God, for his sons, for his own ambition.

Maybe you know the story of Abraham and Isaac. That is the famous story. But Abraham had TWO sons. Ishmael was the son of Abraham's own self-assertion. Ishmael represented Abraham's own answer to God's promises. But when God finally gave Abraham and Sarah the son of His own promise, Isaac, the other son, the older son— Ishmael began to bully and struggle and compete with Isaac. The conflict really began— Ishmael was strong and older— he bullied Isaac.

This becomes a painful story. Abraham and Sarah sent Hagar and Ishmael away— a cruel thing to do in our 20th century perspective. A very hard thing to do back then. But this hard thing represents to us that whatever it costs us, we need to make sure that we do not tolerate a divided heart! We need to ask God to help us put away our self-assertive tries to be righteous on our own— and to simply obey and trust Him. Paul says, in Galatians 4, that our life in Christ is like the gift of a son of promise to Abraham. Listen to these verses:

(Galatians 4:6-9) Because you are God's children, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out "Abba, father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has also made you an heir. Formerly when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God— or rather are known by God— how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable things of the world? Do you want to be enslaved by them again? (21-24) Tell me, you that want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was the result of a promise. These things are an allegory, for the women represent two covenants. (28-31) Now brothers, you, like Isaac, are children of promise; at that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does the scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the

slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son. Therefore brothers (and sisters) we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.

Jesus said the opposition will come. But Jesus also tells us how to find victory and peace. In Abraham's story we know what he had to do. He sent Hagar and Ishmael off into the desert so Isaac could grow up as the child of promise. "Cast out the bond\woman and her son!" But in our day and age, what in the world does this mean? How can we end the conflict of a divided heart?

Jesus calls this ending of INNER conflict "taking up our cross." It is a decision to follow Jesus, and make him master over even our own will and desires. Then it is a carrying through with His help, day by day. It is the sincere decision of our heart in covenant to Him: NOT MY WILL, BUT YOURS BE DONE!

Jesus is NOT telling us to be hateful to our parents, or to those in our households that oppose. He IS saying, "Follow ME, whatever it costs!"

Whatever it takes to make an end of our own division— to end that thing within that says, "I will not let anyone, even GOD, tell me what do!"— whatever it takes, we can and must do it! Our own will can be submitted forever to God's will, and we can know peace and freedom on the inside. The external challenges will be with us until we die.

Perhaps this surrender— this "casting out our own self-assertion" does not have to be dramatic and emotional. but by a deliberate surrender by telling God that AT ANY COST He can have us for time and eternity— our hearts will be opened to the Spirit in a new and fresh way that can and will set us free from the law of sin and death.

The way of LIFE is the way of the cross. The way of the cross is the way of LIFE! It means an end to Ishmael's tyranny over the Isaac that is God's will. There is an eternal "YES!" that can be said to God's will that changes forever how we approach the future. We have many little "yeses" that will follow. But the great decision can and must be made!

Does it mean an end to temptation? No— of course not. Does it mean we can never fall into sin? No— I wish it did mean that.. but we are still free moral agents. But if

with all your heart you ask God for the grace to cast out the self-seeking, self-righteous way— God will meet you in a new fresh way with His Spirit.

This is what we call "Sanctification! Entire sanctification"— entire— because it holds nothing back! But it is not finished, ever! it is a total surrender of self— PLUS asking for all God's fullness! Have YOU surrendered your SELF for time and eternity??

Prayer

#335 Would You Live for Jesus (His Way with Thee)

Abraham and Isaac

"For Love of God"

June 30, 1996

Genesis 22:1-14

LOVE is what makes life worth living. We love and we are loved. We say to our babies "I love you SO much!" BUT DO WE LOVE GOD? (Satan's question in Job 1 "Does Job serve (love) God for nothing?")

Father Edward Collins Vacek, S.J. (America 3/9 courtesy of Martin Marty's "Context" for June 1, 1996): *"In my own conversations with Christians, I find that almost all of them talk approvingly about love for others, some talk confidently about God's love for us, but few are willing to talk about their love for God. When I press them to say what it means to love God, some of them in fact deny that we can love God directly, many admit that they don't give much thought to love for God, and most deny there is any ethical obligation to do so. They judge that it is wrong not to love people, but they have no such thoughts about neglecting God. In short, many contemporary Christians subscribe to Jesus' second great commandment, but not to the first."*

Vacek continues: *"In short, it is not enough just to love our fellow human beings. Sincere conscience and anonymous theism are not enough."* Vacek suggests that every age has its central religious concept and a question that will challenge all of us today is this: *"`Do you love God?' That question evokes the endlessness of our heart's quest as well as the incomprehensibility of God, and it gives us an absorbing center for our lives."* (Courtesy e-mail & Fred Kane)

What does it mean for you and me to be in a love relationship with Almighty God? This 4,000 year-old story of Abraham sheds a lot of light on that question.

I. LOVE FOR GOD WILL BE A DEMANDING LOVE

Love for God ALWAYS demands "first place" in our loyalties:

Matthew 10: 37 - 39 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

The story of Abraham and Isaac underscores the cost of loving God

By the time we come to the sacrifice scene on Mount Moriah, we are nearing the end of Abraham's life. He is an old man. He has walked in obedience to God for many years. He had done what God had told him across the years. He had even put away Hagar and Ishmael, the son of his own self-assertion, and that had been hard to do.

What Abraham had left was Isaac, the son of God's promise. In Isaac were all Abraham's hopes and dreams of the great things God had promised him way back in the land of Haran.

Then a stunning thing happens. God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac to him on an altar of burnt offering.

Make no mistake about it, this is a difficult lesson for us to understand.

One of my correspondents, Fred Kane wrote:

*It is a most difficult text. As has been pointed out:
God prohibits child sacrifice, yet sacrifices God's own Son.
Reading the story as one of commitment, sacrifice and obedience
challenges my hypocrisy as I call others to give what I am unwilling to
give.
I relish the Gift, but do not trust the Giver
(who asks for the Gift to be returned)
to give again and again....
I want God to be God on my terms.*

(Transition: But a demanding love like this doesn't come like a request to foolishness. God is like a patient lover. He calls us, reassures us— for)

II. LOVE FOR GOD IS A GROWING LOVE

The Abraham Saga is a Pilgrim's Progress that illustrates HOW God calls, and encourages, and works with a person who wants to walk with Him.

- Abraham LISTENS for God
- Abraham ARGUES/REASONS with God when he is unsure of himself
- Abraham ENTERS COVENANT with God
- Abraham "IS PRESENT! TO GOD!"

The ABRAHAM COVENANT does not spring full-blown into this crisis on Mount Moriah. It BEGINS (12:1) when Abraham sets out to follow God. It is RATIFIED FORMALLY (15) when Abraham BELIEVES GOD, and sets out the sacrifice/covenant God asks. It is RENEWED (17) when a mature Abram gets a name change— indicating a growing God-likeness. It is further REFINED (21) in the giving up of Ishmael, representing Abraham's self-striving. And finally it is CONFIRMED (22) in today's story of supreme sacrifice— giving up even God's own gifts so nothing stands between Abraham and the heart of God.

This is a mysterious, difficult story which we will never fully understand this side of heaven. Abraham had made a complete consecration and covenant with God. But every consecration is tested. The covenants we make never work out perfectly smoothly, exactly as we thought. That is when the character of the covenant makers is made clear. Keeping our word when the going gets tough proves what sort of stuff we are made of.

(Transition: Love for God will be a growing love— and will be a challenge to our faith... but)

III. LOVE FOR GOD WILL BE A DEEPLY SATISFYING LOVE

There are several important lessons we can learn from Abraham's faithfulness:

A. THERE IS NEVER A STOPPING PLACE IN SAYING 'YES' TO GOD

When do we stop "living by faith?" When do we stop "giving all to God" and sit back and take it easy in the walk of faith? I certainly don't know when that time is.

I remember one day talking with Lillian Irwin, Mrs. Don Irwin, whom I respected very highly as a woman of prayer and a godly woman. She was facing some very difficult times, times that often made her weep. I remember her saying: "I don't give God my LIFE now. I give him my days—each day as it comes!"

But this story also assures us:

B. THERE IS REALLY NO CRUELTY IN GOD! GOD CAN BE TRUSTED WITH THE THINGS THAT REALLY MATTER

There is mystery involved in why God would ever ask this of the great Father of Faith. Much is made of the cruelty of the request. Some preachers on my study list have asked, "How do you imagine Isaac felt? He would be scarred for life!" And probably there is humanly speaking that question to be asked.

This mystery reflects an even greater mystery— the mystery of the Atonement itself. When Abraham took Isaac up the hill of sacrifice God prepared a ram to substitute for the son of promise. But when God's own Son walked up the hill of Calvary there could be no substitute. What happened on Calvary, and why it was necessary is a mystery that we cannot understand. That greater sacrifice speaks of the awful seriousness of our sins:

*All we like sheep have gone astray
We have turned every one to his own way
And the Lord has laid on HIM
The iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53)*

Isaac was safe even though Abraham had to give him up to God. God cares about the things that matter— even more than you do. He is in charge!

C. LOVING GOD MAKES A PERSON MORE AND MORE LIKE HIM

- Abraham became a friend of God (I can imagine God saying to Abraham "No one know how I feel in giving my only begotten Son!")
- Abraham actually became A PICTURE of God
- Abraham became a blessing!!

And so will we—

Love is what makes life worth the living. And loving God makes life wholesome and clean and good.

BUT— do WE LOVE God for what WE get out of it? Do WE go to church because WE want to go to heaven? Do WE help others so that God will reward US? That is the question from this text today: Do you love God? Is God more important than your car, your possessions, your family, your children? Do you love these blessings from God more than you love God?

When the test of our faith comes, we can remember Abraham, who believed in God's love no matter what. When our faith is on trial, dare to love God and to trust Him! He who has spared not His OWN Son will provide!

Prayer

#142 *Wonderful Savior* followed by

#133 *I Love You, Lord*

Come to Me and Find Rest

The Call to Know Real Peace

July 7, 1996

Matthew 11:25-30

Introduction

Summertime traditionally is the time when we recharge our batteries— find rest and recreation. Rest is something we all need regularly, and from time to time we need special times of renewal. Here in Matthew is one of the most attractive invitations to rest and renewal in the entire Bible:

This passage begins with a prayer.

Jesus has been talking about tension. He spoke about a divided home, and a divided heart. He has been speaking about the tension when some people follow God and others do not. Such tensions require great wisdom on the part of Christians. The disciples could easily become bewildered and overwhelmed.

The disciples might have wondered if only extremely gifted people could ever know God's will, or very strong people could carry it out. Often when Jesus spoke about conflicts to come they would say, "When? What? How?" "If these tensions and troubles come," they were thinking, " how will we ordinary people cope?"

Here in his prayer, Jesus gives insight into how the really vital things of salvation are known. Jesus thanks the Father that what we really need to know can be known. But then he uses the key word: "revealed." The walk with God is first of all a revealed way.

Wisdom Is Revealed To Infants

"My Father, Lord of heaven and earth, I am grateful that you hid all this from wise and educated people and showed it to ordinary people. Yes, Father, that is what pleased you."

Come to Me and Find Rest

"Showed it to ordinary people"

Faith, genuine faith in God, is a great leveler. I thank God for scholars and theologians. I thank God for people who are not afraid of truth. I believe by faith that all truth is God's truth. And yet as it is pursued and developed, theology is sometimes a very esoteric science. The truly great theologians are humble people, at least where they encounter truth.

Make no mistake about it, I believe it is vitally important WHAT we believe. But there are always those very smart people who forget that finally Truth is a Person who is very capable of making Himself known to those who seek him. I believe our children and young people can invite the Lord Jesus into their heart, and know Him in their everyday lives. But Academia at times would make understanding salvation a Mensa test. Jesus in his prayer says that wisdom unto salvation is revealed to ordinary people ("babes") through the love of God revealed in Christ. Hebrews 11:6

Transition

But that is not the invitation to rest I spoke about.

A Broad Invitation To All Who Need A Rest

"Come unto me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest..." Here is a sincere invitation. By the Holy Spirit Jesus is speaking to you and me this morning. It is a call to renewed fellowship with Jesus.

We don't have to be rich or poor, or wise or simple, or any other criteria of judgment— all we have to be is tired. God actively invites; he is not indifferent or passively available IF we know how to apply. If we will begin coming to Him, he will begin moving toward us with rest. You will not be put off. Coming to Jesus is not like applying to any other source of help:

Illustration: Harvard Community Health Plan— very good— but when you call you get this menu of numbers to push— THEN you get a receptionist, who screens the call, THEN you maybe get a triage nurse, THEN you give your number and if you're

lucky THEN the doctor calls you back. And Harvard is one of the better helping institutions. By contrast Jesus says, "Come here! I care!"

"I will give you rest!" What does this mean? What sort of rest does Jesus give? I confess I want to know!

It is rest from any and all guilt. You don't need to carry guilt the rest of your life.

It is rest from resentment and unforgiveness. You don't need to carry hard feelings against others.

It is rest from fear of dying. You don't have to worry about eternity, and whether or not you are saved.

It sometimes is just plain rest. Jesus is interested in what you need. When Elijah was depressed he found he served a God who cared— and God does not care less for you— and me.

Transition

This is a pure love. There are no "strings" attached to the love of Jesus— he loves you as you are. But there are conditions that help us find Christ's rest. We have to let go of other masters. Jesus sets us free to be what we are created to be. He speaks about "a yoke."

The Yoke Of Jesus

In the same thought/phrase/breath that Jesus speaks of rest he also tells of a yoke. A yoke is a work collar, a harness put on an animal that is going to labor. Or at times, a yoke is made for people so they can carry burdens. Jesus is using the term to indicate a submission to his mastery.

Submission is not incompatible with freedom.

A yoke usually implies connection, or team work. On a very few occasions I have had passing glimpses of yoked oxen, or ox teams. We are so citified that many of our children have never seen cattle up close, let alone having driven or touched them. But this would be very familiar to his hearers/

Come to Me and Find Rest

(**Illustration:** Ken Sullivan's early years saw him driving oxen in Nova Scotia...??)
We work together with others who belong to Jesus. Christ's "yoke" implies that we have the privilege of being on a team together— we help each other— we are not galled by our assignments.

But best of all, to take the yoke of Jesus implies more:

We are yoked with HIM. (I Corinthians 3:9 "We are laborers together with God")
When the Master Himself is with us, our work is joy! When he tells us to do something, he also goes along with us, before us, behind us— to take the heavy end of the task. (I Corinthians 3:9 "Laborers together WITH God...")

When we share with Jesus we never come out on the short end of the deal. Do you remember Bob Benson? There is a passage in his book *Come Share the Being*, that I have gone back to again and again:

Do you remember when they had old fashioned Sunday School picnics? It was before air conditioning. They said, "We'll meet at Sycamore Lodge in Shelby Park at 4:30 Saturday. You bring your supper and we'll furnish the tea."

But you came home at the last minute and when you got ready to pack your lunch all you could find in the refrigerator was one dried up piece of baloney and just enough mustard in the bottom of the jar so that you got it all over your knuckles trying to get at it. And there were just two stale pieces of bread. So you made your baloney sandwich and wrapped it in some brown bag and went to the picnic.

And when it came time to eat you sat at your end of the table and spread out your sandwich. But the folks next to you— the lady was a good cook, and she had worked all day and she had fried chicken, and baked beans, and potato salad, and homemade rolls, and sliced tomatoes, and pickles, and celery, and topped it off with two big homemade chocolate pies.

And they spread it all out beside you and there you were with your baloney sandwich. But they said to you, "Why don't we put it all together?"

"No, I couldn't do that, I just couldn't even think of it," you murmured embarrassedly.

"Oh, come on, there's plenty of chicken, and plenty of pie, and plenty of everything—
- and we just love baloney sandwiches! Let's just put it all together!"

And so you did, and there you sat— eating like a king when you came like a pauper. Benson goes on "And I get to thinking— I think of "me" sharing with God, when I think of how little I bring, and how much He brings, and that He invited me to "share" I know I should be shouting to the housetops, but I am so filled with awe and wonder that I can hardly be heard.

"I know you don't have enough love, or faith, or grace, or mercy, or wisdom— there's just not enough to you. But He has— He has all those things in abundance and says, "Let's just put it all together."

If Bill Gates, the richest man in the world, should invite you to share a joint checking account with him— you putting in all you have and he the same— how long would it take for you to agree? Here God Himself, in the person of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, says, "Come join with me forever in doing my work, and I will share with you, and never leave you." As we seek rest and renewal this summer, respond to this Great Invitation of Jesus: "Come unto Me!"

Prayer

Song: #100 *The Lord's My Shepherd* (Crimond)

Musings about the Tasks that Lie Ahead

August 4, 1996 - pm

Using a favorite verse: John 15:8 -also again- the lectionary about the pearl of great price from Matthew 13:

This time of the year is often if not always difficult for me. The task ahead seems absolutely overwhelming. It always does this time of year. I think it is because I have a little understanding of the mega-size of the job— of what a perfect church might be— and I know a little bit more about our shortcomings— my own in particular.

I think of the way some pastors can plan out the entire year, and have the machinery all oiled and well running. I think of the year in the large segments— of the Gospel we will be studying— of the themes and emphases I believe God would be pleased to open to us all. I look ahead to the beginning again of fall— the Advent Season and preparing for Christmas— to Messiah, and Epiphany and then all too soon, to Lent and Easter and Holy Week and Pentecost, and I think of how we need small groups and children's teachers and classes on personal evangelism and classes on membership and church history and on and on— until I am almost exhausted and the year has not even begun.

But then I realize with God's help some things that help me return to the task with hope, and with love, and yes, even with joy. In my private prayers I have heard God saying things you and I know, but need to hear again:

1. I am not alone. I have God and we have each other. I don't have to do it all by myself
2. I can do some things. I don't have to do what I cannot do with God's help
3. I am loved (and so are YOU!) God cares about me! He cares about YOU! What I am and WHO I am are more important to God than what I do.

I don't say these things to lessen the standards of excellence in my work for the church. As comforting as these things are, I also realize that

Musings about the Tasks that Lie Ahead

1. God expects the church to represent Him: we are God's ambassadors!
2. I have a pretty good idea of what the church is expected to do:
 - worship
 - witness
 - educate
 - fellowship
 - serve
3. I am willing to join hands with YOU and begin again the wonderful task of being God's people:

When do we begin? Just As I Am— and waiting not!

- not waiting for someone on TV to say it is "OK!" God speaks at the local church level!
- not waiting for the perfectly organized program. We can be used of God even before we understand all the lines of authority and accountability
- not waiting until we have a seminar or class to "show me how" Reporting for duty every single day
- not waiting for one who can "do it better!" This is the particular curse of a large (college) church— you have "so much talent!"
- not waiting until I am in "the inner circle" Even when we feel "left out" at times— it is a feeling, not a reality!

Real praise goes beyond the "expression"— clapping, hands raised, shouts of "Amen!" Those are well and good and we should not "quench the spirit" (Spirit) But real praise comes when we seek to manifest the Spirit of Christ in love where we are!

Best of all, the Lord Himself is willing to bankrupt heaven to help us in his work of redemption. When we start out NOW to do His work and will HE will be with us, no matter how little or insignificant that our ambassadorial role may be:

Our pearl of great price— our treasure— is right around us, the people we deal with every day. I came across an old story again this week, from Marian Wright Edelman. She tells this story about a school teacher,

"Jean Thompson, and a fifth grade boy, Teddy Stollard: On the first day of school, Jean Thompson told her students, "Boys and girls, I love you all the same." But she did not like little Teddy Stollard. He slouched in his chair, didn't pay attention, his mouth hung open in a stupor, his eyes were always unfocused, his clothes were mussed, his hair unkempt, and he smelled. He was an unattractive boy and Jean Thompson didn't like him.

Through school records, the teacher learned that Teddy's mother had died a year ago and his father showed no interest. A previous teacher's note had read: "Teddy is in deep waters; he's totally withdrawn."

Christmas came, and the boys and girls brought their presents and piled them on her desk. They were all in brightly colored paper except for Teddy's. His was wrapped in brown paper and held together with a string. And scribbled on it were the words, "For Miss Thompson from Teddy." She tore open the paper and out fell a rhinestone bracelet with most of the stones missing and a bottle of cheap perfume, almost empty. When the other boys and girls started to giggle she had enough sense to put some of the perfume on her wrist, put on the bracelet, hold her wrist up to the class and say, "Doesn't it smell lovely? Isn't the bracelet pretty?" And taking their cue from the teacher, they all agreed.

At the end of the day, when all the children had left, Teddy lingered, came over to her desk and said, "Miss Thompson, all day long you smelled just like my mother. And her bracelet, that's her bracelet, it looks real nice on you. too. I'm really glad you like my presents." And when he left, she got down on her knees and buried her head in her chair, and she begged God to forgive her. From then on, she was a different teacher. She tutored Teddy and put herself out for him. By the end of the year, Teddy had

caught up with some of the children and was even ahead of some. Several years later, Jean Thompson got this note.

Dear Miss Thompson: I'm graduating and I'm second in my high school class. I wanted you to be the first to know. Love, Teddy. Four years later she got another note: Dear Miss Thompson: I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy, but I like it. Love, Teddy Stollard.

Four years later, another note: Dear Miss Thompson: As of today, I am Theodore J. Stollard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I'm going to be married in July. I want you to come and sit where my mother would have sat, because you're the only family I have. Dad died last year. And she went and she sat where his mother should have sat because she deserved to be there.

Dr. Teddy Stollard was a pearl of great price. I'm not sure that Miss Thompson had any idea that he was. But the LORD did! HE is the one who is looking for pearls— and he is using us to look! just one Teddy Stollard would be a pretty good year's work for our church— and I am sure that there are more than one we can find. We ALL are God's pearls— and we ALL are God's pearl-finders as well.

The task ahead could be overwhelming if we had to do it alone, or had to do it perfectly all at once. But you and I can do what we can do with God's help. We can remember we are not alone— we have God, and we have each other. And we can look forward the rest of this summer with prayer and anticipation and love and hope and joy because that is what God wants us to do! It is HIS work! And we are HIS family. Amen.

What is our treasure? What is our pearl of great price. We have been freely given a treasure...eternal life, beginning right here on earth. How are we being grateful, full of joy, and working at sharing our treasure with others.

Living Clean in a Dirty World

Christians Respect Personality

August 18, 1996

Re-worked from January 26, 1992

Matthew 5:27-32

A TIME OF GREAT CHANGE

Every generation takes its turn living on the seismic fault-line where past and present crunch together. Our crunch time comes when everything is shaking, and the upheaval between old and new has never been so fast and violent. Change is the order of the day. Facts that once were considered immutable have been discarded.

A majority of young people believe that there are no absolute truths. The only thing for sure is that tomorrow will be different.

I think it all began with something my children brought home from school twenty-five years ago or so, something called the "new math." At least I'd like to find some one thing I could blame it on.

My friends from IBM showed me different ways to count numbers back then— I had always used my fingers and based my number-sets on "10." Now they had machines— machines that cost millions of dollars and filled whole rooms— machines that could do hundreds and even thousands of complicated calculations in just a few minutes. And these machines only counted up to "2." Or, as they told me, just "on" and "off."

Now I have a desk top computer two or three years old...obsolete already, I know... it cost less than \$2,000.00- - and it could do some things those big million-dollar main frame computers of two decades couldn't do— and faster, too—if I knew how to tell it how. I just use it for e-mail and as a word processor— maybe a computer game or two—.

We've gotten pretty blase, about progress and change. We have even gotten a little bit contemptuous of the past. If it isn't newer and faster and cheaper and better it isn't worth our time. Almost everything is changing.

CHANGE CAN BE BOTH GOOD AND BAD

Change is not all bad. This past year both Helen and I were in hospital. We both benefited from surgical procedures that were not even heard of just a few years ago. Helen had angioplasty that literally stopped a heart attack before it really got started. I'm grateful for change. But change has not all been good, either. Along with the "new math" and the personal computer has come the "new morality" and the individualization of religion. Yesterday's certainties have been called into question. The traditional family concept is under attack. Many denominations of the Protestant wing of the Church have sold out their prophetic birthright on the altar of keeping up with the latest fads of humanism.

CHANGE IS CHALLENGING THE BIBLE

Among the SACRED THINGS we used to take for granted that have been called in question have been the most basic tenets of the Judeo-Christian heritage. The First Table of the Ten Commandments have been scrapped altogether as absurd and irrelevant. The Second Table has been modified beyond recognition. We now have, for our religious enjoyment, THE SIX SUGGESTIONS!

No commandment has suffered greater attack and vilification than the seventh commandment, Thou shalt not commit adultery. Jesus has not only affirmed the "absurdity" that the commandment is still in effect, but in our text for this morning He has gone way beyond absurdity, and has stated that unless we are prepared to live clean and even to think clean in a dirty world we are guilty of sin.

"Sin," is a word that does not "compute" in our modern thinking.

The reason "sin" is an obsolete word is because it is a word related to "God- things" and God has been "privatized." All the same, Jesus seems to take the word "sin" very seriously. And because Jesus thinks sin is so serious, we are left with a serious

problem ourselves: We have to decide who we shall believe and trust with our lives— Jesus— or David Letterman.

I. WHAT IS THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT? WHAT IS "ADULTERY"?

- A. In the precise English definition, "adultery" is sexual infidelity involving person or persons who have taken marriage vows. But in its broader scope, the seventh commandment means "Thou shalt not have illicit sexual relations."

The commandment includes the full range of wrongful sexual relations; fornication, or relations by unmarried people; adultery, or marital infidelity; sodomy, or sexual relations with the same sex; or bestiality- sexual relations with an animal. In a word, sexual activity outside of the heterosexual marriage relationship is forbidden by the Word of God, which is focused in this commandment: "Thou shalt not commit adultery."

- B. In this comprehensive definition, "adultery" is irresponsible sex, or intimacy without commitment. The only scripturally condoned context for sexual intimacy is called marriage. All sexual intercourse outside of the marriage relationship is sin, and is condemned by the Word of God.
- C. This means that pre-marital sex, or fornication is a breach of the seventh commandment. [I am sorry to have to be so graphic in my language. But the times demand that Christian ministers speak out.]

1. Loud voices in our society seem to say that "everybody is into promiscuous sex." They say "It is a fact that cannot be denied" The message many in public media would have us to believe is that "everyone" is promiscuous, that all young people are sexually active before they are married, and so we need to accept that fact.

When former Vice President Dan Quayle spoke out on the subject of AIDS and had the audacity to suggest that one answer to AIDS might be abstinence he was reviled and ridiculed. The media moguls of our society can forgive any kinds of character flaws, it would seem, except simply believing what the simple sense of God's Word says.

2. But according to recent figures of the Department of Health and Human Services, 73 percent of fifteen-year-old girls in America are virgins. Fifty percent are virgins at age seventeen. And it is still sin if 99 percent were doing it—which they are NOT!
- D. This means that homosexual intercourse is also prohibited by the Seventh Commandment, as well as by other more explicit passages elsewhere. It is a sin, even though we are pressured increasingly to see what once was called perversion as "alternate life styles."
1. I do not attack or despise homosexuals. I care about them. Homosexual people are people, made in God's image, people that God loves. But by the same token as a Christian minister I do not condone any homosexual activity; all such activity is sin.
 2. I do not condemn homosexual sin any more or any less than I condemn heterosexual activity outside the bonds of marriage. All pre-marital or extra-marital sexual intimacy is sin, and comes under the condemnation of God.

II. WHY IS SEXUAL SIN WRONG? WHY IS IT SIN?

- A. Because God says so. That should, perhaps, be enough. But God always has good reasons. Some of these reasons which we can follow are:
- B. Sexual transgression is wrong because it cheapens and threatens the integrity of the family. What is meant as love within total trust and commitment becomes self-gratification. It corrupts the relationship which mirrors the love which Jesus Christ has for you and me as members of the Bride of Christ, the Church.
- C. Sexual transgression is wrong because it subverts or distorts the normal result of intimacy, which is the conception and rearing of children in a stable and pure family situation. The abortion holocaust, with more than 1,000,000 babies killed each year in our country as a malignant form of birth control after the fact is an evil testimony to the truth that sex outside of marriage is sin.
- D. Sexual transgression is wrong because sooner or later it makes the I-Thou into the I-It. In refusing or denying a permanent vow of commitment, it

1. desecrates the image of God in another human being; and
 2. it undermines the integrity of all society because of damage to the family.
- E. This is not an exhaustive list of "why adultery is sin." Your own soul mirrors the image of God, and testifies within you to the truth that God's commandment is right! Purity is better than defilement! We are all made in the image of God, as far as we may have fallen. In quiet times of reflection every person comes to say with Isaiah (and I paraphrase from the 6th chapter): "I am unclean! Would that I might be made clean!"

SEXUAL SIN IS ACTUALLY A SYMPTOM OF SOME DEEPER, MORE PROFOUND PERVERSION: THE LOSS OF GOD FROM HIS RIGHTFUL PLACE!

III. IS SEXUAL PURITY POSSIBLE? CAN IT COEXIST WITH WHOLENESS?

[If I live a celibate life outside of marriage will I somehow be less than human? No!]

- A. Sexual appetite is the only normal appetite of which complete indulgence is made to appear not only acceptable but impossible to control.
- B. Sexual purity does NOT mean an end to sexuality. We are made by God in two sexes. Sexual attraction is built in. It is not moral or immoral, any more than any other normal appetite. But like every other appetite it must be brought into line with legitimate restraints.
- C. Sexual restraint is commanded in the Bible. God's commands are also His promises. He never asks His people to do what He is not prepared to enable them to fulfill.

IV. PURITY MUST COME FROM THE INSIDE OUT!

A. PURITY CANNOT BE LEGISLATED IN SOCIETY

1. THE SEXUAL SICKNESS OF OUR SOCIETY IS A SYMPTOM OF A PEOPLE WHO HAVE FORGOTTEN GOD.

We want to attack this sexual problem by attacking the smut-mongers of society. Let's get rid of porno— let's get the TV cleaned up! [I want to attack on that front, too!] But what we may not be able to see is that the sexual problem is more of a symptom than it is simply a disease. The root of the trouble is not sex, it is self!

2. THE CHURCH IS OCCUPIED WITH OTHER THINGS ??

What we desperately need is a genuine revival, a spiritual awakening of mighty proportions, that will bring Christians everywhere to put God back in first place in our lives. We are NOT in the minority!

It isn't that Christians are in the minority. It isn't that nobody is going to church. George Cornell, a writer for the Associated Press worked out a comparison of church attendance and sports attendance for one year (1980), and added up figures for professional and college football, baseball in major and minor leagues, basketball, hockey- all pro leagues- soccer, tennis, boxing, flat and harness racing and even dog racing. He came up with a total sports attendance of 356 million for the year in the USA. Attendance at churches and synagogues was thirteen times greater, totalling 4.7 billion. More people attend worship every month than attend any sports whatever in the entire year. All evidence suggests that the pattern has not changed in the past twelve years. 88 percent of Americans belong to the Judeo-Christian heritage. But we have forgotten the secret of spiritual power is that when God's people cry out to Him He hears and sends refreshing and revival!

3. A CHURCH IN TOUCH WITH GOD WILL HAVE A CHANCE TO CALL THE NATION TO PURITY

God's people look to pass legislature and to take part in boycotts, and in various kinds of anti-this action or anti-that letter campaign. There is a place in the Church for these.

But this is a spiritual problem, and we must fight with spiritual weapons. God's people need to clean up our own acts! We are getting used to the sound of evil! We live in Sodom and Gomorrah,

and we all too easily get used to hearing things that a few years ago would have shocked us beyond speaking.

4. YOUR CHILDREN AND MINE (Let alone "the world,") ARE NOT GOING TO AUTOMATICALLY LIVE CLEAN IN A DIRTY WORLD UNLESS WE ARE SERIOUS ABOUT OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD!

The secret to saving our own children just now is not laws (first;) it is Jesus Christ as Lord of your home! Jesus Christ first in all that you do!

B. OUR PERSONAL LIVES MUST BE MADE PURE FROM THE INSIDE OUT, AS WELL. If society cannot be legislated into purity, neither can you simply force your inner self to be clean. If the uncleanness of our age has invaded your private world, you need to heed Christ's call to purity!

1. OWN WILL POWER CANNOT 'LEGISLATE' PURITY!. It is not a supreme act of will, to stop acting a certain way, or stop saying certain words, or stop thinking evil thoughts that will purify our hearts. We must bring our lives to the Cross. It is impossible for a person to cleanse his/her own mind and heart.
2. ONLY GOD WITHIN CAN MAKE AND KEEP US CLEAN It is possible to submit the mind and heart to God, and ask Him to undertake the job.

The key here is: submit.

What must be done is a simple surrender, an acknowledgment, saying, "Lord, I don't even know my own mind! But I am willing for You to take control, to make me willing, to cleanse my mind and heart!"

3. Addictions are strong! There must be submission to a stronger One. [The addictions of evil are many and varied. One pernicious one is pornography. Some of those in church today will have this addiction!]

CONCLUSION:

We are in a deadly battle for life itself! We will never learn to keep the Seventh Commandment, or the other five of Table Two until we remember the First Four!

Living Clean in a Dirty World

- Thou shalt have no other God's before me!
- Thou shalt not worship idols!
- Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain!
- Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy!

When we bring God back into the equation, we will find purity, beginning in the center of our being!

Prayer

No. 490 (STL) *O to Be like Thee* (Verses 1 and 5 only)

The Question of Questions

August 25, 1996

THE QUESTION OF QUESTIONS

Matthew 16:13-20 (also Mark 8, Luke 9)

In the July 15 issue of *Christianity Today* this summer there was an amazing, almost unbelievable article. All my ministerial career no study or listing of heretical or quasi-Christian sects in America would have been complete without mentioning at least in passing the World Wide Church of God, founded by Herbert W. Armstrong. This article, by Ruth Tucker, fully endorsed by CT stated that the WWCG is now an orthodox Christian fellowship being welcomed into the Church of Jesus Christ. It seemed to me almost too good to be true— but after careful reading, I believe it is true.

The details are, in brief, that after the death of Herbert W. Armstrong the very authoritarian leadership passed to a man named Joseph Tkatch, Sr., who made the astounding statement that he was prepared to follow the whole counsel of the Bible and acknowledge any errors that may have been taught as God's way of salvation. The metamorphosis is too complicated to deal with in detail here; the WWCG had been very legalistic, teaching salvation by what seems to me to be a combination of OT rulings (no pork, no observation of Christmas, a myriad of other rules) and had specifically denied the Trinity— ruling that God the Father had no only begotten Son in Jesus Christ. It was in answering the question: WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM? that the WWCG entered into the true faith.

Of course the members of the WWCG had decisions to make as well. in 1986 they reported 89,000 members in the US. In 1996 after the momentous decision they now report 49,000 members. They have lost nearly half the people who were brought up believing what Herbert W. Armstrong had told them. But the 49,000 that remain belong now to a Christian denomination. And the central reason we can rejoice and

The Question of Questions

believe that is the answer to the question Jesus asked the disciples that day in Casarea Philippi: WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

The one main reason that the Christian community can welcome the WWCG is that this great question was answered correctly— this question Jesus asked the disciples: Who do you say that I am?

Actually JESUS ASKED HIS DISCIPLES TWO QUESTIONS as they walked through the hills in the far north of the Holy land. The pace of their ministry had been fast and furious, but now they were alone on the road. JESUS ASKED FIRST: "WHO ARE PEOPLE SAYING THAT I AM?" The disciples needed to know what people thought of their Master, and so do we. (Many of the answers we will hear are "wrong" answers, just as the disciples reported to Jesus then: answers that contradict the clear teachings of the Bible. Some of these answers are simply ignorant or incomplete: Jesus was a great teacher, a martyr, or whatever. Many answers are probably "right" answers as well.

Every sermon, every good book, and even what Matthew Mark and Luke and John say about Jesus are right answers to this first question Jesus asked.) But what people say about Jesus tells more about them than it does about Him. Jesus is the great I AM. To have that knowledge is life itself. Who is Jesus?

It is the watershed question of all time.

It is the most important question in the world.

Actually when the question comes to you and me it has two parts:

WHO IS JESUS? is the first part. But the second part is: WHO IS JESUS TO YOU?

When Jesus asked THE BIG QUESTION to the disciples, Peter, of course, gave the right answer. He was like the little kid that sat in the front row in your fourth grade class and had her hand up all the time. Peter always had something to say. This time he hit the nail on the head. "You are the Christ! You are Messiah! You are the Son of the Living God!"

Jesus' response was immediate— and he said, "Blessed are you Simon, son of John! This idea didn't just come out of your own head— it was a revelation from my Father, God, in heaven!" And then Jesus went on to say that this faith, this revealed confession of Peter is foundational to the very kingdom of God!

This is fine when it is a story about the disciples long ago. But when Jesus asks us here and now, today, "Who are you saying that I AM?" it becomes a living issue. IT MAKES AN HONEST PASTOR STOP AND THINK...(how do I answer it?)

A couple of years ago Rev. Martin Copenhaver, of Wellesley Congregational Church, preached on this same passage. He had been to a pastor's seminar where Michael Greene from Britain, a scholar of the history of evangelism, had challenged a group of pastors with "When is the last time you told your congregation what Jesus means to YOU?" Later Pastor Copenhaver wrote in his study "As a pastor I talk a good deal about Jesus, but do i say what Jesus means to me?" He decided he would try to do just that.

In his sermon he said, "As a pastor in the UCC our forebears in the faith worried that they might be taken for heretics. Today we UCC people seem to be more worried about being taken for fundamentalists" So in personal, devotional terms Pastor Copenhaver tried to tell his people what Jesus Christ meant to him.

Evidently the sermon was quite a personal testimony. After the service Pastor Copenhaver noticed on dear lady whom he respected as one of the 'saints in Zion'— she came past to shake his hand, and could not speak. So she went around and came past again, to give herself time to compose herself. When she finally came the second time she simply said, "Why didn't you tell us this before?"

Copenhaver wrote: "I did not know how to respond. Now her question, along with Michael Greene's, continues to haunt me."

I have wrestled with the question again this week. I can answer it professionally with not too much trouble. But really, how do I answer honestly who I say Jesus is? How do YOU? What do we say?

The Question of Questions

The Apostle's Creed? Sure. Orthodox answers ? Jesus can build his church on those answers, especially as they come from a sincere and seeking heart.

But how about searching, honest answers: "I don't really talk about Jesus all that much!" or "I used to think I knew Jesus when i was younger— now I'm not so sure I know as much as I thought I did?" It may be true that a maturing faith sometimes requires new revelation. The battle doesn't get easier— but the love does deepen and grow. No matter how well we know Jesus he seems to keep growing and growing...

Who is Jesus to me? How can I tell you honestly? ...

Jesus is a PRESENCE! I have never seen him, but I cannot imagine life without Him. I talk to Him. I listen for him. I wish I could hear his voice— but he does speak to me from time to time, as I'm sure he does to you as well.

Jesus is A FRIEND. But a friend with a capital "F." he is not my peer. He is not someone I consult with before I decide whether or not to do his will. There are many decisions I have to make, and Jesus lets me make them, along with my share of mistakes. But when I know— when Jesus makes it clear that this is or is not his will— there is no decision further. i have already decided years ago that i will follow my Friend.

Jesus LOVES ME! I confess I don't know why. It is sometimes hard for me to believe. But I DO believe it! I learned "Jesus loves me this I know" before I can remember. I never knew a time when I didn't know that and sing that. But this love has been dawning on me, little by little, more and more, for all the years of my life! I really want to return that love!

... I really want to answer that question with my life!

HOW DO WE ANSWER THAT QUESTION IN TESTIMONY TO OUR WORLD?

Can a fellowship, or an institution "answer" the question: "WHO DO YOU SAY JESUS IS?" (Both parts? A lot of churches can say "This is who Jesus is!" But can we answer "This is who Jesus is to US?")

HOW YOU THINK OUR DENOMINATION MIGHT ANSWER?

HOW WOULD THIS FELLOWSHIP, THE WOLLASTON CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE ANSWER THIS QUESTION? (Doctrinal words are vital— important. The SPIRIT of Jesus is EVERYTHING!)

Do we say "Jesus is LORD!" by the spirit of our fellowship? Does JESUS at the center make us any different than we would be without Him at all? Can we show Jesus to others? I believe we can. By faith I believe we WILL. And I believe that is what Jesus meant by saying this is how he will build his church.

PETER DID NOT KNOW THAT DAY HOW WELL HE HAD ANSWERED!

Years later Peter had perspective on that day when Jesus called him "a rock." He was writing to the churches.. and he was thinking "Jesus called me "a rock!" I see now— Jesus is the Cornerstone. And we Christians are all living stones that Jesus is building into a habitation of the living God! The church is made of people who can say "Jesus is LORD!" Then he wrote these wonderful words that in part define the church: (I Peter 2: 9,10)

Coming to (Jesus) as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ . . . (9) ...you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.

OUR WITNESS, IF NOT OUR SALVATION, hangs on how we answer that question Jesus asked the disciples so many years ago.

WHO DO YOU SAY JESUS IS?

- With your understanding: do you believe he is God's Son?
- With your emotions: Do you say you LOVE Jesus?
- With you WILL: Do you accept Jesus as your Master and Lord?

The Question of Questions

HOW DO YOU ANSWER IT, PERSONALLY? HOW DO I?

Prayer

576 [STL] *Jesus Is All the World to Me*, or

#142 [STL] *Wonderful Savior*

What is in a Name?

August 25, 1996 pm

Hebrews 11:23-29

The Bible tells us, in Exodus chapter 2, that Pharaoh's daughter named Moses. She found this little baby boy in a bassinet in the bulrushes, and gave him the name, Moses, which means "drawn out." It was to be a very prophetic name.

For God is the hero of the Book of Exodus, but Moses is the human instrument that God chooses to "draw out" his people from Egyptian slavery, and with strong leadership oversee their formation into a nation, a people that has strong identity to this very day, 4,000 years later. The keeping of the Passover which Moses kept "by faith" as the Hebrews passage tells us, is still a central part of Jewish faith.

The central figure of Exodus, I repeat, is God Himself. Exodus is still a vital study— a vital message for people of faith. The message of Exodus is a statement about the very nature of God. It is a statement about salvation as deliverance from bondage. It is a call to the freedom of following God into His promises.

But you can't fully understand Exodus unless you know a little bit about Moses. Moses comes across to us across the ages as a mighty man. We have seen Moses portrayed in sculpture as tremendously impressive, a magnificent general, an imposing figure. And so perhaps he was. But the Bible tells us that Moses was the meekest man who ever lived. Meek is an interesting word. It means strength under control. Moses may have had a big ego— but he never let it dominate him!

Moses' life divides neatly into three segments of forty years each. The part of his life for which he is famous began when he was turning 80 years old. And the Bible says that although he lived to be 120 years of age he was vital and strong right up until the day of his death.

Moses literally changed his world. Through his contact with God he gave us the Ten Commandments that are the foundation of our Judeo-Christian heritage. But all this

What is in a Name?

because one day Moses met God, and believed what God told him, and then Moses held on and "endured" because, as the text says, "Moses saw the one who is invisible." In other words, Moses had faith to trust and obey God.

But it certainly didn't come easy for Moses.

For the first 40 years Moses led a highly privileged life. He had many advantages— which God could use later on, perhaps. Perhaps Moses had to "overcome" some of his advantages. Perhaps he knew he was (1) a miracle, special; and so though he could do whatever he, Moses, thought was right all by himself. Moses also (2) knew he was highly trained—skilled—educated— and felt he could analyze what people needed. Moses (3) was action oriented— and ready to DO something about what he saw as injustice. But Moses forgot one small detail. Moses forgot God.

So— magnificent sacrifice,, and tremendous idealism— all Moses' best efforts were for nothing. Moses failed!

For the second 40 years of Moses' life Moses was pretty much out of circulation. He had to flee for his life as a murderer, even though he was saving a man's life when he killed the Egyptian. What a frustrating time this must have been for Moses. He was on a desert, keeping sheep. Have you ever been in a place where the landscape seems so vast that human beings seem so small they shrink down to nearly invisible? Moses kept getting "smaller and smaller..." Or, perhaps Moses simply thought his life was in the past— and perhaps this is where that powerful meekness developed. After 40 years on the desert, feeling smaller and smaller, one day God finally said, "Moses, you are now small enough that I can use you! I have a job for you! Come here!

That third and last period of 40 years of Moses' life was immediately preceded by a personal contact with God. Exodus chapter 3 is one of those wonderful seminal stories. Moses sees a bush burning— perhaps he had seen bushes burning several times before. But as he watched this bush was not consumed- It kept burning and burning— until Moses travelled the distance to draw near to see what was going on. You know the story. God spoke:

"Moses, put off your shoes! You are on holy ground!"

Moses met God. Moses heard a new "name" for God that was never heard before, and that still challenges us to worship and awe. God is the great I AM THAT I AM! Moses argued with God— but not the argument of pride or When Moses was ready to go God's way—wholly— the way of faith— then he was ready to accomplish more than he ever dreamed possible. A powerless group of slaves was not only set free— they became a nation— a people— and have retained their identity across 4 millenia!

WE are called to that freedom! I Peter 2:9, 10

Exodus is still a vital message for the church of God.

God still hears people who cry to him in their bondage in sin and injustice.

God still asks people to call other people to freedom. (Even when, like Moses, they say, "Who, me??" Perhaps especially, or even ONLY when they realize they need God so very much!)

God is saying "I am calling YOU to be my people!

God is saying, "I am asking YOU to tell someone they can go free!"

The Call to Stand on Holy Ground

The Exodus Series, Part 1 of 4

1. **The Call to Stand on Holy Ground**
2. [Pathway to Salvation](#)
3. [Crossing the Red Sea](#)
4. [Angels in the Treetops](#)

September 1, 1996

Exodus 3:1-10

Most of the people you meet each day, good bad or indifferent, live by their wits in this dog-eat-dog world and never think about God at all. If they ever do consciously think of God they probably think in terms of restrictions and oughts and shoulds. But at the same time most of the people we meet each day at some time or other have stopped and asked themselves the question, "Is this what life is all about?" For when we live by our wits or not, life is full of hard places.

If we were to be brutally honest, it isn't just the most of the people we meet that are frustrated with life at times— and who do not think of God most of the time. People LIKE YOU AND ME who should know better, or who may have been taught better, or even people who in earlier times at a youth camp somewhere or a revival meeting or a VBS made a commitment to God find that they can live a whole day a whole week a whole month without ever looking to God, and then one day ask that same question, "Is this what life is all about? Isn't there more than this?"

THIS IS WHERE THE EXODUS STORY COMES IN....

In the most modern, progressive, intelligent civilization the world had known to that time— a nation that had already produced man-made wonders like the great pyramids of Giza that were evidence of knowledge of celestial orbits— in that nation were several hundred thousand men, women and children who were descendants of the Hebrew Patriarchs. Four hundred years earlier Jacob had taken his tribe in a time

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of famine into Egypt, following his son Joseph who was viceroy of the entire land. They had been honored guests of the Pharaoh. At that time there were a total of 72 Hebrews.

But in the intervening 400 years governments had changed, and generations had passed and now the Egyptians had brutally dominated the Hebrews. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were reduced to living by their wits in the absence of God— or so they thought. But from time to time they raised their heads and hearts and voices and said, "O God! Is this all there is to life?" And so far as they knew — nothing! Nothing happened! Day followed day, and nothing happened.

WHAT A GREAT STORY THIS IS!!

Just as these people were praying almost in despair— several hundred miles to the southeast there was a solitary shepherd on the backside of the desert near a mountain called Horeb. He looked like any other shepherd, perhaps. He was a shepherd with a very interesting life story. He had been a prince. He tried being a hero. He became a fugitive. I have no idea what was going through this man's mind as he stood, a tiny isolated little speck of humanity in a vast dry wasteland south of the Negev. But Moses was about to have an encounter with God.

GOD MEETS ONE LONE MAN IN THE MIDDLE OF A BARREN DESERT—

The man, Moses, saw a fire. It was a fire that burned and burned and burned. Moses turned aside to see it. (Significant!) The scripture says (4) "When the LORD saw that (Moses) turned aside..." then Moses was confronted with Almighty God. Moses was drawn, but he was also almost in terror. It was electrifying.

After more than 3,000 years this story has tremendous significance. For it tells in language deeper than words can express, to those who will listen, something about what happens when we come into living contact with God.

THE WONDER OF GOD REACHING TO A HUMAN BEING

[All Moses could do was "draw near"...not generate the experience; also extreme reverence of Jews for this name "YHWH" and LORD in our OT...]

Rudolph Otto, a respected German scholar, used three Latin adjectives to describe encounters with God in the Bible in general, and this Burning Bush story in particular. Those three words are *tremendum*, and *mysterium*, and *fascinans*.

Tremendum: Otto used the word *tremendum* to express three aspects of a divine-human encounter. First, he said was (1) A sense of awe. It is, in his words, "a quite specific kind of emotional response, wholly distinct from that of being afraid, though it so far resembles it that the analogy of fear may be used to throw light upon its nature." The Scripture says "Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at God." Later, when God had brought all the people to this place again they, too, were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance.

But there is more. *Tremendum* means also (2) an overpowering, a majesty— a majestic distance— realizing the infinite difference between the ineffable God and our mortal humanity. The prophet Habakkuk said: "I hear, and I tremble within; my lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters my bones, and my steps tremble beneath me." Daniel said, "My strength left me, and my complexion grew pale, and I retained no strength." Both these men stated later that they felt greatly beloved and yet they were shaken physically and mentally and spiritually.

Finally *tremendum* has elements of what can only be described as (3) sheer "energy." The "energy" is sometimes represented in fantastic ways— Ezekiel's wheels within wheels— the four living creatures of Revelation— even the picture of the living Savior in Revelation chapter one— (words like Psalm 29: 5 - 9)

The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, And Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire, The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voices of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!")

"Awe" like Abram in Genesis 15 when "a horror" came over him as God passed between the pieces of the sacrifice "Overpowering" like Habakkuk who says, "I hear,

The Call to Stand on Holy Ground

and I tremble within; my lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters my bones, and my steps tremble beneath me." Energy beyond any human-generated excitement!

[THAT IS A LONG WAY FROM BODY SURFING AT A JESUS ROCK CONCERT]

But AWE is not all when God asks us to turn aside: [Another word:]

Mysterium: Encounters with God can never be really described. And they cannot be duplicated or summoned up at will. Ezekiel is never ever willing to say he saw God or even God's glory— but he IS willing to say he saw something LIKE the glory of God:

And above the dome over their heads there was something LIKE a throne, in appearance LIKE a sapphire, and seated above the likeness of the throne was something that SEEMED like a human form..." and so on.

When the Bible tells about people coming into contact with God it never confuses this great I AM THAT I AM with the physical setting nor does it give any glory to the humans involved. God is not in the whirlwinds or the fire or in the burning bush or even in the mountain or the tablets of stone. Moses does not fast and pray until God has to do as Moses says. There is always mystery involved when the great God reaches out to communicate with people.

One might say God has a big problem. How does he get near to us without on the one hand consuming us with his energy, and on the other hand convince us that He really is interested in us if we will listen and respond in humility and faith. There will always be mystery.

[Finally— and wonderfully— there is another aspect:]

Fascinans: The final adjective Rudolph Otto uses to describe encounters with God is fascinans, or the root word for "fascination." There is a tremendous attraction within the human heart for the holiness of God. For God is white hot passionate caring LOVE. To think that someone just simply downright LOVES you is just about the most fascinating thing in the world.

"Love" of some kind or other is the dynamic that drives most of the dramas and novels of the world— the concept of loving and being loved. But no love can compare with the purity and intensity of the LOVE that emanates from an encounter with God.

Awe. Mystery. Great fascination! Moses is awed. He covers his face. He certainly does not understand. But what is this— this I AM THAT I AM finally saying to Moses?

THIS GREAT GOD CARES ABOUT PEOPLE

He is saying, to Moses,

"I have been listening to a bunch of people who are living by their wits, and who haven't really ever thought much of Me, except that I am "absent" from their lives. I have been hearing them ask 'Is this all there is to life?' And I have even heard some of them cry poor, broken prayers like, "O God, if there IS a God— like I have heard about in fairy tales and myths and stories about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob— why don't you show up here and help me? ' Well, Moses, I AM is going to show up! And GUESS WHO is going to introduce ME and begin the process of answering their prayers??"

God went on to say that the proof that He was really God would be that right here— right at the base of this mountain— one day you will be standing with those very people who are praying to Me right now— and together you will worship. And then, and then only, the fire disappeared. It did not "go out." It simply was gone, and there stood Moses all alone in the vast expanse of desert.

THERE IS A CONNECTION, OF COURSE, BETWEEN THE PEOPLE IN EGYPT ASKING "IS THIS ALL THERE IS TO LIFE?" AND THE BURNING BUSH EXPERIENCE OF MOSES— DO YOU THINK THERE MIGHT BE A CONNECTION OF GENUINE WORSHIP AND GOD'S LOVE FOR PEOPLE "OUT THERE"??

A lot of things happened in the next few months to Moses and to Egypt and the people who were slaves but were to become the people of God. Great miracles took place, and God nearly destroyed Egypt getting the people out and away from their old masters. But the bottom line is this: one man met God— Almighty God— and obeyed Him. When this one man invited the slaves in Egypt to follow God they

The Call to Stand on Holy Ground

believed him, they responded to the promises of this God. And one day the living descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob stood at the Mountain of God, and they saw the fire and they experienced tremendum, and they experienced mysterium, and yet at the same time they knew fascinans.

When WE think of the Exodus we think of the details of the journey— the parting of the sea, the manna, the water from the rock— and that is only natural.

But really Exodus is about a God of fire and holiness and mystery who calls people to look up and believe and to walk with Him and trust Him and find they have never been so free and so happy. Exodus is about being drawn out of life that goes around in circles into a life that ascends in spirals that never, ever, ever end. Exodus is about an invitation to fellowship with the eternal God, the I AM THAT I AM.

THE WONDER OF EXODUS IS THAT GOD WANTS TO COME NEAR HIS PEOPLE AND NEVER, NEVER LEAVE THEM AGAIN!

So— who are we? and where is God? Are we saying "Is THIS all?" Can we ever see God inviting us to come nearer to Him? Will we take time to "turn aside"??

THE MESSAGE OF EXODUS IS THAT ORDINARY PEOPLE CAN EXPERIENCE THE TREMENDUM AND THE MYSTERIUM AND CERTAINLY THE FASCINANS OF COMING INTO GOD'S PRESENCE— AND THAT ORDINARY PEOPLE CAN WALK WITH GOD AND NEVER NEED TO LEAVE HIS FELLOWSHIP EVER AGAIN.

Prayer - 133 *I Love You Lord* — [Alleluia! Alleluia!]

Passover Transformed

September 1, 1996 pm

Exodus 12:12-13; Luke 22:14-20

The wonder of this table of the Lord began 4,000 years ago in the homes of slave people in Egypt. Before there were Ten Commandments as such, and before one Hebrew slave had crossed the Red Sea into the freedom of the desert, and before, even, the ethnic group had become an organized nation, there was the Passover meal.

It began as a table of promise.

It was also a table of protection.

It was the result of sacrifice. Life blood was involved, it was a solemn thing.

Through Moses God told all of Egypt that judgment was coming, and that the Angel of Death would visit every home.

Through Moses God also told them that if they would sacrifice a special, unblemished lamb, whose roasted body would be food to give strength for the journey out of bondage, and whose blood would be sprinkled on the doors of houses of faith, the Angel of Death would see the faith of the household and would Pass Over that house as God promised.

Now, 4,000 years later the people called Jews still celebrate this night when God made and kept a promise, and they began to become a special people, the people of God. And now, 4,000 years later in the sacrament of the church we call the Eucharist we remember that night as well.

For the night Jesus was betrayed and arrested, the night before he was crucified, was Passover, and Jesus was eating that meal with his beloved disciples. And for us Christians Jesus changed the significance of that meal forever.

The Paschal Lamb of sacrifice in Egypt in and of itself never had any power to keep the Death Angel away. The power was in God's promise, and the Paschal Lamb was

always a symbol and emblem of the One Holy Lamb of God which was yet to be sacrificed. It was in and of itself just ordinary food. But in obedience to God's promise it entered into the reality of that night. The homes where the blood was sprinkled on the lintel and doorposts were spared. The homes that ignored the promise were bereft. Wailing was heard throughout Egypt.

These humble elements of bread and wine are like that Paschal Lamb. In and of themselves they are ordinary food, and certainly by their size, no meal at all. But to those who enter into the promise of God, who look to Jesus Christ as our Paschal Lamb, these emblems become a true means of God's grace.

Before one Hebrew slave had crossed the Red Sea into the freedom of the desert, and before, even, the ethnic group had become an organized nation, there was the Passover meal. The invitation into God's family is something like that. It is of grace. Before you do one work of righteousness— or before you turn over a new leaf— while you are still a slave in trespasses and sins Jesus calls to you— THERE IS A SACRIFICE FOR YOUR SINS! COME, LOOK UP, BELIEVE— BE SAVED!

The Passover began as a table of promise.

It was also a table of protection.

So this table— Holy Communion— is for those who believe, a promise.

It is a table of family solidarity.

It is a table of comfort and strength

Prayer

Chorus: *In My Life, Lord, Be Glorified*

THE HOLY COMMUNION

The Law Read and Confession Made

The Lord Jesus Christ has said to us: "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great

commandment. The second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Shall we **pray**:

Search us, O God, and know our most private thoughts. Try us, and show unto us the deepest motives, the real state of our hearts. Forgive us where we have been selfish, or insensitive, or sinful in any way. We cannot keep the Great Commandment, and truly love You, O God, with all our heart, soul, and mind unless You in mercy grant to us the grace of Your indwelling Spirit. We cannot love each other as we should unless Your love is shed abroad in our hearts.

Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to draw us near to Himself so that we can come to his table with confidence.

We do not presume to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

Let us confess our faith:

The Nicene Creed (STL # 14)

The Informal Invitation ("This is not my table . . . ")

Holy and gracious Father; in your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin, and were worthy of death and hell, you, in your mercy sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to You, the God and Father of all.

He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

The Words of Institution:

On the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had give thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat:

Passover Transformed

THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

After supper he took the cup and when he had give thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me: Amen

We praise you for the mystery of our salvation! We truly believe

Christ has died!

Christ is risen!

Christ will come again!

Bless these emblems, O God, and make them to us the Body and Blood of your Son, spiritual food, and spiritual drink of new and unending life in Jesus Christ.

And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us:

Our Father which art in heaven . . .

Now, humbly we receive the Gifts of God for the People of God

Pathway to Salvation

The Exodus Series, Part 2 of 4

1. [The Call to Stand on Holy Ground](#)
2. **Pathway to Salvation**
3. [Crossing the Red Sea](#)
4. [Angels in the Treetops](#)

September 8, 1996

Exodus 12:1-14

Matthew 18:15-20

The Exodus Begins

A CHALLENGE TO BELIEVE

As the story of Exodus began, the descendants of Jacob were living by their wits as best they could, surviving as virtual slaves in an alien culture. From time to time they cried out to God, "Is this all there is?" Then one day word went around the Hebrew quarters that a Bedouin shepherd had appeared claiming to be Moses, one of their own, a descendent of the patriarch Levi. This sunburned shepherd said that he had a message from the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Deep in their hearts a spark of hope kindled. They wanted to believe, but believing is always a challenge. That spark of hope, when it is genuine, is beyond words of merely human persuasion. Revelation and faith never explain the mystery of God. Over the next days and weeks they became convinced that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whom they now began to know as Yahweh, really had heard their prayers of despair. They decided to follow Moses as he followed God.

God's directions then became more specific. The word came that they were to begin to prepare to leave Egypt forever. They would be leaving in a time of crisis. They would be leaving in a hurry, probably in the early morning hours just about dawn, on

a day sometime in the near future. They were told to pack up, and be ready at a moment's notice. In preparation for their final meal they were to get a supply of unleavened bread. They were to bring a yearling lamb into the houses. They would be told the night before that this was the night.

Four days after these preparations had been made the word went out: this is the night! Kill the lambs, and roast them. Cook the first batch of unleavened bread. Families— eat together and don't go out until morning— this is it! Passover was under way. Exodus had begun.

The path of salvation begins with OBEDIENCE BEFORE THE MYSTERY OF GOD'S WORD - "when I see the blood I will pass over you"

It took courage for them to come together and decide that they would believe the God of their great fathers. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It took faith for them to obey orders even when they could not grasp the significance of what they were doing. That faith was expressed in simple obedience.

God's directions given through Moses and Aaron went beyond what they could understand. The idea of eating meat for strength, and unleavened bread that would not spoil along the way would seem to make sense. But they were to sprinkle the blood of the lamb on the sides and top of the door to their homes. It would be a sign and symbol of obedience. That did not "make sense." They simply obeyed!

The significance of the blood was different from all other blood sacrifices of pagan religions, even though blood sacrifice is common; this was somehow very different. The Passover represented great respect for life itself; blood, representing life, became very sacred to God's people. The Passover demanded obedience in this mystery of respect for life. That obedience was the sprinkling of the blood on the lintels and doorposts of those who believed. It may not "make sense." But 4,000 years later our Jewish neighbors remember the Passover with reverence.

I think I hear echoes of this incredulity at times, 4,000 years later, when people trying to simplify the mystery of the Cross of Christ. We can understand the need for the good and kind things Jesus taught, but why do we need to speak of the Body and

Blood of Jesus? We have managed to find fault with all the old theories of atonement, (ransom, substitution, redemption, etc.) even though each of them probably has some facet of truth from the scriptures. Some evangelical Christians have pretty much ended up where the liberals were nearly 100 years ago. Jesus is to them an example and a martyr.

A Holy Mystery is exactly what we are challenged to embrace when we come seeking the freedom from sin we call the God-life. Paul writes "While we were still dead in our sin, Christ died for us!" Peter tells us that as a lamb without blemish, Jesus shed his precious blood so that we might have eternal life. And Jesus Himself said (John 6) unless we eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink His blood, we have no part in Him. It is in Christ's DEATH that our life begins! That was exactly when multitudes left him. (see John 6:66.)

Sophisticates tell us they have gone beyond the message of the cross. But the mystery we celebrate is Jesus Christ has died! Jesus Christ is risen! Jesus Christ is coming again! The CROSS, the Lamb of God, is at the very HEART of our salvation! Thank God if you can believe! If you can and will, you are SAVED!!

The path to salvation continues with

THE DISCIPLINE OF A COMMUNITY OF HOPE

- "having loins girded; your shoes on— eat it in haste.."

The slaves were on their way— but they had not yet arrived. They had a long, hard journey ahead of them. They were not a nation, a people— but God was bringing them together. In the same way when we have come to the Cross and our sins are forgiven and we are baptized we have eternal life, and we have also begun a long journey. To believe God is to begin the discipline of the community of hope.

It is God's plan that every born again Christian have a place in the community of hope. Another word for Christian is "disciple." And that sounds like discipline. Paul says, "Lay aside every hindrance— and the sin that does so easily best— and run with discipline the race that is set before US— looking unto Jesus!"

The first major stop on the Exodus journey as the slaves began to become God's own holy nation was at the mountain where God had first met Moses. There they received holy commandments for living— Ten Commandments that have never been repealed. I will not go into detail in this sermon about the commandments. The epistle lesson reminds us, however, that God's people live by disciplines of obedience to God, and of caring and respect for personality. The commandments and ordinances and rules of God are not harsh and arbitrary. God saves us, and as we meet at the foot of the cross we realize we are not alone. We gladly embrace the discipline of the people of hope.

But mere discipline is not quite enough. God's way is not just keeping rules, and doing right and not doing wrong. The path of salvation intends that we all come to ...

FAITHFULNESS EMERGING AS GENUINE LOVE

To band together in mutual need is one thing— to become one in heart and spirit is quite another. The end God has in mind is not simply to get the people out of Egypt— or even to get the Egypt out of the people— and finally, not even to get the people over into Canaan where they each have a house and vine and fig tree— where the milk and honey flows— but the bottom line is LOVE! WE ARE NOT THE CHURCH GOD INTENDS US TO BE UNTIL WE "AGREE" IN LOVE!

Our God is a God of fierce, passionate, white-hot LOVE! He wants his people to love Him. He wants them to know He loves them! He wants them to love each other and show the world how life can be lived.

This kind of love didn't fully happen there in the desert— and really is hasn't happened too many times in the Christian era, either. But where people press through the mystery of obedience, into the discipline of a community of hope— they come into the challenge of seeing their faithfulness emerging as genuine love.

The Gospel lesson says that when just two people AGREE in prayer God will answer with power. What sort of AGREEMENT do you suppose this can be? What does it mean? There is power, Jesus would have us to know, when people forget their selfish agendas and unite to seek the whole will of God. Promises that underscore the power

of prayer are easily twisted and misunderstood. "Ask what YOU will—" "Ask in MY name..." "If two of you AGREE..." What do these promises mean?

To agree to follow Jesus— to set aside selfishness— is to risk finding out what the promises mean! It is risking the awe and the mystery and the fascination of having God move in and show us how we should live.

In his book *The Acting Person*, the man who once was Cardinal Karyl Wojtyla gave two authentic and two inauthentic ways people act and react in community. He called the two authentic ways solidarity, which i would call "agreeing," and opposition. The two inauthentic ways are conforming (which i would call "going along passively" and non-involvement. We can betray love by saying "yes" when we should say a loving "no!" We can betray love by refusing to take an active part in the redemptive community. But when as many as two people really AGREE that they are going to follow Jesus, then things must happen, good things— eternal things.

These are milestones along the pathway of salvation: deliverance from sin, to taking part in the community of hope, to learning to agree in love to seek and do God's will, God wants us to be His body, His people, the CHURCH! I close with the "text" of this Exodus story, 1 Peter 2:9,10:

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who once had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.

Prayer

Hymn 452 *When I See the Blood* (v1,2,4)

Crossing the Red Sea

The Exodus Series, Part 3 of 4

1. [The Call to Stand on Holy Ground](#)
2. [Pathway to Salvation](#)
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Crossing the Red Sea

September 15, 1996

Exodus 14:19-31; Matthew 18:21-35

The night of the Passover had come and gone. The slaves were streaming out of Egypt on their way to the birth of a new nation, to becoming the people of God. They were free, at least for the time being. They had been set free in what can only be called a miraculous way. Now they were being directed by a miracle, following a visible pillar of cloud by day that became a glowing fire by night.

You would think that with freedom, and with the sense of doing God's will, life would immediately be much better. In fact, life almost immediately became much more challenging. Living by faith is not for the faint of heart.

There is a certain bogus security in being a prisoner and a slave. Life within the walls of a prison is probably somewhat predictable. But now even that wispy security was gone. God's special people couldn't simply live by their wits any longer. They were learning to follow God's word, and live by faith. So— shortly after the miracle of Passover the people who were being called out by God found themselves facing a life-threatening crisis. They were being introduced to grace.

Pharaoh was in a rage. After the first awful shock and panic of the loss of his first-born son his pain and sorrow turned to bitter hatred. He assembled his armies and began pursuit. He intended to round up his former slaves and punish them. They would now have a slavery worse than they had had before.

Crossing the Red Sea

Pharaoh had all the weapons of war, the slaves had none. The refugee-like columns of Israel were marching themselves right up against the barrier of the waters of a sea. The position of the Israelites was without any visible way out. Behind was slavery. Ahead was impossible. What good could the Passover be if they were going to simply be killed or recaptured?

But then a way appeared. It was the way of grace. The obstacle they faced, once it was behind them, became a barrier between them and the country that had enslaved them. The Red Sea actually was only the first of many, many challenges the people of God faced. And every time they could fail and die in unbelief, or, they could look for the way of grace.

It is a real "stretch" to connect the Red Sea crossing of Exodus to today's gospel lesson from Matthew 18 on forgiveness. But we, too, [like the Israelites] are learning to live by faith, learning to trust the God of grace. We are called into the life of faith by the love of God. We believe the story of the Cross and begin to follow Christ. Then we find that this life of faith is a pathway of challenges. This world does not surrender its prisoners easily. We can surrender and go back— or we can do the impossible and go straight ahead. There are challenges that can only be met by walking straight ahead in God's way of grace .

One of the BIG obstacles we face as Christians AFTER we have started out by faith along the path of salvation is how to handle the matter of forgiveness. Forgiveness is of the essence of grace. It is God's way of dealing with us, and with our sins. That is what we usually think of as the heart of "being saved:" OUR sins are forgiven.

But then we discover that God is expecting us to treat OTHERS the way He has treated us. We discover that God wants us to forgive ourselves, and forgive our parents, and forgive our enemies, and simply move away from condemnation and guilt forever. Jesus knew it would be an ongoing struggle, for he taught us to pray "Forgive us whatever we do wrong...as we forgive all those who do any wrong to us!" [and then Jesus commented on that part of the prayer: "If you do not forgive, neither will your heavenly Father forgive you.."]

The way of grace is revealed particularly in this matter of forgiveness. Several factors in the nature of grace present themselves:

1. GRACE IS OF GOD: THE SLAVES—are powerless until God sends them Moses; WE are powerless to save ourselves. Then God speaks through His Word, by His Spirit—we believe and are saved. Then we begin to discover:
2. GRACE IS RELATIONAL. Grace begins with trust toward God. But grace continues in the community of hope. We begin to learn to trust and love each other as well. The Exodus narrative is not as explicit just at this point; it is later. But in the Epistle lesson today (Romans 14:7) Paul says flat out: "No one lives to himself, no one dies to himself." We live to the Lord and for one another.

Just how important is this lesson of relational grace?

Bitterness, hidden resentments, unresolved conflicts can keep Christians from knowing God's perfect freedom and grace just as certainly as the Red Sea could keep the Hebrew children from getting away from raging Pharaoh. Not to forgive acts as a block to receiving grace. A clenched fist can not receive God's free gift. But there is more about the nature of grace:

3. GRACE IS 'NOT FAIR.' That is great when it comes to your sins and mine: we don't want what we deserve. But when we begin to think about forgiving people who have done US wrong it often is another story. Grace is "not fair"—it "goes beyond."

Peter's question "How many times should I forgive??" seems to indicate that Peter was thinking about the high cost of being generous in forgiving. Seven times may be generous for Peter, and for us as well, but God isn't into keeping score. Peter's question also gives insight into God's kind of forgiveness: God's grace is extravagant. God challenges His people to live beyond bitterness and revenge and hatred as well.

How does God help us deal with the challenges of spirit that come after we have begun this way of faith? Especially, how does God help us forgive, and ask forgiveness, and relate in honesty to Him, and to ourselves, and to one

another? Believe me, it takes as great a miracle as parting the Red Sea! But that miracle is available.

Reprieve to story: God did not abandon the people of faith— he (1) went behind them and kept them safe until they could get moving; He (2) went before them to show them the way through the waters. The "obstacle" that seemed to be absolutely impassable now became a barrier to the old way of life.

That is the way obedience works: seeking and finding and giving forgiveness from the heart releases grace.

One last thing about the nature of grace:

4. GRACE IS PRESENT HERE AND NOW

These scripture words are far more than just an interesting history story. Some of you are like the people who were learning to know God and walk by faith. You are face to face with the Red Sea of the need for forgiveness. You ask: Can God really forgive me? or, perhaps, "How can I believe and receive the freedom I want to know in my life while I find it hard to let go of the bitterness and forgive someone who has made life hard for me?"

Prayer - Then #84 - into #85 *Grace Greater than our Sin/ Amazing Grace*

Giving God the If Only

September 15, 1996 pm

2 Samuel 23:13-17

The exact time in David's life that this story took place is not clear. We do know several things:

1. David is in hiding, threatened, being pursued by King Saul. He is at times emotionally drained and overwhelmed (as his Psalms reflect.)
2. David has an as-yet unfulfilled promise: he has been anointed to be king over Israel. To his everlasting credit, David has not insisted on his rights. Instead he has waited on God to open the doors.
3. We know also that David's home town of Bethlehem is in the hands of the Philistines. And in it all David is very much "down." He is not having a good day.

IF ONLY FEELINGS COME TO US ALL . .

The reason this story appeals to us is that we can all identify with David. (He doesn't tell it like it ought to be—but like it is!) David's UNIQUE situation is also often UNIVERSAL experience:

1. Aware of God's PROMISES (God wants me, God loves me, God wants to use me) and in a sense believing, but at the same time
2. Very much aware of problems and circumstances. There is a temptation to think that God doesn't REALLY understand OUR situation— how WE feel just now. We're tempted to think God doesn't care when we hurt. Tempted to feel that somehow we shouldn't ever be "down" when others who don't believe at all are better off. We face the prospects of a long hard pull with no change in sight.
3. And right here comes the temptation to take a short-cut. Since God's BEST seems so far away, I'll just settle for what seems next best! I'll go for the PRESENT SATISFACTION. And yet we know the truth: there isn't any short-cut answer to doing God's will. Illustration: Under pressure in New Jersey in 1962 early in my ministry there I was homesick for (of all

places) Ohio. I was thinking "If only!! I had \$1,000 I would move back to Ohio and start all over again..."

4. In times like these it helps to remember that these feelings are.... just feelings! No real harm done IF (IF!!) we don't indulge them, or let them hang around too long. Feelings of loneliness, frustration, uselessness are part of living. But when those feelings come— right here— we need to be careful of the "IF" words! "IF only..." "What IF..."

HERE DAVID SAID: "IF ONLY I had a drink from the well at Bethlehem I think I could make it on..."

And David's men heard him— and he had an opportunity to be "satisfied" on the terms of his "if only." At great personal risk the warriors broke through enemy sentry lines and got him water from the well of his home town.

Then David did a strange and wonderful thing: HE TOOK THE WATER AND POURED IT OUT AS A SACRIFICE TO THE LORD!

REFUSING TO SATISFY SELF FIRST IS THE WAY OF SEEKING GOD'S BEST IN OUR LIVES: HIS PROMISES ARE SURE

Maybe David recognized the deeper meanings of his thirst for Bethlehem water:

Bethlehem's water— maybe it represented an innocence he could never quite recapture.

We can't turn the clock's hands backwards.

Bethlehem's well where the water came from was in enemy hands. No amount of water he could drink would change that fact.

Refusing to satisfy HIMSELF at the risk of other men's lives seems important to me here, too. David revealed a quality that I like— I want in my own life: LOYALTY, RESPECT FOR FRIENDS, NEVER USING THEM

... so David kept his goals firm: I'll follow God's promises in God's way— cutting no corners.

Illustration: What would it take for YOU to change your goals in life? You do have goals? Would \$1,000,000 tax-free change the basic goals of your life? LIFE HAS DEEPER MEANING THAN THINGS, AND WHAT MONEY CAN BUY!

So David poured out his IF ONLY to God along with his future. And with it was BETHLEHEM'S FUTURE! It, along with the well, and all the water, was soon his!

David poured out his successes and failures, too. Not just here— but on two or three other occasions David had it in his power to "promote himself" to be king— to take things in his own hands and kill Saul. But David decided that God had promised, and God could and would open the doors. The raising up of David was up to God! And David became a candidate for greatness.

A self-indulgent David would never have become "a man after God's own heart." David did not pull back from keeping God first. David maintained his integrity.

WE HAVE FACED THE 'IF ONLY' TRAP many times in our experience. Do you see how the big "IF" can paralyze you? When the feelings come— and they will— pour them out before the Lord! Reject them!

No human marriage has ever succeeded without setting aside some "if only" items. No worth-while long-term goal has ever been reached unless that goal has been kept in mind.

OUR WITNESS DOES NOT NEED TO WAIT FOR AN 'IF ONLY!' (If only the times weren't so bad! If only people were more God-minded...) WESLEY'S 18TH CENTURY ENGLAND WAS AT LEAST AS VILE AND EVIL AND COARSE AS OUR OWN TIMES.

If you truly belong to God, He has made some promises. Nothing can keep you from becoming ultimately what HE wants you to be. If you are NOT God's person, then NOTHING ELSE can make up the difference! Not a million dollars . . . not ANYTHING!

Will you deliberately give your thirst to God? Will you trust Him just as you are just now? Trust him with ALL your future?

PRAYER

#489 Where He Leads Me I will Follow

Angels in the Treetops

The Exodus Series, Part 4 of 4

1. [The Call to Stand on Holy Ground](#)
2. [Pathway to Salvation](#)
3. [Crossing the Red Sea](#)
4. **Angels in the Treetops**

September 22, 1996

Exodus 16:2-15; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

In January of 1956 I loaded up a U-Haul and drove to the place where I was to begin my pastoral ministry. Cherry Valley is a tiny crossroad community, not even a village, in northeastern Ohio. I was twenty-five years old. As I began to learn the wonders of the pastorate, I was blissfully unaware of many problems and pitfalls. Amazing grace kept me safe sometimes in dangers I remember, and no doubt many times when I didn't have sense enough to recognize real danger. I did things backwards, I'm sure. I remember times when I was dreadfully afraid, and many times when I probably did the wrong thing.

But people in the community were saved. God blessed in many ways. God has been good to me, and given Helen and me four loving sons, and twelve wonderful grandchildren, and I have served churches where the congregations have treated me with love beyond what I deserve.

In that very same month, January 1956, a small group of young Christians just a little older than I were launching a new ministry as well. These were people with top-notch college and seminary educations, the kind who go to the very top in any field they enter. The one thing that distinguished this group was that they had totally dedicated their ambition to God.

This particular group had come together because they believed God wanted them to take the gospel of Christ to a tribe in South America where the life expectancy was

barely 30 years of age, and where revenge and murder was the accepted way of life. Five wonderful, bright young Christian families believed God was leading them to take His Good News to these primitive people. They prepared in the best imaginable ways. It was as sophisticated and yet as dedicated a missionary endeavor as you could imagine, using aircraft and radio contacts. And then in their very first contact with the dangerous tribe all five men were killed.

Why have I put these two beginnings side by side? Am I comparing myself to those great martyrs? No— there is no comparison in my mind. I wouldn't change places with them, and I know they wouldn't change places with me. I have the CONTRAST in mind. Grace does not seem to treat us all alike, as the gospel lesson makes clear. But again today (as last week) we see several insights into the nature of God's grace:

[Last week speaking particularly about FORGIVENESS, we said:

1. GRACE IS OF GOD - HE ACTS
2. GRACE IS RELATIONAL - WE RESPOND TO GOD AND TO OTHERS
3. GRACE IS NOT 'FAIR' - IT IS LIFE-CHANGING

GRACE IS GOD'S BUSINESS, ON HIS TERMS

Our gospel lesson tells of contrasts in work and working conditions: "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who hired people in the morning who worked all day in the sun— he hired them at nine, and noon, and three in the afternoon, and again he hired an hour before quitting time— and they all got a day's wage. The all-day workers cried foul. Humanly speaking, as the only way we can speak, it was unfair.

How God assigns, how God rewards, what God calls vital and important is finally His business. Our business is to follow the pillar of fire, the "Presence," where it leads. Our challenge is to believe, to trust that God will care for us.

GRACE IS GOOD, BUT IT DOESN'T MOVE TO OUR EXPECTATIONS

Exodus passage: underscores the very human traits of grumbling when things don't go as expected. What outside forces could NOT do— destroy the Exodus mission— internal dissension and bad will almost did do. The biggest headache Moses had was ...grumbling, complaining, murmuring—

The people experienced some hunger ... and expressed their discontent. They made unfair comparisons. They remembered best times of slavery— Still on the journey, the Exodus no one starved... but some died from snakebite. Grace may be present and unrecognized, even despised; grace can be blacked out, even apparently defeated. The miracle of manna is how God chose to feed his people. It required both faith and obedience. That lesson is echoed every time we pray the Lord's Prayer: "Give us THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD! Faith and obedience connect with God's grace! We have provision for today to be what God would have us be today.

GRACE IS NOT FAIR. IT IS UNDESERVED. IT IS GOOD.

When the five missionary martyrs died Life magazine carried pictures of red eyed widows, and corpses beginning to bloat in jungle heat. The reporters did make mention of the amazing calm of the women and children, and their lack of hatred and revenge spirit. But it was a sad, sad story. To a pure materialist there is no question that these people were deluded in the matter of life investment and spiritual reality. What a waste for people to study language and sociology, and to take expensive equipment into the moldy hot jungles only to be killed on their first encounter with their target tribe, and have their airplane torn apart.

The Christian world saw things somewhat differently from the start. It was not too long before the very same warriors who had killed the missionaries testified that the missionaries' God had conquered them, not with punishing power and vengeance, but with forgiveness and life-changing love.

But just recently the whole story has emerged. In the latest *Christianity Today* is an article by Steve Saint, who was a baby when his father, Nate Saint, was killed by the people he was trying to reach with the love of Jesus. I read to you:

"Why didn't he flee into the jungle?" Mincaye emphatically asked me. "If he would have fled, surely he would have lived. Instead, he just waited for Kimo to wade out and spear him."

Dawa, one of the three women, told me she had hidden in the bush through the attack, hearing but not seeing the killing of the five men. She told me she had been hit by gun pellets in the wrist and just above the knee. (The obviously came from random warning shots fired to scare the attacker, because Dawa was hiding on the far side of the narrow river and the men could not have known of her presence.) She also told me that after the killing she saw COWODI (Auca word for foreigners) above the trees, singing. She didn't know what this kind of music was until later she heard records of Aunt Rachel's and became familiar with the sound of a choir.

Mincaye and Kimo confirmed that they heard the singing and saw what Dawa seems to describe as angels along the ridge above Palm Beach. Dyuwí verified hearing the strange music, though he describes what he saw more like lights, moving around and shining, a sky full of jungle beetles similar to fireflies with a light that is brighter and doesn't blink. Apparently all the participants saw this bright multitude in the sky and felt they should be scared, because they knew it was something supernatural. Their only familiarity with the spiritual world was one of fear. Dawa has said that this supernatural experience was what drew her to God when she later heard of him from Dayuma. CT 9/16/96 26,7

Maybe that is something of what Paul meant when he wrote: Philippians 1:20, 27-29 For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain. ... Only live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is the evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear I still have.

Did you get that one sentence? the end where Paul wrote: For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well—

We don't know where God's grace will lead us when we start out. AND THAT IS GOD'S BUSINESS! DO WE DARE TO FOLLOW? Steve Saint closed the article he wrote about his martyr father with this short paragraph:

God took five common young men of uncommon commitment and used them for his own glory. They never had the privilege they so enthusiastically pursued to tell the Huaroni of the God they loved and served. But for every Huaroni who today follows God's trail there are a thousand COWODI who follow God's trail more resolutely because of their example.

This success withheld from them in life God multiplied and continues to multiply as a memorial to their obedience and his faithfulness. CT 9/16/96 27

GRACE IS LOVE, IT IS HERE FOR US NOW IF WE WILL RECEIVE IT

If you decide to take the way of depending on God you may have forty years of ministry, or you may have a disaster so far as a humanist observer could see. Grace is not fair. Thank God it is not fair. But I feel sorry for the people who have no invisible means of support.

Prayer

Hymn # 443 *I Know Whom I Have Believed*

Two Sons: One Went; the Other Did Not

September 24, 1996

There is a story told of two young monks, climbing the hill toward their monastery on a cold winter's night. The wind was chilling and snow almost blinding. As they climbed, it became bitterly cold, and both grew alarmed about making it to the monastery alive. About halfway up the hill, the younger of the two stopped, as if he had heard a voice. "Do you hear that voice, crying for help?" he asked the other. "No," said the second, "it is just the howling of wind! We must keep moving, or we will freeze to death." But the younger monk motioned the other to go on, while he remained behind listening to the voice.

Sure enough, the younger monk had heard correctly, for not far away was an old man caught in the snow, pleading for his life. The young monk assisted him up, placed him on his shoulders, and covered the both of them with his own cloak. He then proceeded up the hill. As the young monk was about to enter the monastery, he saw the other monk dead on the wayside, covered with snow. He had almost made it to the top. The younger monk, because of the warmth of two bodies, was able to reach the top safely, and alive, carrying the load of the stranger.

Many years later, this younger monk was made the abbot of his community, and he became known for his wisdom and insights. When he was on his deathbed, the community gathered around for prayer. One of the monks asked him, "Father, what is the most tragic thing that could happen in this life of ours?" The abbot, remembering that night in the snow, smiled and said: "The most tragic thing that could happen in life is to live without having another person's burden to carry. One must be empty enough to be filled with the other." [1]

This story touches on the gospel today. There we see two brothers: one said "yes" when his father asked him to go and work in the field; the other said "no," but then he went and did as his father had asked.

Two Sons: One Went; the Other Did Not

The young monk in our story was not worried so much about getting back to the monastery, even though he had probably taken a vow not to be outside of the monastery after a certain hour. No, his main concern was action, taking care of an old man who was freezing. The other monk, who went ahead and did not help out, later was found dead.

The point seems to be that action is the most important thing in our behavior. We have all made promises that we later thought better of and did not keep. Maybe we are guilty...or maybe we had such a good reason for not keeping that promise that we would have been guiltier in keeping it. For not keeping the promise would have taken us away from a serious act of charity done for someone in great need.

We often readily give lip service to the principles of Christianity, such as service, caring for the homeless, self denial. But the doing is always the proof of the pudding.

"For three decades, author Jonathan Kozol has been plumbing the depths of poor inner city neighborhoods and the children who live there. He says, "The ghettos serve a very important function for the privileged. If there was no ghetto...the rich and the privileged would have to look into the eyes of the poor every day.

"In the early and mid 1980s, thousands of families became homeless in New York... Inevitably these people walked the streets and stood outside the restaurants and theaters. The civic boosters of the city were alarmed... The last thing the theater owners wanted was to have a wealthy couple spend \$200 to the Broadway play '*Les Miserables*' and then come out from the theater and see the real thing!

"I walked by that theater sometimes and would notice people who had presumably been weeping for the poor children in Paris a few minutes before in the theater; now, coming out on the street, they were miserably offended by the sight of people begging on the sidewalk." [2]

This is somewhat like the story of the rich lady in the eighteenth century who sat in her opera box weeping at what was going in the play on stage while her coachman sat outside in the freezing weather, waiting to pick her up after the show.

Our words come easily, then, but actions prove what we say we believe. Pastor William Willimon says, "A few years ago I was leading a discussion about preaching among a group of lay persons in an affluent Washington, D.C. parish.

"What do you look for in a sermon?' I asked.

"Immediately, one of the group members said, 'I want a sermon which helps me to think about things in a new way.'

"Everyone in the group nodded in agreement. That's the goal of preaching, to describe the gospel in some interesting and engaging new way, to help us to think new thoughts and explore new ideas.

"All of that sounded good to me at the time. Yet over the years, the more I have thought about preaching, the less I like it as a test for good preaching. 'A sermon which helps me to think about things in a new way.' "Such a test can be an evasion of the sermon rather than a mark of a good sermon. Isn't that the way we love to deal with things? We love to think about things, to run them over in our minds, then to go home and have a good lunch? We can then think, or feel, but never need to act.

"A good sermon," pastor Willimon says, "ought to help me to act on things in a new way." [3]

C.S. Lewis said, "A person cannot remain just a 'good egg' forever. Either one must hatch or rot."

Sometimes we think our credentials can stand in place of our actions. Fr. Dick Rice is a noted counselor of priests and nuns in the archdiocese of St. Paul Minneapolis. He was giving a day of recollection to Mother Teresa and some nuns. He said, "Mother, what is, would you say, your most difficult problem?" Immediately, he felt he shouldn't have asked the question.

But Mother Teresa came right back and said, "Professionalism." Fr. Rice blinked and repeated "Professionalism?" "Yes," said Mother Teresa. "When I send a sister off to school to become a nurse or a doctor, she returns with her degrees and diplomas, I always have to interrupt her after a while in her work. She has become too

Two Sons: One Went; the Other Did Not

intellectual about her work. She has lost the personal touch. So I send her down to the ward where we have people with advanced diseases who are dying. I tell her to just sit with them, empty their bedpans, hold their hand, feed them. Then, after a couple of months I let her go back to her work."

If anyone is a no nonsense person, it's Mother Teresa. In her reply she showed how important it is not to lose the common touch, no matter how many degrees one has after his or her name.

Some people substitute hanging onto their old ways of practicing their religion as God's will. They think that God never intended any change to affect the Church. But Pope John XXIII called the church to change in the second Vatican Council. And today the saintly leader of Chicago, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, who has inoperable cancer, has just called for a meeting next spring of many theologians, men and women, and other people to talk about what's happening in the church today.

Such a common ground of talk has been criticized even by some of Bernardin's fellow members of the hierarchy, who say that once the church has spoken, we don't need to discuss anything. Everything is set in concrete once the Church, Holy Scriptures, and Tradition have spoken, they say.

But the Holy Spirit speaks through the grassroots also. It's a source of revelation called "sensus fidelium," or "the sense of the faithful," and it is not to be ignored.

Many referendums have been taken in recent years in Europe. In Austria and Germany last year some 2.5 million signatures are urging genuine dialogue in the whole church concerning certain issues. Signature sheets are being distributed throughout the United States by volunteers. People are asked to sign "with prayerful hope for a new movement of the Spirit in our church."

Organizers plan to take the results to the Vatican next year. Main points are:

1. Equality of the faithful and the right of a community to participate in selecting pastors and bishops;
2. equal rights for women, including ordination;
3. optional celibacy for priests;

4. affirmation of the goodness of sexuality combined with a shift of emphasis from sexual morality to other essential issues, such as peace, social justice, and the environment; and
5. a generous and welcoming spirit that affirms people rather than condemning them for following their conscience in such areas as divorce or theological debate."

It is important to note that no one expects the church to change overnight as a result of popular demand but rather, that those in charge of decision making should not simply close the door but continue to explore those issues in careful dialogue with many constituencies. Petition signers are in good company. The church must heed the signs of the times. Cardinal Martini of Milan has suggested we need another ecumenical council to deal with women's ordination. Bishop Reinhold Stecher of Innsbruck where the entire movement originated officially requested that Rome consider the ordination of women to the diaconate and the ordination of married men to the priesthood. Theologian Hans Kung said that the petition drive "reminds us of the original freedom of early Christianity and does an immense service for the Church in this difficult period of transition." [4]

Vaclav Havel, the head of Czechoslovakia, said, "The worst thing is that we are living in a decayed moral environment. We have become morally ill because we have become accustomed to saying one thing and thinking another. We have learned not to believe in anything, not to care about one another and only to look after ourselves. Notions such as love, friendship, compassion, humility and forgiveness have lost their depth and dimension, and for many, they represent merely some kind of psychological idiosyncrasy, or appear as some kind of stray relic from times past, something rather comical in the era of computers and space rockets." [5]

The story of the two brothers is very central for us today. We must not get caught up in our head, in giving assent to principles that we have long since ceased to believe, to put into action.

"In his autobiography, Telling Secrets, Frederick Buechner tells the story of an evening visiting his mother in Manhattan. she had prepared and was serving a gourmet meal for her visiting son when the phone rang. A friend was on the line. He

asked Buechner to come wait with him at the airport. This friends' family had been seriously injured in an accident, and he was waiting for a flight to join them.

"When Buechner's mother learned of this request, she was furious. the meal was ready and was getting cold. She called him a fool for thinking about ruining a rare evening together for such a ridiculous reason. Buechner says, "And for a moment I was horrified to find myself thinking that maybe she was right. Then the next moment I saw more clearly than I ever had before that it is on just such outwardly trivial decisions as this should I go or should I stay that human souls are saved or lost." [6]

- [1] Richard N. Fragomeni, *_Markings_*, 26th Sun OT, Cycle A, Sept 29, 1996.
- [2] *_Connections_*, "Les Miz in our midst," 26th Sun OT, Cycle A, Sept. 1996.
- [3] William Willimon, *__Pulpit Resource_*, (24): 54, "Relating the text," 26th Sun OT, Cycle A, July, August, September.
- [4] Ingrid Schaeffer, *_Good News_* (23):327, "Model homily," 26th Sun OT, Cycle A, Sept. 1996.
- [5] Arthur E. Dewey, *_Good News_* (23):341, "Model homily," 26th Sun OT, Cycle A, Sept. 1996.
- [6] Gary Charles, *_Lectionary Homiletics_* (7):40, "Will we go or will we stay," 26th Sun OT, Cycle A, Sept. 1996. Jerry Fr. Gerard Fuller, o.m.i., St. William's Church, P.O. Box 367, Gainesville MO Tel. (1 417 679 4804); Fax (Same); E mail: oblate@Juno.com.

Grace to Repent

THE NATURE OF GRACE

September 29, 1996

Philippians 2:1-13 - Poured out for love of family

Matthew 21:23-32 - Two sons, neither of whom did as they said

Have you ever wondered why people are the way they are?

Have you ever wondered why YOU are the way you are?

Some of us seem always pleasant and loving— like the Colonel, for example— and some of us are congenital pessimists (not you or me, of course!) But there are "personality sets" that begin early in life, and often carry over into the way we express life's most important relationships, to our families, to ourselves, and to our God.

These passages of scripture raised the question: Can a person ever really change directions? What does it mean to "repent?"

THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT GRACE IS...PEOPLE CAN CHANGE

To "repent" means basically "to turn around." One definition of repentance is "a godly sorrow for sin." But it is more than sorrow— it is a willingness to change one's mind— to change directions. Whenever anyone says, "Jesus is Lord!" there is the potential for a wonderful new direction in life! To "repent" means a willingness to take a new direction when new light is given.

We "repent" when we BECOME a Christian. But being a Christian is more than a one-time turn-around. Being a Christian is about becoming like Jesus. It is about loving to do God's will, having the same spirit that Jesus had. WE NEVER GROW PAST THE NEED FOR COURSE CORRECTION, AND THAT IS ALSO 'REPENTANCE.' "Faith" involves a willingness to change life-styles.

Jesus was talking with religious people— chief priests, elders— people who knew every passage of scripture, and who took their religion seriously. But their faith never was just in their heads, and never reached their heart and hands and feet. They were mental believers, and not concerned with caring about others, not worried about bearing one another's burdens.

Jesus told these religious people a parable about two sons: A father asked them both to do something; one said "I will obey you" and then promptly forgot and went about his own way. The other said, "I will NOT obey you" but then REPENTED and out of love for the father went and did as he was asked. He changed the kind of person he was, by grace.

Then Jesus said directly to these religious people, and I quote: "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John (the Baptist) came to you preaching righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not CHANGE YOUR MINDS and believe him."

The word repent is a key here. We think of repentance as "a godly sorrow for sin." But actually it is a willingness to change course and follow Jesus at every stage of our lives. It is the humility to be led, to follow.

That is what this Philippians passage is challenging me to do— to quit living selfishly and begin thinking about you. But " I want to think about ME— and I want YOU to think about me— I want to be loved— that is just human nature, isn't it?? I want to avoid discomfort as much as possible. "

So— Jesus is a real challenge. He had it all. He needed absolutely nothing. But then Jesus left it all in order to come looking for... me. He left heaven to give me a chance to come into his inner circle of love, and be like him. But once I got into that circle and began to see what Jesus' great joy was all about, I found this challenge: I really want to be in his inner circle— but it is there I have to seek to be like Him. And HE lived for others!

ABRUPT ENTRY INTO NARRATIVE

Just a week ago yesterday (9/20/96) I lost a friend. This man may have been your good friend as well, although I don't really know anyone who ever talked with him in person. That friend was Henri J. M. Nouwen, who wrote over thirty books, many of which are on my bookshelves, and many of which I have given away to others. His writings have meant a great deal to many Christians. Henri Nouwen died a week ago yesterday, apparently of a heart attack, while visiting his family in the Netherlands. he was 64.

Let me tell you just a little about this friend, this good man. Henri was evidently very gifted, and gifted in several wonderful ways. he was spiritually very sensitive, and answered God's call to ministry the best way he knew; in very liberal Holland Henri became a priest and took vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience. But Henri was exceptionally gifted intellectually as well. His resume is too lengthy to recite here, but he was a highly desired faculty member, teacher, at Notre Dame University in Indiana, then at Yale University, and also was tenured at Harvard University. But more than these two gifts, Henri was especially gifted in articulating his faith; he not only was bright, he could make common people like me understand great truth. As a result his greatest influence, perhaps, came through his writing. He had a way of making truth winsome and gripping. I put him alongside such men I have heard as Bob Benson and Reuben Welch and E. Stanley Jones; perhaps we could speak of Paul Tornier, even C.S. Lewis, perhaps Max Lucado.

One day this passage— at least the essence of the truth which this passage expresses— began to deal with Professor Henri Nouwen of Harvard University, right here in Boston. He was popular, he had it all going for him; he was teaching the movers and shakers-to-be of the nation at the nation's most prestigious school. God spoke to Henri Nouwen about kenosis— about becoming a smitten rock— about emptying himself and BEING instead of just SAYING. (It isn't that Henri hadn't been "doing" the right things before. But this was a challenge to a new turning, a new repentance—.)

Let me use Nouwen's own words:

"After twenty years in the academic world as a teacher of pastoral

psychology, pastoral theology, and Christian spirituality, I began to experience a deep inner threat. As I entered into my fifties and was able to realize the unlikelihood of doubling my years, I came face to face with the simple question, "Did becoming older bring me closer to Jesus?" After twenty-five years of priesthood, I found myself praying poorly, living somewhat isolated from other people, and very much preoccupied with burning issues.

Everyone was saying that I was doing really well, but something inside was telling me that my success was putting my own soul in danger. I began to ask myself whether my lack of contemplative prayer, my loneliness, and my constantly changing involvement in what seemed most urgent were signs that the Spirit was gradually being suppressed. It was very hard for me to see clearly, and though I never spoke about hell or only jokingly so, I woke up one day with the realization that I was living in a very dark place and that the term "burnout" was a convenient psychological translation for a spiritual death.

In the midst of this I kept praying, "Lord, show me where you want me to go and I will follow you..." God said, "Go and live among the poor in spirit and they will heal you" ... So I moved from Harvard to L'Arche, from the best and the brightest, wanting to rule the world, to men and women who had few or now words and were considered, at best, marginal to the needs of our society. It was a very hard and painful move ... " In the Name of Jesus, 9-11

So— Henri Nouwen went to Toronto, Canada, and became pastor at an interdenominational home for severely mentally retarded people, a place called "L'Arche" — you know, "The Ark" like Noah and saving a few people from the rising flood. A place for severely retarded people. A place where no one cared that Henri Nouwen had written all those books. A place where he was just "Henri." That was Henri Nouwen's employment until he died last week.

Henri Nouwen did not stop writing or speaking after he went to L'Arche. But now it was different. He had to ask if he should go or not. He usually took a retarded person with him on his trips. One such engagement was at Washington, D.C., where Nouwen was asked to talk about Christian Leadership. The remarks Henri made there became the nucleus of a book called "In the Name of Jesus." In that book he said something of what it means to not only THINK holy thoughts, but to let the holy thoughts become incarnate in BECOMING like Christ— the mind of Christ incarnate. These are some of the things he said about Christian leaders:

The leader of the future will be one who dares to claim his irrelevance in the contemporary world as a divine vocation that allows him or her to enter into a deep solidarity with the anguish underlying all the glitter of success and to bring the light of Jesus there. (ibid, 22)

The question is not: How many people take you seriously? How much are you going to accomplish? Can you show some results? But: Are you in love with Jesus? Perhaps another way of putting the question would be: Do you know the incarnate God? In our world of loneliness and despair, there is an enormous need for men and women who know the heart of God, a heart that forgives, that cares, that reaches out and wants to heal,. (ibid, 24)

The task of future Christian leaders is not to make a little contribution to the solution of the pains and tribulations of their time, but to identify and announce the ways in which Jesus is leading God's people out of slavery, through the desert to a new land of freedom. (ibid, 67)

When Nouwen delivered this challenge to the Center for Human Development at Washington, D.C. Nouwen traveled from L'Arche in Canada with a mentally retarded man named Bill Van Buren. Together these two, brilliant professor and scholar Henri Nouwen and severely handicapped Bill Van Buren teamed up to carry the message. And carry it they did [If there is time tell how; see book for details to refresh memory later]

Grace to Repent

Can we find grace to change direction? Of course we can: here it is in this challenge: Be of one mind, of one heart, of one spirit! Let this mind be in US that was in Christ Jesus!!

The church is made up of all kinds of people who, left to their own unchallenged interests, will never be heard outside the walls. But if we can be of one mind, of one heart, and care for each other— if we can have this mind in us which was also in Christ Jesus— we can be a mighty army for God to tell the world about his love. The serious can learn to care for the flighty. The impulsive can actually have patience with the retarded. The sex-crazed can be made pure in heart! We can repent, again, by grace, by the mind of Christ.

PRAYER

Seek ye the Lord while he may be found; call ye upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the evil man his thoughts, let him turn to the Lord and he will have mercy upon him— to our God for he will abundantly pardon..(Isaiah 55:6.7)

OR

Willimon: seminar decided that the most important thing about preaching is to help people think about truth in a new way. Willimon reflected— "No, it is to help people LIVE in a new way!" Are WE willing? -am I willing to "repent" and turn in any direction that the Spirit of Jesus in me will lead?

526 Let the Beauty of Jesus be Seen in Me

Grace for Guidance

THE NATURE OF GRACE

October 6, 1996

World Communion Sunday

As we get ready for communion this morning the scriptures we have read call to my mind two or three pictures- pictures that may seem not to have any connection with Exodus or the Psalms. I think first of a wedding scene:

Grounds For Marriage - An Exclusive Covenant For All Humankind Exodus 20

What is more dramatic than a wedding! Each one is different— and maybe some day I will write a book— or at least a chapter— on exciting things that took place when two people met at an altar to make solemn vows and begin life together.

What is more optimistic than a wedding? I have never known one couple in all that I have ever married who came to the altar expecting their marriage to fail.

What is more exclusive than a wedding? It may be a small wedding, or a big one with hundreds of guests. But by "exclusive" I am not talking about who is welcome and who is not. Along with flowers, and attendants, and music, and cake and guests, at the heart of the wedding is a betrothal promise, a promise that "forsaking all others, (I will) keep only to him/her so long as we both shall live." That is exclusive! And that exclusiveness is reinforced again in the vows themselves when bride and groom say, "Till death do us part, I pledge you my faith(fullness.)" The heart of a wedding is the covenant. A covenant kept is at the heart of every successful marriage.

Sinai hardly looks like a wedding scene. But a wedding is what it is. A covenant of hope and optimism and, yes, exclusivity was made at Sinai. The people who had been slaves in Egypt were now to become God's own people. Jeremiah wrote about Sinai hundreds of years later, God's words: "For when I brought your forefathers out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, but I gave them this command: Obey me and I will be your God and

you will be my people. Walk in all the ways I command that it may go well with you." God proposed: This is how my called out people shall live, and I will be their God forever. That is why in the New Testament the Church is called, the Bride of Christ. It began back at Sinai, and Passover, and it began with covenant. It was exclusive in the sense that there would be no other gods. But God loves all the peoples of the earth, and has made it clear that He will be the God of all who will turn exclusively to Him.

Covenant is the strength, the ribs, the backbone of marriage. The Ten Commandments are the basic building blocks of God's covenant with those who want to be His people. GOD HAS MADE COVENANT WITH US! We may keep covenant with Him!

But I see another picture in my mind as we read these scriptures. It is a scene of dancing!:

Celebrating The Covenant - Learning To Love As Well As Being Loved Psalm 19

In his novels the Jewish writer-historian Chaim Potok takes us to the synagogues in Brooklyn, New York, where the Hasidim, very strict orthodox Jews, clap and sing and dance in celebration of the giving of the Law— dance actually with the scrolls in their arms. How long has it been since we were that excited about the fact that God has given us his word on how we shall live?

For many, many years Jewish people of faith have not viewed the "law" as something restrictive, but as God's special gift to his people. God cares how we live! Let's celebrate!

The liturgical churches, especially in some of their high masses, do something which to me is similar to this dancing with the scrolls. The Gospels— that portion of the Bible that especially tell of the life and passion of Jesus Christ, are carried high in the air out into the congregation while people stand. Incense is lit, holy water is sprinkled. In a dramatic way the people are reminded that God has desired to make covenant with His people.

And that same joy is reflected just a tiny bit when we stand for the reading of the Gospels in Protestant churches— we are celebrating the covenant!

God's Covenant is to be celebrated! The Psalmist catches the joy of covenant in the Psalm (19) for today:

The word of the Lord is true, clean, good, righteous, pure, all the things that make for joy and wholesome ability to love and be loved.

In my mind I see a third picture from these scriptures: A guard brings a piece of bread and a bowl of soup, and the prisoner pushes back a letter he is writing and eats alone in his cell. But as Paul eats alone his God reaches into that lonely cell and embraces him, and he is not alone! And the love and the joy of the letter he wrote that day reach across the centuries to where we are now:

Beyond The Letter Of The Covenant - The Goal Of The Law Of God — Philippians

3

Covenant is necessary, and wonderful. But a good covenant goes way beyond the letter of the law. A good marriage is more than NOT cheating, and NOT being abusive. A good marriage is an exploration of what it means to care, to share joys and sorrows, perhaps to raise children, to live together and flesh out the covenant. If the exclusive covenant is the ribs and backbone of a good relationship, who wants to be married to a skeleton?

In that letter Paul was writing in his cell he said that before he was saved he kept the letter of the outward law perfectly. But it did nothing for him until he realized the love of God in Christ. Now, Paul says, he wants to go beyond the letter of the law— beyond "doing this" and "not doing that" as a means of salvation— and live to please God.

This is no cheap grace! Listen to Paul's declaration:

"I want to know Jesus!" ...so do I!

"and the power of His resurrection!" ... yes, that is great!

"and the fellowship of His sufferings!" ...wait a minute! What is he saying?

"being made conformable to His death!" ...is Paul talking about taking up a cross??

"If by any means I may obtain the resurrection from the dead!" —and here I get the feeling that Paul is not only talking about coming to life after he dies, but more important, coming to life before he dies! "I want to LIVE before I die— as well as live forever with my God!"

- Covenant is Grounds for Marriage - We are the Bride of Christ
- Covenant is to be Celebrated - The Commandments of the Lord are Pure, Rejoicing the Heart!

We Must Go Beyond the Letter of the Covenant - Our challenge for time and eternity is that we can know Jesus Christ, who is life itself.

Are we ready to eat at the Lord's Table this morning?

A billion people today are sitting down around the Lord's Table with us today. This is World Communion Sunday, and as the sun rolls around the earth from east to west, people are taking communion in cathedrals, and in churches made of tin and thatched roofs with dirt floors. People will be at the Lord's Table in the hills of Appalachia, and on the plains of outback Australia. On every continent, and on the islands of the seas we are God's people, bound to Him by covenant, seeking to celebrate the covenant God has made with us— that if we will be his people, he will be our God!

Eating with family means a lot to me! When my boys were at home one thing I couldn't stand was to sit down at the supper (you call it dinner) table with people missing. How many times I've gotten up and called the boys in from playing football, or even have driven a few blocks to hurry them home so the family could be together.

I remember, too, how it felt after the first son left home (in New Jersey) and went far away to Eastern Nazarene College. Our family was never really regularly the same around the table again. But when we did get together how good it was. (I still often go into Boston and have lunch with that son!)

The Table of the Lord is one place where the family gets together, and we are one with those we love, one with those who belong to our God.

All are welcome here. I invite you to quiet your heart, and prepare to share at the Lord's table with your brothers and sisters, your family near and far away.

Shall we pray:

THE HOLY COMMUNION

Communion is one of the sacraments of the church which as a means of grace gives us opportunity to draw near to God, and which affirms the fact that we are one with all people around the world who say by the Spirit, "Jesus is Lord!" This sacrament was foreshadowed by the Passover in Egypt nearly 4,000 years ago. The Lord Jesus Himself commanded it the eve of his sacrifice on Calvary. Since then it both looks back to the Cross and forward to the Great Banquet when the saved of all ages will celebrate eternal Life together in the glorious Light of God's immediate Presence. Will you prepare, with the help of God the Holy Spirit, to come to Christ's Table?:

The Law Read and Confession Made

The Lord Jesus Christ has said to us: "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Shall we **pray**:

Search us, O God, and know our most private thoughts. Try us, and show unto us the deepest motives, the real state of our hearts. Forgive us where we have been selfish, or insensitive, or sinful in any way. We cannot keep the Great Commandment, and truly love You, O God, with all our heart, soul, and mind unless You in mercy grant to us the grace of Your indwelling Spirit. We cannot love each other as we should unless Your love is shed abroad in our hearts.

Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to draw us near to Himself so that we can come to his table with confidence. We do not presume

to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

Let us confess our faith:

The Apostles' Creed (STL # 8) OR [Nicene Creed #14]

The Informal Invitation ("This is not my table . . . ")

Holy and gracious Father; in your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin, and were worthy of death and hell, you, in your mercy sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to You, the God and Father of all.

He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

The Words of Institution:

On the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had give thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat: THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

After supper he took the cup and when he had give thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me: Amen

We praise you for the mystery of our salvation! We truly believe

Christ has died!

Christ is risen!

Christ will come again!

Bless these emblems, O God, and make them to us the Body and Blood of your Son, spiritual food, and spiritual drink of new and unending life in Jesus Christ. And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us:

Our Father which art in heaven . . . (partake together // instructions if otherwise)

Now, humbly we receive the Gifts of God for the People of God

The Nature of Gods Grace

THE NATURE OF GRACE

October 13, 1996

"...the God of peace will be with you." Phil 4:9

Thesis: To have/keep the peace of God it is necessary to come to know the God of peace.

I think I would like to read the entire Epistle passage, Philippians 4: 1 - 9 as a bridge to these other two passages, from Exodus 32 and from Matthew 22 before I try to preach this morning.

Therefore my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. I urge Eudia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I as you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And THE PEACE OF GOD, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and THE GOD OF PEACE will be with you.

There is more in those few words than we can talk about this morning. This letter is full of hope and joy and love, even though it was written by a man in prison. But what

I want to lift out that helps me understand the difficult passages from Exodus and Matthew is that we cannot separate THE PEACE OF GOD from THE GOD OF PEACE.

"The peace of God" represents the good things God wants to do for us. His blessings, his promises, his forgiveness for all our sins. "The God of peace" reminds us that the way of grace is not lists of things to do or not to do; it is the opportunity to get to know God Himself. This way of salvation is a personal faith. By 'personal' I do not mean 'private.' By "personal" I mean that God is a Person who loves YOU very much, and wants you and me to learn to know and love Him. [With that as background:]

Two pictures are presented by the scriptures this morning:

Exodus:

Picture of a people who have come a long, long way. They are camped at the base of Mt Sinai. A good deal has happened to them in the last few weeks and months, They were slaves, now they are free. They were hungry and thirsty, now they have enough that they want to celebrate. They were "no people," but now they are people of a covenant. THEY HAVE RECEIVED A BIG DOSE OF 'THE PEACE OF GOD.'

But all is not ideal here.

The people become impatient waiting for the "next step." It seems they have been camped here for too long— Moses is still up on the mountaintop, out of touch as some leaders seem to be. Beside that, all the other people they ever heard of have gods they can see and understand and control. So— they said, "Let's worship the Lord God who brought us from Egypt, but let's worship him in ways that we ourselves improvise and design. Aaron, we don't know whatever happened to your brother, but give us a god we can see!" Their IMPATIENCE, and their AUDACITY sought to whittle down their God into one they could both see and manage and in some sense control.

So Aaron did the most foolish thing he ever did, and his sin was a great success— the people thought their Golden Calf was just as great as Egypt's Sacred Bull— now they had caught up to the neighbors— and they had a great time of praise to God around the idol, and they sat down and had a great feast, and then they began to dance and sing—- What could be wrong with that?

Matthew 22:

Picture of a wedding banquet.

A king has invited important people to his wedding feast. (Be careful here, don't read more into it than is intended.) The so-called important invited guests have snubbed the king and attacked his messengers, so he has in turn rejected and destroyed them. Then the king invited everyone and anyone- "both good and bad"— who would to come to the feast, and many answered the call.

But all is not ideal here, either.

Wedding garments were provided for everyone. The music and the food and the dancing were in the spirit of sharing the joy and love of the king. All these were good things supplied by the king—(THE PEACE OF GOD?) But in the midst of it was this conspicuous rebel, this one who was perfectly willing to eat and drink and dance, but who said by his non-conformity to accepted custom: I don't give a hoot about my king, and am not celebrating his graciousness— I'm here for myself.

And the story says that this gracious king asked the man: "Friend, why aren't you dressed for the wedding?" The man was speechless. Whereupon the king had him treated like the people who had originally refused to come at all. Then this enigmatic story closes with the enigmatic words: FOR MANY ARE CALLED, BUT FEW ARE CHOSEN!

[You can see why even better preachers than I try to dodge this passage!]

Both the Exodus passage and this difficult story of Jesus in Matthew 32 seem to say that there is more to faith than seeking what God can do for you. Whatever the reasons that we come to God— and we all come more or less selfishly, I am sure— God is not satisfied until we realize he loves us— and until we begin to try to return that love. God is not just trying to make us GOOD— he wants us to leave the things that enslave us, and find his peace— so that we can learn to walk with HIM!

Is it possible to be "good" without God? If we mean by "good" paying bills and not kicking the dog, sure, there are a lot of people, thank God, who qualify as "good." But

The Nature of Gods Grace

if by "good" we mean finding what life is about, and living in such a way that we find our noble purpose in life, then it is my conviction that no, it is not possible to really be good apart from connecting with God.

Good is not an end in and of itself. God does not save us to make us good. He makes us "good" so that we can get things out of the way and get to know Him, and what He is about. God wants a people who will wait for Him, who will seek Him, and who will love Him.

If you need freedom, God will hear your cry for help. If you want forgiveness for sins, God has already made the way for them to be forgiven forever.

But God LOVES us— he wants us to know that. And we can't STAY free— we won't STAY happy IF WE TRY TO MAKE OUR OWN GODS, OR IF WE JUST TRY TO USE GOD'S GOOD GIFTS SELFISHLY. God's life isn't like that!

God is seeking a people who not only want what He can give them, of forgiveness of sins, and peace and good will, but who will seek HIM! It isn't enough to come to the wedding, we have to become a part of the family.

xxx

One last lesson from this message today: there is great power in intercession. Moses, only one man, prayed for the people who had greatly erred. They had gone in the way of destruction. But Moses changed the mind of God. What that means I don't know— for we know that God knows the end from the beginning. But it tells us that if we will pray for those in sin, God will listen. If we identify in love with others, there has to be power in that kind of prayer.

The nature of grace makes possible many benefits and blessing simply because God loves us, and delivers us, and invites us to his place to make covenant, and to be his people. But that same grace opens the way for response to that love Moses demonstrated the power of intercession.

xxx

Prayer - Hymn 109 *Our Great Savior*

The God Who Knows My Name

THE NATURE OF GRACE

October 20, 1996

Exodus 33:12-23

Tevya, the milkman in *Fiddler on the Roof*, is one of those unforgettable, loveable characters who has become a reference point in our culture. I think one big reason I like

Tevya so much is the way he carries on a running conversation with God Himself. "If I were a rich man..." he muses, "hmm — Lord, would it foul up Your universe if you made me a very wealthy man?" And then he goes on delivering his milk. We get the idea that Tevya's God is a God he lives with and a God he can talk to.

How do you talk with God? How real is that conversation?

Children often talk with God. They seem to understand and accept some things we have forgotten. Where along the way do we lose that immediacy? When does our conversation with God become something else? And at the same time, isn't it strange that we lose the immediacy of childlike faith and still we often stay at a childish level of prayer? Many

Christians seem to progress in every other phase of human development except talking with God. They are computer literate. They are fashion conscious. They are up on the latest diet fads. But their prayers seem to get stuck at the pre-teen level. When they talk to God it still sounds like "Now I lay me down to sleep ..." Which, I am sure, is better than nothing at all. But grace challenges us to move on, and get to know God better and better.

Moses was at a point of "moving on." God had called and Moses had responded. God had saved the people from bondage. They had crossed the Red Sea. They had come to the place of covenant. Now Moses knew he had to start out for the Promised Land. But just then it began to dawn on Moses that he didn't know God as well as he

The God Who Knows My Name

wanted to know Him. Moses said to God: "Are You going with us on this journey?"
God said, "I AM going with you— or rather, you are going with Me!"

Moses said, "I need to know You better! You know me. I hardly know You at all! Show me Who You really are!"

God said, "If you really want to know Me come closer. There is a place nearer to Me. I will tell you my Name again. I will give you as much of my Presence as you are able and willing to know now."

Then God put Moses 'in the cleft of the rock, and covered him with His hand.' Of course we don't know all that means, but we get the message: God and Moses were communicating "face-to-face," is the way scripture describes it. God knows Moses—and now Moses is moving deeper in his conversation with God.

God knows your name. He knows all about you, and He loves you just as you are. Would you believe, God loves you as much as He loves Moses himself? Why, then, does it seem to be so hard to pray — if God loves us so much? Why is it that God doesn't seem so "real?"

Maybe one reason is that we constantly let anything and everything keep us from taking time to talk with Him? How would your doctor treat you if you were waiting to see her and the nurse called your name and you said, "I'm really into this article on President Reagan in this 1989 Reader's Digest you had on the table here in the waiting room. Tell the doctor I'll be in when I finish."

Try praying like Moses prayed: "Lord you know me. Help me know you!" And then hang on! Listen to what God says. You don't have to explain yourself to God; you just need to want to know Him. Really WANT to know Him. Look for Him! Listen for Him! Be ready to talk with Him, or be quiet while He talks to you.

Sing with me:

"I love You, Lord!

And I lift my voice to worship You— Oh my soul rejoice!!

Take joy my King in what You hear!

May it be a sweet, sweet sound in Your ear.

The Call to Glory

-All Saints Day-

November 3, 1996

I John 3:1-3

You probably have had enough of Halloween this past week, and so have I. Not the innocent dress-up fun like your family and mine enjoy, I mean the strange preoccupation with the macabre, with witches and goblins and graveyards, which is not a Christian scene at all, and according to the best sources had its roots in Celtic paganism. (It seems like every TV station had some story of vampires or witches or the occult.) I am not sure why death and the dark unknown are so fascinating. But it is probably one way the pagan mind deals with an unspoken horror of unbecoming. Death is the worst thing that can happen.

One recurring theme on tombstones in old graveyards is the couplet that supposedly gives a voice to the dead lying in their graves, goes something like this:

*As you are, so once was I;
As I am soon you will be.*

Now that is encouraging, isn't it!

Christians know that the grave is not our final destination. Centuries ago the Church made November 1 a day to remember that all who know God in Jesus Christ are alive eternally. The Church of Jesus Christ is made up of all people of faith of all ages, alive eternally in Christ. This is All Saints Sunday. A powerful text for All Saints is the opening thought in I John 3:

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved NOW we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we KNOW that when He is revealed, we SHALL BE like Him, for we shall see

Him as HE IS. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

There is tremendous truth packed into these very few words:

1. These words assure us of the great love of God. GOD'S AMAZING LOVE God loves the world (John 3:16) and gave His Son that WHOSOEVER believes in Him SHOULD NOT PERISH but have everlasting life.

2. These words say that those who receive God's love by faith are His children! WE MAY BE CHILDREN OF GOD, HERE AND NOW

"Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us that we should be called children of God!"

Everlasting LIFE, "family-life" shared with God, this ETERNAL LIFE, does not begin when we die. The moment we come to Christ for salvation we are:

- a. Justified
- b. Regenerated
- c. Adopted into God's FAMILY.

As God's children we still face the hard realities of a sin-cursed world. We face hardships and disappointments. We get sick, and, yes, we die. But there is a difference. God Himself came and dwelt among us. He shared our sorrows. He identified with our weakness. He suffered and died. But He conquered sin and death and hell, and has blazed a trail for us to follow. He rose again from the dead! He sends us His very Presence in the Holy Spirit! He will always be with us. He will never abandon us.

3. These words also tell us we are different from 'the world.'

THE WORLD DOES NOT UNDERSTAND OUR HOPE

"Therefore the world does not know us ... "

Christians look at death and even sorrow differently from those who do not know Jesus. [A litany of people I have watched die— Bob Howard??]

[Millard Porter died in a ward, frustrated by a stroke. But with his last breath he managed to whisper "34!" That has been a shining testimony to me across many years!]

Christians sing by the open grave. [We SING at the open grave. The tears run down because we will miss our loved ones for a while. But we know that the grave cannot hold them. "How many of you knew Donna Bowers? Astonished grave-diggers!]

4. This word admits there is mystery, a great deal we don't know:

THERE IS MYSTERY IN FACING THE FUTURE

"It has not yet been revealed what we shall be..." We do not glorify death. We do not pretend to have all the answers. We don't know what lies beyond— the after-death is mysterious. (Oscar Stockwell ready to go— apprehensive about going someplace he had never been before..I understand that.) But Jesus comes to receive us. He sends His angels to prepare the way. And THAT is the final word:

5. But the final word: We DO know Jesus! We DO know Jesus knows us! BUT THERE IS ALSO CERTAINTY: WE KNOW HE KNOWS US!

"We know that when he shall appear we shall be like Him!" (Possible use of George O Cole's ILLUSTRATION of the industrial magnet and the Friday evening scrap heap—)

THERE IS CERTAINTY: WE SHALL BE LIKE JESUS HIMSELF!

THIS HOPE KEEPS US PURE -

Remember the message of the tombstone in the cemetery— that supposedly gives a voice to the dead in the grave: "As you are so once was I—- as I am soon you will be!"??

Pretty depressing if the grave is our final resting place.

The Call to Glory

But take these same words and hear Jesus speak them to us, and suddenly they are very true:

"As you are, so once was I!" He took our sins and our sorrows and made them His very own! He was tempted in all points as we are, yet without defeat! Jesus came all the way down to be one with us... but that is not the end—

"As I am you soon shall be!" Or, as John writes, "We know that when we see Him we shall be like Him!"

Knowing the JOYS of a holy heaven!

United forever with a pure love to all the saints in glory!

Thank God for His transforming love! Amen!

Prayer

685 For All the Saints!

Responsible Love

The Nature of Grace

November 17, 1996

Joshua 24:15-25

Synopsis: We have followed the Exodus, from the Burning Bush and the call of Moses ... to the Passover Night .. and the Giving of the Law at Sinai. We come to the end of the biblical account. The story entered a new phase with Joshua, and the trauma of changing leadership. Moses climbed the mountain and viewed the Promised Land and died without himself ever entering. Joshua was charged with taking the generation of survivors of the wilderness into Canaan. Joshua, whose name is the same as our Savior, completed the Exodus journey.

Moses brought the people OUT, and Joshua led them IN. A generation died in the 40 years of wandering. The ones who were children and youth led the way into the Promised Land. And now even Joshua is ready to retire, and calls a new generation to covenant, to renew what they already believe.

The Exodus story is tremendously important. [You may have heard of the book, "All I ever really needed I learned in Kindergarten"? Well, the Exodus story is a lot like that!] It tells more than we can ever fully understand about how God loves and calls people to be his own. It tells about the church- even the church we know today. It tells us about ourselves and how we can relate to God. If we had to sum up the lessons of Exodus, MY list would include:

1. God hears when people cry for help.

The LOVE of our great God responds!

2. God usually sends people to help people find His salvation.

Moses' call— was God's answer to a cry for help in Egypt! Sometimes we are "Moses" and God calls us to go— Sometimes God sends a "Moses" to answer our cry . . .

3. "Salvation" is a journey as well as a time or two of crisis.

Passover - - Red Sea - - Pillar of cloud/fire - - Manna - - Sinai - - all these necessary, but "salvation" meant staying with God right on through . . .

4. God's grace is personal, but is always in the context of the community of faith.

We Americans, particularly, often miss the total sense of community that permeates the Bible, Old Testament and New. The word "saint" does not appear in the New Testament! It is always in the plural. God cares about you as much as anyone in the world. But God has no favorites! We are brothers and sisters— in this together!

5. The GOAL of Exodus, and thus the goal of "salvation" is God Himself.

The real GOAL of the Exodus was God Himself. When we settle for His gifts, and make them ends in and of themselves, they fail to satisfy. The paradox of the call of God to Himself is that while we are seeking Him He is with us. The Exodus "ends" when we leave

Egypt (we are "saved"), and yet it "continues" even after we have entered Canaan.(We are still seekers after God!) The mystery of Exodus is the wonder of the Incarnation. It is God seeking a home in His people. . . . and finally

6. **(Conclusion)** Grace demands a choice, and on-going obedience.

Joshua 24:15-30 (a dialogue between Joshua and the people at the end of Joshua's time of leadership)

Joshua: Grace demands a response of LOVE for God! I will serve the Lord!

People: So will we!

J: You CANNOT serve the Lord! HE is holy!

P: We will lay aside lesser things! We WILL!

J: You are witnesses against yourselves!

P: Yes, we ARE witnesses!

And so the covenant was renewed again.. another generation accepted the challenge to be God's called people!

- At the close of last week's series of meetings many of you came forward, as I did, to the altar, to tell the Lord we really are available to Him— we really do love Him. We were saying, in effect, like these people when Joshua challenged them: We want God more than anything else!
- That service was moving to me! I caught a glimpse of tremendous power waiting to be released. Power, not because you are strong, or I, but because when a group of people are willing to simply obey, and seek God on His terms, there is no human way to understand all God can do. Dwight L. Moody is supposed to have said, "The world has yet to see what would happen if someone gave himself completely to God, and I intend to be that person!"— only here it is "This world has yet to see what God might do with a community of faith that is wholly dedicated to Him, and we intend to follow the Lord with all our hearts!"
- There will be plenty to DO— but what is important now is letting go, and letting God have all of us! The struggle is not to make ourselves holy, or strong, or gifted. The struggle (*agonidzomai*) is to say to God— "At any cost, O God, I want YOU!"

At the funeral for Esther D. Williamson I chose a poem to sum up her life, which had many achievements.

*My goal is God Himself— not joy, nor peace,
Nor even blessing, but himself, my Lord.
'Tis his to lead me there, not mine, but his,
At any cost, dear Lord, by any road.*

*So faith bounds forward to its goal in God,
And love can trust her Lord to lead her there.*

Responsible Love

*Upheld by Him, my soul is following hard
Till God fulfills my deepest prayer.*

*No matter if the way be sometimes dark;
No matter though the cost be oftentimes great;
He knoweth best how I can reach the mark;
The path that leads to Him must needs be straight.*

*One thing I know, I cannot say Him nay.
One thing I do, I press toward my Lord;
My God, my glory here from day to day,
And in the glory there, my great Reward.*

Prayer

497 - *I'll Live for Him Who Died for Me*

Where Love Abides

November 17, 1996

I John 4:7-2

John 13:34 *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this shall all men know that you are My disciples, if you have love one for another.*

INTRODUCTION (v 7)

"Love one another" the hallmark of John's ministry; the hallmark of God's people. But what is this love?

Look at this passage with me. It is:

I. A STATEMENT ABOUT GOD

A. GOD IS LOVE (v 8)

God is love. This is not comprehensive (it is not all that may be said of God) but it is conclusive: whatever else God is, He is LOVE! And so love defines God's family.

Wesley's statement: "God is love. -This little sentence brought St. John more sweetness, even in the time he was writing it, than the whole world can bring. God is often styled holy, righteous, wise; but not holiness, righteousness, or wisdom in the abstract, as He is said to be love: intimating that this is His darling, His reigning attribute, the attribute that sheds an amiable glory on all His other perfections." One stanza in Frederick W. Faber's hymn, *There's a Wideness*, says it very beautifully:

*'For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of man's mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully KIND!*

B. GOD IS KNOWN, REVEALED BY HIS LOVE (also v8)

John is so strong in his conviction about God being love that he says: Love is essential to knowing God in any degree! "The one who does not LOVE does not know God!" God is known by His love; somehow we come to know Him by receiving and reflecting that love. How deficient some of us may feel as we hear this! How poorly we reflect such a great love! Never mind! God's commandments are also God's promises!

[But this passage is also a statement about God's people:]

II. A STATEMENT ABOUT GOD'S PEOPLE

A. GOD'S PEOPLE ARE TO REFLECT HIS NATURE

If God loves us, and has accepted us on the basis of grace and His own loving-kindness, then God expects us somehow to reflect His life and His love in our everyday living.

B. THIS IS EXPRESSED 'NEGATIVELY' HERE BY SHOWING TWO THINGS THAT ARE MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE WITH GOD'S LOVE:

If love is the hallmark of God's people there are some things that God's love does not coexist with:

1. "Love" and "fear with torment" are mutually antagonistic, and where there is "perfect love" fear is "excluded." Taken in its literal statement of language ("all fear") we understand fear, this has been carried to logical absurdity.

There are all kinds of fears— fears that have no moral or spiritual implications whatsoever— fear of heights, of pain, of spiders . . .

John does modify his "fear" statement by speaking about fear that has torment. So we may safely say that the love of God does not change our human nature so that we have no fear of anything, ever.

And, too, we will still have a healthy "fear of God." The immensity, the majesty, the wonder of God the Creator, and above all else, the

glimpse of His perfect holiness will ever inspire a holy awe, which the Bible terms "fear." But the Psalmist has it right: "The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever!" (Psalm 19:9)

2. God's love does not co-exist with hatred of other human beings.

We love what He loves, we hate what He hates. And that includes the most cruel form of hatred which is "un-love!" That detached interest in which we view other human beings in their failures, sins and sufferings as though they were specimens in a laboratory—make observations on their motivations and their conduct, and say, "Tsk, tsk! Isn't it a pity!"

[But remember, don't despair because you feel you don't measure up!:]

III. A COMMANDMENT THAT IS ALSO A PROMISE

- A. Which brings us back to John's "life emphasis": "Love one another!" But it isn't original with John. It was the Savior's last commandment: John 13:34

It didn't come "naturally" to John! He was a son of thunder, and a seeker after "destiny." But it came. It came as John obeyed the Savior: "Love one another" is possible with God! God's commandments are also His enablings.

But how can we obey and fulfill this greatest commandment?

- B. Our struggle is not to love one another, or to love the unlovable; not to pretend to 'feelings' we cannot manufacture, but to **MAKE GOD AT HOME IN YOUR HEART AND IN MY HEART!**

BEFORE WE CAN LOVE THE WORLD— OR EVEN BEFORE WE CAN REALLY LOVE EACH OTHER— WE MUST BE AWARE THAT GOD LOVES US! And when that reality begins to dawn on us, God's LOVE will transform us!

- C. It is **GOD'S GRACE** that makes His LOVE a reality! The world looks at what we do; and it cannot help it. But the world does not care **WHY** we do what we do— but 'the WHY' is everything to the Christian.

The world admired Martin Luther King (after the fact!) but it ignored and ignores the fact that he did what he did on the authority of the Bible.

The world admires Mother Teresa for her amazing love of the un-lovely. But what the world does not care to see is THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER AND DEVOTION TO JESUS THAT FIRES AND EMPOWERS THAT SERVICE.

[**CONCLUSION:**] We cannot all be acclaimed as great 'saints,' or for that matter as great anything! But we all can love Jesus and seek to obey His word. When Jesus Christ is truly 'at home' in our hearts, it must follow as the day follows the night, that God's transforming LOVE will flow through us, and we can obey this 'impossible' commandment.

Let us pray:

Gifts Before Christmas

Advent 1

December 1, 1996

I Corinthians 1:7 "*... you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ...*"

EPISTLE: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

THE HOLY GOSPEL: Mark 13:(24-32)33-37 (The revelation of Christ in glory is) . . . like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home he puts his servants in charge, each with his own work to do, and says, you watch out for each other and do your work. I'll be back!"

When you were in second or third grade did you ever— do you remember— did you ever have your teacher say, "I have to go down to Mr. Benson's office for two minutes. I'm going to leave the door open and Mrs. Hagen across the hall will be listening. You be good and quiet and do your work. I'll be right back!"?? I remember!!

I hated it when they made some teacher's pet the tattletale. Still, sometimes we were reasonably quiet. Sometimes maybe we weren't.

In high school it was a little different. It could be that when a teacher left the room it would get noisy, or things might be thrown around the room, maybe someone's lunch or a pretty girl's books. Usually when classes changed and students filed into a classroom the teacher would be there waiting, because the class would be in her home room. But sometimes we would have to wait for the teacher to come. It could get very interesting if the teacher's coming was delayed more than a minute or two. We would think, "Maybe she isn't coming at all!"

For a little while when I was a junior in Akron North High we had a substitute English teacher, and she was almost always late for our class, which met on the third floor. She usually arrived with her arms full of books and papers, out of breath, scolding us, in a good-natured way for the most part, into silence.

One awful day she was later than usual, and the class was noisier than usual. Erasers were flying, books were sailing. It probably doesn't do any good to tell you that, truthfully, I usually did not take part in the chaos, although I can't say I didn't enjoy it. Anyway, on this fateful day one boy— Stanley M(ika) — produced a cherry bomb from his pocket. The room got very quiet.

Stanley lit a match and we held our breaths. The windows were open— they were the kind that the middle pane swung out from the top. Stanley evidently intended to light the bomb in the classroom and throw it out the window toward the athletic field two stories below. We couldn't believe it— but Stanley lit the bomb— and threw it— and it hit the window pane above the open window and bounced back into the middle of the room, under the desks, hissing.

Just at that very moment our teacher came breathlessly into the quiet room— quiet except for the hissing— with her arms full of books. But before she had a chance to worry about why we were quiet, or what the hissing sound was —-KA- BOOM!— the cherry bomb exploded, and instantly the room was full of smoke, and then there was silence again. Our teacher did not drop her armload of books. She did not miss a step. She simply went over to the desk and sat down and put her face on the books and papers she had been carrying.

I think it may have been a full five minutes that no one said a word, no one made a sound. I imagine today the police would be called and someone would be expelled from school, and there certainly would be a lawsuit. But her awful silence, and the fact that we were all shocked and stunned was punishment for us all, even Stanley the bomb-thrower.

More than forty-five years later I still feel that little woman's pain and disappointment at the chaos that greeted her coming. The Gospel passage is a little like that. We see it from our point of view. It is a little frightening— these passages about the Lord's Coming. God has said, "I'll be right back— you be good and do your work!" And he has left the room in charge of the learners.

The actual words from the Gospel are: "It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work (to do)..(Mark 13:34)." From the Master's point of view, do you think He ever wonders how faithful we will be? Do you think He has made a mistake to trust us so much? In Luke 18:8 Jesus asks what seems a wistful question, "When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Will we say, "The teacher is late today— we can do whatever we want!!"?

In many ways, it seems that is exactly what this world IS doing. I've been re-reviewing biographies of John Wesley lately, and I have been impressed again at how much our culture today resembles the early 18th century— not in terms of modernity or creature comforts, but in spiritual poverty and violence and utter insensitivity to God and kindness. They had rampant gambling, we have rampant gambling, legal and illegal. They had bull-baiting and cock-fighting— we have Terminators and DOOM and super-heroes that kill and let blood. It almost seems like chaos is going to be reigning when the Master returns.

Two statements stand out to me in the Gospel lesson, both statements from the same sentence, (verse 31.) Jesus says, first HEAVEN AND EARTH WILL PASS AWAY! (Isn't that encouraging??) "Heaven and earth will pass away?" You may say, I don't know much about that right now, but my employer has sold out and I don't have a job and I don't have money— and I do have bills! "Heaven and earth will pass away?" You may say I don't know about that right now but people I really trusted have let me down. I hurt, and I hurt a lot! Where are you when I need You? "Heaven and earth will pass away?" It isn't comforting at first to realize that heaven and earth WILL pass away. Chaos comes.

But Jesus also says, BUT MY WORDS - - WHAT I AM TELLING YOU RIGHT NOW - - WILL NOT PASS AWAY! Jesus says, "Trust Me! I am making you a promise! I'm coming back! I won't leave you without resources!" I'm leaving YOU in charge! Each of you has his or her work to do! So stay at the job! Don't give up! I'll be back!

SO, WHAT DO WE DO? **HOW DO WE APPLY CHRIST'S WORDS?**

Cry! Cry out to God! Then keep your eyes and ears open! God cares! And also comfort one another— because God may be using YOU, even as you hurt, to bring His love to someone else. Don't refuse to be God's instrument of healing. Paul says that because of the GRACE of God, we are NOT LACKING IN ANY SPIRITUAL GIFT that we need as we wait for our Lord to reveal Himself.

Even though heaven and earth are passing away, God gives us resources to hold steady as we wait Christ's coming. Those gifts include LOVE! Not love in the abstract— but the tender love of God for YOU! And that love, reflected in the Body.

Those gifts include STRENGTH! The promise is "As thy day, so shall your strength be!" Those gifts include, best of all, GOD'S SPIRIT! His PRESENCE ! Yes, the Master went away— but He is very much with us because he has sent us the Presence! CONCLUSION - It seems like a funny way to approach Christmas— with words about heaven and earth passing away. Is it right to approach the happiest, friendliest time of the year with messages of the end of time, and of the Day of the Lord?

I have a more serious question: Is it right to make the Gospel message "fit" the times? (In the 18th century John Wesley did not spend too much time moaning and crying about how wicked his age was— he preached instead that God LOVED the common and the uncommon, the rich and the poor. He told people they could be saved and they could know it.) With the example of John Wesley, I propose that we don't spend too much time with negatives, crying what's wrong with our times. We are in charge of the Church— and we each have a job to do. We have the gifts necessary to carry out our jobs faithfully.

I don't have any special revelation that a new Wesleyan Revival is on the way, and the world may end in chaos before we know it. But I do have revelation that we are called to be faithful where we are. The results are not for us to determine. God has said, "I'll be right back— you be good and do your work!" And he has left the room in charge of the learners.

The actual words from the Gospel are: "*It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work (to do).*"(Mark 13:34).

#279 *It Will Be Worth it All*

The Desert Road that Leads to Christmas

December 8, 1996 - Advent II

Isaiah 40:1 *Comfort ye my people, saith your God*

INTRODUCTION

If someone were to ask you to tell them about the Messiah, how or where would you begin? George Frederick Handel began with the word, "Comfort!"

A MESSAGE OF COMFORT FROM GOD

That word "Comfort." the way the Bible uses it means consolation, and strength, and assurance, and hope. It doesn't mean softness and luxury, but it does mean God cares.

In fact, beginning with the word "Comfort" that story will be told again in words of scripture this evening (Messiah will be performed here at 7 o'clock) that God was made man, and that this man who was God was crucified for our sins, and that he rose again from the dead. The story of comfort, the Good News of the Gospel, goes on to say that if we will receive Him we, too, may become new creatures, sons and daughters of God.

This message of comfort was shouted in the desert. First Isaiah, and then John called out to people with very real, very desperate problems that God cared about them, and knew where they were. Deserts are places 'over at the edge of things,' out past where life is smooth and easy, out where life becomes a fight just to survive. Believe me, there are deserts of the spirit just as real and deadly as any Sahara that sometimes we are forced to cross. Times get hard, vows are broken, separations come. We find ourselves spiritually isolated. Maybe we ourselves have failed, and failed miserably. For whatever reason, we wake up to the fact: We are in the desert.

Without changing a word, these words of scripture are full of power for today. They say God loves you, and there is no desert where He cannot or will not come.

A PROPHET USUALLY BRINGS THE MESSAGE

God usually brings his message of Good News through a human instrument. Sometimes even a prophet. But prophets are people.

Isaiah was priestly and elegant. John the Baptist was, well, strange. He wore funny clothes. He ate strange food. 'Proper' citizens may have thought he didn't have the 'proper' worship style. But John loved God, and obeyed Him. His words carried great power.

Sometimes God's speaks through unexpected sources. God might even want to speak through you!

Pastor Fred Craddock tells the true story of a little girl from one of his early pastorates in Tennessee. Her parents sent her to church, but never came with her. They would pull in the church's circular drive, the little girl would hop out of the car, and they would go out for Sunday breakfast. The father was an executive for a chemical company, upwardly mobile, ambitious. But every Sunday, there was the little girl.

One Sunday Craddock says he looked out over his congregation and thought, "There she is with a couple of adult friends." Later, he realized she was there with Mom and Dad. When, at the end of the service, the invitation was given, Mom and Dad came down front, in their fellowship they came ' to join the church.'

"What prompted this?" Fred asked the father and mother after the service.

"Do you know about our parties," they asked.

"Yeah, I heard of your parties," said the pastor.

"Well, we had one last night again. It got a bit loud, a little rough, there was much drinking. And it woke up our daughter, and she came downstairs and she was on about the third step. And she saw the eating and drinking and said, 'Oh, can I have the blessing? God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food. Good night, everybody.' She went back upstairs.

People began to say, 'It's getting late, we really must be going,' and 'Thanks for a great evening,' and 'Thanks for a good...' Within two minutes the room was empty."

Mom and Dad picked up crumpled napkins and spilled peanuts, half sandwiches, took empty glasses on trays into the kitchen. And they looked at each other, and he said what they both were thinking. "Where do we think we're going?"

God had spoken to the right where they were. Their response in obedience became a homecoming.

God has people speaking for Him; if we will listen, God will speak! Have you heard Him recently? Do you think that: Sometimes even you and I might be asked to tell someone God cares!

It may sound strange, but we are called to be "on both sides" of the prophet's message of comfort.

We need the message ourselves, every one of us! We all desperately need God's peace, because we all have desert places to go through.

But we need to let the world know about this message, too. And when God comes to us, His Presence enables us to say with Isaiah and John: "God has told us Comfort ye! Comfort ye! God loves you!"

WHEN WE WELCOME JESUS INTO OUR LIVES, AND INTO OUR CHURCH , OUR WELCOME ITSELF BECOMES A MESSAGE OF COMFORT

My concern is: I WONDER IF WE FULLY REALIZE WHAT IT MEANS TO "WELCOME JESUS IN TO OUR LIVES, AND INTO OUR CHURCH'!! We don't bring Jesus into our lives or into the church by our own righteousness, or our good works. (But John the Baptist's message was rugged!) To "prepare the way of the Lord" means somehow we are willing to accept Him as LORD as well as Savior. I wonder if we really know what that means?

A young missionary went off to India 50 years ago and visited there a Hindu monastery whose halls were lined with pictures of many religious personalities of history, including Jesus. Every Christmas the picture of Jesus became a focus of

The Desert Road that Leads to Christmas

prayer and sacrifice. It was obvious to the young, cultured Englishman that this was a perfect example of syncretism. Jesus had simply been incorporated into the Hindu world-view, and that world view was unruffled.

Slowly he began to see that his own faith had this same character, of bringing Jesus in to his own world-view, instead of radically rearranging it. Along with many other missionaries, on his return to the homeland that sent him he realized that here, too, was a mission field. (Leslie Newbigin, CT Dec 9,1996, 32)

I wonder if it is possible for any of us to realize just how much we are children of our secular, amoral, godless culture?? Sometimes I get the beginnings of a sick feeling way down inside that this "syncretism" is exactly what WE are doing. Many, many Christians have things in their lives that, practically speaking, are more important than God Himself. Possessions, material comfort, people's opinions, prestige— whatever— but a life/church like that is not going to get out the true message of God's comfort to a world than desperately needs it.

Spiritually, the world we live in is certainly a desert! I have a vision of a loving, caring community that becomes itself a Desert Road that Leads to Christmas! I believe that the believing, caring community is the basic unit God wants to tell the world He still loves them. In fact, I am sure that the ONLY way the world will hear is when churches just like our own hear and believe this word of comfort.

CONCLUSION

We hear a lot of challenge these days in evangelical circles for churches to "leave their comfort zone." By that I suppose we mean that we are supposed to say and do things we don't usually like to do. What that means to me is that I must stop being self-centered, and self-serving, and stop worrying about serving the petty gods of our 'desert culture,' and seriously go about welcoming God into my heart.

But God is challenging us to ENTER His "comfort zone" where whatever else happens, we are at home with HIM. Whatever we think it might cost, it is worth it!

We will never truly convert or convince the world to God by our wisdom, or our apologetic, as important as they truly are. But when we have opened our hearts to

the message of HIS comfort— when God comes to us, and we truly love Him and love one another, then this church will be another one of God's voices, crying in the desert, "God loves you! Get ready, He is coming!" Amen.

PRAYER FOR ADVENT II

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our idols, that we may prepare with joy the coming of our Savior. Grant, then, that we, too, may join with the prophets in proclaiming the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

[To closing hymn, and benediction]

Looking Forward to Christmas

Advent III

December 15, 1996

John 1:26b *Among you stands one whom you do not know*

This past week our grandson Jake was stuck at our house for a few hours, which usually means watching Rugrats or sheer boredom for a six-year-old. But somehow this week Jake got to exploring the upstairs bedrooms. He discovered that his grandmother has turned the guest bedroom into a sort of Santa's workshop with wrapping paper and ribbons. And what is more, Jake discovered mysterious boxes and packages of different sizes and weights. Jake proceeded to investigate. Believe me, Jacob was pleased with himself. He was excited! I'm not sure if Jake has what I could theologically call a proper Advent spirit, but I can tell you he is certainly looking forward to Christmas.

Of course, our anticipation of Christmas and all it stands for is much more mature than a six-year-old's, or at least I would hope it would be. Still, there is still something of that little child in each of us, and I'm glad there is. Our Christian faith, when it is mature, can enjoy human traditions, and gifts, and carols, and all the rich human mosaic that brings families together again and again for the holidays, just so long as the trappings don't become ends in themselves. We understand that. But maybe we think we understand Christmas better than we do. Advent means Christmas is coming. Again. We've heard all the sermons about "Let's keep Christ in Christmas..." We've been there before. We've done that. We the "Jesus part" of Christmas— know who Jesus is— don't we?

John the Baptist said two things that might help us anticipate Christmas a little better this year. First, surprisingly, he said, "I am not Messiah!"

John turned aside questions about himself, for he knew he was just a messenger, a voice crying in the desert. It certainly sounds like stating the obvious, but John told us something both about himself, and about how to get ready for Christmas when he

told us who he was not. Sometimes we need to say what we are NOT. When it comes to really changing lives, we need to understand just how limited we are in ourselves, and how important it is to point them to the One who can make all the difference. The sooner we realize "I am not God!" the better. John the Baptist knew we all need to know Jesus.

But then, John the Baptist said, "Messiah is already here with you and you do not know Him!" Maybe this Christmas we need to look for Jesus in ways we haven't looked for him before!

Certainly we Christians DO know Jesus! John was speaking to those sinners who were coming to him for baptism when he said they didn't recognize Messiah— wasn't he? Certainly this does not apply to me! I have heard about Jesus all my life! I cannot remember a time when I didn't know about Jesus, and did not believe "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so!" I certainly DO know Jesus!

Yes, we do know Jesus! We do not need to get saved all over again to understand what Christmas really is about. But in John the Baptist's words is a kernel of truth for you and me, here today: however much we know Jesus, and however precious he may be to us, there are wonders and surprises in store for those who want to know Him better, and are willing to ask Him into the scene where they are.

Jake will find as he grows older that while Christmas presents are always nice, the good feelings they bring don't last forever. He'll find out if he's spiritually smart that our hearts really crave being loved, and being able to respond in love. That is what really meets the needs of human hearts.

And if that is true on a human level, it is also true on the highest level, our relationship with God.

Advent is when we celebrate the miracle of miracles: the fact that God loves us so much he gave his only begotten Son to become one with us, to live among us, to die on the cross for our sins, and by his rising from the dead provide eternal life to every one who believes in him. Advent is when we rejoice in the gift of a Savior. But Advent is also when we try to grasp the fact that God is not just interested in our "souls" but

that he loves us, and wants us to love Him. Advent is a time when the people who know Jesus best seek to express that desire to know Him better. If we have not learned the daily walk with Jesus as Friend, then in some sense "one stands among us that we do not (yet) know (as we might.)"

Advent is for right NOW! It is not ancient history! We need to understand that Advent is not trying to identify with the people who sat in darkness, and imagine what it was like before Jesus came. Millions of people still need the message John the Baptist shouted. And we ourselves, in our deserts of isolation, or nights of darkness of the soul, can cry out for God to come, even as we know He is now with us. The "One among us" cares very much where YOU are right now.

Advent is for right NOW! It is not ancient history! But more than 1,000 years ago hymns were written to express the deepest longings of the human heart for Christ. There were seven titles or names in those hymns: "Come, O Come!" (the "O Antiphons") Come thou Wisdom from on High; Dayspring; Root (or Rod) of Jesse; Key of David; Adonai (Lord!); Desire of Nations. But all these are summed up in the most familiar of all, "O Come Emmanuel!" And that name means, "God with us!" God IS with us, waiting for us to ask Him into our lives where we are right now!

It is in that coming— in the certain knowledge that God is indeed "with us" that there is JOY - an audacious thing, certainly NOT the product of our will and energy, but rather the result of realizing that we are not alone, not lost— but that God Himself is here with us. This Emmanuel does not "fix things" necessarily in the way we think they ought to be fixed. He simply says, "If you will open your heart to me, I will come to where you are and I will never, ever leave you again!" We get the idea that if this is true, then maybe we can face the unthinkable. We're still very human, very fragile. But Jesus is, too— human, that is— and he shares his strength with us.

One very human story illustrates the power of love that comes to where we are: Henry Carter, a pastor and an administrator of a home for emotionally disturbed children, tells of an encounter he had one Christmas Eve that gave him a new insight and perspective. He was busy with last minute preparations for the worship service, when one of the floor mothers came to say that Tommy had crawled under his bed

and refused to come out. He followed her up the stairs and looked at the bed she pointed out. Not a hair or a toe showed beneath it. So he talked to Tommy as if he were addressing the bucking broncos on the bedspread. He talked about the brightly lighted tree, the packages underneath it and the other good things that were waiting for Tommy out beyond that bed.

No answer.

Still fretting about the time this was costing, Henry dropped to his hands and knees and lifted the spread. Two enormous blue eyes looked out at him. Tommy was 8, but looked like a 5 year old. He could easily have pulled him out. But it wasn't pulling that Tommy needed it was trust and a sense of deciding things on his own initiative. So, crouched on all fours, Henry launched into the menu of the special Christmas Eve supper to be offered after the service. He told of the stocking with Tommy's name on it, provided by the Women's Society.

Silence.

There was no indication Tommy heard or that he even cared about Christmas. At last, because he could think of no other way to make contact, Henry got down on his stomach and wriggled in beside Tommy, snagging his sport coat on the bedsprings on the way. He lay there with his cheek pressed against the floor for a long time. He talked about the big wreath above the altar and the candles in the window. He talked about the carols all the kids were going to sing. Then, finally running out of things to say, he simply waited there beside Tommy.

After a bit, a small child's chilled hand slipped into his.

Henry said, "You know, Tommy, it is kind of close quarters under here. Let's you and me go out where we can stand up." As they slid out from under the bed, Henry realized he had been given a glimpse of the mystery of Christmas.

Hasn't God called us too, as Henry had called Tommy, from far above us? With his stars and mountains and his whole majestic creation, hasn't God pleaded with us to love him and to enjoy the universe he gave us as a gift?

And hasn't he drawn closer through the Bible, and through preaching, and conviction for sin? At then that very first Christmas God stooped to where we live, and came all the way down to live among us. And we have heard, and received, and found assurance of His salvation.

But even this very day, wherever we are in our spiritual journey, One is among us, where we are, that is willing to "get under the bed" with us and stay with us until we have the courage to come out and go with Him, and He will go with us.

PRAYER for Advent III

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we often are so easily centered in ourselves, let your light shine on us, to show us how very near

You are to us, and how very much You love us. We invite you to enter every part of our lives. O Come and let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen

#155 - A Name I Highly Treasure

A House Where God Lives

Advent IV

December 22, 1996

Romans 16:25b-26a *"...the mystery that was kept secret... is now disclosed"*

Today, on this final Sunday of Advent, the story we remember is about Mary, the mother of Jesus. But strangely enough, our scripture lessons begin the story with a conversation between God and David, seven or eight hundred years before Mary was born.

David, as we all remember, began his working life as a shepherd boy, and he became the greatest king Israel ever had- maybe for a short time the greatest king in the world. In his mature years David sat in his beautiful palace and began to wonder what he could do for God. He decided to build a great palace, a temple for God.

When he told Nathan, his spiritual adviser, the prophet was delighted. Nathan is impressed. He says, in effect, "Go for it!" But later, that very night during devotions, God spoke to Nathan: "You didn't bother to ask me about this." And then God said, "I have a question for David:

"Are YOU the one to build a house for ME to live in?"

Then God, through his prophet Nathan, went on to tell David:

"I brought you from the pasture to this palace. I am the one who has built YOUR house.' Where do you think I really want to live?"

Just Where DOES God Live? Where IS God's House?

When that temple finally WAS built, (whether or not it was God's best choice,) at the dedication Solomon said these words: (2 Chronicles 6:18)

"But will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth? behold heaven, and the heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built!"

The church building is called 'the house of God.' Mighty cathedrals and humble chapels are dedicated or consecrated to the worship of God, and we call them houses of worship, or houses of God. They are special, and they ought to be. But God does not "dwell" in them. I often come here to this room to pray. It is a sacred, special place. I have come to this altar publicly— I have come here privately many times with others in special times of need, and probably so have you. We need special places— but God does not "live" here— and God can and does meet us whenever and wherever we pray.

Think again of Solomon's question, "But will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth? " Solomon obviously saw this as a rhetorical question with the obvious answer as "No!" Solomon knew God wouldn't "live" in a building— but also Solomon never had the concept that God wanted to permanently "live" or "dwell" with or in the company of men and women. God is too great, too majestic. The temple was a focal point for worship of God. Beyond that is mystery.

And then suddenly we come to the story of Mary. We come to the story of a teen age Jewish girl in an obscure backwater village in a tiny middle eastern country. From talk of cathedrals and lavish buildings and houses of worship, we abruptly enter the tiny private world of a devout but very young woman, going about her business only to be startled by the shining presence of an archangel of God Almighty!

And we know that lovely story. God who fills the universe and cannot be confined to cathedrals comes to earth to be born of a maiden. The scripture tells us that all generations will rise up to honor Christ's mother.

The Mother Of Jesus

Luke gives us enough of the story to let us know that Mary was not simply a passive recipient of God's revelation as to the great purpose of her life. When she was greeted by the majestic archangel the scripture says she was "perplexed." Any one of us would be. Mary may have been startled, but she was not struck dumb. She questioned. She probed. She was not stubborn, but she needed to know. Maybe the

angel has got the wrong Mary?!? But then Mary trusted. She gladly accepts God's best will for her life, and she never looked back.

Misunderstanding, joy, pain, and peace all mingled together in the working out of Mary's story. We know a little bit about her pain. But when we think of Mary we remember her song of praise, the Magnificat, "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!" So it came to be that Mary gave God a place to dwell.

We have here the makings of a great mystery story. As a matter of fact it is THE greatest mystery story of all time! It is the story of a God who is looking for a place to live. A God who is so big that he exists beyond the light years we can grasp as what seem to us infinite space and time of our cosmos, and yet so loving and so intimate that in his fullness he comes to be knit together, fearfully and wonderfully made just as you and I were once knit together in our mothers' wombs, God Almighty seeking the womb of a virgin to be born as a Baby so He can live with us! If you can believe that, — not understand it— but believe it— you are coming very close to the wonder of Christmas! [But that is not the final end of it.]

Our text says that a mystery, THE mystery that was kept secret for long ages, is now disclosed . . . that is . . . the God of the Universe wants to live in human hearts!

In Ephesians Paul speaks about this mystery—(3:17) "...that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith . . . that you being rooted and grounded in love may know ... this love of God which surpasses knowledge." The mystery now disclosed in the Christmas story is that through the Gospel the God of the Universe is also Emmanuel - God with Us! Jews and Gentiles alike, WE are to BE the dwellingplace of God on earth!

- Christ, too big for the Universe to contain
- Christ coming as a Baby born to one Jewish girl
- Christ dwelling— at home— in hearts of believers
- Christ making the church His own Body!

The closing paragraphs of the Bible give this dramatic statement: (Revelation 21:3) And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

So, where does the story of Mary intersect with you and me? How does the idea of God living in our Body "connect"? We know the beautiful carol, "O Holy Child of Bethlehem .. descend on US we pray. Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today!"

How will we respond as God says this morning, "I want to be born in YOU today!"?? Probably, like Mary, the circumstances seem all wrong just now for the unfolding of God's presence in our lives. We might say, "I'm too entangled with responsibilities; I have too much of my own problems just now, Lord.

"Besides, there isn't a lot of room in my life for anything else. I'm too crowded in here already.

"Come back later, God, when I've worked a few things out, and I'll put you on the agenda. You must have the wrong person. At least it is the wrong time!"

Then we hear that conversation again: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you."

God says, "I am God, and you are not! Don't get all caught up in the circumstances. I have chosen you. I have chosen this time. I have chosen these circumstances, and I will deal with them. Let go."

Each day God calls out to us. This morning, God calls out to us. God wants to make us children of the Most High. Mary shows us the way to welcome Jesus into our lives. Probe God, ask questions, offer objections, but *listen.* God will provide a way. God has a plan for your life. You can trust the One who has always loved you.

"I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

Amen.

Thank God for this sanctuary, this building. But God is looking for a home in YOU!

PRAYER (contemporary language)

Purify our hearts and clarify our spiritual understanding, Almighty God, by your faithful Holy Spirit's revelation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

The Story of Christmas Continuing

December 29, 1996

Luke 2:21-32

Galatians 4:4-7

Revelation 3:8, 20; 4:1

It was just another commonplace ritual in the Temple. It came about the fortieth day of Jesus' earthly life. There were no angels as Mary and Joseph brought their Baby into the Temple for the purification ceremony. No worshiping shepherds, no adoring Magi, at least not yet. Scripture tells that the sacrifice The Holy Family brought was the one prescribed for people who couldn't afford the higher priced sacrificial lamb. It The wonder of that first Christmas night was nowhere to be seen.

How quickly Christmas does seem to disappear! You probably noticed that again this week. One day it was total Christmas, and a lot of original thoughts, like "Why can't we have this warm Christmas feeling all year long?" The very next day it was "back to normal" with not a mention of Christmas with the exception of wonderful post-Christmas sales and bargains.

It isn't hard to discern the difference between a pagan and a Christian observance of Christmas. The pagans leave the Baby on the doorstep— they never bring the Baby into the house. And in some respects you can't blame them. A baby is inconvenient! ANY real commitment costs something.

I. THE INCONVENIENCE OF COMMITMENTS

Families are not primarily places of convenience. They are places of costly love. In our families we experience the heights of joy and the depths of pain. As Christians our families are to reflect to each other the self-giving, unconditional love that God our Father has shown to us in His Son, our Brother, Jesus Christ, both in good times and (more importantly) in bad times.

The Story of Christmas Continuing

The Holy Family of Joseph, Mary and the child Jesus, in the suffering and tragedy they endured together, is a model for us and our own families as we confront the many tensions and crises that threaten the stability, peace and unity that are the joys of being a family. In our Gospel lesson today The Holy Family was quickly learning some of the costs of commitment. One of the things they had to do as a family was present their son in the Temple for rites of circumcision and christening. These were rituals that demanded sacrifices.

Babies bring a lot into a home. Babies are exciting— for a while. Then they become very demanding. Babies are cute, whatever that word means. But sometimes babies are downright upsetting! It is usually six weeks before the parents of a new baby get the semblance of an unbroken night of sleep. Babies demand commitment. Are they worth it?

The commitment to marriage itself demands the inconvenience of commitment. No matter how well a couple prepares, and no matter the premarital counselling— they are shocked to find out that every marriage that succeeds takes WORK; no commitment was ever made that did not demand some measure of life changing inconvenience.

A commitment to God Himself is not a matter of convenience, either. Our church family ought not be a matter of convenience. As a matter of fact, a commitment to God just may be the most inconvenient thing imaginable. God never "fits" into our activities until He is given his rightful place.

Which is one answer to the question "Why can't we have this warm Christmas feeling all year long?" Christmas is a beginning, a birth, and not a goal and ending in and of itself. It is a happy welcoming of the Babe into our hearts and homes. It is a challenge to be REAL!

II. THE CHALLENGE OF COMMITMENT

The challenge to be real.

Our culture doesn't like plain old reality. There is a real question in my mind if it is possible for people who have to be excited and entertained and stimulated all the time can ever find the attitude or receptivity to come to know and receive the Babe of Christmas.

William Willimon wrote:

"...If every day at church were like Christmas Eve, then nothing would be like Christmas Eve. Show me a church where everything is happy, upbeat, joyous every Sunday and I'll show you a place out of touch with life. I don't care how developed your spiritual sensitivities, in life there are always peaks and valleys, sunshine and rain. Life is a rhythm. If your religion is only a faith of Christmas Eve and Easter Sunday, it isn't much, because life has a lot of low times, too. It's great to go up to the temple at Jerusalem. It's a wonder, on some mountaintop or Bethlehem of a place, to witness the heavens opening and to catch a wisp of angels' wings. But that can't be for always. . . . the ordinary returns after the extraordinary, and everyday life resumes. "

The story of Joseph taking Mary and Jesus to church "as he was supposed to do" is as much an affirmation of Emmanuel, GOD WITH US, as the more familiar part of the story earlier in the chapter with the angels and the shepherds and all. God is with us here the Sunday after Christmas just as much as Christmas Eve. God is with us NOW, going to church, doing what we're supposed to do, obeying the rules, going back to work, back to the office, back to the pots and pans as much as God was with us at Bethlehem.

The challenge of commitment is to walk with Jesus when it is exciting, and when it is routine and difficult. My challenge to reality is to tell Jesus every single day that I am available for Him to use as He sees fit!

Your walk with Jesus is not peripheral to all the other things you do. All the other things you do are peripheral to your walk with Jesus.

The Story of Christmas Continuing

Your time of prayer with God each day is not simply a chore to get over with— but it is a request that He will take His rightful place in your life, and that you will come to reflect His love. It may not be exciting every day. But it is LIFE!

There is a danger in the virtual reality of the media-dominated culture of our times—the excitement and the vicarious experience that pushes aside the inconvenience and the investment of time and effort required in finding authentic LIFE!

I have heard for years pastors complain that their members are always comparing a local church and program to, say, some great TV church or cathedral. But it is not just in the areas of religion— the TV pictures all of life as exciting, and glamorous— marriage is supposed to be one thrill after another. But real life isn't like that at all.

[Aside: a comment on the appetite for bizarre, etc.??]

I think one of the most discouraging things I have read lately is the statistic that a recent movie release of vulgar TV cartoon characters {Beavis and Butthead} was the top-grossing money maker over the Christmas holidays. I don't think the movie itself will send us down the tubes— it simply indicates that in many ways we are already there!

Sometimes the erosion of all that is noble and good and holy seems to be accomplished not by a great frontal attack or a dramatic moral collapse, but simply by frittering away our days and our hours with our backs to the Babe of Bethlehem until God seems less real than Oprah and Bill Parcells or whomever.]

The challenge to be loving.

But being "real" is not all of the challenge to make the Babe of Bethlehem "at home" in our lives:

The glamorous lies that promise satisfaction without commitment tend to make life more and more self-centered. But "bringing the Baby into our lives" challenges us to care about people besides ourselves. Real "Christmas love" cares about others.

A wonderful man named Lawrence Jenco died last July 19, 1996. His name probably doesn't ring a bell for you. He was a Servite Priest who was kidnapped and held

captive in Lebanon for 564 days— until he was released July 26, 1986. The next ten years Fr. Jenco was a living testimony to the power and quality of forgiveness. A friend of his, Fr. Joe Nolan, told a little story that gave great insight into Lawrence Jenco's love for others. Fr. Jenco's mother was dying. As he came near her bed she attempted to speak. He bent low to hear her last words of wisdom. With great effort she said, "Did you have lunch?" She died within the hour. His mother, on her death-bed, was thinking of others. Fr. Jenco came by his spirit of love honestly!

[I had a very similar experience as pastor of this church. The people we remember with love and awe are those who genuinely cared— who loved! Fifteen or so years ago one of the most beautiful ladies I ever knew, Dee Starr Sullivan, was dying in Beth Israel hospital after a long and painful battle with cancer. As I came to her bed the family parted and her husband Bernie and her dad said, "Dee, the pastor is here!" She opened her eyes and said very plainly, and with her sweet caring spirit "How ARE you?" I have not gotten over that reality she showed— of living for others.

Transition: This is the last Sunday in yet another calendar year. Perhaps this IS "2,000 A.D.!!" A few days ago I was reading in Revelation, coming to the end of my "One Year Bible" again— and I saw again how COMMITMENT IS GOD'S OPEN DOOR INTO ALL HIS PROMISES.

In his messages to the churches the Risen Savior spoke of at least TWO different "doors" in two different cities.

III. COMMITMENT: GOD'S OPEN DOORS INTO LIFE

A Door in Philadelphia. Jesus said, "You have (just) a little strength." But I have put an open door in front of you! Is there risk involved? Certainly. But NOT to enter the open door is certainly a sentence of consignment to insignificance for ever and ever. To follow Jesus COSTS! But it is the way of life.

But there was another door Jesus spoke to a church about; that other door was mentioned after the message to Laodocia.

The Story of Christmas Continuing

A Door In Laodocia. Jesus said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock!" Laodocia may not be exactly our address. But we do understand its language. "I am the greatest!" "We're Number One!" Sound familiar?

In sadness, the Savior says to a smug people: "You really don't know what you are talking about! You have never even SEEN real health and wealth!" Then the Savior says, "I have pure gold for the asking— it is paid for! I have all the wealth that you REALLY need! Would you really like to be rich?"

There is a closed door which stands between the Christians at Laodocia and all the promises of the Book. That door represents commitment!

This door is a door we open when Jesus saves us. "One door, and only one, and yet its sides are two—" and "Into my heart! Into my heart!" But that door is also the door by which we go IN AND OUT AND FIND REALITY!

God has set an open door before us. God is asking us to keep an open door to Him all the days of our lives.

God's open door can not be forced shut by all the hard things that come. But at the same time, God will not push the door of your heart and your personal life open if you choose to keep it closed.

The biggest challenge to you and me as we face a New Year and the rest of our lives is not to do something great and spectacular— but rather it is to keep the door open and keep walking day by day with Jesus!

Your walk with Jesus is not peripheral to all the other things you do. All the other things you do are peripheral to your walk with Jesus.

It was just another commonplace Temple ritual of purification, just another Jewish baby. But not for Mary and Joseph and Jesus. And not for two old saints who knew how to keep their eyes and ears open to spiritual reality. They were tuned in to the Reality of God. That day God revealed to Simeon, and then to Anna wonderful truth. God enabled them to be witnesses to the Savior even before He could speak.

And if we stay tuned to the Reality that is our God, He will show us what it means that the church is not peripheral to this world, but the world is peripheral to the church. Amen.

Prayer

A Prayer for Just After Christmas

Father God, you have given us the Gift of your only begotten Son to be born of a pure Virgin, to take upon himself our nature;

Grant that we by faith may receive Your life through Him, and be truly made your sons and daughters, and may find grace to daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit, through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God eternal, world without end. Amen.

Hymn #192 *Angels from the Realms of Glory* or #617 *A Closer Walk with Thee*

Speak for Your Servant is Listening

Say Yes '97

January 5, 1997

1 Samuel 3:10 (1-10)

Samuel's call was sudden and even dramatic when it came. It woke him in the quiet of the night. Yet it was pure and simple when it came. God spoke and Samuel heard, even though at first he did not understand. But it is not surprising that God called Samuel. In fact it would have been surprising if God's call had not come.

Hannah, Samuel's mother, love him very much. She loved him so much she gave him to God. She said, (1 Sam 1:27-8) "I prayed for the child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked. So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be the Lord's." More than anything else, Hannah wanted her son to be a man of God. And that is what he became.

Samuel's growth was gradual, both before, and certainly for years after that remarkable night when God called and called and called again. No child, even the most gifted, springs into greatness full blown. Children must be nurtured, and taught how to listen for God, and encouraged to say yes to his revealed will.

Eli, the old priest, had a part in helping Samuel understand what he was hearing. Eli was far from perfect, but he was a man who had enough sense to coach Samuel. Eli said, when God calls say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening!"

Samuel's "Yes!" as a child just was the beginning. He was the last and greatest of the judges. He was the first of a line of great prophets. And he became a bridge to future greatness for his entire nation.

Because Hannah his mother loved him enough to start him in the right direction, and Eli the priest had sense enough to help him say "yes" to God, God found a man who would anoint two kings, and who would himself see the greatness in a shepherd boy, David, who became Israel's greatest king.

Speak for Your Servant is Listening

(Believe me,) This world needs a Samuel today. It needs a David, and a Nathan. It needs a Hannah and a Moses and a Mary. It needs a "YOU" filled with God's Spirit! Our world needs Jesus, and needs people who can show him to the world. And that NEED is at the heart of what "Say Yes" is about.

Our goals are high. We want to know God better than we have ever known him before. And we want to have such a climate here in our community that Samuel can hear God call. We want to provide a place where God can bring us to our full spiritual potential in Jesus Christ.

To say yes is to enter God's great plan for your life. And that is exciting. But more, much more. To say "Yes" as a community ...

- Opens a door for greater ministry than any one of us can do on our own. To say "Yes!"
- Opens the door for our young people to answer God's call in faith. It opens the door for exciting growth in ways we haven't learned to measure.
- Our goals are high. Some people think of a missions emphasis as raising money to enable missionaries to go where we cannot, and say what we cannot. And that is wonderful. But our goals are higher than money.

Some people think "Say Yes" is a means to make our church here healthy and strong. That is wonderful, too, and is getting closer to the goals for "Say Yes." But our goals are higher than building a church.

Our goal this month is to lay the foundation for an entire year of deliberate obedience to God. Our goal is on-purpose spiritual progress.

- We will hear from evangelical networking in New England -(tonight!)
- We will hear from Nazarene missionaries.
- We will hear and meet people who have ministered in China, and among Asians here in our country.
- We will have a General Superintendent help us with a vision for the world.

But the key is our own willingness to simply obey the Lord in little things and big things— in our homes and together as the Body of Christ. A church that says YES to God will make a difference in 1997. Together with God's help we can say, "Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening!"

Everyone can say "Yes!" Give God your children, your money, your time, your love.

+ + +

I came upon a remarkable story recently. We have heard how a few hundred thousand or a million Chinese Christians BEFORE Communism became more than 50,000,000 today and still growing. This story is about one very ordinary young woman who simply said "YES" to God's will. Her life became a part of that miracle growth in China:

This young woman was working as a servant, a parlormaid in London— when one day she attended a revival meeting and heard the preacher speak of dedicating her entire life to God.

GLADYS AYLWARD responded— said "YES" and became convinced she was to preach the Gospel in China. At age 26 she became a probationer at China Inland Mission Center in London— but failed her examinations and was rejected. So she went to work at other jobs and saved her money.

Then she heard of a 73-year-old missionary Jeannie Lawson who was looking for a younger woman to carry on her work. Gladys wrote ... was accepted if she could get to China. .. not enough money for the ship fare..had saved enough for the train fare, and so in October of 1930 she set out from London with her passport, her Bible, her tickets, and two pounds ninepence, to travel to China by the Trans Siberian Railway, despite the fact that China and the Soviet Union were engaged in an undeclared war. She arrived in Vladivostok and sailed from there to Japan and from Japan to Tientsin, and thence by train, then bus, then mule, to the inland city of Yangchen, in the mountainous province of Shansi, a little south of Peking.

1. The building in which they lived had once been an inn, and with a bit of repair work could be used as one again. Mule caravans that carried coal, raw cotton, pots, and iron goods

on six week or three month journeys. When next a caravan came past, Gladys dashed out, grabbed the rein of the lead mule, and turned it into their courtyard. (Jesus stories) After the first few weeks, Gladys did not need to kidnap customers they turned in at the inn by preference. Some became Christians, and many of them (both Christians and non-Christians) remembered the stories, and retold them more or less accurately to other muleteers at other stops along the caravan trails. Gladys practiced her Chinese for hours each day, and was becoming fluent and comfortable with it. Then Mrs. Lawson suffered a severe fall, and died a few days later. Gladys Aylward was left to run the mission alone, with the aid of one Chinese Christian, Yang, the cook.

2. After the death of Mrs. Lawson...met the Mandarin of Yangchen. The government had decreed no more foot-binding; the mandarin needed a foot inspector, a woman (so that she could invade the women's quarters without scandal), with her own feet unbound (so that she could travel), who would patrol the district enforcing the decree. GLADYS accepted the job .. it gave her undreamed of opportunities to spread the Gospel. She moved to Yanchen— and in her second year there Gladys was summoned by the Mandarin. A riot had broken out in the men's prison. She arrived and found that the convicts were rampaging in the prison courtyard, and several of them had been killed. The soldiers were afraid to intervene. The warden of the prison said to Gladys, "Go into the yard and stop the rioting." She said, "How can I do that?" The warden said, "You have been preaching that those who trust in Christ have nothing to fear." She walked into the courtyard and shouted: "Quiet! " Lives were saved. Prisons were changed! The people began to call Gladys Aylward "Ai weh deh," which means "Virtuous One." It was her name from then on.
3. About this time GLADYS saw a woman begging by the road, accompanied by a child covered with sores She satisfied herself that the woman was not the child's mother, but had kidnapped the child and was using it as an aid to her begging. She bought the child for ninepence a girl about five years old. A year later, "Ninepence" came in with an abandoned boy in tow, saying, "I will eat less, so that he can have something." Thus Ai weh deh acquired a second orphan, "Less." And so her family began to grow.... to more than 200.

She was a regular and welcome visitor at the palace of the Mandarin, who found her religion ridiculous, but her conversation stimulating. Then the war came. In the spring of 1938, Japanese planes bombed the city of Yangcheng, killing many and causing the survivors to flee into the mountains. Five days later, the Japanese Army occupied Yangcheng, then left, then came again, then left. The Mandarin gathered the survivors and told them to retreat into the mountains for the duration. He also announced that he was impressed by the life of Ai weh deh and wished to make her faith his own.

4. A Japanese handbill offering \$100 each for the capture, dead or alive, of (1) the Mandarin, (2) a prominent merchant, and (3) Ai weh deh. She determined to flee to the government orphanage at Sian, bringing with her the children she had accumulated, about 100 in number. (An additional 100 had gone ahead earlier with a colleague.) With the children in tow, she walked for twelve days. Some nights they found shelter with friendly hosts. Some nights they spent unprotected on the mountainsides. On the twelfth day, they arrived at the Yellow River, with no way to cross it. All boat traffic had stopped, and all civilian boats had been seized to keep them out of the hands of the Japanese. The children wanted to know, "Why don't we cross?" She said, "There are no boats." They said, "God can do anything. Ask Him to get us across." They all knelt and prayed. Then they sang. A Chinese officer with a patrol heard the singing and rode up. He heard their story and said, "I think I can get you a boat." They crossed, and after a few more difficulties Ai weh deh delivered her charges into competent hands at Sian, and then promptly collapsed with typhus fever and sank into delirium for several days. As her health gradually improved, she started a Christian church in Sian, and worked elsewhere, including a settlement for lepers in Szechuan, near the borders of Tibet. Her health was permanently impaired by injuries received during the war, and in 1947 she returned to England for a badly needed operation. She remained in England, preaching there until her death, Jan 3, 1970.
5. In 1957, Alan Burgess wrote a book about her, THE SMALL WOMAN. It was condensed in THE READER'S DIGEST, and made into a movie called THE INN OF THE SIXTH HAPPINESS, starring Ingrid Bergman. When NEWSWEEK magazine reviewed the

Speak for Your Servant is Listening

movie, and summarized the plot, a reader, supposing the story to be fiction, wrote in to say, "In order for a movie to be good, the story should be believable!"

Miss Gladys Aylward, the Small Woman, Ai weh deh, died 3 January 1970.

The tremendous power of an ordinary person who simply said "YES" to God's will.

We have heard how a few hundred thousand or a million Chinese Christians BEFORE Communism became more than 50,000,000 today and still growing. It was because of powerful seed planted by little people like GLADYS, and like you and me, who said "YES" and kept on saying "YES" where the Lord led them, where they were!

+ + +

Samuel's call, when it came, was sudden and even dramatic when it came. It came in the quiet of the night. God spoke and Samuel heard, even though at first he did not understand. How much do we love our children? What are our highest hopes and dreams for them? Do we want them to be men and women of God more than any other thing? How much do we trust the Lord? God is still calling. And the response is still, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening!"

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for the life humble people, even like your servant Gladys Aylward, whom you called to preach the Gospel to the people of China. Thank you for all who are answering your call right now, from this church, and throughout your Church around the world.

Speak in our day, in our fellowship, heralds and evangelists of your kingdom, wherever you would send them, that your Church may show the unsearchable riches of our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Our focal point of this our first service in this month of "Say Yes" is the Table of the Lord. This sacrament is a living reminder that Jesus said "Yes" to the Father's will. It is an opportunity for each of us to say "Yes" to all of God's will for us today.

THE HOLY COMMUNION

The Law Read and Confession Made

Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to draw us near to Himself so that we can come to his table with confidence.

Shall we pray:

Search us, O God, and know our most private thoughts. Try us, and show unto us the deepest motives, the real state of our hearts. Forgive us where we have been selfish, or insensitive, or sinful in any way. As you grant us, and ONLY as you grant us the grace of your indwelling Spirit can we hope to keep the Great Commandment, and truly love You, O God, with all our heart, soul, and mind . As your love is shed in our hearts, and ONLY as that love IS given to us we are enabled to love each other as You have commanded.

We do not presume to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

Let us confess our faith:

The Apostles' Creed (STL # 8)

The Informal Invitation ("This is not my table . . . ")

Holy and gracious Father; in your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin, and were worthy of death and hell, you, in your mercy sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to You, the God and Father of all.

He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

The Words of Institution

Speak for Your Servant is Listening

On the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had give thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat: THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

After supper he took the cup and when he had give thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me: Amen

We praise you for the mystery of our salvation! We truly believe

- Christ has died!
- Christ is risen!
- Christ will come again!

Bless these emblems, O God, and make them to us the Body and Blood of your Son, spiritual food, and spiritual drink of new and unending life in Jesus Christ.

And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us:

Our Father which art in heaven . . . (partake together)

WE WILL COME TO THE ALTAR TODAY (even though it is quicker and easier to serve and be served in the pews). MAY OUR COMING FORWARD BE OUR PILGRIMAGE TO WORSHIP . . MAY WE SAY BY MOVING TOWARD THE ALTAR "I WANT TO SAY "YES!!" TO YOU, O GOD!" BEFORE MY SISTERS AND BROTHERS I AM CONFESSING BOTH MY NEED AND MY CONFIDENCE IN CHRIST'S SHED BLOOD FOR MY SALVATION.

instructions if otherwise)

Now, humbly we receive the Gifts of God for the People of God

Genesis Questions

January 7, 1997

Happy New Year!

A word about SAYes '97— a time when our church renews and refreshes its mission statement. You're welcome, invited, to get in on the challenge.

New Year also a time for beginnings— for personal renewal.

I begin with Genesis and Matthew - - and again this year was struck with the questions, the first questions in the Bible:

1. The serpent's question YEA, **HAS GOD (REALLY) SAID...?**

In a sense we have come to label people by the way they answer that question.

- Atheists say "No, of course not!"
- Fundamentalists say: "Yes— and he wrote it down like THIS! This is IT!"
- Liberals say: "People have been discovering God all across the centuries! God is probably speaking even today . . we are discovering . . WE WE"
- Conservatives: "God has spoken... and this is what Calvin said, and Luther."

An oversimplification—YES—but this is a question that cannot be dodged.

THE WORD OF GOD IS ALIVE . . DYNAMIC.

Ultimately it is a Person — it confronts . . .

THERE IS NO SHORTCUT TO THE ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION

2. God's first question ADAM, **WHERE ARE YOU?**

The amazing picture of Creator God walking through a Garden looking for Adam and Eve.

- God knew/knows where they/we are/were . . . but
- in respect for their person-hood does not drag them out
- in answering God's question THEY discover where they are

TWO ANCILLARY QUESTIONS

- "WHO TOLD YOU YOU WERE NAKED?" God addresses "conscience"
- "HAVE YOU EATEN FROM THE TREE?" "Good" and "evil" are God's business! Can we let HIM have the authority?

3. Cain's question **AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?**

In his guilt and sin the first murderer looks up to God and says "Why are you asking ME about my brother?"

God makes it plain that He is holding Cain responsible . . . but also makes it plain that there is mercy . . .

THE REST OF THE SCRIPTURES ANSWER THESE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS . . .

WE ARE CALLED TO ANSWER THEM OURSELVES.

THE CHORUS: *HERE I AM, LORD*

Grace for Help in Time of Need

February 2, 1997

2 Kings 5:1-14; Mark 1:40-45

Before the royal caravan ever got near the capital city the palace was on 'red alert.' Any visit from the north and east was a cause for alarm, and it was clear that this visit was very important. Fearing the worst, but hoping for the best, King Jehoram of Israel had the red carpet run out. The important visitor was greeted. He was Naaman, King Ben-Hadad of Syria's greatest general. What could he possibly want?

And then after some small talk, out it came. Naaman had a letter from the king of Syria to the king of Israel. The letter said, "My great general, Naaman has leprosy. I have sent him to you so you can heal him. Thank you very much. (signed) Ben Hadad."

King Jehoram nearly fainted dead away on the spot. He said, "Could you excuse me for just a minute? I'll be right back." And then he left the meeting hall and went to his quarters where he shouted to his servants, "Who does King Ben-Hadad think I am? God? This is just an excuse to start a war!" And according to the custom of his people, he began to tear his clothing as a sign of anguish.

Just about that time a little man was ushered into the king's presence. His name was Gehazi, and he had a note from his master, the great prophet Elisha. The note read "Don't tear up your royal wardrobe, King. Send the leper over to me." The note was signed "Elisha the Tishbite."

Just then the king didn't have a better idea, so he went back into the meeting room and acted like he had just been out making arrangements in a businesslike way. He said, "Go and visit the prophet over on Cottage Lane. His name is Elisha. Elisha is our leprosy specialist. Elisha is your man. Thank you very much. Goodbye."

So the royal caravan left the royal palace and headed down the main street and down side streets and out to the edge of town. There were plenty of people to tell the

camel drivers the way, and with a dramatic entrance the glitter of scarlet and gold and bellowing camels and guard uniforms came to a stop in front of the house of the prophet Elisha.

This is one of the funny scenes in the Bible. The prophet was at home, but somehow he didn't bother to come to the door. Where the king had fallen all over himself to fawn on his threatening guests, Elisha just sent down his servant, Gehazi, with what really was a remarkable promise of grace. Gehazi had to tell one of the most powerful men he would ever meet, "My boss said for you to go and dip seven times in the Jordan River and you would not have leprosy any more."

Naaman's pride almost kept him from the miracle. He was used to having his ego massaged. He expected a different kind of treatment. He was a VIP. But what he got was the thing he needed most. He couldn't pay for his healing. He couldn't do some heroic thing to deserve it. All he could do was trust the prophet's promise, and do as he was told.

The leper in the Gospel story was at the other end of the social register. He didn't have a note from a king. All he had was leprosy. But he knew where to go. He knew what to say. He knew how to say it. On his knees before the Son of God he cried for help. "If you choose, you can make me clean!"

Mark, the Gospel writer, says Jesus was moved with compassion. He stretched out his hand and touched the leper. Everyone had been taught not to touch lepers. It may have been years since anyone had deliberately put a kind hand on this man's shoulder. But on purpose, with love, Jesus reached out and touched the man who asked his help.

"I do choose," Jesus said. "Be made clean!"

Two stories:

- A flawed VIP finds healing as he is humbled. he doesn't get the VIP treatment he thought he deserved but he got something better.

- A poor outcast leper finds healing that not only saves his life, but brings him back to "life." As we come to the Table of the Lord this morning we probably feel far removed from both of these stories.

The Table of the Lord is a Table of Grace. It is a reminder that no one is rich enough or important enough to pay his own way, but at the same time, no one is so poor and so lowly that God does not love them and welcome them to His side.

[Senator Bill Bradley, 6'8" tall, came through a cafeteria line at the Capitol. He asked for a second pat of butter from the 5'5" waiter. He was refused: policy. "Do you know who I am?" asked the senator. He is impressive— former Knick pro basketball player, former Rhodes scholar. "I am United States Senator Bill Bradley!" "Do you know who I am?" asked the waiter, drawing himself up to his full 5' 5" height. " I AM THE MAN WITH THE BUTTER!"]

Grace is how we come to be saved. It is a humbling thing to have someone die in your place. God is not impressed with your importance, nor is He about to reject you because of your past sin. Grace is how we come to be saved.

Grace is the way we continue to walk with God in the good times and the hard times of life. Every last one of us lives in need to God's grace. You may have it all together just now— but you still need God's grace more than you know. Some here this morning are on living quietly on the edge of desperation. Grace is the way we continue to walk with God!

For us all these stories remind us that God hears us when we cry for help!

God is moved with compassion— he cares when we hurt.

The Naaman story may be shrouded with centuries of history and mystery, but still the fact remains that God healed a pagan general when he asked for help, and when he was willing to follow God's Word.

Jesus looked with compassion at the leper when he begged for help. I believe that Jesus cares about YOU!

His promise is simple - we COME because He invites us

His keeping grace is the same— "He that spared not his own Son but delivered Him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?"

As we come to the table this morning bring your burdens, your cares, your needs, your flaws— and ask Jesus to make you whole. The miracle begins when we ask! The best, the strongest, the most needy— all may come and find God's grace.

Directly to Communion unless otherwise led here:

The Communion

Scripture (I Corinthians 11:23-30)

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood.

Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Whoever, therefore, eat the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. [NRSV]

Apostles' Creed (#8)

Invitation to the Table of the Lord

Jesus Himself is the Host.

Examine your heart. If He bids you come, you are welcome.

Prayer of Confession/Forgiveness

O Father, The "holiest" among us needs every moment the grace of God; we are not holy in and of ourselves. We come short of the perfect will of God in performance, and all too often, we lag in spirit, are insensitive in our relationships, and act more to our own self interest than for the kingdom of God and the salvation of others.

For this we ask your forgiveness— the purchase of your blood on Calvary.

We claim your promise: (I John 1:7,9) If we confess our sin, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Prayer of Dedication

We ask that we may have your ASSURANCE that we have been CHOSEN of you to be your sons and daughters.

We ask that you will give us our ASSIGNMENT, not just our "big" assignment for life's career, but our day-by-day assignment of introducing You to those we know.

We ask that You will help us ACCEPT Your revealed will, and put you at the center of our lives, in all we do.

We ask that as You have told us that You are the Bread of Heaven, that by faith may we partake of your body and blood to our soul's life and health.

Lord's Prayer (Our Father which art in heaven . . .)

(**Instructions.** This morning you will be served in the pews. Pass the tray and then receive the bread and cup from the person to whom you gave the tray. Please hold the bread and the cup and we will all partake together.)

At the moment of partaking:

The BODY of the Lord Jesus Christ: (may it) Preserve you blameless to life everlasting.

Again, with the cup:

The BLOOD of the Lord Jesus Christ: Preserve you blameless to life everlasting.

#430 Singing I Go

Benediction

How Faith Really Works

February 2, 1997

The epistle lectionary for this day was from I Corinthians 9— just a short passage about discipline: (9:24-27)

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but they do not all get the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

That reminded me of another passage by the same author, written to his favorite son in the faith. This other passage is:

2 Timothy 1-16 This is just a bit modernized in my own language, but I believe very true to the scripture:)

2:1 Timothy, I really want you to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that you have heard me speak before many people, I want you to entrust, to pass on to faithful believers, who in their turn will be able to teach others also. [If the faith does not die with us we will have to:]

I ask you to dare to endure hard times, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one who is in a warfare gets entangled with the affairs of this life; we need to live to please the One who called us to follow him to be a soldier in His army.

I ask you to be like an athlete who goes into training, and studies the rules. You know that if someone competes as an athlete they don't win anything if they don't know the rules and play by them.

I ask you to be like a good farmer: A farmer works hard, but even farmers have to understand and live off the land.

How Faith Really Works

Really meditate on this lesson, and God Himself will give you insight regarding your faith.

Remember that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Royal Son of David, Himself was raised from the dead according to this gospel. And even I, your teacher, suffer trouble, as an evil doer; even now I am in prison writing this letter. But the word of God is not bound. Therefore I endure all things for the sake of God's called people, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

We can count on it: If we have died with Him (in baptism), we shall also live with him: If we suffer, we shall also reign with him. But if we deny him, he also will deny us: If we believe not, yet he carries forward in the faith: he cannot deny himself.

2:14 Teach these things! Challenge believers before God not to get into debates about words that will do no one any good, only turn people away.

2:15 Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness.

The exhortation

I don't have a sermon, proper just now. I guess after this morning I just want to talk with you as pastor about a few things.

1. The certainty of change. The church is changing.
2. The absolute need for love between the different changing parts. Love can bridge a lot of gaps. Chinese-Caucasian— that is obvious. But generation and cultural gaps are not so easy—they take deliberate understanding and love (We need to believe in each other even when we don't understand!! each other!!)
3. The on-going call to "pass the good news along: (And the things that you have heard me speak before many people, I want you to entrust, to pass on to faithful believers, who in

their turn will be able to teach others also.) We are to be links in an unbroken chain from Jesus to the world to the end of time.

4. The need for personal discipline.

- I ask you to dare to endure hard times, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.
- I ask you to be like an athlete who goes into training, and studies the rules.
- I ask you to be like a good farmer: A farmer works hard, but even farmers have to understand and live off the land.

Right here in Wollaston we ALL have an opportunity to love and share with generations, ethnic differences, as we walk into exciting (and threatening) change....

The invitation

779 We Are Called to Be God's People

The Rainbow of Gods Promise

February 16, 1997 PM

1 Peter 3:18-22

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: 19 By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; 20 Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. 21 The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ: 22 Who is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him.

RAINBOW is the reminder of a promise. It is a reminder of God's love even in a time of judgment. It is a reminder of the fact that when most of the world went crazy there were some who obeyed God. it is a reminder of the story of Noah

Somehow THE WATER OF BAPTISM GETS INVOLVED IN THE STORY— at least in this passage from Peter. He says that like the ark saved Noah, baptism now saves those who turn to the risen Savior. I mentioned baptism as a saving sacrament this morning. Peter says it does not save by washing away sins from the body— it does bear witness to a clear conscience with God.

JESUS was baptized at the beginning of his ministry here on earth. CAN YOU IMAGINE WHY JESUS NEEDED TO BE BAPTIZED? John the Baptist himself could not, because John knew Jesus did not need cleansing. But somehow Jesus identified with us sinners. "He took my sins and my sorrows; He made them his very own!"

THEN Jesus began His message to earth: "THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS NEAR AT HAND!" Why was that good news? Because the kingdoms these people knew were

kingdoms they needed salvation FROM. God's kingdom, they understood, meant freedom and goodness and joy.

But when they looked around they didn't SEE a kingdom— they saw only JESUS! JESUS IS THE KINGDOM! THE KINGDOM IS WHERE JESUS IS! This is the very same message WE need to hear: THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS NEAR! Jesus wants to set us free from the kingdoms of this world— of greed and hate and selfishness—

WHERE IS JESUS? By faith Jesus is HERE! Jesus is where we need Him! Where YOU need Him! Jesus is the ARK OF SAFETY!

Key words in Jesus' message of safety and deliverance were "REPENT!" Turn! Change course! and "BELIEVE!" Trust what I am telling you! Follow Me! Make ME the center of your life!

DURING LENT IS A WONDERFUL TIME TO GET RIGHT//DRAW NEAR TO JESUS!

223 224 I stand amazed in the Presence // O How He loves you and me!

To Build an Ark

February 16, 1997

Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

I never, ever, put myself into the Bible story of Noah, even as a small child. I could never build a model airplane that would fly, let alone a boat that would float. I could imagine myself as David, or as Paul and Silas, but never Noah.

But did you ever think that sooner or later every one of us comes to a Noah-like situation. We see a world that is tuned out on God, and that seems bent on going to hell. We may not recognize it as such, but we have to make a Noah-like decision. We think about it. We ponder, "What can I possibly do?" We think, "I don't want my family to be lost! I don't want to lose my own soul!"

Then amid all the pondering comes a thought from God: "Start building an ark!" Well— maybe not that. But a challenge comes from the God of Noah. God says, "Did you know that you don't have to live like the world?" And we face the question, "How much do we really want to be saved?"

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE SAVED?

Water in the story is significant. Christian baptism, among other things, refers back to this Noah story when eight people in the world were saved by the very water that destroyed their generation. To be baptized is to be saved— right? Well—

Believing in Jesus is absolutely vital. THAT is what it means to be saved, isn't it? The Bible tells us (Romans 10:9,10) that to say from the heart "Jesus is LORD!" and to believe that God has raised him from the dead is the essence of salvation. But the Bible also teaches us that "to believe" is more than just a mental assent— saying the right things. "To believe" is to hear God make a promise— and to respond to that promise!

BEING SAVED IS A PROMISE

Being saved is a promise GIVEN

To Build an Ark

God is a covenant making God. He makes promises. In the Noah story he covenanted never to destroy the world again by flood. Then nearly 2,000 times in the Bible we read about "covenant." We live by promises. We exist by honor.

- God has promised (John 3:16) that "whosoever believes in Jesus will not perish"
- God has promised (I John 1:9) that if we confess our sins he will forgive them"
- God has promised (Luke 11:13) that if we ask the Father will give us the Holy Spirit
- God has promised (John 15:7) if we abide in Jesus, and Jesus' words abide in us we can ask what we will and it shall be done!
 - Our Christian life— salvation depends on promise GIVEN.
 - Being saved is a promise RECEIVED.

Every promise in the word is conditional. God's LOVE does not depend on whether we are good or bad. God loves us when we deserve nothing. To meet the conditions of a promise is not the same as deserving what is promised. To pass from death to life is a mystery. But there must be a WILLINGNESS TO RECEIVE!

- To RECEIVE forgiveness there must first be CONFESSION
- To be filled with the Spirit there must first be an ASKING!

But did you know that salvation is more than an "experience" or a "fact of history?"

Being saved is a promise HONORED.

But being saved is more than an event— more than a one-time happening. Just as a good marriage is much, much more than an exciting wedding— but is built on covenant and mutual trust, so our relationship with God is an on-going PROMISE, a COVENANT!

SALVATION IS AN ARK OF SAFETY

Unless we are living differently from the world around us what assurance to we have, and what witness does the world see that salvation is worth anything at all?

Is that judging? Is that spiritual elitism?

No— that is God's still, small voice saying:

"Get busy! Start building an ark! Save your children! The flood of judgment is coming!"

LENT IS A GREAT OPPORTUNITY TO SEEK TO HONOR GOD'S COVENANT

Jesus began his ministry proclaiming GOOD NEWS!

He said: "The kingdom is near!" Where Jesus is— THERE is God's kingdom!"

BUT JESUS ALSO SAID

REPENT! JESUS SAID BELIEVE ME! JESUS SAID CHANGE THE WAY YOU LIVE! THAT IS WHAT 'REPENT' MEANS!

The challenge of Noah sounds like a great sermon preached on the day of Pentecost. Peter challenged the good people of his day to avail themselves of God's covenant-making love. In Acts 2:38-41:

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the LORD our God shall call. And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation. Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.

Save yourselves from this perverse generation God help us in OUR perverse time!!

Peter was not preaching self-salvation! But he was preaching repentance and obedience!

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE SAVED?

To Build an Ark

- IT MEANS BEING DIFFERENT FROM THE WORLD!
- IT MEANS BEING FREE FROM THE BONDAGE OF SIN!
- IT MEANS BEING IN A COVENANT RELATIONSHIP WITH A WONDERFUL SAVIOR!

#142 *Wonderful Savior* - Invitation

Abraham's Challenge

February 23, 1997

Genesis 17:1

I love the story of Abraham. Even across millennia, I feel connected to the father of faith. It is easy for me to see why three great world religions look to Abraham as the one who showed them what it means to walk with God by faith.

It is easy for us to try to fit the life of Abraham into our understanding of theological truth. Frankly, I don't know any other way, because that is my understanding of truth. Perhaps we shouldn't say "Now this is where Abraham was saved, and here is where he was sanctified, and so forth." But here in this passage (Genesis 17) there definitely is a challenge to Abraham to move to a new level of trust and faith.

Abraham had left his native land to follow God. He had started out not knowing where he was going. Furthermore, Abraham had made covenant with God simply on the basis of trust (see Genesis 15:6.) But now in old age, when Abraham's best years seem to be behind him, God asks Abraham to move up. This call to move higher reached Abraham at the very point of his weakness and inability. (When we think it is all over, maybe God is thinking about beginnings!) "When Abraham was ninety years old and nine YHWH appeared . . ."

We could easily get sidetracked by the use of the word "perfect." God's challenge was to walk before Him and be perfect, or blameless. Abraham responded perfectly to God's challenge. It wasn't a perfect performance God was looking for, for Abraham's performance before and after this covenant was not without flaws. But Abraham fell on his face before God. He prostrated himself in worship and submission. He agreed with God, he continued to believe God's word; Abraham's perfect response was simply total willingness to belong to God and God alone.

This faith of Abraham and Sarah was not that they believed they would do great things with God's help. Rather, they believed God would do whatever God wanted to

Abraham's Challenge

do with them. God would do great things if God said so. Abraham himself became a living sacrifice, and God could have him, weakness and all.

Two things took place when God challenged Abraham to a closer walk with Himself. God changed Abraham's and Sarah's names. Scholars cannot say for sure what the new names mean; the best explanation for me is that God took a part of his own name and put it into Abraham's and Sarah's names. One thing is for sure— when God changes a name it is significant, and it means a life, a character is being changed for the better. When we hear God's challenge to move up, to believe Him, it is a life-changing, character-changing thing.

God also established the old testament covenant of circumcision that day. He asked Abraham, the man of faith, to accept a permanent sign of the covenant, and forever to belong to God. Being circumcised did not save Abraham. Being baptized will not save you. But Abraham's faith resulted in obedience. Whatever God said, Abraham listened, and believed, and obeyed.

The Gospel lesson from Mark 8 is Abraham's challenge all over again. It is a call to a deeper walk, a higher way.

That challenge is open to us all: Jesus was speaking to the twelve disciples, and yet at this point he also included all who would listen, "the multitude," and he said,

If any one will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. It is clear that God's call is to the whosoever: John 3:16 "God so loved the world . . .that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Peter tells us (2 Peter 3:9) " The Lord is . . . longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."

(We are all called, but not everyone— in fact not many— respond to that call. In fact, it seems as though there are at least two levels of Christians— many are called— few are (finally) chosen. But those who do choose to follow, to walk with Jesus, he has promised His Presence.)

Dr. (Edward S.) Mann used to begin one of his great sermons with a bit of poetry. I probably don't have it exactly right, but this is how I remember it: (I don't know who wrote it . . .)

*Behold, I set before you a way, and ways, and a way.
And the high soul goes the high way,
And the low soul gropes the low.
And in between, on the misty flats,
The rest drift to and fro.
But to each is opened a high road and a low,
And each one must determine
The way his soul would go.*

The challenge to Abraham, and the call from Jesus to each one of us, is to deliberately choose the high road of walking before God, or, as Jesus put it, of following after Him.

Jesus makes it clear and simple what the steps are if we want to take the high road. They are just three:

- We are to deny self.
- We are to embrace the cross.
- We are to follow Jesus.

To deny one's self is not to deny one's self of something. It is to ask God to do what we cannot do— to seal us with His Spirit— to circumcise the heart— It is a willingness to be His love-slaves for time and eternity. It is to take self out of the center and to seek with all one's heart to know and do God's will.

Some of the disciples loved Jesus that much. They wanted to be where He was. They were willing to give up their own selfish wills. And when the Holy Spirit was given to them they found that their hearts were made pure, and it was possible to deny self and delight in God's will at any cost.

Abraham's Challenge

To take up the cross is more than being willing to die for Jesus. It is being willing to LIVE for Him— it is making an offering of our lives to Him. The world lives for happiness. If a relationship is painful, throw it away. If promises or responsibilities get in the way of happiness, throw them aside. "We deserve it!" But to take up the cross is to say with Jesus, "Thy will, not mine be done, even when it costs!"

To follow Jesus means simply that this higher road, this deeper walk has the great privilege of always being where Jesus is. God's challenges are always in the context of covenant— and we can count on it, God keeps his word.

If we will take the time to listen these days and weeks of Lent, we will hear God calling us to come and walk with Him. Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, God wants to make covenant with you. He wants to unfold His best will for you, in you. But God's best and highest come only as we, like Abraham, go down on our faces before God— as we, obeying Jesus, are willing to deny self, take up our cross, and follow Him.

Shall we pray:

Prayer (of A. W. Tozer)

I am your servant, Lord. How I want to be a good disciple. Lead me; awaken me— not that I might be great through you, but that you might be glorified through me. Amen

#462 Sweet Will of God

The Celebration of Gods Law

To love God's law

March 2, 1997

Psalm 19

A man named John Killinger began a book about the Ten Commandments (TO MY PEOPLE WITH LOVE, Abingdon, 1988) with a remarkable parable:

A village was being plagued with disaster after disaster. The reason was that someone had planted land mines all over the countryside. People were constantly being killed or maimed.

Then one night a village elder had a dream. In that dream he saw a map of where every land mine was hidden. He awoke and wrote the map down, and gave it to the people. They were absolutely delighted and grateful. And they memorized the map.

The Ten Commandments are like that: they tell us what to avoid...those actions and attitudes that would blow us and our world of faith and love apart. God's great Laws are like road signs that say more than, "Don't do this! Don't go there!" They also say, "Life lies in this direction! We are true wisdom!"

Psalm 19 is the voice of faith responding to a God who is big enough to make the stars and fill the heavens, but still who cares enough to speak! People of faith can't get enough of a God who loves enough to show His people how they should live! God's Law is precious to people who make it life's business to seek to know God.

The great novelist, Chaim Potock, gives us Gentiles insights into the tremendous love that religious Jews have for Torah, the Law of Moses. During certain days of the year the giving of the law is celebrated with singing and dancing. Members of the congregation take turns in dancing with the sacred scrolls in thanksgiving to God. [When is the last time you saw a Christian dancing with the Bible?] Torah is the most prized possession of any worshiping congregation. If a scroll of the Law is burned in a synagogue fire, or damaged beyond repair, the whole congregation mourns; a

The Celebration of Gods Law

funeral is held; the damaged remains are buried in a regular cemetery with genuine grief for the loss.

Sometimes believers make costly choices to keep God's Law:

- Eric Liddell (Chariots of fire); Sandy Koufax (Yom Kippur/ 1965 World Series);
- Eli Herring, a 340 pound offensive tackle at BYU- a devout Mormon, turned down a possible multi million dollar deal with the Oakland Raiders —These are celebrities.

But many common, ordinary citizens refuse to cheat their way to promotions; refuse to sacrifice their families on the altar of selfish ambition— and no one knows except God. These are people who have their values on straight!

Never feel sorry for people who put God's will ahead of their own. That is not sacrifice. That is common sense! "What does it profit?" Jesus asked.

- How do we approach God's Law?
- How do we get ready to come to the Table of the Lord?
- How do we know what God's Law means for right now?

We can bring a genuine humility to God's Word

We can come to Him saying, "Speak, Lord, and you servant will listen, and obey, and follow." {I am still thinking about LAST week's text, and what it means to (1) Deny self; and (2) Take my cross, and (3) Follow Jesus>}

Genuine faith begins when we are willing to agree with God. God's standards are not our own; either his Word stands in judgment of us, or, as we think, we stand in judgment of the Bible. We consciously or unconsciously let God know what we expect of HIM!

Paul says (I Co. 1) that the Jews demand a sign and the Greeks desire wisdom. And somehow we all fall into one if not both of those categories: we begin by telling God what we expect of Him. Jews want "experience" — the proof of a "feeling;" Greeks want "doctrine" — an "airtight understanding"

In the little microcosm of the universe where I have lived for a few years I see both Jews and Greeks making their demands. Right-brained people, and people of naive faith, and people brought up on strong emphasis on experience demand signs, and things happening, and excitement— and that is understandable. Left-brained people, and people aware of the depths of literary criticism, and people well read in world philosophies look for keen argument, and can usually find flaws in just about every gospel presentation ever made.

There is only one message: that message is the word of the cross.

Until we have been to the cross there is no other message that matters. Not health, or wealth, or spiritual experiences. Nothing!

Will Willimon says "We've made place of worship into a neighborhood supermarket. Get out of bed, get dressed up, open the hymnal, sing the songs, keep your eyes open, stand for the benediction...say hello to God, go back home. "

We all too often go shopping in the worship place for what we want, instead of what God has for us.

Willimon goes on: "...We do not stand, in Lent, before the mirror of our own morality. That would be an easy thing. We stand before a righteous, demanding, accusing God. His standards are not our own. His demands intrude upon our easy complacency, overturning tables, setting wild birds loose, clanging coins on stone floors. His presence is a sting of the whip upon the neck. He barges in here and drives us out of our burrows of religious seclusion.

This is exactly what took place in the Temple, as seen in John 2: Jesus told the people there that they were not worshipping as they should. And when the authorities asked him, "What sign can you show us for taking such authority as to upset the tables and drive out the cattle we brought in here for sacrifice and profit?" Jesus replied with the enigmatic message (to them) of the cross! And they did not understand a word Jesus was speaking! For the cross only makes sense when it is heard with faith!

The Celebration of Gods Law

While people continue to stand in judgment of the Word, and make demands of miracles or esoteric revelations from their God, the heavens remain silent, and there is no delight in God's law.

But when , whether Jew or Greek, we look to the God of creation with faith, and when we come humbly, seeking to listen with the ear of faith to the God who speaks, we will find. to paraphrase another, that 'God is there, and He is not silent.'

If we come listening, and kneeling down in our hearts before the God whose name is I AM THAT I AM, we will hear him say, "If anyone— if YOU will come after me, deny yourself! Take up the cross! Follow me!"

THE HOLY COMMUNION

The Law Read and Confession Made

The Lord Jesus Christ has said to us: "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Shall we pray:

Search us, O God, and know our most private thoughts. Try us, and show unto us the deepest motives, the real state of our hearts. Forgive us where we have been selfish, or insensitive, or sinful in any way. We cannot keep the Great Commandment, and truly love You, O God, with all our heart, soul, and mind unless You in mercy grant to us the grace of Your indwelling Spirit. We cannot love each other as we should unless Your love is shed abroad in our hearts.

Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to draw us near to Himself so that we can come to his table with confidence.

We do not presume to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the

blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

Let us confess our faith:

The Nicene Creed (ST # 14)

The Informal Invitation ("This is not my table . . . ")

Holy and gracious Father; in your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin, and were worthy of death and hell, you, in your mercy sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to You, the God and Father of all.

He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

The Words of Institution

On the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had give thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat: THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

After supper he took the cup and when he had give thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me: Amen

We praise you for the mystery of our salvation! We truly believe

- Christ has died!
- Christ is risen!
- Christ will come again!

Bless these emblems, O God, and make them to us the Body and Blood of your Son, spiritual food, and spiritual drink of new and unending life in Jesus Christ.

And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us:

Our Father which art in heaven . . .

The Celebration of Gods Law

Now, humbly we receive the Gifts of God for the People of God

Coming to the Light

March 9, 1997AM

Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3; 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

The scripture lessons this week are a study in contrasts that bring a wonderful message of God's grace. There are contrasts of judgment and mercy, contrasts of death and life, and, as in the gospel passage, contrasts in darkness and light.

The Old Testament story of the fiery serpents and the brass serpent on the pole gives a glimpse into both the justice and the mercy of a holy God. God permits the murmuring Israelites to be bitten by snakes— in fact the story says God sent the serpents among the people. But even as they came to the point of death, God in mercy was listening to their cry and sending a remedy. You know the story— don't you? God told Moses to make a bronze or brass copy of the serpents, and put the bronze serpent high on a pole where it could be seen even from a distance. Then God said that everyone who would simply look to the serpent would be healed.

God does not excuse sin. His holy nature is a rebuke to wickedness. But as the Psalm (107) says, even when "fools" have brought themselves to the gates of death through their iniquities, when "they cried to God in their distress" he brought deliverance and healing. I have faced many times when I felt absolutely powerless, and my prayer seemed to go no higher than my head. But still I believe that no cry to God, no genuine cry for mercy, goes unheard or unheeded. Even God cannot remove the scars of sins of the past. But God can and does bring forgiveness and healing and forgiveness and life. God is not looking for ways to keep people out of heaven. Far from it, in His mercy He is seeking ways to bring us all to Himself.

The gospel lesson, from John 3, picks up on the story of the serpent. Jesus told Nicodemus that just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, just so He would be lifted up between heaven and earth, and that he would draw all people to himself.

Coming to the Light

In this passage there is the additional contrast between darkness and light. Nicodemus came to Jesus in the darkness, out of the shadows. Jesus abruptly interrupted Nicodemus to tell him that he had to be "born again" in order to be able to see the kingdom of God. Then Jesus told him that heaven's light has come into the world.

"The Message" translates those final verses of our Gospel passage this way:

'This is the crisis we're in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won't come near it, fearing a painful exposure. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is.'

[Justice and mercy— God-light and darkness— but there is one more contrast in these lessons this morning: the contrast of death and life!]

In Ephesians 2 Paul says you were all dead, but God has made us alive together with Christ. What is this "death" Paul is talking about? Certainly it is not physical death. What is death, anyway?

"By and large, most of us pretend that death is something which happens to other people. Somehow, it's like the husband who said to this wife, 'If one of us dies, I think I'll move to Paris'."

But this death is something we have all experienced. In verse 3 Paul says, "All of us lived among them— the spiritual dead—and were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else." What does it mean to be spiritually dead— and how can we know if we are truly alive unto God?

One definition of death is a total inability to respond to the environment. Those who are spiritually dead have no idea that there is a world of glory and light and love. Prayer and the cross and worship are foolishness or worse, because they simply have no correspondence to reality.

Paul defines spiritual death as (1) following the course of this world. The Message puts it this way (Ephesians 2: 1- 6)

'You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. Its a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us.

But then comes that contrast of death with life:

"Instead God, immense in mercy and with incredible love, he embraced us. he took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. he did this all on his own, with no help from us! Then he picked us up and set us down in highest heaven in company with Jesus, our Messiah.

Contrasts in death and life, in light and darkness, struggling to balance what we see of God's justice with what we are told of his mercy, these contrasts tell the story of every one of us. We have all been bitten by the fiery serpents of sin and guilt. But we can be saved by a look at the cross. Of course, the cross itself does not save. The look does not save. But God!! . . . comes down the pathway of that look— the power released from the cross of Christ is God's redeeming love.

Prayer

Hymn No. 327 *Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus*

Exhortation

"Justifying grace is what we experience when we choose to stop closing our eyes to God's love in any aspect of our life

We experience the grace of God from even before we were born. There is not a moment of our lives when we are not surrounded by the grace of God. But for some reason either deliberately or through our stubbornness or just because we are too busy we often don't realize that God is there.

Coming to the Light

It's probably not so much a that we walk around in pitch black but we walk around in the light but with our eyes closed, or with a blindfold on.

Try something for me: Close your eyes as tight as you can. While you are forcing them closed, try opening them with your fingers. Now, instead, relax your eyelids. And now try to open them with your fingers. That's a bit like what goes on as we experience justifying grace.

God is always trying to open our eyes to see the light that is always there.

Sometimes we are forcing our eyes closed because we don't want to look at ourselves. We think that we are not able to be accepted.

The LIGHT, the MERCY, the LIFE of God in Justifying Grace is about us realizing that God accepts us just as we are.

Jesus said that he did not come into the world to condemn, but to save.

It is our job to believe Him. It is ours to surrender to His love. It is His job to save us, and take us where he wants us to go.

Life Beyond Pain

March 16, 1997

Psalm 51 *"Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow."*

John 12 *"Now is my soul troubled and what shall I say?" "Where I am, there also will my servant be." "Sir, we would see Jesus!"*

Introduction

One of the lessons from the scripture lessons today may be one we don't particularly want to hear. Before the resurrection there is a cross. Good Friday comes before Easter. The hard lesson for today is: sooner or later life will involve us in real pain. With that lesson, the scriptures hold up to us a mirror, and a challenge.

The "mirror" that the scriptures hold up to help us see ourselves is found in Psalm 51. The pain there is David's pain. In some ways it can be like our own.

I. David's Pain

David was in an agony of guilt. He had done some terrible things, no mistake about that. He had betrayed another man by seducing his wife. He had multiplied that betrayal by scheming to have the man he had betrayed killed to cover his guilt. And David had gotten away with it for a while.

David had swept his guilt under the carpet of activity, and of forgetting. But God sent a prophet to confront him. Nathan the brave prophet told David an intriguing story. David could be enraged about another person's injustice, even though he had destroyed a home, and had killed an innocent man. But then Nathan said, "Thou art the man!" David came face to face with his own sin and guilt. It hurt! And this Psalm is a record of what happened next.

David's pain was deserved. Guilt is not an evil thing. It is the result of evil. Guilt is like physical pain. It is necessary, even healthy. But like pain, guilt is not to be

ignored or covered up or accommodated. God wants his people to find freedom from the pain of guilt. I am in no way saying your sins or mine were as gross as David's, although that is possible. But I am saying that every one of us has sinned. We have known what it feels like to be caught in the wrong. That is the mirror. Psalm 51 holds up to us the mirror of confession: we do not have to live with that kind of pain.

If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9) The only sin that cannot be forgiven is the sin that we refuse to bring to the light. We do not have to live with the pain of guilt.

David prayed that the JOY would be restored. David prayed that he would know the Presence of God. And that prayer was answered. The grace of God has broken the guilt and the power and the eternal penalty of sin forever.

Transition: But there is another sort of pain in our lessons for today. It is the pain of the Lord Jesus Himself.

II. The Pain Of Jesus

This was a very different sort of pain from what David knew. Looking immediately ahead to the passion, the climax of his earthly ministry, to the cross Jesus said, "Now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say?" This was not guilt. This was not deserved. This was pain endured as the price of love. (Gethsemane underscores this pain)

I don't pretend to understand such love, but I think I know this much: Jesus did not swerve aside from His cross because He loved the Father, and because He loved you and me.

Love costs. Love will demand sacrifices. Love cost Jesus— and yet Jesus saw something He believed He could reach in you and me. The writer of Hebrews says that Jesus saw a JOY set before him that enabled him to go forward even when it cost him.

This pain of Jesus, this great giving LOVE, is to me not a mirror: I don't see myself in His story. I am not of myself pure and holy. I am not a hero or a martyr. I am not able

to save anyone. I can identify with David, and ask for forgiveness for my sins. But I cannot identify with Jesus. No one is good and holy like Jesus.

The pain of Jesus is to me a challenge. I cannot think of myself in the same sentence as Jesus, but somehow Jesus asks me to follow him. He asks you as well: "Deny yourself! Embrace your cross! Follow me!" It cost Jesus his life. It will cost us, too.

What sort of challenge is this? What does it mean to follow Jesus?

(I still am trying to cope with that challenge we heard again for the first time this Lent: "If anyone will come after me let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.")

To embrace the cross may mean in plain language:

Giving up what WE want so that someone else may have what they need. or Forgiving someone who has wronged us even though they don't deserve it. or Giving our service to others even though we have not been served. or Listening to someone else's heartaches even when we have heartaches of our own.

There is a pain that we can and should escape. We do not need to live with the pain of guilt. But there are times when we hear the challenge of Jesus' pain: "My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? Get me out of this?" and the answer is "Lord, just let me follow You whatever it costs!"

To accept this challenge to follow Jesus is worth whatever it costs! HOW? Once again, this is something we each must answer for ourselves, but I think I know this much: 1) we can be with the One we love. ("Where I am there also will my servant be." If we can be with Jesus it is worth whatever it costs.) 2) we can share the JOY of Jesus. There is no joy like hearing the Father say, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased!" and, that day, when Jesus did not shrink back from the cost of love, the Voice said, "I have glorified (my Name)! ("I AM pleased!") ("I AM glorified in what you are!") and ("I WILL BE glorified again!")

Conclusion:

Life will NOT be pain-free. But life can have its full share of joy.

God's GRACE enables us to deal with the pain of guilt. We can come and confess as sinners, and be born again into the kingdom of God. We can confess our need for grace as Christians, and maintain the necessary course-corrections that keep us in fellowship with God and with one another. The Lord's Prayer reminds us of our need for the grace of forgiveness.

God's LOVE calls us to embrace the cross. We certainly do not seek any way of pain. We pray "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." But also we hear our Lord say, "Follow me!"

PRAYER

Almighty God, You alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of those who come by faith to you. Grant your us your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the dizzying changes of this world, our hearts may surely stand firm where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

#547 - Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone (First Two Verses ONLY)

Praise on Parade

March 23, 1997

Mark 11:1-11; Psalm 118; Philippians 2:5-11

Can you take a trip this morning? Come with me through both time and space to Jerusalem. It is springtime of the year that Jesus was crucified. It is the first day of the last week of His earthly ministry, although we don't know that yet. In our journey we have been set back in our understanding of Jesus to exactly where his disciples were right then during that last week. We know and love Him, just like Peter, and James and John. But we don't really understand what this week will unfold.

The weather is beautiful, sunny and almost too warm. We are standing alongside a narrow road that winds down the steep hill called the Mount of Olives. It goes down through the ravine called the Kidron Valley, and up to the Eastern Gate of the Temple Mount.

We are sure that Jesus is going to enter Jerusalem during this time of Passover festival, and we are excited about that. Since he has raised Lazarus from the dead the whole world must know that he is Messiah. After Jesus has done so much good it can't be long until the whole world will want to know him like we know him.

There is an excitement in the people around us. There is an anticipation that something really wonderful is going to happen. And then it begins. Around the bend at the top of the hill comes a movement— a swirl of activity— and then we see more clearly. It is Jesus!

Jesus is riding on the back of a donkey that has been draped with holiday cloaks. On impromptu saddle blankets of scarlet and white and gold the Savior is sitting with one knee drawn up, sort of side-saddle. He is looking right and left and as the people see his face they feel deep praise to God welling up within. They cry out words meant for royalty, "God send salvation!" "Hosanna!" "God save the King!"

People who couldn't get their holiday cloaks on the donkey spread them out in the dusty road in front of Jesus. Little children join in. Palm branches are broken from young trees in the fields nearby. The parade doesn't just pass the crowd. As Jesus passes, the people join the march. The road just ahead, alongside, and following behind Jesus is jammed with people. As they come near we are caught up and we are following Jesus as well. What could possibly be more wonderful? Our beloved Teacher is being accepted by everyone! The kingdom he has been proclaiming is here, now! "Hosanna! Can you believe it! Jesus is Lord!" Where is Jesus going? What is he going to do?

As we get nearer to the gates of the city we see the Very Important People coming to meet us. Can it be that they are going to join the parade? But no, they are pushing through the waving palms and the children. We hear them say, "What is going on here? Are You starting a riot? Tell these people to be quiet!"

But our Lord is not apologetic at all. We are thrilled to see him stand up to these dry bones. "If these people stop shouting," Jesus says, "the very paving stones along the way will cry out!" And the leaders actually slink away. They are really worried. We find out later they said to each other, "The whole world is going after Jesus!"

Our excitement rises. Our anticipation. What great thing is Jesus going to do? Will he go directly to the Temple and there announce that a new way of worship has arrived with Him?

Now we are just across the little valley from the Temple and the city across the way. Jesus stops his little colt, and we look. He is . . . weeping! He is saying something we can't hear just now, but it seems like a strange way to celebrate a parade of praise.

In a moment the parade goes on, down and down and across the brook. The crowd follows their proclaimed Messiah as he gets off the donkey just inside the Eastern Gate and crosses over to the temple court. Now it will happen! Heavenly fireworks!

But Mark tells us that by this time it was late afternoon. And Jesus looked around, and then quietly left the temple area.

The crowd is at least mildly disappointed. They expected some speeches, some declaration. Maybe tomorrow? What is this— this non-climax?

We do not understand any more than Peter and James and John. We love this Man we believe is the Son of God. But we don't understand all that that means. We have faith that this Jesus will set up a kingdom of Peace. But we still do not really know what that means.

Come back to Wollaston for a few minutes while we talk about what we have seen. It is obvious that the people, the very best people, did not understand where Jesus was heading that Sunday so long ago. Jesus had said over and over he would die at the hands of unbelief and evil, but that he would rise again from the dead. Even on the day that Peter affirmed, "Thou art the Christ!" Jesus told him how he would die. But Peter did not understand it then, and he did not understand it during that colorful parade down the hill, either. The very best people did not understand what it meant to follow Jesus.

But I suggest that we do not always understand what it means, either. Oh, we really do believe in Jesus. We know intellectually about the cross. We know Easter is coming. But it is not a simple thing to follow Jesus, because Jesus is on His way to a cross. And Jesus said if we want to come after him we need to deny our selves, embrace our cross— and follow Him.

Peter and James and John tried hard to follow Jesus through that week. They ended up asleep while Jesus prayed, and the Bible says that not just Peter, but "they all forsook Jesus and fled." Our king does not meet our expectations. Our flesh is weak. We want to follow, but there is a failure of spirit. If we put ourselves back in that story with the limitations we had before, I am sure, that every one of us would fall out of the parade before it finally reached Golgotha. Peter said, "I'll die first!" And Peter is a far better man than I am. But Peter's spirit failed.

But do you know what? You are in this story! I am! And Jesus is still saying, "If you want to— you can come after Me! Deny yourself, embrace the cross— follow Me!" The secret is that the same Spirit that was in Jesus, and that enabled Jesus to cry,

"Abba! Father!" is now given to all who truly follow Jesus. The secret to following Jesus all the way to the Cross and beyond is that the very Spirit of Jesus Himself is waiting to enable us to follow Him.

"Abba," that term of endearment, is found only three times in the New Testament. In Mark's Gospel Jesus said, "Abba! Father! All things are possible for Thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what Thou wilt" (Mark 14:36).

"Let this mind— this spirit— this Spirit— be in you which was also in Christ Jesus!" The mind of Jesus is obedience. If we want to follow after Jesus, and call God "Father" there is only one way. It is the way of "yet not what I will, but what Thou wilt!" It is the way of Christ's Spirit that leads beyond the Cross to the Life Everlasting.

Both in Romans 8, and Galatians 4, Paul writes that it is the Spirit, the HOLY Spirit, within the believer's heart that cries "Abba! Father!" That intimate drawing near to God is the heart cry of those who want to follow Jesus more than they want their own way. If we want to follow after Jesus there is only one way. If we want to know God as "Father, Abba Father" we must follow Jesus along the way of "Nevertheless!"

Jesus somehow never meets OUR expectations when he comes into our lives. But Jesus is King of Kings! His challenge to us is to follow Him, and if we do, we can begin to meet HIS expectations for us! Where He is, we will be! His JOY will be our joy! And we will begin to understand how we can call His Father our "Father, Abba Father!"

Prayer

490 *O to Be Like Thee* (and) 491 *Not My Will, but Thine*

The Mind of Christ

March 23, 1997

Philippians 2:5 *Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.*

Palm Sunday is another study in contrasts. It starts out with a parade. But it is also called Passion Sunday, and Jesus weeps over Jerusalem before the parade is over. Even with the hindsight of 2,000 years we cannot grasp all its significance.

But still we are called to follow Jesus. The disciples started out on Palm Sunday as participants in the parade. But before Jesus got to the cross the Bible says they had all forsaken him, and had fled. And we would not have done any better.

But we can do better now. At least we now have the promise of the indwelling Spirit. Every person who comes to God through Jesus, and is born again, has the indwelling Spirit. And we have the ability to follow Jesus. We won't do it perfectly. We will stumble, and we will fail.

But Paul tells us— challenges us— "Let this mind— this spirit— this disposition be in you which was also in Christ Jesus!" Can you or I say that we know what that mind might be?

Jesus called God "Father." Jesus taught us to call God, "Father in heaven." Jesus intends that we should have the spirit of adoption, of sonship. In that sense we can have "the mind— the attitude" that was in Christ Jesus. We can be family with God, through grace.

But this family thing is demanding! The more intimate we want to become with the Father, the closer we want to walk with Jesus, the more we fill out that formula: deny self, embrace the cross, follow Me! At his most intimate moment, and in the very climax of the drama of salvation Jesus called his father "Abba!" Perhaps near our word "Daddy" or "Dad!" But do you know what that love was costing Jesus. He was saying, "I am hurting because of what lies ahead— but whatever it costs— i want to

do what You will have me do!" The spirit of intimacy with God is the spirit of obedience and submission.

Did you know that that term "Abba" is only found three times in the entire New Testament. Here in Mark's Gospel— and then in Romans and Galatians, where Paul says that the Spirit within us— the Spirit of submission and obedience— cries out in most intimate terms "Abba! Dad! Daddy!"

Best Morning

Easter Sunday Morning

March 30, 1997

Introduction

"Mary!" "Teacher!" (John 20)

EASTER is God's promise of eternal life in the face of all the harsh realities of this world. Easter is a time for JOY!

The fire and brimstone preacher looked down sternly at all the worshippers gathered in the pews one Easter Sunday morning, and he said, "Every member of this congregation is going to die one day!" He got the response he was looking for: there was now a somber look on everyone's face. But there was just one exception. A man he did not recognize sitting right down in the front got a big smile on his face.

The preacher's face turned just a little redder as he looked squarely into the smirk on this one man's face. He raised up to his full height, put on a his most severe face and said, "I REPEAT! "Like it or not, every member of this congregation is going to die one day!"

The smile grew even larger than before. The preacher couldn't handle this incongruity, so he stopped and actually addressed the man directly: "May I ask you sir, what you find so amusing in my statement?"

To which the man replied, "Oh, I'm not AMUSED.....I'm RELIEVED. You see, I'm not a member of this congregation!"

THE CRUNCH TIMES COME AND CHALLENGE OUR FAITH

The story of Easter is the powerhouse of the Gospel. The fact that Jesus is Lord over sin and death made all the difference to the men and women who were there when the story first unfolded. But the best thing about the story of Easter is that it isn't over yet.

Easter's great story began in a graveyard. It began with people whose faith was in the past tense. Easter's story began small. Just a few disillusioned people who loved the teachings of Jesus, and believed them, but also people who had watched Jesus die, and had helped to bury him. The harsh realities of life as they knew it did not match up to what they had expected from their Master.

The challenges to our faith 2,000 years later may seem very different from those in that graveyard on the first Easter morning. But I am not so sure that people have changed all that much. We have our expectations of just what God ought and ought not to do. We think we know how he should make himself known. Then we are challenged:

- What kind of God would permit a child to die of cancer?
- Where was God when a loved one I prayed so very hard for died anyway?
- How do I really know my faith is any different from 39 apparently very sincere people who killed themselves so that they could rendezvous with a space-craft the other side of the comet Hale-Bopp?? from the foolishness of self-proclaimed Messiahs?

The answer lies in the reality of whether or not Jesus is truly alive, and able to make himself known to his disciples. The answer is in the reality of "Jesus is Lord!" The difference in vital Christian faith and all other religions, is that a grave marks the place where religious leaders finally end up, but an empty tomb is where the Easter story began. And that story is not finished.

[[ASIDE - CULTS AND TRUE FAITH Perhaps it would be an interruption in the story to pursue "differences" in true and false faith on Easter Sunday. But there are some valid differences in living faith in Jesus Christ and so-called sect mentality and alternative religions. First, WHO IS JESUS? (Creed!) Then,

1. Faith in Jesus is not esoteric, for the few. If a pastor or evangelist makes a living telling Christians all the other denominations and faiths are false, run the other way as fast as you can— Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. But Jesus is Lord of all who will own him. This way challenges the deepest minds, but you don't have to be either a monk or a

- rocket scientist to be a Christian.
2. Faith in Jesus is not sectarian, as much, perhaps, as some of us would like it to be. We Nazarenes don't have a corner on salvation. The love of God is broader than the measure of man's mind.
 3. Jesus is not owned or operated by human effort, or for human profit.... wayfaring people can follow Jesus. Jesus is Lord! Jesus refuses to perform according to our expectations.

The idea that Jesus now comes to live in each one of us, this good news we call the Gospel, is foolishness to the Greeks, and scandalous religious nonsense to the Jews. If you get your wisdom from the talk shows and newspaper editorials, then you probably will feel foolish to confess Jesus Christ as your best friend, and admit that you talk to Him every day of your life. There is a certain amount of so-called foolishness involved. But whose fool are you? - - BACK TO THE STORY]]

Jesus had risen exactly as he had said he would. And one by one, and in small groups, Jesus found his people. The final chapters of the Gospels, and the history book of Acts, give us story after story of people in various levels of sadness and unbelief, and later of people in rebellion and sin who were brought face to face with the risen Lord, and who believed, and were changed forever.

THE LIVING LORD KNOWS WHO WE ARE, AND WHERE

The Easter story unfolds very simply: People who did not know where to look for Jesus were challenged with the wonderful dawning truth: Jesus was already looking for them!

The eternal day began with a tiny trickle of light. [Just like this morning's sunrise. it was exactly at 5:31 that the sun rose above the horizon, and it was daytime. but it was not very spectacular this morning. Still the sunrise is a fact, and no power on earth can either deny or change that fact!] The Eternal Day that is still dawning began very quietly.

First it was a small band of believers— or, at the time— sad un-believers— who saw the dawning light. John says that he was the first one after the resurrection to grasp the truth. He and Peter ran to the tomb when Mary Magdalene told them Jesus was

not there. They saw the empty tomb, and John says at that moment it dawned for him. He had not yet seen Jesus, but he believed. The Easter story now had begun for John the beloved.

Mary Magdalene was the first to see and know the risen Savior. Oh, make no mistake, Mary Magdalene certainly knew Jesus. She had been perhaps the least likely member of the inner group— she was a woman with a past. She had been possessed by evil. But Jesus had turned her life around. She loved him with all her heart. But the Easter story had to dawn by faith for Mary Magdalene as well. (A poem from years ago puts these words in Mary Magdalene's mouth:)

BEST MORNING

*I could never forget his face;
Sweet face of forgiving,
Stern face of temple cleansing,
Marred face on Skull Hill
I saw them all.
And yet that morning,
That best morning,
I did not know him when first I saw him.
But in my heart a curtain tore
From top to bottom,
Tore when he spoke my name.
And something in me that had been sorrow
Became eternal life!*

And so it was with Peter and Andrew and a week later with Thomas and all the rest. Within two months, after Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit, the light had grown until thousands had met Jesus in life-changing power. Before their generation died, many of them martyrs, they had begun to 'turn their world upside down.'

And so it has been with hundreds and thousands and, yes, millions of people since. There have been many human failures in the name of Christian faith. But the living Lord is alive and well in his body the church to this very hour!

Do you remember when the Good News became personal to you? We have been walking our own Emmaus Roads when the living Word has confronted us, and we have had to confess: This is God Himself calling! What will I do with this challenge? And while we are seeking Him, it turns out that He was looking for us all the time!

THE BOTTOM LINE IS LIFE: THE STORY GOES ON

John's Gospel closes with the clear purpose of the entire book plainly stated: (20:21) "These words are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and that believing you might have life through his name!" It is clear that the Easter story is still going forward!

As the disciples grasped the fact that Jesus is alive, Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit! And go, tell people that their sins are forgiven!" Get busy spreading the good news! Get into the Easter story! The Lord is Risen! He is risen indeed! The day that began dawning by the open tomb that Best Morning is not over yet. The story unfolds! Jesus asks you, and asks me, to carry the good word where we go!

Thomas Hine, an author who wrote a book titled Facing Tomorrow, tells of his relationship with his grandmother when he was a child. She would take him on her lap and tell tales of her life in Ireland. She spoke of coming to America as a teenager and how she had made her way through hardships and blessings. And then he concludes with these words,

"Though she never said it directly, I knew the story had no ending because I was an important part of it. It was up to me to know the story, make it part of my life, add to it and pass it on."

INVITATION

I challenge you to pray a prayer inviting Him to find you, and to take charge of your life! I challenge you to tell him that if he will be your Lord you will be his man, or his woman! If we want to own him Lord and God he will very much find us where we are and change our world..

PRAYER

O God, who gave your only begotten Son to the death of the cross for our redemption, and who by his glorious resurrection delivered us forever from the power of our enemy: Grant us grace so to die with him to sin and selfishness, and grace by faith to live with him and for him, in the joy of his resurrection, in whose holy name, the name of Jesus we pray;

Grant that we, who celebrate with joy this day our Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin here and now, and know with you the life eternal, world without end, by your life giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the same Spirit ever, one God, world without end.

Hymn # 264 or # 266

The Faith of St Thomas and St John

April 6, 1997

John 20:27-31

The story of Thomas is very important, or it would not be at the climax of the gospel. But what does it mean? (In a way that is an arrogant question, since it implies I KNOW the answer.) I can tell you a part of what I believe it means, and what it certainly means to me.

Why Thomas, here at the end? If this book is written so we might believe in Jesus Christ the Messiah, is Thomas the ideal believer?

The list of those coming to living faith in this chapter begins with the writer, John himself, who entered the tomb and believed on the spot! Then comes Mary Magdalene. Then the Eleven, locked in the meeting room, but without Thomas, who for some reason was absent. And now at the very end, Thomas. Are we to strive to be like Thomas? Or, perhaps, we should be like John who was the very first to believe— he told us himself— even before he saw the risen Lord?

What this says to me is that John is not holding up either himself or Thomas as models for us to follow. Rather, John is telling us that whoever or wherever we are, if we want him, and if we seek him in love, Jesus will find us and let us know he is alive. In the next chapter Jesus finds Peter in a different way, and restores him to fellowship. But that is another story.

"These are written that you might believe..." All these testimonies— this entire book is to tell us that the risen Lord is as good as his word. "Go back carefully to the beginning and read what I've written," says John. "'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...' Read again with faith that entire story of Jesus... see how he spoke like no other man... see how he had authority over life and death and creation... see how he lived and how he died and how he has risen again... read that story, John says, read and believe! Believe and have life!"

It doesn't really matter if you come like John, or like Thomas, or like Mary Magdalene, or like Peter or Paul— the important thing is to be able to say, "My Lord and my God!" Sometimes it seems like we are all expected to be giants of the faith. But Thomas helps us understand that the good news is for everyone— great and small. It is not limited to a certain temperament or personality type.

Some of us come emotionally, with tears for wasted years. Some come as little children, and never know the dramatic conversion. Some seem to be able to simply quietly believe, and know they are alive in Christ. Some struggle and agonize and pray, "O God, please give me a sign!" And yet the important thing is that synapse of faith, that spark of recognition that finally says, with Thomas and every other true believer, "My Lord and my God!"

That statement is the climax of the entire Gospel. "My Lord and my God!" comes as the confession we all are to make! That confession by Thomas precedes the text "But these are written that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that believing ye might have life in his name."

Two other elements of great importance are linked with this confession in this climactic chapter of John's Gospel.

Jesus breathed on the company of disciples, and said to them: "Receive the Holy Spirit!" Faith in the risen Savior is not just a matter of being persuaded of an historical fact, but it is to be a present relationship with a God who is as near to us as our very breath. The presence of God indwells every believer. "Receive YE the Holy Spirit!" It is an inevitable result of believing in Jesus Christ the Messiah!

Jesus also told that little company, the nuclear beginnings of the church, "Go and forgive people's sins!" As we understand that, it was not some confessional power, but a way of saying that if we believe in a risen Lord, and if he is present with us in his Holy Spirit, then our assignment is sharing the good news that God has already forgiven the sins of the world, and that life is to be had for the asking.

But it begins with this inner persuasion: I have met the risen Lord! I know he is alive! I bow before Him! You, O Christ, are my Lord and my God!" That faith enables us to

"be more than we are!" It may not be just for giants of the faith— but Christ comes to live in us, and helps us through the reality of life. And as we stay close to Him, He lives out through us if we will but let him.

As a Post Script:

Some scholars seem to hold Thomas up, if not for scorn at least hold him up, as a poor role model. We are not to be like "doubting Thomas." who needs more and more proof— we are to be like John who believed immediately. Thomas was not "a giant of the faith" like Peter... or so some say.

But there are in existence in India to this day Christian churches who worship God in the name of Jesus Christ, and who venerate this very same St. Thomas. For however scholars may scorn Thomas's need for proof, it seems that while St. Paul traveled west with the good news of a God who cares, St. Thomas traveled east and preached as far as India where he established the church of Jesus Christ, and where he was finally martyred for his faithfulness to Jesus.

When we say by the Holy Spirit, "My Lord and my God!" the risen Lord Himself enables us to "be more than we are" in our own strength. He gives us his Spirit. He enables us to share his grace. He is with us this very hour.

PRAYERS (contemporary language)

Everliving God, who strengthened your apostle Thomas with sure and certain faith in your Son's resurrection: Grant us so perfectly and without doubt to believe in Jesus Christ, our Lord and our God, that our faith may never be found wanting in your sight; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Almighty and everlasting God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation: Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith;

*through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you
and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever.*

THE HOLY COMMUNION

The Law Read and Confession Made

The Lord Jesus Christ has said to us: "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Shall we pray:

Search us, O God, and know our most private thoughts. Try us, and show unto us the deepest motives, the real state of our hearts. Forgive us where we have been selfish, or insensitive, or sinful in any way. We cannot keep the Great Commandment, and truly love You, O God, with all our heart, soul, and mind unless You in mercy grant to us the grace of Your indwelling Spirit. We cannot love each other as we should unless Your love is shed abroad in our hearts.

Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to draw us near to Himself so that we can come to his table with confidence.

We do not presume to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

Let us confess our faith:

The Nicene Creed (STL # 14)

The Informal Invitation ("This is not my table . . .")

Holy and gracious Father; in your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin, and were worthy of death and hell, you, in your mercy sent

Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to You, the God and Father of all.

He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

The Words of Institution

On the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had give thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat: THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

After supper he took the cup and when he had give thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me: Amen

We praise you for the mystery of our salvation! We truly believe

- Christ has died!
- Christ is risen!
- Christ will come again!

Bless these emblems, O God, and make them to us the Body and Blood of your Son, spiritual food, and spiritual drink of new and unending life in Jesus Christ.

And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us:

Our Father which art in heaven . . .

Now, humbly we receive the Gifts of God for the People of God

You and the Holy Spirit

April 6, 1997

John 20:21-23

This penultimate chapter of John is full of realization or expectation; it contains the final purpose for which Jesus, the living Word, the Son of God, the Creator, ever came to earth. The nuclear center of that purpose is stated in verse 31 "But these (words, this book) were written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that believing you might have (eternal) life through his name."

To my mind, John seems to say that believing comes differently to different people and personalities. But the important thing was that each of them were enabled to believe because Jesus revealed Himself to them. It was a gift of faith that was somehow different for each one, and yet somehow the same: Jesus was risen! Jesus is Lord!

But there are other key conclusions in this chapter as well; things that Jesus expects his church to be and do.

Jesus tells his nascent church that they will have a key role in telling the world their sins have been forgiven through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them." Mysterious words, these. There is good news for the world that the church has to tell. God loves them, and values each one of them, even as he loves you and values you.

But the one expectation I want to touch just now is that (mysterious) part where John wrote "When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."" Before they could tell the Good News, they were to have the Holy Spirit for themselves. Luke makes an even bigger thing of this command, both at the end of the gospel and the beginning of Acts. In both places Jesus says in effect: "Don't leave town until you know you have the Holy Spirit!"

You and the Holy Spirit

What can this mean, to receive the Holy Spirit? Who has the Spirit? Who may have the Holy Spirit? How do we receive the Spirit now, today?

What does it mean 'to receive the Holy Spirit?' Do you know?

Wherever you are just now on your spiritual journey, the Holy Spirit is with you. You already "have" the Holy Spirit in the sense that wherever any person may be, God cares, and God is speaking, and God has made provision to do whatever is necessary to make that person a part of his family.

So we could say: to receive the Holy Spirit for a person seeking after God is simply to pray a prayer of discovery, or for discovery— a prayer that says, "Lord God, if you are there, I AM WILLING TO LISTEN!"

But that is not all that Jesus meant that Easter Sunday evening when he told the disciples: "Receive the Holy Spirit!" We can be pretty sure of that.

For we could say: to receive the Holy Spirit for a person finding God is to pray a prayer something like that little chorus many of us learned in Sunday School: "Into my heart, Into my heart— come into my heart, Lord Jesus!" It can be amusing, and yet we really are not confused about "God in there!" (Ben told the doctor "Jesus is in there!" - - and when Joe Finn was here he was telling about his boy at the barber's opening his mouth looking in the mirror "He must be way down in there . . .")

But HE IS IN THERE!! Romans 8 "If any person does not have the Spirit . . ."

But we Nazarenes re-discovered what Wesley re-discovered: the truth of "secondness"— the fact that Christians have to make their own sacrifice of self-will— God loves us so much that he won't dominate us like puppets. And so we have heard stuff like— "The Spirit is WITH you but he wants to be IN you— so "get sanctified!" We have prayed for the Holy Spirit to come when he is already there— but God has understood what we were crying for and had accepted our sacrifices all the same. And the Holy Spirit has come in to make Christ THE UNCHALLENGED LORD OF OUR HEARTS. We have said an ETERNAL YES to God's will.

So: to receive the Holy Spirit for a person seeking to be entirely sanctified is to say from the heart: NEVERTHELESS, NOT MY WILL BUT YOURS—FOREVER AND EVER!

And that's the end. Right? WRONG!!

For to say we are now "filled" and that's that is to ignore the dynamic realities of the way life is lived.

We need a daily, fresh infilling with the Presence of God. We need to tell God how much we love him, and receive the Holy Spirit today, now.

And there will be times along the way when we need a very special infilling, a grace that borders on the miraculous— certainly supernatural. I think of Acts 4, when the disciples were threatened and frightened and warned never to speak in the name of Jesus again. What does the record say? They went back to the fellowship, they prayed until they prayed "through." The place was shaken— and what? THEY WERE ALL FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT AND SPOKE THE WORD OF GOD WITH BOLDNESS.

So what am I saying? That you don't need the steps of conviction, and conversion, and consecration and cleansing and all that?

Not at all— but I am saying that wherever you are on your spiritual journey— God loves you very much and cherishes you. And God is very, very near to you and asks you to receive from Him what he has to offer you. And that gift is HIMSELF! "Receive the Holy Spirit!"

Wherever you are on your spiritual journey— RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT!

Prayer

Chorus:

Witness to Life

April 13, 1997 AM

"We are witnesses" Acts 3

The resurrection of Jesus did not just bring him to life from the dead. That same mighty power brought a new kind of resurrection life the disciples. The disciples found that they could share this new life, and that same mighty power began to bring into being a living fellowship we call 'the church.'

The Living Word of God Himself was the source of this great power. But the Living Word used both the spoken and the written word. Words. Not just talk, but incarnate words. There were miracles, certainly. There was a great deal of love, and that was and is essential. But there were also words.

1. The WORD came through words of witness. Peter said, "We are witnesses of the resurrection." After the miracles. After the people's attention was turned to see the life the disciples enjoyed— then "We are witnesses!" There is fascinating power in hearing someone tell first hand when an important thing has taken place in that person's life. Peter told the people what he knew for himself. This was first generation knowledge. Peter knew the scriptures and used them. But what gave the words "bite" was the first-hand certainty. "I know," Peter could say. "I was there!"
2. There WORD Himself came and illuminated the words of scripture. In Luke 24 in two different places we are told that the risen Savior explained the Old Testament scriptures as existing to testify of Him! On the Road to Emmaus Jesus "expounded the scriptures." Here in the end of the chapter Jesus "opened their understanding to see that the scriptures exist for the purpose of putting us in touch with God through Jesus Christ. John 5:39 is a text I love: "Search the scriptures, " Jesus told the educated cynics and nay-sayers. "It is in them you think you will find eternal life; it is instead in them you will find ME!" Jesus IS eternal life. Apart from Jesus the Bible is a book of wisdom and history up for interpretation. But as a

handbook on Jesus, the Bible becomes a means of grace, and the chief avenue for knowing about God in Christ.

3. These two "words" are still what the Living WORD uses! The Bible used to lift Jesus up—and the personal word of witness: "This is what I know!"
 - a. First, a word of encouragement to you. You don't have to do it by yourself: sharing the word is always a team effort in the final analysis. Peter said, "WE are witnesses, and so is the Holy Spirit!" Paul plants, Apollos waters, God makes the living seed grow and grow—and what you can't do and I can't alone—we can, by God's help, begin to do better together.
 - b. Second, another word of encouragement. This sharing/witness business is always a process. Life takes a while to germinate. Every step along the way is important. A new life in Christ may begin with as simple a thing as a kindly smile with a prayer behind it! The one who finally leads a person to pray "Lord have mercy on me a sinner" is not more important than the one who took in a meal when a husband or wife was in the hospital. It all is part of the word-of-life-process.

Finally—and here's the 'punch line' of this message: I believe every one of us can have a part in passing along the word that brings Life! I want to do better, and I need you! You want to do better, and we need each other!

We might begin by reviewing how we read the Bible. Jesus is still willing to open our understanding so we can see how much people matter to God—so we can see Jesus in His Book! Let's renew our focus in Bible reading: read to find Jesus! Read to draw nearer to Him. Ask the Holy Spirit to do the very same thing the disciples experienced: open our understanding to see Jesus in the written word.

But I am especially interested in that personal word: Peter said, "We are witnesses!" And do you know—we still are! and here's the 'punch line' of this message: let's use our personal stories!

Do you know Jesus? I believe you do! How well do you know Him? How well do I? Not as well as we would like, maybe. But we do know Him!

How would you introduce Jesus to a friend? "Jack, meet Jesus! Jesus, meet Jack!" Don't you wish it were that simple? It isn't, usually— people aren't used to people who have invisible Friends that they go around talking to all the time. (But isn't that who Jesus is at least some of the time?)

Your witness will be as real as Jesus is real to you. Finally—Don't mix up simple reality as you know and experience it with romantic stories of someone else's dramatic conversion.

[[The powerful witness of the early church flowed from their personal experience of a Risen Lord in their midst. John's letter begins with a description of that personal experience, and then John says "the reason we are telling you about this experience we are having is so that you can have it too." In the passage for this morning, John tells us very clearly that the power of having such an experience with the Risen Lord will have an impact in our everyday lives "Those who are right do right."

So now listen again to the offer Peter makes "Silver and Gold have I none, but such as I have give I thee . . ." Put those words on your own lips. "Silver and Gold have I none, but such as I have give I thee . . ." What is it that you have? What is it that I have? Is the root of our Christian identity to be found in the fact that we can say the Creed, or that we know some favorite hymns, or that we are recognized in the local church of our choice? Or is the reality of our Christian identity wrapped up in our experience with the Risen Lord?]]

I wish you would do me a favor: this week get some place where it is quiet and begin writing out your own story of how you know Jesus. You might bring in something like Psalm 4 "I was at a place of need and I asked for help— and Jesus came through" You might not. But make it personal to you. Don't despise your own story because it isn't like Emergency 911. Think about how Jesus has changed your life. Think about what life would be if you didn't know Him. If you have the courage, share your stories with your prayer group or parents or children. I'd love to read some of your stories. Don't try to sound like Harmon Schmelzenbach or Mother Teresa. Admit where you have weaknesses. But praise the Lord for his grace in your life.

Then get ready— write it out in simple, non-theological language. Don't use stained glassed words. If you will get ready— God will give you the opportunity to say, "You see, I have this Friend ..."

If we do this it doesn't mean we will now be a dynamite, apostolic church in great revival and renewal. But it just might be a small step in that direction! And I believe it just might please our Lord.

Will you pray with me?

O God, whose Son our risen Lord made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread: and who opened to them the scriptures so they could begin to see your great plan of salvation, Open the eyes of our faith, that we may see how He is at work in our own lives, and open our mouths to tell what your grace enables us to see for ourselves of Him who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Hymn # 532 *Little Is Much When God Is in It*

The Shepherds Table

April 20, 1997

The class of nursing students was new, just in its second month. The first thing on this particular morning the professor gave them a 'pop quiz.' For the most part they were all doing very well until they came to the last question: "What is the first name of the woman who cleans this building?" This had to be a joke. The students had all seen this woman many times. She was tall and dark haired, a woman in her fifties. But how could a student be expected to know her name? So they handed in their papers leaving the last question blank. But before class was over one student asked if the last question would count toward the grade.

The professor said, "Absolutely! In your calling you will meet many, many people. But every one of them is important. Every one of them deserves your attention even if all you can do is smile and say hello." Those nurses never forgot that lesson. And they never forgot the cleaning woman's name, either. It was Dorothy.

To be a good nurse is more than coming into the room and saying, "Which arm do you want this in? This might sting just a little!" And to be a true Christian is more than thinking we have found the answers to life's problems. The Christ life is a life of relationship. The Christ life is being known and loved by the Good Shepherd. The Christ life is learning to love as the Good Shepherd has loved us.

Jesus is, by his own mouth, our Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd knows each one of his flock and calls them by name. The Good Shepherd gives his very life for his sheep. He cares personally for each one.

"I AM the Good Shepherd," these words in John 10 incarnate the power and beauty of Psalm 23. In Jesus Christ we come to know personally that "The LORD is MY shepherd!" Psalm 23 is personal if it is anything! Fourteen times in those few short verses we say "This shepherd is MINE He leads ME He restores MY soul!!

How can this possibly be? Given the millions of people who call him Lord, how can Jesus Christ possibly know and care personally about someone who is a speck on a

The Shepherds Table

tiny planet in an insignificant galaxy among millions of stars spread out over light years of space?

Believe it or not, one spin off of modern computer science has underscored the certainty in my mind that knowing and caring for me, personally, is no problem to my Shepherd! Helen and I were staying for a week in a third floor flat in Falmouth, England, in June of 1990, and I thought I would see if my AT&T card would work as advertised. I walked to the bank where the "hole in the wall" was on the street; put in my card, punched in my ID and the amount 1 0 0 0 I wanted £ 10, but I forgot to put in a decimal and so nothing happened and i went home, pretty sure I was too far from home and in a foreign land and could not be recognized. But then back at the apartment I went over what I had done and so i went back to the hole in the wall and thought, this time I'll try for £100 and so typed in 100.00 and BANG! before i could blink the machine started counting out those British bills! I had been recognized and my request had been granted even though I was in a strange land and thousands of miles from home.

I saw then even more clearly that if human beings can figure out ways of identifying one person among thousands instantly, and answering a reasonable request, then what problem is it for the infinite wisdom of God to keep track of you and me, and to hear our sincere prayers wherever we might be. I got a blessing using a hole in the wall, even though I knew it was just human technology.

Knowing the Good Shepherd makes a difference in our lives. That difference is what this world desperately needs. The Psalmist says, "You prepare a table before me, (even) in the presence of my enemies!" The table of the Lord, where he meets our soul's hunger and thirst and I am speaking of the sacrament of communion, yes, but beyond the sacrament itself, speaking of all the love and care and nourishment that it richly signifies in our lives that table is what this world desperately needs! In the words of an old, old Bert Bacharach song, 'What the world needs now is love, sweet love!' So how do we set about to save the world???

The children in your home need love. You may think of their needs as food and clothing and shelter and T ball and ballet class and those things can be very

important I am sure. But most of all your children need to know that you love them enough to give yourself for them. You are in the line of the Good Shepherd to your own family.

Mother Teresa was meeting with some wealthy men and women in a metropolitan suburban area. One of the suburbanites, during the question and answer period said, "Mother Teresa, you have done a great deal to make this world a better place. How can we help? What can we do?"

Mother Teresa answered with a smile, "Love your children!" The questioner had expected a different sort of answer, something more profound. But before she could draw her breath to ask more Mother Teresa raised her hand to silence her.

"There are other things you can do," she said, "but that is the best. Love your children. Love them so that they know that you love them. That is the best."

That is exactly what the Good Shepherd wants to do to you and me. He loves us—and wants us to know that he loves us! That is what John says in our scripture today: "See what kind of love the Father has bestowed on us that we might be called the daughters and sons of God and that is what we are!"

On this Good Shepherd Sunday we could do worse than stop and listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd telling us that he loves us! And we could do far worse than asking for grace to pass that love along to everyone we meet. We need to love our families. We need to "Shower the people we love with love." That is where our sharing of God's love should begin. But God loves the whole world! Even in the Old Testament, in that Shepherd Psalm, there is a hint of the need to demonstrate love even in the presence of our enemies.

I asked you last week to think about how you know Jesus. How you might share him with others. That witness is what your neighbors and friends need. The reality of Jesus to you is the most powerful testimony you can have.

Many Christians feel the need to be ACTIVIST in their proclaiming God's word. They have an agenda. Moral majority— pass laws— get out and work! Many Christians believe we are to be CONVERSIONIST in presenting the Gospel; and I agree that

The Shepherds Table

people need to be born again. But all too often means "See the way I see do the way I tell you!" But the 23rd psalm seems to say "EAT IN FRONT OF YOUR ENEMIES!" There is a third way to witness! (Hauerwas) This is the CONFESSIONAL way! As we CONFESS JESUS AS OUR LORD we will be at least as active as the activists we will talk about Jesus at least as much as the conversionists but as we invite all who will to the Shepherd's Table we will be in some measure doing what these scriptures say.

Prayer - O God, who in your great love has sent your Son Jesus Christ to be our great and loving Shepherd, grant that we, receiving his great loving-kindness might find grace to share that love with those we meet; beginning with our own families, and reaching out even to those outside our present fellowship; through Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, world without end. Amen.

Hymn 490 - *O to Be Like Thee*

The Prayer God Loves to Answer

April 27, 1997

John 15:8; Acts 8:26-40

It is a coincidence, I suppose, that on Annual Meeting Sunday the Gospel lesson ends with a life verse of mine. For years John 15:8 has been a real challenge to me, literally almost daily in my private time with God. I know it sounds silly to always say that 15:8 comes right after 15:7, but 15:7 is a great, great promise of God answering prayer that people who know anything about the Bible love to quote. "Ask whatever you will!" they say, as if that means we can bring any kind of wish list to God. But that promise is a focused promise: IF you abide in me— and IF my words abide in you— and THIS IS HOW MY FATHER WILL BE GLORIFIED—-IF you bear much fruit! John 15:8 challenges us to will God's will. John 15:8 challenges us to dare to bear MUCH fruit to the glory of God!

One important emphasis of this entire passage is that every branch that is connected to the true vine will bear fruit. Not to bear fruit is to prove there is no vital connection to the vine. Jesus says plainly (5) "apart from me you can do nothing."

What does it mean to "bear much fruit?" I am glad that the final answer to that is not yours or mine to say. But i really do believe that if I abide in Christ, and Christ's words abide in me— this is one prayer that Christ is really serious about answering! This is the pray God loves to answer. we all can bear fruit— and we don't have to just settle for being nominal, leaves-only Christians!

One example of "much fruit" is this story of Philip, the deacon, who in the lesson we just heard read witnessed Christ to the Ethiopian eunuch and baptized him on the spot and thus was God's instrument to take the Gospel to Africa for the first time. But Philip's story is spread through the Book of Acts for us to see:

First, to Philip (in Acts 6) "bearing much fruit" meant serving tables to free up the apostles. Philip even had the same name as Philip the apostle, who seemed to be in the 'inner circle.' But he was willing to serve on the board of deacons and wait on

tables if that meant Peter and James and the others could spend more time filling out their assignments. Acts 6:7 says, "Then (after the deacons freed up the apostles) the word of God spread, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly..."

But then the assignment changed. Stephen, one of the board members, was killed. The persecution began in earnest, and the disciples were scattered, and Philip found himself in a city of Samaria—

Then, second, to Philip (in early Acts 8) "bearing much fruit" meant becoming a witness to revival. An entire city was stirred. People came in crowds. The "fruit" was visible and abundant. There was great joy in that city. And so what happened? The "preachers" came and took over— Peter and John came down to preach about the need for being filled with the Holy Spirit. Philip wasn't the star any more.

And that is where this morning's lesson begins— the Holy Spirit said to this very fruitful branch of the true vine— "Go down into the desert, to the road that leads toward Egypt and beyond."

So Philip found still another, a third definition of "bearing much fruit." (In our lesson, Acts 8) He was a one-on-one witness. In the wonderful timing of God it was "just an amazing coincidence" that as Philip, obedient Philip, arrived a small cloud of dust was moving southward following a wealthy man's chariot. The Holy Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and do what you are supposed to do!" And that day Philip led one man to Jesus. One man. "Much fruit!" Revival in Samaria? One Ethiopian? What is "much fruit?" How do you imagine the Optic Church and all the Christians in Ethiopia got their spark of light?

So— that is the end of Philip...right? Well, not exactly. Years pass, and toward the end of Paul's ministry as he is returning to Jerusalem for the last time before being arrested and sent to Rome, the disciples stop in the beautiful marble city of Caesarea, and stay for a while in the home of— old Philip, the evangelist, one of the original seven deacons (see Acts 21:8.) Now I'll admit i don't have a lot of facts about the rest of the life of this man Philip, but I can say with some assurance that Philip (finally in Acts 21) could define "bearing much fruit" as seeing his own family in

the faith. The Bible tells us that Philip had four wonderful grown daughters who all knew and loved the Lord, and who knew how to share their faith. To this father and grandfather mind, this is the greatest kind of bearing fruit to God that can be!

There we have it, the example of Philip, the consecrated lay person:

- A servant and supporter of the front-line workers
- A key part of mass evangelism, stepping into the place of need, but also willing to step aside when the apostles came down from Jerusalem— step aside with beautiful grace
- A person willing to obey the Spirit even when it meant a desert assignment. But also a gift of using the scripture— being able to begin with an opportunity and share the love of the crucified, risen, personal Savior.
- A faithful family person— give his wife credit, too, of she in fact was there as the girls grew older; no doubt she was— we don't know the details.

Can we translate the challenge of John 15:8 into a church's challenge to be a living part of the True Vine and not settle for just bearing fruit, but asking that we bear MUCH fruit?

We will need the vision for serving, for caring. We need the glue of loyalty and the oil of fun and fellowship. We can't do Christ's work unless we do it with joy along the way!

We will pray to see the times of revival, with numbers seeking and finding God. There will be these times— and like the Book of Acts, it is impossible to see what comes before or after. the revival in Samaria was the result of tragedy in Jerusalem, or so it would appear to us. But we pray that many will find Christ in the public services.

We ask God for the vision to learn better how to obey God one-on-one; along the desert roads, the Spirit will arrange for Philip to meet the Ethiopian. Race, culture, customs— none of these can be a barrier when God gives the guidance.

Perhaps dearest to my pastor-heart:

The Prayer God Loves to Answer

We ask God for vision to equip our families to grow in the love of God until, like Philip's four daughters, they will go past us, out-do us in serving the Lord! What will it profit us to gain the whole city of Quincy if we lose our own sons and daughters? But God helping us, we will not!

I cannot think of a better challenge for Annual Meeting Day than this passage from John 15. What is the "state of our church?" Maybe I should have been speaking about the \$100,000+ we have given in assigned budgets for others, or I should have been raising the challenge again for Sam and Winna Chung and the Asian ministry—perhaps I should have been publicly thanking God and so many of you who minister in Sunday School and small groups and compassionate ministry and so many, many other good things this church does because we belong to the True Vine. Instead I ask you to join with me in believing with all our hearts the promise of John 15:7— that IF we abide, and IF God's truth is in us— we can ask whatever we will— and then daring to pray John 15:8: **WHATEVER IT COSTS, O LORD, MAKE US BEAR MUCH FRUIT TO YOUR GLORY!**

That is the prayer God loves to answer! And He will do it!

Hymn 36 To God Be the Glory or 702 Christ for the World We Sing

What Does God Require?

May 4, 1997

Micah 6:8 *Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly with your God.*

Acts 10; John 15: 9 17

A STORY

Two very different men.

- Cornelius. Roman officer. Wealthy, powerful. Definitely Gentile, non kosher. But a seeker after God, and after God's truth. A man who cared about people, and who prayed for light to find the way.
- Peter. Acknowledged leader of the Christians. Great Christian— people actually sought his shadow as he passed, so they could be healed; an angel had released him from Jerusalem's inner prison ... No question, Peter was the best of the best.

Raised a strict observant Jew, and kosher all his life. He found no problem at all in simply carrying his kosher disciplines along with his genuine faith in Christ. In fact he probably even saw the new faith as a continuation of his devout upbringing. And there was not one Gentile Christian in the entire world.* (*not counting the Samaritans who were 'half-Jews.')

Two visions from God.

- First to Cornelius: An angel of God appeared as Cornelius was praying. Angel says, basically, "God knows you are seeking Him. God loves you a lot. Send to Joppa, the house of a man who cures hides and makes leather. Another man, Peter, is staying at his house. The house is right on the beach there at Joppa. You need Peter to help you come to know me better." The message came about three o'clock one afternoon, and within the hour Cornelius had sent off two trustworthy servants and a Roman soldier whom he also trusted. They set out to go thirty miles to the south to look for this house by the

What Does God Require?

sea and a man called Peter.

- Second vision, this time to Peter. It was about noon the very next day. Peter was at Simon the tanner's home, just as Cornelius's angel had said. Actually he was up on the roof garden praying. As he prayed he got hungry, and sent down an order for lunch. While he was waiting Peter drifted into a trance-like state. In a vision Peter saw a huge sheet held by its four corners like a big seine purse and in it were all kinds of animals, kosher and non kosher pork chops, lobsters, clams, ham sandwiches a Jewish nightmare! And the word came from heaven, "Get up, Peter you're hungry have a ham sandwich!" But Peter immediately responded, "Lord! I will not! I have never had an non kosher meal in my life!" And the word Peter got back in his trance was, "Whatever I call clean is not for you to call unclean!" This happened three times.

This is the point where the two visions from God began to come together, because right then there was a knocking at the outer door downstairs. "Is this the home of Simon the tanner? Is there a man named Peter staying here? Could we see him please?" The men from Cornelius in Caesarea were at the door. At the very same time God was telling Peter "Go downstairs and meet some men I have sent. They're Gentiles but they won't bite you! I have sent them!"

And so the three Gentiles came into a kosher home and had a kosher meal and they rested the rest of the day, and spent the night together. That was a miracle in itself. And then first thing the next morning a group of strict kosher Christian Jews, and Gentile members of a Roman occupation officer's household started out on a day-and-a-half journey together. It had to be a first!

The next day, the fourth day since Cornelius first had his vision, the little group reached Caesarea. They had made the thirty miles back in good time. And that is where our scripture lesson for this morning breaks in. Cornelius was almost willing to worship Peter, but Peter stopped that. Peter had begun to learn a lesson that maybe he needed to learn again and again: God had showed him, Peter said, that he should

never, ever count out anyone as not being precious to God. God cares for everyone! That is a great lesson for every one of us to learn!

Then Peter began to preach. He told the household of Cornelius about Jesus, and his grace and mercy. He told them of his atoning death on Calvary. He told how Jesus carried OUR sins away— the Lamb of God! And then he told them about the mighty power that had brought Jesus back from death the resurrection power of God. And as he spoke that same resurrection power came on the household of Cornelius. It was like another Pentecost, a lot like the first time the Holy Spirit was poured out with power on the church at Jerusalem.

Cornelius, a Gentile and Roman citizen, became a baptized believer in Jesus Christ that very day. He became a Christian. Cornelius never did become a Jew. He never did embrace kosher ways, so far as we know.

Peter remained a Jewish Christian. He was more comfortable that way the disciplines of that life reminded him of all the promises of the Bible. But from then on a new day had begun in the church. A wall had come down. God had been working both ends of the relationship— the seeker and the speaker. He still does.

The big fisherman got a new insight into just how much God loves all people, not just those who know all the rules. The powerful officer of the greatest government in the world bowed before the son of a Jewish carpenter who had never been more than ninety miles from where he was born, and yet who was and is the Son of God come down from heaven. That day the old and the new praised God together because of His great love.

GOD LOVES PEOPLE! GOD LOVES YOU! This love shines in the words of Jesus (John 15:15) "I have called you servants, but I don't want to call you that any more. I want to call you friends! I want to show you all that is in my great heart of love!"

Maybe when we read this it just slips past us. Maybe we are sometimes too kosher or too self-occupied to hear it. Commandments are holy and good. It does make a difference to God if we seek to do his will or not. But they are all means to draw us to God!

What Does God Require?

God loves people. He loves you. God wants us to draw near to him so he can draw near to us! As we seek him, like Cornelius did, he will show us how to draw nearer. As we pray and meditate, like Peter, he will work on our prejudices and give us chances to tell people why Jesus came and died and rose again! He wants us to be his friends. he wants us to walk with him!

The Old Testament prophet Micah said it best— and he wasn't even a Christian— although I'm sure he is now. He said (6:8) "*He has shown you, O seeker, what is right; and what does God require of you but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.*" Too often we talk when we should be listening. We begin with the answers when we don't even know the questions. But if we are going to walk with God, as his friends, the only way we CAN walk is humbly. He is willing.

Pray with me.

O God I am a seeker after You. Show me how to draw nearer!

O God I am an old believer! Show me how to tell others how much You love them.

Amen.

#552 O Master Let Me Walk with Thee

Waiting for the Spirit

May 11, 1997

Acts 1:1-11; John 17:6-19

In the period between the Ascension of Jesus and the Day of Pentecost the disciples, in obedience to their Lord's command, waited in Jerusalem for the prayer of Jesus to be fulfilled. They were waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit on the church, the great Promise of the Father and the Son. They certainly didn't know quite what to expect. But they had been prepared, and they had been prayed for:

This greatest prayer ever prayed is a favorite source of texts for holiness preaching. Jesus prayed "Sanctify them through thy truth, thy word is truth." And he also prayed these wonderful words, "I sanctify myself that they also may be sanctified in truth." Too often those wonderful texts become points of departure, and we want to explain in great detail the mysteries of God's great saving grace. Too often the result is not helpful.

The prayer of Jesus is not an explanation of sanctification. There are some things, however, that shed clear light on what it means to be sanctified. If Jesus does not give a theological discourse on what sanctification is and does, in his prayer Jesus gives

A PROFILE OF THE LIFE-STYLE OF THE SANCTIFIED

They are in the world, but not of the world.

"I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world ... I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one." In another passage this same idea is expressed: "Don't let this world squeeze you into its mold."

God's people are not looking for a way to avoid life the way it is lived in the here and now. Sanctified people do not cluster into colonies and look for a space craft to take them to a higher level.

Waiting for the Spirit

They have an assignment: to be like Jesus.

"As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." The Father sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world but to be the light of the world. The Father's Son has said to his disciples, to you and me if you will, "You are the light of the world! You are the salt of the earth!" And here he says in his prayer that he is sending his sanctified ones to carry out his work.

It is a big assignment, to be like Jesus. Bigger than we can be without help. That is what Jesus is praying about. It is a big assignment, being like Jesus: it means caring and healing and giving of ourselves. To be fully Christian means to be a servant. It means to have a mind-set to help other people. To be like Jesus means telling people who God is— not in theological words they can't understand, but in the plain language of an eye-witness. We exist to say from our hearts, "God is GOOD!"

They have access to real joy.

"I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves." When we talk about profiles of holiness, never, ever leave out the joy! When we start to backslide— when we begin to cool off in any way in kingdom work— the JOY is usually the first thing to go! Because it is more important and vital than we realize! The Presence of Christ's Spirit brings joy!

What is this sanctified joy?

This past Thursday I visited with Tom Crawford, my daughter-in-law's father, a pastor in New Jersey who buried his wife of 48 years last Saturday. Before we had prayer together there were hugs and a few tears and smiles. There was real loss and real sorrow. But there was something else as well. There was the real Presence of God, a tangible Love that means " joy in the midst of sorrow," and "peace in the midst of pain." It is real, brothers and sisters, this Jesus Joy!

Transition

ISN'T THIS PROFILE EXACTLY WHAT EVERY CHRISTIAN NEEDS AND WANTS?

Who are these sanctified people? Super saints who never make mistakes, and never get down or even sick? Hardly. When I think of holiness, of sanctification, I think not of theories and doctrines first of all— I think of people I know and have known. I think of my teachers in college, Jasper R. Naylor and Alice Spangenberg and Bertha Munro. I think of General Superintendents Charles Strickland and William Greathouse. But also I think of think of so-called "little people," people I knew that had faults and pain, and still were totally sold out to God and had His love.

On this Mother's day I think of my own mother's testimony. In another denomination, without knowing what to call it, she asked God for something to take away her bitter spirit. And her testimony reminds me of another person in still another denomination, who never heard a message on sanctification, and didn't know what to call it, but cried out to God for cleansing of her spirit— Mary Pitman!

My OWN testimony - not to perfection— but to a removal of bitter hatred.

I haven't sought to explain what Jesus meant when he prayed "Sanctify them!" I haven't begun to talk about the doctrine and the experience and what it does in cleansing and empowering and filling with God's love. And whatever I might say would not take away the wonder and mystery of God's grace. But I can tell you how to begin to seek what Jesus was praying for! Holiness, sanctification, in its simplest, most elemental form is simply belonging to God without reservation!

HOW TO BE A SANCTIFIED CHRISTIAN

A GOD-INSPIRED DESIRE - "I pray not (now) for the world; I pray for these who are not of the world, worldly." You cannot be entirely sanctified unless you want to be; and it is the people who love God who want to belong to Him without reservation. This is A DESIRE TO LOVE GOD BETTER - Jesus: "I sanctify myself that they also may be sanctified in truth." A loving Son tells the Father he dedicates himself to His will in order that his brothers and sisters might also come closer to God.

Waiting for the Spirit

A DELIBERATE, TRUSTING CONSECRATION - Romans 12: 1,2 "Brothers and sisters, by God's great grace, give yourselves to HIM!!"

AN ATTITUDE OF SEEKING, TRUSTING, BELIEVING - I Thess. 5:23-24

#522 - in Hymnal - to read in unison

Conclusion: I challenge you to ask God to sanctify you through and through— I challenge you to tell Him He can have you for time and eternity! He will receive you!

PRAYER (contemporary language)

O God, King of glory, you have received your only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven. As he has promised us, Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and by faith exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

#272 Crown Him with Many Crowns

The Breath of God

May 17, 1997 - Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2

John 15

[Ezekiel 37]

Genesis 1:1-2 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the waters. And God said, "Let there be light!" And there was light!

The breath of God is the Spirit of creation. But God was not through with creation. The story continues:

And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.

And man became a living soul. The Spirit of God is the creating force that enables you and me to have spiritual existence. Whatever the image of God in humankind may be, it is only possible by the breath of God. Every human soul is an act of creation. Every human being is a potentiality for great God-likeness. But there is still more:

A learned man came to Jesus by night asking about eternal life, and Jesus told Nicodemus: The wind blows where it will blow, and you hear its sound. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit. You must be born again of the Spirit in order to know eternal life.

The same mighty creating Spirit that brought worlds into existence, and created Adam and Eve in the image of the Eternal is essential to our salvation. We cannot even see the kingdom of God unless and until this powerful breath of God in creation has visited our waiting souls. A soul saved by grace is an act of creation.

The Breath of God

A small congregation of just 120 waited in anticipation a promise they did not fully understand when suddenly There came from heaven the sound of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. A new body, a body of believers assembled by the command and promise of Jesus, had the breath of heaven breathed into its nostrils, and the Church was born. Whether or not we understand all that the church of Jesus Christ is, or what we think it ought to be, by His Spirit God breathed life into the Church of Jesus Christ on that first Pentecost Sunday, and the one, holy, universal and apostolic church is alive today by the same mighty creation power that holds the entire universe in existence. The Spirit of God is the life of the church. That is what Pentecost means.

When the Spirit breathed life into the church the believers were all filled with God Himself! The scriptures say that immediately they began to speak in languages that all the world could clearly understand. The very message which Jesus had said the Spirit would bring became reality that day. Jesus had said: "When He (the Holy Spirit) is come he will convince (convict, reprove) the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment." As Peter and the rest of the eleven apostles gave witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus, the assembled crowds heard about sin and of righteousness and judgment to come. They were convicted of sin, because they had rejected the Savior. Of righteousness, because that Savior was now at God's right hand where He makes intercession for sinners who call to Him, and gives them God's own righteousness! Of judgment, as Peter said, "Repent and turn from this crooked generation! Repent!"

And the response of the people who heard the Spirit-filled church: "When they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

Peter's response was (Acts 2:38-39.)

When God's Spirit fills his church, the message is proclaimed: Sin! Righteousness! Judgment! Salvation! God's Spirit comes to His church we are guided into all truth, and Jesus is lifted up and obeyed. There is light and life and fellowship.

We too often think in static terms— Pentecost happened ... I was saved ... I was filled with the Spirit ... the world was created. This is how it is. But what if God wants us to think in dynamic ways? What if creation is still going on? What if God's Spirit wants to fill you and me and fill His church again and again until the world hears in its own language about sin and righteousness and judgment to come?

Ezekiel's message is actually a message of HOPE! Do I think we are a valley of dead, dry bones? No, not at all. I believe that God has blessed us in many wonderful ways. But the passage in Ezekiel 37, the vision of the prophet, is one of the standard texts for Pentecost Sunday. (You know the strange vision— you probably have heard the old spiritual, "Them bones- them bones- them—dry bones!") In that vision the Lord takes Ezekiel into a totally hopeless situation— where dry bones are scattered across the floor of a valley. He tells Ezekiel to preach to the bones— and as he preached they come together as skeletons, and then sinews and flesh come on the skeletons and there is a vast army of not-dead but not-alive people standing in front of the prophet as he preaches.

Then God says to Ezekiel, "Call on the WIND, Ezekiel! Call on the WIND from the four winds of the earth!" And THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD, who brooded over the darkness and chaos, and who breathed into proto-man's nostrils the spark of humanity— and who makes eternal life possible to the believer— and who came as a rushing mighty wind at Pentecost— THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD BREATHED LIFE INTO THE ASSEMBLED HOST IN EZEKIEL'S VISION, AND THEY BECAME A MIGHTY, LIVING ARMY!

Do WE dare to ask the Holy Spirit to enter our body in a new and wonderful way? Do we DARE to ask Him to have control over our bodies, and our minds, and our wills? Do WE dare to prophecy to the WIND, the Breath of God, and let him come in his own way— whether it be a hurricane or a sweet fresh zephyr? Would you turn with me in your hymnal to (#500) Charles Wesley's hymn about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit?

In this hymn Charles Wesley is asking for a fresh anointing of the Spirit of Pentecost. In the first verse he prays to Jesus to shed his all-victorious love into his heart so that his feet will never wander again, but his heart will be grounded in God. In the

second verse he sees this filling of the Spirit as a fire being kindled to burn up cheap and unworthy motives and desires, and he asks God to let this cleansing fire blaze.

Would you read aloud with me the next two verses— read them slowly and make them not only YOUR prayer, personally— but with me, make it the prayer of our assembled fellowship:

*O that it now from heav'n might fall,
And all my sins consume.
Come, Holy Ghost, for Thee I call;
Spirit of Burning, come!*

*Refining Fire, go through my heart;
Illuminate my soul.
Scatter Thy life thro' every part,
And sanctify the whole.*

845 a.m.:Prayer: Almighty God, who on this day opened the way of eternal life to every race and nation by the promised gift of your Holy Spirit: Shed abroad this Gift in our hearts here and throughout the world that by the preaching of the Gospel it may reach to the very ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen

11 a.m. :Prayer: Lord, that hymn IS our prayer! We thank You that in fact you already have come and sent your Spirit to make us the church and to make worship possible. We celebrate your Presence today, even as we ask you to come again and again, in any way that You will. Thank you for your Promises. Thank you for your Presence! We give you praise, in Jesus' name. Amen

291 - *The Comforter Has Come*

Reality Check for Salvation

June 7, 1997

2 Corinthians 13:5

[Examination time:] Scholars tell us that 2 Corinthians was written to speak to errors in doctrine and worship and life-style that had surfaced in the Corinth Church of the Nazarene when Paul was General Superintendent. In addressing the things that were wrong, Paul gave something of a simple positive outline of the things that are right about being saved. In the first twelve chapters Paul says "This is what Christians believe, this is how Christians worship, this is how Christians live!" And then at the close of the letter, in the last chapter he says, "Measure yourselves by this!" "It is exam time!"

I. SAVING FAITH IS SIMPLE

11:3 (I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ) - It is covenant with Jesus. He is Lord, and we are His loving children.

- A. It is a faith covenant 5:7 (For we walk by faith, not by sight) - The reality of this covenant will be challenged by the wisdom of this world. And worldly wisdom is real. It doesn't always "make sense" to trust Jesus
- B. It is a LOVE covenant 5:9 (We make it our aim, wherever we are, to be well pleasing to Jesus) - We learn to live to please our Friend who loved us and purchased us with His blood.

II. SAVING FAITH IS PURE

7:1 (Therefore having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God) - No one can serve two masters. God loves every one of us with "unconditional love." But we cannot love Him with saving faith and at the same time remain in wilful and outbroken sin.

- A. Saving faith always involves repentance, turning away from sin; always involves confessing and forsaking wilful sin 7:10 (For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation; but the sorrow of the world produces death)
- B. Saving faith means forsaking sinful ways 6:14 (Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what FELLOWSHIP has righteousness with lawlessness? And what COMMUNION has light with darkness? And what AGREEMENT has Christ with Satan? Or what part of your self belongs to unbelief? ... You and I together are the temple of God! adapt.) - Our life-style will reflect our love for God.

III. SAVING FAITH IS NOW

6:2 (Behold NOW is the accepted time; behold NOW is the day of salvation) - It is rooted in the past, and it holds bright hope for tomorrow. 1:10 (God delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver us; in whom we trust that He will still deliver us...) But still, salvation is always in the present!

- A. We believe in eternal security; God will never take His salvation back.
- B. But we also believe in accountability— (text) Examine yourself! Are you in this faith today?

Conclusion: The earliest confession of faith of the early church was simply, "Jesus is Lord!" It really says it all if we stop and think what each of those words stand for:

Who is Lord? JESUS is Lord— the only begotten Son of the Father. Not the greatest of martyrs, but God Incarnate.

What is Jesus? Jesus is LORD! Not simply our Friend, though He is that— nor just our Example. But we call Him LORD!

But that little word in the middle! That is present tense! Jesus IS Lord of heaven and earth! Jesus IS seated at the right hand of the Father just now! But when is Jesus Lord to you and me? Jesus IS Lord!

#269 He Is Lord!

Treasures, Kings, and Tiny Things

June 15, 1997

1 Samuel 15:7 *"(The) Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."*

2 Corinthians 4:7 *"We have this treasure in jars of clay..."*

It is father's day today. I thought I might connect that fact with some aspects of the scriptures we have been reading recently; scriptures about treasures in earthen jars, and mustard seed small beginnings and also a story about a father named Jesse and a son named David.

I might begin with an item from Ann Landers' column titled, "A Gentle Reminder Not to Forget Father." It goes like this:

When I was

- four years old: "My daddy can do anything.
- five years old: "My daddy knows a whole lot.
- six years old: "My dad is smarter than your dad.
- eight years old: "My dad doesn't know exactly everything.
- ten years old: "In the olden days when my dad grew up, things sure were different.
- twelve years old: "Oh, well, naturally, dad doesn't know anything about that. He is too old to remember his childhood.
- fourteen years old: "Don't pay any attention to my dad. He is so old-fashioned.
- twenty-one years old: "Him? My Lord, he's hopelessly out of date.
- twenty-five years old: "Dad knows a little bit about it, but then he should because he has been around so long.

- thirty years old: "Maybe we should ask dad what he thinks. After all, he's had a lot of experience.
- thirty-five years old: "I'm not doing a single thing until I talk to dad.
- forty years old: "I wonder how dad would have handled it. He was so wise and had a world of experience.
- fifty years old: "I'd give anything if dad were here now so I could talk this over with him. Too bad I didn't appreciate how smart he was. I could have learned a lot from him.

I don't know, quite frankly, how to "fit" Father's Day into the scripture's message. I do believe that dads are often in the key position to mold lives for better or for worse. Our children are like the potential of mustard seed growth. Every parent deals with unimaginable potential.

"Years ago during the early days of the New York Herald Tribune, the same cartoon ran every year on February 12. Two men are shown meeting in a snowy wilderness road setting. One is astride a horse as the other man greets him, asking what news in the village. The horseman reports that the local squire has left for Washington to see Madison sworn in, and that he has heard that Napoleon has captured most of Spain. Then he asks the man on foot, "What's new out here, neighbor?"

"Nuthin' a tall, nuthin' a tall, 'cept fer a new baby down t' Tom Lincoln's. Nuthin' ever happens out here."

"The seed is planted, the smallest seed."

Leaving a strictly-Father's -Day approach to the texts this morning, the story of the choosing/anointing of David by Samuel has highlighted two verses for me:

I Samuel 5:7 "(The) Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." and 2 Corinthians 4:7 "We have this treasure in jars of clay..." (from the lesson two weeks ago.)

The story of David, Israel's greatest king, of how he was chosen and anointed and lived out his ambition invites comparison and contrast with the story of the king that was actually in power at the time. I am tempted just to sketch out the two stories side-by-side and let them stand on their own, and maybe I will.

God sent the old prophet Samuel looking for a new king. He specifically sent him to Bethlehem (and that's significant!) to look among the eight sons of a wealthy farmer named Jesse.

The youngest son was not even present during the ceremonial part of the visit. But God made it very plain that this was the man he wanted. Then the words of the text: "MORTALS look on the outward appearance! GOD looks on the heart!" David had the heart for being a king!

Some years before this same prophet had gone looking for Saul. Saul, too, had had the oil of anointing poured over his head. Saul had shown signs of great humility. But he had failed his stress-tests along the way. He was shown to be a king that cared more for the outward appearance than he did for the integrity of his heart.

Both these men had tests along the way to assuming full power of their offices. Early on in his reign, Saul was supposed to take part in what amounted to a public coronation ceremony, complete with the blessing of God through his prophet Samuel. But when Samuel was late, Saul was impatient and took over the role of blesser as well as blessee. He took sacred calling upon himself to the danger of his soul. And when Samuel challenged him about it, Saul's response was, "Let's keep up appearances! What will the people think?"

David, on the other hand, was anointed in secret long before Saul's reign was over. David knew God's hand was on him. But on more than one occasion David had opportunity to kill Saul and take his destiny in his own hands, but each time he absolutely refused. David was ambitious, but the ambition was subject to his primary concern: being right with God!

Saul had a way of turning his conquests into profit for himself. He was supposed to be a servant of God, Instead he served his own interests. When he was told to utterly

destroy the bitter enemies of God, the Amalekites, Saul destroyed everything cheap and worthless, but saved out the best of the sheep and cattle for himself. Once again, when Samuel challenged him, Saul said, "Let's keep up appearances! It is the people's fault!" But sadly, Saul also said said, "God has departed from me, and does not answer me any more!"

One of the saddest scenes in all the Bible is that of Saul the night before he died a suicide on a hill in northern Israel. Saul, taller by a head than the men he commanded, now lying full length on the floor before the Witch of Endor, trying to get a word from God any way that he could. Saul cared more for the appearance than for the substance, and he died an empty shell of a king.

These were no doubt great sins Saul had committed. But other kings later sinned, but found forgiveness. The thing was, Saul cared more about appearance than heart reality.

And so it was during the later years of Saul's reign that God began looking, as it were, for a man who cared more about the reality of who he was than he did about what people thought he might be. That is where the key text from that passage makes sense in any contrast of Saul and David:

"Human beings look on the outward appearance; God looks on the heart!"

Across the years after David became king he, too, failed more than once, and suffered because of his sins. But God did not take away his kingdom, and God called David 'a man after his own heart.' What was the difference?

The difference was integrity. David somehow had a personal trust in a God who cared. Psalm 23 reflects that trust. And so David dared to wait for God's timing in personal ambition. When he had opportunity to take Saul's life he refused. David could wait for God.

David dared to be honest with himself. We all can stumble, and we all can blind ourselves at times to our own faults. We can become our own enemies. But David never played games with God. His Psalms reflect many moods. Sometimes it almost

seems that David is impatient with God. But David also asks God to show him, David, who he really is.

And when sin came, and David failed, instead of grabbing the prophet's cloak and saying, "Let's put a good show on before the people!" as Saul had done, David said to Nathan, who had taken Samuel's place, "I have sinned!" And the great 51st Psalm reflects the cry of true repentance. God forgives sin when we cry to him from our hearts.

Conclusion:

We either learn to value the treasure— or we glorify the vessel. Kings or peasants, or for that matter, churches or denominations.

A church or an institution can DIE while trying to keep up appearances. The treasure of any church fellowship is IMMANUEL, God-is-with-us-!, and when we get more interested in keeping the vessel than keeping the treasure we miss our central purpose.

Pray for our denomination this week. Like every other Christian fellowship, Nazarenes face changes on every facet of the human experience— social, economic, inter- and intra-racial tensions, power struggles between good people who think their assignment is all-important— that's only facts of life.

But this week the absolutely latest technology will proclaim the gospel in San Antonio, and many thousands of us will be there. I believe we still have the treasure of God's Presence with us. We need to remind ourselves again that the treasure of our Zion has been the challenge to holy living— it is GOD-WITH-US!

490 O to Be Like Thee

A Lesson from a Boat

February 3, 1995

July 6 (pm), 1997

Luke 5:1-11

A Story

I would love to know what was going on in the mind of the disciples as Jesus preached in their boat. There they were— they were supposed to be praying for the preacher— they were in full view of the congregation— but the sermon was long. And beside that, the night before had been extra long. It is bad enough to have to take advantage of the full moon to work all night. It is bad enough when you fish all night and catch a few. But when you fish all night long in every spot you know, and have come up empty!

So Jesus was welcome to use the boat— and more— Jesus was loved and appreciated. But I am not sure how much of the sermon Peter heard that beautiful windless morning while the multitudes sat or stood along the shore and Jesus sat in the calm waters and taught them about the love of God and the love of fellow man.

Maybe the most important thing about worship is the sermon— and maybe it isn't. I have a feeling that the most important thing about coming together for worship is whenever we feel the love in our hearts for Jesus welling up, making us want to be like him in sharing life and love with our brothers and sisters— that is when worship connects.

The sermon concluded. Peter hadn't been sleeping at all— but still he woke up with a start. He pulled up the anchor out of five feet of clear water where he'd tossed it to keep the boat from drifting. He started to paddle with one oar back to shore. But now Jesus wanted to go fishing.

Now it is one thing to have a preacher tell you how you ought to love God and read your Bible, even though some people have a problem with anyone telling them

anything. But it is entirely another thing to have a carpenter tell a fisherman where to fish. Peter wouldn't mind taking Jesus fishing. But there wouldn't be any sense in fishing here and now because there weren't any fish in this end of the lake.

Still, Jesus not only wanted Peter to go fishing— but Jesus told Peter told him where to go to fish.

"Push out into the deep water and let your nets down there for a catch." Deep water. Right! "Lord, we have worked all night long without one fish!" So much to read between the lines here! But Peter is already swinging his bow out toward the center of the lake. "Nevertheless, at YOUR word we'll go again!"

The usual lesson here is supposed to be that Jesus is master of nature and all creation. He is the God YHWH who commanded ravens to feed Elijah, and who sent manna from heaven to keep the Israelites alive for forty years in their desert wanderings. The miraculous draught of fishes is supposed to tell us that if we mind Jesus he will provide for us. And that is true.

But when I read this I think about people who sometimes doze through sermons and are startled when they hear Jesus urging them, by His Spirit, to change the course of their living! It isn't simply "spiritual matters," that concerns Jesus— He is Lord of all of life! So we hear Him saying "You ought to write a letter to that person you have a misunderstanding with!" or even, "Send off that a resumé you've been praying about!" or "Don't be afraid to drop that course and take the one you've been thinking about!" And we say to ourselves "What does this have to do with holiness and religion? What does Jesus know about life in the computer age? And even if he knows what does he care? He is reaching down to us across 20 centuries, and that is a pretty long reach!"

Then we realize that Jesus isn't reaching at all! Jesus is HERE— the eternal contemporary. Jesus knows more about fishing and fish than Peter does. He knows more about computers than you do. He cares about the details of our lives!

We could do a lot worse than bring our daily schedules and our secular— so-called secular— workaday lives to Jesus for his guidance.

Jesus not only had the nerve to command Peter's boat for that one day— Jesus had the audacity to ask Peter to let him command him for the rest of his life. We still call Peter 'the Big Fisherman' once in a while, but what was immortal about him is not his prowess on the Sea of Galilee. What really counts about Peter is the kind of person he became when he followed Jesus with all his heart. What Peter really accomplished with his life is the result of a power the world cannot understand because it cannot see it. But Peter stood up on the day of Pentecost and preached, and 3,000 people then and there decided to put God absolutely first in their lives. Peter's social standing and his means of making a living meant a lot to some people in his life, I'm sure. But now 2,000 years later we remember Peter as a man who followed Jesus. That has made all the difference in ways that only eternity can tell.

Amen.

THE HOLY COMMUNION

The Law Read and Confession Made

The Lord Jesus Christ has said to us: "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Shall we pray:

Search us, O God, and know our most private thoughts. Try us, and show unto us the deepest motives, the real state of our hearts. Forgive us where we have been selfish, or insensitive, or sinful in any way. We cannot keep the Great Commandment, and truly love You, O God, with all our heart, soul, and mind unless You in mercy grant to us the grace of Your indwelling Spirit. We cannot love each other as we should unless Your love is shed abroad in our hearts.

Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to draw us near to Himself so that we can come to his table with confidence.

We do not presume to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

Let us confess our faith:

The Creed

The Informal Invitation ("This is not my table . . . ")

Holy and gracious Father; in your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin, and were worthy of death and hell, you, in your mercy sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to You, the God and Father of all.

He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

The Words of Institution

On the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had give thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat: THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

After supper he took the cup and when he had give thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me: Amen

We praise you for the mystery of our salvation! We truly believe

- Christ has died!
- Christ is risen!
- Christ will come again!

Bless these emblems, O God, and make them to us the Body and Blood of your Son, spiritual food, and spiritual drink of new and unending life in Jesus Christ.

And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us:

Our Father which art in heaven . . .

Now, humbly we receive the Gifts of God for the People of God

The Citadel: My Heart, God's Throne

Lessons from King David, Part 1 of 3

July 6, 1997

2 Samuel 5:1-5; 9-10

Psalm 48 Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God ... walk about Zion

2 Corinthians 12:2-10 My grace is sufficient for thee; my strength is made perfect in weakness

The stories of the Old Testament are fascinating, and more. They are graphic pictures of the way the life of faith is, or is not to be lived.

The Exodus and the forming of the people of God into a kingdom give many insights into our understanding of the church, even to this present moment.

But narratives have their limits. And too often we read into stories what we want to see. Joshua enters the Promised Land, and the people of God "live happily ever after." Only in fairy tales! The faith walk with God is never that simple. In building kingdoms and noble lives, in human marriage and the covenant walk with our God, there is no substitute for an on-going relationship of trusting love.

When David became king of Israel nearly 500 years after Joshua had fought the battle of Jericho there were still areas of the Promised Land that were in rebellion against the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The kingdom itself had general ownership within its boundaries, but within those bounds were unsublimated pockets of resistance; areas yet to be civilized; or even some places in open defiance of the central purpose of Israel, which was to honor God.

One of these pockets of resistance was Mount Zion, Jerusalem, the very heart of the Promised Land. Because of its fortress-like characteristics, the Jebusites that occupied the high ground were so entrenched that centuries of judges and leaders,

and even Saul the first king had thought it was not worth the bother to bring the Jebusites into the kingdom or else drive them out.

David knew that Israel would not be a noble kingdom with its heart unsubjugated to its central purpose. What would Israel be without Jerusalem? So David found a way—he addressed the task at hand, and the rebel garrison became Zion, the City of David, and Jerusalem is now synonymous with God's Presence!

THERE WILL BE NO UNCHALLENGED REBEL AREAS IN GOD'S KINGDOM

There are areas in all our lives that need to be disciplined. No one is perfectly tuned to a Godly statement of mission that has no room for improvement. But we do not have to live with chronic insubordination to the worship of God. We do not have to live with inner rebellion.

[One red herring pseudo-scholars use to question Old Testament lessons based on war and conquest is the question of God's apparent ruthlessness with rebels. Our God cares for the people of the earth, all nations, all people. This is the great God we have come to know and love, revealed in Jesus Christ. But that ruthlessness and absolute unwillingness to compromise can be, and should be turned against the inner foes, the pride and unbelief and self-worship that threatens every man and woman that decides to follow God. we should have no mercy on the foes within. Bring them to the cross, and let them die there with Jesus, who was made sin for us, so that we might be His righteousness! If that is "spiritualizing" historical texts, so be it. The conquest of Jerusalem to be the heart of worship is just as valid to your needs as crossing the Red Sea is to help you understand your baptism and deliverance from sin.]

THERE WILL BE NO PROPRIETARY ATTITUDE TOWARD HOLY THINGS

After David set Jerusalem free to be a place where God was to be worshiped he still did not take worship there for granted. He never felt he had "the right" to have charge of holy things. One little story-within-the-story makes that point clear, even though it is so brief we might miss it.

David had conquered all the Jerusalem area, but he, personally, did not own any of it. He knew there should be a place of sacrifice. He, in one particular time, was in need of repentance and worship. So he went to the place where Abraham had offered Isaac, the place where the temple one day would stand, and said, "Here is the place I need to set up an altar to El Shaddai, God Almighty."

But the place was owned by a Jebusite shepherd named Araunah. Being a good and loyal subject of the king Araunah simply said, "King David, you can have this whole hilltop! It is yours!" But David said, "I will not offer offerings unto the Lord my God of that which costs me nothing!" So he paid Araunah fifty shekels of silver for the land and the oxen he was driving, and there David built an altar. (In 2 Samuel 24)

THERE WILL BE NO END IN RETURNING TO THE CITADEL; WORSHIP WILL ALWAYS BE THE CENTER OF KINGDOM REALITY

Jerusalem became the focus for all the worship of God. God's people came there when they could; when they couldn't they prayed toward Jerusalem. Jerusalem was not a one-time conquest to be forgotten and taken for granted. Going up to Jerusalem became the high point of every person of faith.

Worship, true worship, has to be like that. When all idols have been cast down, and all rebellions have been ruthlessly dealt with, then at the heart of our being we turn toward Jerusalem. We go to the place of worship when we are supposed to go, when we are able. We look to the heavenly Jerusalem every day of our lives. We come to live with the reality of a Jerusalem, a Citadel within where God reigns without a rival, and where we worship with joy.

GOD'S GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR THE WAY LIFE IS REALLY LIVED

Even with genuine faith and great discipline, life is not fair. Narratives don't tell the whole story. We don't just simply "live happily ever after." The epistle lesson for the day helps complete the lesson that King David began for us.

When the rebel pockets of resistance have been ruthlessly addressed, and when we are worshiping the best we know how— humble attitude, discipline, faithfulness— there will still be things that challenge us to the very depths.

Whatever Paul's famous/infamous "thorn in the flesh" might have been, it wasn't a pocket of rebellion. But it was a source of pain. So Paul prayed again and again that it might be removed. It wasn't. But instead these words: (from The Message, 2 Corinthians 12:)

"Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he did in fact was push me to my knees ...I begged God to remove (the handicap.) Three times I did that, and then He told me, 'My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.' Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focussing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, those limitations that cut me down to size— abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get the stronger I become."

So, the bottom line is: GRACE!

No compromise with God's enemies— but no quitting when times get hard, either. The bottom line is God's grace!

Prayer

He Giveth More Grace 101

Coming to Worship

Lessons from King David, Part 2 of 3

July 13, 1997

Psalm 24; 2 Samuel 6

"A FUNNY THING HAPPENED on the way to church..." I wonder if a play could ever be written on that theme? If we could have a video of how your family and mine, emotionally and mentally and spiritually as well as physically, arrive at their places for Sunday worship it might make for an interesting talk show theme. It is possible that Psalm 24 could be used as a lesson from David on how to come to church.

PROLOGUE - "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof..." The Psalm begins by saying what we all say we know— that God is worthy of our worship, and worship is the most satisfying activity known to humankind.

Worship, coming into God's Presence, is cause for great joy and rejoicing. To rate worship that high may seem like an extravagant statement made by a loony clergyman. It certainly is alien and far-fetched to a worldly perspective. But the fact is that it is true.

Maybe we don't give enough thought to the matter. Honestly, how did you come today? Why? There are many moods of the spirit, even many attitudes or facets of expressing our love to God. Coming into God's Presence can be celebration even while also challenging and even awesome. But it should never be casual or irreverent. The Psalmist talks about climbing the hill to the place of worship:

ASCENDING THE HILL OF THE LORD

"Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord, and who shall stand in his holy place?"

This Psalm reflects a tremendous respect for worship. David learned a lesson about worship early in his reign as king in Jerusalem; in fact the very first time he tried to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Mount Zion.

Coming to Worship

{Illus:} The Story of Uzzah: Early in David's reign in Jerusalem, shortly after he had decided to make the Mount Zion the heart of worship for his people, David (rightly) decided to bring the Ark of the Covenant from where it had been in (reverent) storage more than twenty years to the place where he had set up the Tent of Covenant. The procession began, the celebration started. But when Uzzah took hold of the Ark irreverently he was struck dead, and the dancing and singing stopped.

Then, three months later David resumed the task of bringing the Ark up the hill of the Lord. This time everything was done as best they knew in reverence and respect for God's will and God's way. This time the journey was a spectacular success. The celebration was glorious. David "danced before the Lord with all his might!" There was true worship.

God doesn't strike us dead when we seek to worship in less than perfect ways. As a matter of fact if we really seek to worship, God will never fail to receive us, for he knows our inner hearts. But I cannot help believe that many times our worship seems "dead" because of the way we have ascended the hill of the Lord.

How do you suppose people 'climb the hill' to meet God? (Yes, I mean in your quiet time, but more, in our corporate worship?)

- Some come out of a sense of duty or of fire insurance.
- Some come because it has become a good custom, and good people worship when Sunday rolls around.
- Some people come for practical reasons. Their first consideration is getting perceived needs met, and they see worship as God's therapist's couch.
No doubt some aspects of all these approaches are valid.
- Some people come with anticipation that they will meet with God. Consciously, before they ever get to the place of worship, they think of worship as somehow different from any other human gathering. It is a deliberate rendezvous with God!

But what of the worship itself? When we have arrived, what do we do?

EXPECTING THE ENTRY OF THE KING OF GLORY

"Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and the King of Glory shall come in!"

Corporate worship is more than a group of individuals coming together with each one 'worshiping the "god" of his/her choice.' God IS, and true worship is far more than bowing down to the "God" we have created in our own minds after our own image.

But how can we know this awesome Presence?

It is revealed from faith to faith. Cosmonaut Vs. Astronaut.

Expectation carried forward in the act of worship: Pray the hymns. Listen in the scripture lessons. Affirm in the creeds and prayers. Even listen in the sermon. "And the king of glory SHALL come in!"

{Illus: I was desperate to hear from God one summer vacation. I went to a large church in the morning— and they were having an annual business meeting and little or no scripture or worship. I wanted to hear from God. I went in the evening to a very small church. The service was impromptu and poorly prepared. But Jay Bergers was there, and he stood up to testify spontaneously. His words encouraged me. I realized I had heard from God!}

"Clean hands ... pure heart??" A willingness to be "real" with God, and say "No!" to whatever in order to say "Yes!" to Him.

Remember Jesus' story of the two men who went up to the Temple to pray? "God be merciful to me a sinner!" was the winning prayer that day!

CONCLUSION - "He shall receive the blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation"

{Illus: When we lived (for seven years) in Edison, New Jersey, a highlight of the year— no THE highlight of the year— was our annual vacation: two weeks at Dunn's Camps in Maine. Edison was urban— wall-to-wall cement.

Our cabin was available at twelve noon on Monday. It was a solid eight-hours of hard driving from Edison, south of NYC to Oxford, Maine, north of Portland. So at 4 a.m. we

Coming to Worship

would pile into our station wagon (it was before the era of mini-vans) and with great anticipation we would set out, crossing the George Washington Bridge long before morning traffic, and we would arrive at the earliest possible moment so we would not miss any part of our allotted time.

Sometimes when we would turn down the last lane toward the water on our way to a camp, either at Camp Taconic, or Hogan Pond or wherever, a spontaneous song would break forth out of the back seats of the wagon. "We're here because we're here because we're here because we're here!" And we liked it better when the sun shone than when it rained all week, but whatever happened that "green place" in our lives was precious in anticipation, and in the time it was happening, and as a matter of fact, it still has power to warm our hearts these many, many years later.

I'm not equating the worship of God with a summer's holiday at the lake. I am saying that the true worship of God, in anticipation, and as it happens, and in remembrance, is far more, far, far more! To ascend the hill of the Lord, to stand in His holy place—to welcome the King of Glory! This is the blessing! Why don't we enjoy it every day, every week?

Prayer

O Father God, our Friend and our King!

We do NOT take for granted the great privilege we have of knowing You. Give us hearts of love for You, and help us rejoice for the sheer joy of knowing that we can be in your Presence! O King of Glory, come and live in us we pray! In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Hymn 115 *Come, Christians, Join to Sing*

The Place Where God Dwells

Lessons from King David, Part 3 of 3

July 20, 1997

2 Samuel 7; Ephesians 2:22

INTRODUCTION

David had a bright idea. Nathan the prophet thought it was a great idea as well. David wanted to build a beautiful house in which the glory of God, the Ark of the Covenant, could rest. It would be the heart of the heart of worship for the nation. The Holy of Holies in the center of Jerusalem.

David had conquered Jerusalem. The Ark of the Covenant was back at the center of things. Now, David thought, it is time to build the House of Worship. What could be wrong with that? Nathan agreed.

But that night God spoke to the prophet Nathan. God had some questions he wanted David to think about. Through the prophet God said something like this to David:

Would you like to build me a house? (After all, I've been living in a tent all these years!) Have I ever said, 'Please build me a house?' It is nice of you to want to help me. But maybe you have things a little backwards about who helps whom. Do you remember where and what you were when I began leading you? I took you from following the sheep and brought you to the throne, and to this palace made of cedar wood. I appreciate your gratitude. But when it comes to dwelling places, maybe you have things backwards. I will build your house, not the other way 'round. Just where is it that you think I want to dwell?

Actually, David had the right idea. I'm not sure when he wrote the Shepherd's Psalm, but you remember how it closes with great confidence: "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!" David wanted to be where God was. He wanted God near to him. But just where is that 'house of the Lord?'

GOD DOES NOT LIVE IN BUILDINGS

At the dedication of Solomon's temple about 40 years later David's son the king put the thought into words:

"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!"

In that prayer Solomon made it clear that he understood that our houses of worship are to be focal points in spiritual worship. We call them houses of God, but God makes it clear that he does not live in buildings made of marble or granite or oak or steel and glass. In the last paragraph of Ephesians 2 the place where God dwells is revealed to be the Church.

"Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit."

GOD LIVES IN THE CHURCH!

...but what does that mean? "Church" is an ambiguous English word, easily mis-used. God does NOT live in a building, or in a human organization as such.

The Church where God lives is not a building, per se. That is a tool, a sacred meeting place for the church. How many times people have remarked on coming into our sanctuary, "What a beautiful church you have!" I almost always smile and say, "Yes, we do. And the building is beautiful, too, isn't it!" If God is in this building it is because THE CHURCH meets here.

The Church where God lives is not a denomination. No truly Christian group would ever claim to be the exclusive dwelling place of God on earth. Denominations at their best are networks of cooperation, enabling cooperating churches to do what no single church or two or three churches could ever do. In that they fill an apostolic function. But God does not emanate from offices or organizations. At worst,

denominations become human organizations that exist to perpetuate themselves. If God is in ANY GROUP it is because THE CHURCH is represented there.

TOGETHER WE ARE THE CHURCH, GOD'S HABITATION

The Church where God lives includes every true believer; every person who says by the Spirit, "Jesus is Lord!" The Church that is God's temple is made up of all those whom God is calling. There is a mysterious aspect to that which Christ is building. But it is the Church which is Christ's Body. He is the Head. And if Jesus Christ is Lord, and shall rule over all Creation, the Church is at the very center of God's plans for the Universe.

The "worshiping fellowship" is the basic unit of the church. The individual Christian is NOT the basic unit of the church. We are saved one by one. But we are NOT intended to exist in isolation. God dwells in the building as it is fit together.

DISCLAIMER: THERE IS NEED FOR 'MEMBERSHIP' AND 'BELONGING' THERE IS VALIDITY IN GOD INDWELLING US AS INDIVIDUALS BUT TOGETHER, IMPERFECT AS WE ARE, WE ARE GOD'S TEMPLE, OR BETTER, ARE BECOMING GOD'S TEMPLE AS HE BUILDS US TOGETHER EPHESIANS 2:22

CONCLUSION

David had a great idea. He wanted to build a place for God's glory to dwell. And then the lesson he learned was that God is the builder. God wants to build us into a holy temple where he can live day in day out. God wants to make our homes sanctuaries of holy love. God wants to make our family his family. God wants to make all people of good will into one great dwelling place of peace for ever and ever.

WE DON'T HAVE TO DIE TO LIVE IN GOD'S HOUSE!

In the closing paragraphs of the Bible this theme comes forward again. It tells us that we can be a part of the place where God lives:

Revelation 21: 1 - 5 Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their

God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

That is heaven, yes. But the God-relationship begins when we let God start building us into His house.

David had a great idea. He wanted to build a house for God's glory. It came from a heart of love for God. David wanted to be near God all the time.

God reminded David- and He tells us— that, yes, He does love us and wants to be with us where life is really lived. But it is God that is building. If we let Him he will build our homes. If we cooperate with Him God will build our lives and shape them. And best of all, God is taking your story and mine, along with all who seek Him, and God is building a magnificent Temple. In the words from Ephesians 2, as found in Peterson's translation, The Message:

God is building a house. He's using us all— irrespective of how we got here— in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he's using you, fitting you brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day— a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.

Prayer

Lord God, Heavenly Father,

By the promise of your Son, make us one, one with You, by the grace of your Son, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, and make us one with each other in the bond of your love, that we might together be a place where you are quite at home. Amen.

Hymn #669 *We Are God's Temple*

(Last verse:)

*We are a temple, the Spirit's dwelling place
Formed in great weakness, a cup to hold God's grace
We die alone, for on its own each ember loses fire;*

*Yet joined in one the flame burns on
To give warmth and light and to inspire.
- Bryan Jeffery Leech*

Glory in the Church

July 27, 1997

Ephesians 3:21; John 6:1-21

One early summer morning a small boy was awakened by the sound of birds singing outside his bedroom window. He arose and threw on his clothes, and was soon making his way down a dirt path to the shores of a beautiful blue lake. There he was soon lost in that pastime that may just be the most intriguing pastime known to man.

Time passed and he had only caught two small fish when something else caught his attention. He saw a small group of men walking along the pathway just up from the shore of the lake. He recognized some of the fishermen in the group. He saw at once they were following Jesus, the man who had been amazing the Galilee region with his teaching, and especially with miracles of healing. He had great curiosity about what might happen next, and his curiosity sent him flying back up the dirt path to the village and home to ask his mother if he could go see the Teacher that day.

When he reached home the boy's mother was baking. She gave him permission, and while he was getting ready she cleaned his great catch of two small fish and laid them on the coals- just a couple of minutes on each side and they were thoroughly cooked through. Then she laid them on a cloth in the bottom of his knapsack, and put half a dozen small barley loaves on top of them. (I know the Bible story says there were five loaves, but remember little boys get hungry easily and often.)

By the time the lad got back to the lake-shore the Teacher and his little group had gone on, but he didn't have any trouble finding which way. it seemed like the whole village had the same idea— they wanted to see what excitement might follow this Man who worked miracles and told great stories.

When he arrived where Jesus was teaching, sitting up toward the top of the slope, the great meadow below toward the sea seemed to be filled with people. The lad did what little boys can easily do— he pushed and wiggled his way up the hill until he was near the very front of the crowd. Like little boys, the lad probably missed some of the

finer points in the lessons that day, but then the Master quit speaking like a teacher and began a conversation.

"Look at this crowd!" he said. "Where can we get them some food? They have come a long way. They're hungry."

The lad looked up at the big fisherman standing next to him. "I won't be hungry," he said. "My mother packed my dinner. I have — five barley loaves and two fish I caught myself."

Meanwhile the conversation was going on. Philip, evidently one of the avowed realists among the disciples said, "Lord, maybe we had better just send these folk home hungry. If we had \$5,000 we wouldn't have enough to feed them."

The lad looked up at his new friend. "If he's hungry he can have my loaves and fish," he said.

Andrew spoke to the Master, "There is a boy here who has some food— five barley loaves and two fish he caught himself. He says you can have them— but they are a drop in the bucket to what we need."

Jesus smiled. "Have all the people sit down on the green grass, " he said. And then turning to Andrew he said, "Bring the lad and his lunch to me."

What happened next must have been thrilling beyond belief to one small boy from Galilee. With his five loaves and two small fish Jesus fed 5,000 people. And then as if that weren't enough, the disciples gathered up the good fragments. The doggy bag that day went to twelve baskets full.

That night a tired boy with a jammed-full knapsack burst into his mother's kitchen and said, "Mom, you aren't going to believe what happened today!"

All four of the gospels tell how Jesus took five small loaves and two small fishes and fed 5,000 people. But only John's gospel tells about the lad who brought makings of that great miracle picnic on the shores of Galilee.

Now a story ought to just be told and stand as a story to make its own furrows in the imagination. But a sermon is supposed to urge us to make some decisions and take some actions. This must be an important story to be told so many times. You can probably make up your own sermon.

For me, I have always been encouraged at the thought of adequacy. When Jesus is involved in a project, big or small, he has a way of taking what we have and blessing it or breaking it until it can be more than we thought it could be. In that regard I have always liked to identify myself or my church project with the boy and his lunch in the story.

But the older I get I think about another character in the story. I think about the big fisherman— or we might say, the big fisherman's brother, because Andrew's brother, Peter, certainly was a great man and a leader. This man in Peter's shadow— this Andrew— every time we see him in the scripture he is near Jesus, and he is introducing people to Jesus. He isn't too big to notice a little boy. he isn't ashamed to bring small offerings. He does his best, and that helps Jesus get the job done.

Andrew makes me think of another man we might call a 'second-stringer,' instead of a 'star.' I think of Barnabus, the Son of Consolation, who befriended Mark when he left the party— he looked up Saul of Tarsus when he was considered a security risk. I would like to be like Andrew. I would like to be like Barnabus.

There you have it— a great story for your own do-it-yourself sermon. And I even have a good text from the epistle to sort of bring it all together. On this subject of Jesus taking what we have and doing with it whatever he wants. The general subject of spiritual adequacy, a lesson I need today and every day. The text is the 'doxology' from Paul's great prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are rooted and grounded in love. I pray that

Glory in the Church

you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saint, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be GLORY IN THE CHURCH and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

Prayer

Father in Heaven, help us give you what we have, and then dare to ask you to glorify your name in the church by doing what we could never do by ourselves. we can think and ask some things that seem pretty big to us. but we ask you to take us, bless and break us, and use us in the way that seems best to you. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen

Reverence, Relate, Right

The three "R's" of Etiquette with God

August 3, 1997

John 6 "I AM the bread..."

When Jesus said, "I AM the bread of heaven," (our morning text,) he was opening a window on the greatest and most awesome mystery we can ever address. Jesus was making a statement about God. He was opening a conversation on how we can relate to God, and be right with Him.

HOW WE THINK OF GOD

Jesus was speaking with people who had been absolutely steeped in the idea that God is great beyond all understanding. The Jews were taught to REVERENCE God. That is a lesson we all could learn with profit. The greatness of God is far beyond what we will ever be able to fully grasp.

A REVERENCE FOR GOD

Our generation is in danger because it has forgotten reverence in large measure. We die if we do not reverence God. The first commandment of all time is: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, mind, strength. The first four of the Great Ten have to do with reverence for God. Do you recall them? (No other Gods; No images of God or idols; Hallow the Name of God; Remember the Sabbath Day as a day of rest and worship)

We could learn a lot from the reverence for the very name of God which the OT Jews had, and which orthodox Jews still observe. A reminder of that reverence is in your Bible if you know where to look. It is in the simple word for God, "LORD," that occurs over and over in the Old Testament in capital letters. There is represents the "unspeakable name," the name which God gave to Moses when he called to him from the burning bush. There God said, in effect, "My name is I AM THAT I AM." From that statement the Jews wrote the vowels YHWH, which probably sounds like "Yahweh,"

and which in English we have evolved into "Jehovah," but which in essence is a statement every time we see it or repeat it that GOD IS MORE THAN WE CAN EVER FULLY KNOW. God is great beyond the possibility of anyone but himself ever comprehending him.

THE NAMES OF GOD IN OUR BIBLE

If we read the Bible as a textbook, it BEGINS to expose the mystery of God, in terms that relate to us. The names of God as found in the Old and New Testaments are a good place to begin.

The first name God used of Himself is the name Elohim, which comes from a word relating to "power." It would suggest that God is the Source of all energy and power.

The second name God uses of Himself is the 'unspeakable name' which the ancient Hebrews would not speak, the name we call Jehovah, and scholars usually call Yahweh. THIS NAME IS A PROPER NOUN THAT MOSES HEARD AS I AM THAT I AM.

The Jews used compound names: Jehovah-Jireh "the Lord will provide"; Jehovah-Nissi, "The Lord my banner"; Jehovah-Shalom "the Lord send peace"; Jehovah-Shammah, "the Lord is there"; Jehovah-tsidkenu, "the Lord our righteousness."

Another Hebrew name for God is "El Shaddai," our "God our Nourisher" or "Strength-giver." "Adonai" which means Lord or Master was often spoken when the 'unspeakable name' of Jehovah was read with the eye. These are some of the names or concepts of God we see in the Old Testament. This is one aspect of how mortals must relate to God — with great respect and reverence.

JESUS BROUGHT A NEW DIMENSION IN APPROACHING THE IDEA OF GOD

Jesus did not come to teach us less reverence for God, but He did come to reveal a new dimension of our understanding of God. John declares that Jesus is the WORD of God, with God in the beginning, and indeed, the Word is God. Jesus is the expression of God, the Way in which we can relate to God in a personal way. It was a great missionary, Stanley Jones, who said the obvious: "We have a Christ-like God!"

PEOPLE CAN PERSONALLY RELATE TO GOD

So when Jesus began to say these "I AM" things in John's Gospel, he was taking the unspeakable name and combining it with common things which we need and use for everyday living. This great God is daily bread. This great God is the DOORWAY to life and to all that is good in life. This great God is Light in which to walk, and the Way, the Truth and the Life. This great God is Resurrection from the dead, and everlasting Life. This great God— who is worthy of our deepest reverence— is the True Vine who grafts us in as branches to share his life and bear much fruit.

PEOPLE CAN PERSONALLY RELATE TO GOD

Jesus teaches us that we can relate to God. We reverence God— yes. That is the proper attitude. But not from a great distance. Not in abject fear. God is not our enemy. God is not demanding our pain and agony and happiness and everything we call "good" in order to spare us from the fires of eternal hell. He wants us to know that he has already made the sacrifice necessary for us to begin to approach his holiness. He wants us to know he has set up this Universe in order to fully satisfy every true longing of the human heart. Jesus tells us that we can relate to God.

But there is a third "R" in our vocabulary of "etiquette before Almighty God." It is good and necessary to RESPECT God. It is possible and necessary to RELATE to God. But Jesus made it clear that we can be RIGHT with God, and know it.

WE CAN / MUST BE IN FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD . . . 'RIGHT' WITH HIM

Now to RELATE and to BE RIGHT ON with God seem like one and the same thing. But that is not always so. God is not "getting smaller and smaller" in our concept of Him as we draw nearer— but what is emerging is the fact that God is more than a Force, and more than a distant Ruler in a Capitol City Somewhere who watches a monitor to see where we stumble. What comes from listening to Jesus as he relates to God is the realization that GOD IS HERE! and we need to walk with Him day-by-day. To be in fellowship with God, and to know we are right with Him is the goal of our faith.

This is more than a great feeling. Feelings come and feelings go. This is even more than a true statement of what we believe. The "what" we believe is important. But God is not a "what." God is a very real "WHO."

We can reverence God— and we can even in some measure relate to God but still not think of God as a Person that can be pleased with us, or displeased and even hurt by our attitudes.

We "get right" with God when we invite Him to be LORD. We maintain fellowship with God as we try to live in a way that pleases Him. Sin happens, and God forgives. Wilful disobedience breaks this "right-ness" with God.

I Thessalonians says, "Don't put out the fire of the Spirit!" or "Don't quench the Spirit!" Did you ever have someone talk over you when you were trying to say something?

Ephesians 4 says it another way, "Don't make the Spirit sad!" or "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God!" And the context here is that we are called upon to be kind one to another, and forgiving, even as God has forgiven us. When we are unkind or unforgiving we grieve the Holy Spirit of God.

HOW CAN WE KNOW WE ARE "RIGHT" WITH GOD? THIS IS A "REVELATION MATTER!"

We begin by trusting God's Word (Romans 10:9)

We continue by trusting Christ as Lord (text for the morning.)

[John 5:39] Jesus is somehow always more than the sum total of the "letter." We do not need some esoteric scholar to sift out the "real Jesus" behind the written word on a pseudo-intellectual basis. And we don't need someone to tell us we ought to feel like this, or have such-and-such an experience!

Remember! THIS IS A "REVELATION MATTER!" Jesus IS the Eternal Contemporary! It is a miracle of God's grace that enables us to believe that Jesus truly is the Son of God, and that He makes God "come alive to us."

WE CAN KNOW WE ARE RIGHT WITH GOD THROUGH HIS SON, JESUS CHRIST

Prayer: O Lord, Great God,

Chorus: *O GOD YOU ARE MY GOD*

The Bread of Life

August 3, 1997

John 6:35

There is nothing wrong with eating. And there is nothing better to eat than fresh bread. Bread smells great while it is baking— tastes even better when it is fresh.

WE ALL HAVE TO EAT AND JESUS KNOWS THAT AND CARES

Jesus fed the 5,000 and from then on that seems to be all they could think about. They kept following Jesus around asking him to feed them.

THERE ARE DEEPER NEEDS EVEN THAN HUNGER FOR FOOD; JESUS KNOWS THAT, TOO, AND CARES

The first great temptation of Jesus in the wilderness involved bread and physical hunger and it is a hard temptation to understand. Jesus met that temptation by quoting from Deuteronomy, "Mankind shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God the Father." The people looking for Jesus are in danger of facing that same issue: they think they know how to satisfy their own deepest needs.

Jesus told these people that he knew why they had come seeking him. "You want more bread, " he said. "But what you don't know is that I have something better than fresh bread for you." Jesus was speaking about a way of life and joy these people could not yet imagine.

Were these people coming selfishly? Probably. Probably you and I came to Jesus at first selfishly, too. We came because we thought we knew what we wanted. We stayed because we began to realize Jesus knew even better than we did what we needed. Until we listen to Jesus we think we can be happy with things of this world— good things— and not-so-good things:

FOOD, AND MONEY, AND TOYS, AND SEX, AND DRUGS, AND DIFFERENT KINDS OF POWER ARE ALL THINGS THAT PEOPLE USE TO MEET THEIR NEEDS FOR SATISFACTION. THEY ALL WORK TO A DEGREE. BUT THEN THEY DON'T WORK. THERE IS STILL THAT NEED THAT CANNOT QUITE BE REACHED.

Jesus told these people looking for a meal— that they needed to labor for a higher kind of bread. "How can we do this sort of work?" they asked. "What is the work of God we can do?"

THE WAY TO JOY IS ALONG THE PATH OF TRUST

Jesus said, "This is the work you must do: believe in the One that God has sent to you!" The work that begins the road to perfect satisfaction is trust.

JESUS CLAIMS TO BE ABLE TO SATISFY THE DEEPEST NEEDS OF THE HUMAN HEART. BUT FOR THIS TO HAPPEN A CERTAIN SORT OF 'LABOR' IS DEMANDED. IT IS NOT A 'WORKS' SALVATION OF EARNING OR MERIT. THE 'LABOR' OF WHICH JESUS SPEAKS IS TO TRUST THAT HE KNOWS BETTER THAN WE DO WHAT WE REALLY NEED.

One of the big lies of Satan is to convince people that making Jesus Christ Lord is like going on a diet. 'If it tastes good or if it is fun it is forbidden. Jesus has come to take all the joy and satisfaction out of life.' Here come people looking for a picnic and they get a lecture on spiritual bread and eternal life. They look at Jesus as if he is the great Killjoy.

Nothing could be farther from the truth.

The happiest and most joyful people in all the Universe are people who intimately know Jesus Christ. They have found the ultimate high.

In 1989 a scholar-pastor named John Piper wrote a book called Desiring God. In it he recognized this lie of Satan, and acknowledged that all too often Christians live far, far below the levels of joy intended for them. Piper wrote

Christianity has become the grinding out of general doctrinal laws from collections of biblical facts (78)

But then he goes on to challenge us Christians by saying

Worship is nothing less than obedience to the command of God: Delight yourself in the Lord! (77) and also...

The great hindrance to worship is not that we are a pleasure-seeking people, but that we are willing to settle for such pitiful pleasures (77)

He goes on to complain about the prosaic way we worship, saying

... childlike wonder and awe have died. The scenery and poetry and music of the majesty of God have dried up like a forgotten peach at the back of the refrigerator. (78) Not to pursue our JOY every day in the Word of God is abandonment of the revealed will of God. It is sin (125.)

Possibly we all came to Jesus at first for less than perfect reasons. I know that I did. And sometimes it is very difficult to honestly see into our deepest motives for even the good things we do. Parents and children, husbands and wives, friends and neighbors all can have a selfish edge on even the good things we do.

OUR CHALLENGE IS TO TRUST JESUS, THAT HE WILL LEAD US INTO JOY

Jesus told these people that they were seeking him because they thought he might feed them again. It almost seemed like Jesus couldn't get them off the subject of food. "Show us again," they said.

And Jesus, instead, challenged them to get to know him, and come to trust him, and let him call the shots of what they needed.

Some of them did. A whole lot of them didn't. They thought they knew better than Jesus. They thought Jesus' way of joy was impractical in their modern times. They went away one at a time and in groups.

Jesus turned to the people he had asked to follow him. "Do you want to go away, too?" he said.

They didn't go away. And they worked the work of God— they began to learn to trust Jesus.

*I heard the voice of Jesus say, "Behold, I freely give
The living water; thirsty one,*

Stoop down and drink and live."

I came to Jesus, and I drank of that life giving stream.

My thirst was quenched, my soul revived, and now I live in Him.

559 *All the Way my Savior Leads Me*

Into Communion

August 3, 1997

THE HOLY COMMUNION

The Law Read and Confession Made

The Lord Jesus Christ has said to us: "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Shall we pray:

Search us, O God, and know our most private thoughts. Try us, and show unto us the deepest motives, the real state of our hearts. Forgive us where we have been selfish, or insensitive, or sinful in any way. We cannot keep the Great Commandment, and truly love You, O God, with all our heart, soul, and mind unless You in mercy grant to us the grace of Your indwelling Spirit. We cannot love each other as we should unless Your love is shed abroad in our hearts.

Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to draw us near to Himself so that we can come to his table with confidence.

We do not presume to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

Let us confess our faith:

The Nicene Creed (STL # 14)

The Informal Invitation ("This is not my table . . . ")

Holy and gracious Father; in your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin, and were worthy of death and hell, you, in your mercy sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to You, the God and Father of all.

He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

The Words of Institution

On the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had give thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat: THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

After supper he took the cup and when he had give thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me: Amen

We praise you for the mystery of our salvation! We truly believe

- Christ has died!
- Christ is risen!
- Christ will come again!

Bless these emblems, O God, and make them to us the Body and Blood of your Son, spiritual food, and spiritual drink of new and unending life in Jesus Christ.

And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us:

Our Father which art in heaven . . .

Now, humbly we receive the Gifts of God for the People of God

The Magnet

August 10, 1997

John 6:44 *No one comes to me unless the Father draws them...*

Ephesians 4:32-5:1 [Be kind — like God is kind]

INTRODUCTION

One force in this world is more powerful than any other. It is an attractive, drawing force. Most things we think of as powerful are pushing forces. Engines. Power that can blow you to pieces or land you on the moon. But with all those, a drawing force is ultimately the greatest. Gravity is a powerful force that attracts.

In the realm of personality there are many forces to push us. We have to make a living. We have to obey various laws. We have to get up and go to school. Often the force that pushes us is called a parent. Later we get pushed by teachers. Then a boss of one kind or other. But again, one force, one power that pulls, attracts, draws us, is greater than all of these other powers. There is a hunger for love in us that will pay any price, make any sacrifice if only that need can be met. The whole world seeks after love. Most life-shaping forces for good or for bad are based on this need for belonging, for love.

The greatest love is God's love. It is as silent as gravity, but it is even more powerful. When once we get a glimpse of God's love we can never be really satisfied with anything less. God's love is the center around which all Creation will finally be ordered and arranged. It is also the power that will draw you to the joy of eternal life if you respond to God's Word and come to Christ.

What do these passages tell us about God's kind of powerful love?

THE INITIATIVE IS GOD'S

Jesus said No one comes to me unless the Father draws ...

Mystery - There is always wonder involved when God connects with you and me. There is that little "synapse" that "gap" that Michelangelo graphically painted in his Creation. There is no ability in us to grasp hold of life apart from God's grace.

We "explain" these mysteries so glibly! But wars have been fought over the details of explanation. Reformed/Calvinists emphasize the helplessness of man and the sovereignty of God. In the extreme this means that God chooses who shall be saved and who shall be damned. Wesleyan/Arminians (and long before, all Eastern Christianity) emphasize the free will of men and women. Taken to the extreme it almost seems to make salvation an act of the human will, which no Wesleyan theologian believes. Universalists of various persuasions simply believe everyone will finally be saved, contrary to what the Bible warns, that there is a heaven to gain and a hell to shun.

The fact remains that Jesus said unless and until God convicts of sin and righteousness and judgment we remain helpless and unable to come to Christ. And the fact remains that the Bible teaches both the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of you and me to choose to follow that sovereign will.

If you have any desire to be saved, thank God that he is drawing you, and make up your mind to come to Jesus. For along with the initiative of God, we have the promise:

THE PROMISE IS CHRIST'S

Jesus says "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out..."

Again and again Jesus made it clear that his mission was to save us from our sins. I came not to condemn the world, he said, but that the world through me might be saved. (Adapted from John 3:17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.)

No doubt people come to church for many reasons. Maybe we even get saved from pressure— forces that "push." But the only way we "stick" is if we find that great drawing power of God's love. Maybe that love is so wonderful we have to discover it

over and over again. But let me tell you again: God loves YOU! And He has told you so in Christ! And that is the most wonderful thing in the world!

Choosing to come to Jesus is not simply a matter of our own initiative. Choosing to follow is more than accepting certain true facts about God and Jesus

Choosing to follow Jesus is to enter a trusting relationship; it is to seek to let Christ's spirit (Spirit) reside (preside) in us. (cf. here Ephesians 4:32-5:2)

And that is God's way of spreading that love to all the world:

THE FATHER GIVES HIS LOVE THROUGH THE CHURCH

(epistle) Be ye kind, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, be imitators of God, walk in love...

The love of God is on display in the church. The command to be kind, to love and forgive, to imitate God and walk in love is much more than a plan for harmonious and happy life within the church. It is the secret of reaching the world because it is the release of the magnetic, drawing, attracting power of God's love.

When this love really happens, it is powerfully attractive. A world hungers for real love. This is not simply mutual admiration it is self giving, forgiving, God like, God centered love. All real church growth has to begin and end here or it is not true church growth.

Jesus understood this when he said (John 13: 34-35) A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another, as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one for another.

This great drawing power is not just a gimmick to build the church, however. It is a love that will never let go of us, never, never, never!

THE POWER OF GOD'S LOVE REACHES BEYOND TIME INTO ETERNITY

...THE ATTRACTION IS FOREVER ..Jesus said, "I will raise him up at the last day..."

The Magnet

From all reaches of time and space the Magnet will call, and every atom of the Body will find its place. God's power begins here and now to draw us to himself. THAT 'ATTRACTIVE POWER' WILL UNITE US WITH GOD FOREVER

(Illustration: I cannot imagine what "the Last Day" will be like. Perhaps George O. Cole's illustration of great magnet in steel mill on Friday night, pulling all iron filings from the piles swept up on the floor... But we will meet Jesus! You may be sure!)

TWO THINGS SPEAK TO ME from these passages about God's powerful, drawing love:

1. I need to respond to the love that draws me!!
2. I need to take seriously my part in showing a needy world that love by being kind, tender-hearted, compassionate along with my witness of Christ's salvation.

Prayer

Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?

I have heard you calling in the night

I will go, Lord, if you lead me

I will hold your people in my heart.

Our Daily Bread

August 17, 1997

John 6:51 *I am the living bread.*

Ephesians 5:18 ... *be (being) filled with the Spirit.*

INTRODUCTION

What is your favorite food? What was a great meal that you can remember? Can you think of one or two or three? What did you have for dinner, say, last Thursday?

Favorite foods can reflect changing tastes. When I was six months old my favorite food was milk. I graduated to hot dogs, spaghetti, hamburgers, pizza. Then for a while I think a big juicy steak was tops. Now I think seafood is as good as anything.

Favorite meals remind us of special times. Family get-togethers. Holidays. Vacations. But we don't stop eating in between the spectacular times. We don't even stop eating when the food is not at all spectacular. In between the great meals there are ordinary meatloaf days, and sandwiches on the run, and even potato soup meals. They may not be spectacular, but they keep us going. You may not remember exactly what was for dinner, but it kept the hunger pangs away for a few hours.

So what does all this have to do with the lessons of the day?

TWO TRUTHS TO TAKE HOME TODAY

JESUS HIMSELF IS OUR LIFE

First of all, Jesus says that he is the living bread. He says we must eat his body, broken for us like the five loaves and two fishes that fed the 5,000. He says we must drink his blood, his life poured out for the salvation of the whole world. He is speaking about a level of reality that takes all the faith we can muster.

When Nicodemus came to Jesus by night (as recorded in the third chapter of John's Gospel) Jesus cut his flattery short by saying, "You have to be born again!"

Nicodemus recoiled from that figure— and said, "How can I take the fetal position

and get in my mother's womb again?" But Jesus was talking reality beyond the literal meaning of the word. Being born again is a reality. And eating the Bread of Life and drinking the cleansing, healing Blood of the Lamb is also spiritual reality. By faith we share in the very life of God.

Eternal life is a quality of reality, reflecting the love of God Himself. When we say "eternal life" we think only in terms of never-ending eternity. We think of living forever. And that is true. But if we simply lived on and on in the same plane of existence it would not be "eternal life." And by the same understanding, we do not need to wait until we die to enjoy the beginnings of "eternal life."

*"Eternal life, begun below,
Now fills my heart and soul.
I'll sing his praise forevermore,
Who hath redeemed my soul!"*

Eternal life is for us a never-ending theosis.

The sacrament of communion is a reminder that a real, living, breathing Person came from God's glory into the world where we live every day. Jesus was not an "idea" or a beautiful message from another incomprehensible realm. Jesus is the Message that God is, and that God wants to bring us all into the deeper reality that is eternal life.

To connect with Jesus is to begin to know life at its ultimate level. But to connect is only the beginning. The glimpses of the way God relates to us— the Door, the Bread, the Light ... are clues to the nature of eternal life, life centered in God. The final "I AM" saying of Jesus is "I AM the True Vine— ye are the branches." The life we know is an on-going, growing thing. And this is what it means to be filled with the Spirit, as well.

BEING FILLED WITH LIVING BREAD IS AN ON-GOING REALITY CHOICE

- To be filled with the Spirit is the whole purpose of salvation

I need to be careful that I do not make it seem less than that. Jesus came and became the living bread so that we might share his life. That life does

not begin in heaven when we die, but here and now when the Holy Spirit brings life, and forgiveness and adopts us into God's family.

- To be filled with the Spirit begins with a crisis of obedience and surrender
I also need to be careful that I do not de-emphasize what it means to be sanctified wholly or entirely. One aspect of being filled with the Spirit is the response of God to a complete and total consecration. the fullness of the Spirit, in that sense, means a crisis of cleansing and empowering. We dare not stop short of the witness of God's Spirit that He has accepted our living sacrifice (Romans 12;1,2.)
- To be filled with the Spirit is also a daily necessity
Ephesians 5:18 is a present imperative: "Be continually filled with the Spirit." We cannot go on being filled unless and until we have let the Lord fill us. But then there is a verse we all need to learn and use every day— Luke 11:13 "If ye being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him!"

Get up in the morning— make eye-contact with Jesus! Tell Him you love Him. Tell him you're sorry if and where you may have goofed. And then ask the Father to fill you for today— just ask Him! Use Luke 11:13! Believe that God hears— and go in the strength and power of the Spirit to walk with Jesus all day.

CONCLUSION

No meal, no matter how wonderful, can last a lifetime! We need a healthy diet; we need our daily bread. No "feeling" no matter how true and wonderful, can give us strength for a year or a month or hardly even a week. We need regular fillings.

Did you ever think that this is at least part of what Jesus is teaching is in his "Lord's Prayer"? We need the living bread as our daily bread! And we need the sacrament of communion to help us keep making that connection. Every time we have the privilege of communion the spiritual reality world somehow connects with the physical reality world in which we now live.

The Home of the Soul

(is where Jesus is!)

August 24, 1997 John 6:56-69

Ephesians 6: 16 - 20

(also Psalm 84 How lovely is Your dwellingplace, O Lord)with

INTRODUCTION

When you hear the word "home," what first comes to your mind? Do you think of a family around a table? Or, maybe the house where you lived when you first went to school? Do you think of the place where you now live? One of our denomination's advertising logos, which Merritt Nielson helped develop a long, long time ago is "Our Church Can be Your Home!" "Home" is a loaded word.

HOME IS MORE THAN A PLACE

"Home" is always more than a place. Home is always where love connects with trust and covenant on a lasting basis.

Place is important to me. I grew up my formative years traveling from place to place without a house we called our own. I remember the first little bungalow my parents rented, and I had a bedroom that was my own. When my parents moved to a house they bought a few years later I was so upset at leaving that place that I went back and crawled through a cellar window into the empty house and went up to my room and just sat there. I thought I was losing my home, my place. But it wasn't "home" any more. I quickly found out that home went along with the relationships— home was wherever there was that long-term love and trust and covenant.

That same phenomenon happened all over again when I came to this campus. I was so frightened and alone— and then little by little this place became home to me. Over the years I was a resident student here I made friends that are like family, even after more than forty years. But I found that sense of home was more than these

grounds and buildings. After I had been away just a few years, pastoring in Ohio, I came back for a summer pastor's retreat. I knew a lot of the pastors— they were my brothers in Christ. But E.N.C. was so very, very different! My generation was missing! My "family" here was gone! I was NOT at home any more!

HOME IS WHERE LOVE CONNECTS WITH TRUST AND COVENANT ON A LASTING BASIS

Where lasting relationships are formed, our souls can be at rest. That slogan "Our Church Can Be your Home!" is a powerful promise. God help us to make it more than a slogan!

OUR HEARTS CRY OUT TO BE AT HOME

As we go through life our hearts keep crying out to be really at home. Again and again the Bible authors capture this sense of the hunger of the soul. David says it so powerfully and so beautifully in our morning psalm (84) "How lovely is your house, O God! My soul longs and cries out to be with you all the time! And you make me at home, too, O God! Why, even the little sparrow has found a place with you!"

David had found the paradox of being "at home "with God while at the same time being "on pilgrimage" to keep that covenant, and maintain that trust, and finally find his eternal home with God. Both psalm 23 and Psalm 84 are very true. "The Lord IS me shepherd!" and "My soul cries out for the living God!" David knew the peace and joy of living in covenant with God.

Our earthly homes are to be places of covenant love. The heart can find rest where love connects with covenant and trust on a lasting basis. Some covenants are clearly understood: Marriage is first of all a solemn covenant. Some covenants are assumed: Every time parents dedicate children they make a covenant to be there for them! They're saying to those children, "God help me, you can count on me! You can trust me!" We assume a similar covenant between the children and their parents: "I'll obey you! I'll be loyal to our home! I'll trust you and love you, too!" (Maybe we ought to formalize that sometime on Mother's Day or father's Day??)

COVENANTS ARE COSTLY

They are not set up for ease and comfort. Love and trust and covenant do not always have smooth sailing. "For better for worse, in sickness and in health..." those hard times come. But when love and loyalty are there, a home is being forged, and there is something precious beyond all understanding. Happy indeed is the earthly home where loyalty and love overcome temptation and the pathways of least resistance. There is probably not a family here that has not been wounded with the pain of trusts betrayed and covenants abandoned. Our homes have been attacked, and are being attacked from many different directions. There is no simple answer to this great need. But here in this church home we can and must support one another and pray for our homes that love and covenant and trust will prevail.

THE HOME OF THE SOUL

There is a home for the human soul that is the place where love and trust and covenant come together in a divine-human connection. Jesus came to establish a family relationship with every one of us. Trust — love— and commitment. Covenant. Jesus gives us all three— he trusts us. He loves us. He makes the commitment of his Presence with us for ever and ever. Jesus asks us for a commitment in return. "I am the only way," he declared. "No one comes to the Father except by me," and "no one comes to me unless the Father grants it and draws them."

"If you want to be with me," he told the crowds, "you'll have to share in my body and my blood." It was a hard saying. It wasn't easy to understand. it was hard to simply trust.

CONCLUSION

Many simply turned and walked away. We want a home for our soul, they thought. but we know better than this Man what we need. Then they simply walked away.

Jesus turned to the disciples. It is the climax of this chapter— the climax of this whole lesson about miracles and bread and the home of the soul. "Will you go away, too?" Jesus asked.

The Home of the Soul

Peter spoke for the other eleven— and I want you to know he speaks for me as well. "Lord, where would we go? You have the words of eternal life! You are the Holy One of God!"

It was underlined in her Bible— Marion Turkington "went home" to be with the Lord last Friday— these words from the morning's Psalm:

" For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness. For the Lord God IS a sun and shield; HE bestows favor and honor. No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly. O Lord of hosts, blessed is the man who trusts in thee!" (84:10-12) HAPPY IS THE PERSON WHO IS 'AT HOME' IN YOU, O GOD!

Prayer: O God, YOU are our home! You have the eternal words of life! Thank you that we can have the privilege of walking with you, and being 'at home' in your Presence, until the day comes when we will see you face to face in that 'place' you are preparing for all your family. In Jesus' name. Amen

Hymn 577 *Jesus is All I Need*, or 626 *Gentle Shepherd*

Extending the Comfort Zone

++Celebrate the Church!++

August 31, 1997 AM

2 Corinthians 1:3-10

INTRODUCTION

There they were, six tough kids— **the Hayford Street Gang**— just down the street. I was on my way home from school by myself, and I was in big trouble. You see, kids from my street always walked together so we wouldn't get into trouble like this. The Hayford Street Gang! I was so scared my whole life passed before my eyes in a flash! Of course it didn't take very long because my life wasn't too long at that time, I being only eight years old.

My alert mind went into high gear— should I walk up on a front porch and sit down, pretending that my aunt or uncle lived there? Should I take off between the houses and see if I could outrun them? They had spotted me! I knew that.

Just then alongside came a great big kid from junior high school. He must have been thirteen or fourteen years old. I didn't really know him, but my alert mind flashed with a great idea, and I said out of the corner of my mouth, "Hey, sir, can I walk with you? Those kids up there— they're after me!"

And the big kid said, "Sure, I don't care."

So I got in step with the big kid from junior high school, and walked along like he was my best friend, just smiling and talking. And when we came to the Hayford Street Gang they parted just like the Red Sea, and we walked through smiling and talking.

When we came to my corner, I turned down Magnolia Street and ran for home. My life had been spared. GOD'S COMFORT is something like that!

GOD'S COMFORT IS 'COMING ALONGSIDE WITH STRENGTH'

The Word says that God's kind of comfort begins with COMPASSION. WE HAVE A GOD THAT CARES. Not like the big kid who didn't care if I walked with him or not, God cares very much about us. COMPASSION means he FEELS everything we feel.

The Word says that God is a God of MERCY, and of HEALING COUNSEL. GOD IS FOR US, HE DESIRES OUR VERY BEST. If we will listen, God will guide us into His will for our lives.

The Word says that God's kind of comfort is revealed by His PRESENCE

Somehow, some way, God gets through to us that He knows where we are, and He cares, and he will give us the help we need. GOD IS WITH US RIGHT NOW!

Sometimes this "Presence" is direct, from the Word, or from a worship experience, a sermon— when the truth becomes personal.

Usually, however, this God of comfort 'comes alongside' in the love of one of His children. We may not be looking for it, but we see the reflection of God's face in the faces of His sons and daughters.

EXTENDING GOD'S COMFORT ZONE

The usual challenge these days for God's people is to "leave their comfort zone," which means to dare to step out beyond the usual— to put ourselves out and do whatever it takes to reach our world for Jesus. I understand that, and believe it. It costs to 'come alongside with strength.' It cost Jesus the glory of heaven. It certainly wasn't "comfortable" for Him to bear our sins.

Jesus left the glory of heaven— and to be willing to deny ourselves, and take up our cross, and follow Jesus— that means at times leaving "comfort" in the usual way we think of that word.

But in a deeper, root meaning of that word- the fact is that human beings cannot live long without COMFORT— God's kind of COMFORT. We need Him to come alongside us and give us grace day by day. And when the way gets tough, we need him all the

more. Beyond the direct ministry of God the Holy Spirit in this kind of comfort, WE NEED TO COMFORT ONE ANOTHER! In fact, WE EXIST TO EXTEND GOD'S COMFORT ZONE! As Reuben Welch wrote in a beautiful little book a couple decades ago— We Really Do Need Each Other!!

THE MESSAGE PUTS IT THIS WAY:

All praise to the God and Father of our Master, Jesus the Messiah! Father of all mercy! God of all healing counsel! He comes alongside us when we go through hard times, and before you know it, he brings us alongside someone else who is going through hard times so that we can be there for that person just as God was there for us. 2 Co. 1:3,4

Coming alongside with strength can be within the Body. Thirty-eight years ago a member of a small church on Long Island, New York, a young woman named Millie Crawford was pregnant with her third child. She had had blood problems with her first two pregnancies, and though both of those babies were now alive and well, the doctors held little hope that she could carry this third baby to term.

Coming alongside with strength can mean sitting with dying people in a crude Romanian hospital like our own Joanna Rapalje did a year or two ago. She cared for very ill people, and was with several of them as they died. It changed the way Joanna looks at the world, and if I can speak for another person, I see great and wonderful growth in Joanna herself.

Coming alongside— extending our comfort zone— can become the heartbeat of an entire congregation. We want to extend our comfort zone to collegians, to Chinese neighbors, to single parents— to as many as God will let us reach. The Apostle James warns us not to be selective in giving away Go's love. The rich need it— the poor need it— the old need it, the young need it.

Let's take God's comfort Zone

CONCLUSION

Extending the Comfort Zone

God has a way of finding us, and 'coming alongside' when we really need Him— if we will look and listen. The disciples on the Road to Emmaus were lonely and sad and discouraged— and Jesus 'came alongside' and their hearts were warmed, and their faith sprang into life. The first thing they did was walk seven miles back to Jerusalem to tell their friends: "We have seen the Lord!"

"He comes alongside us when we go through hard times, and before you know it, he brings us alongside someone else who is going through hard times so that we can be there for that person just as God was there for us."

Prayer

Lord we need your comfort and your strength. But so do a lot of people, some we know and some we don't. Thank You for 'coming alongside where we are,' and help us, if it be Your will, to take your kind of comfort to those we meet today. In Jesus' name. Amen

Sing to the Lord # 679 - *The Servant Song*

Prayer requests today: Chinese church begins next Sunday at 9:30; new DS Chuck Zink, Sally Zink operation tomorrow; [death of Marion Turkington] Bill Restrict has been in hospital; Jason Kottis;

The Great Invitation

September 7, 1997

HAVE YOU RECEIVED AN INVITATION LATELY?

There are all kinds of invitations going around— some are more than invitations— they are SUMMONS: Come, or else we'll come after you! Some are to parties or special occasions but really are FUND RAISERS, or SALES EVENTS. They really don't want YOU— they want your MONEY! And then some PROMISE THE WORLD ("You have already won! If you are chosen you will win \$1,000,000.00!!!)

So it is only natural that we have become very SKEPTICAL OF INVITATIONS. We have learned that if it is too good to be true, it is too good to be true! The problem is— we carry that skepticism into our spiritual life as well. We don't know who to believe when everyone claims to have the true faith. We even wonder if God is to be trusted— and if we can get past this preacher's spin or that denomination's sacred cow to find what God really is saying. Then even when we are pretty sure God is asking us to walk with Him and be his friend— we're pretty sure God has some ulterior motive in mind.

WHY WOULD GOD WANT TO ASK ME TO BE HIS FRIEND?

Then we find out that if we are going to follow God— sure enough— he wants us to learn from him, and take his mannerisms, and do his will. AHA! WE SAY— JUST AS I THOUGHT! GOD WANTS TO MAKE US HIS SLAVES!!!

What we don't stop to realize is that there is one— just one— Person in all this Universe who knows all about life! What we don't stop to realize is that every real commandment of God is based on the LOVE of God— and is for our ultimate happiness and joy and fulfillment.

Did you ever hear the story about the village that was seeded all around with landmine. Hardly a week went by but someone or other was either killed or their feet blown off by stepping on a mine as they walked through the fields and forests around

the village. Then one night a village elder had a dream. In his dream he saw where every landmine had been planted. Quickly he arose and drew a map, and marked every place of death and danger. The next morning he called the village together and showed them the map, and they rejoiced! They copied the map— and those who were careful to stay in the paths were safe.

God's invitation to life is like that— there are no strings attached— he loves you as you are. But then he provides all you need to come to him and walk with him, and finally to spend eternity with him.

THE HOLY COMMUNION

COMMUNION IS A SACRAMENT OF THE CHURCH THAT 'DRAMATIZES', IF YOU WILL, THE GREAT INVITATION OF GOD FOR US TO DRAW NEAR AND BE HIS PEOPLE

THIS SACRAMENT WAS FORESHADOWED BY THE PASSOVER NEARLY 4,000 YEARS AGO

THE LORD JESUS HIMSELF OBSERVED PASSOVER WITH HIS DISCIPLES THE NIGHT BEFORE HE WAS CRUCIFIED FOR OUR SINS

AND THAT NIGHT HE TRANSFORMED IT FOR CHRISTIANS INTO A MEANS OF GRACE FOR THE WHOLE CHURCH— ALL BELIEVERS WHO CALL JESUS LORD

SINCE THAT NIGHT COMMUNION LOOKS BACK TO THE CROSS, WHERE JESUS BECAME OUR 'LAMB OF GOD' TO TAKE AWAY OUR SINS AND THE SINS OF THE WHOLE WORLD

AND IT LOOKS FORWARD TO THE GREAT BANQUET TO WHICH WE ARE ALL INVITED EVERY TIME WE COME TO THIS TABLE WE ARE ONE WITH ALL CHRISTIANS AROUND THE WORLD AND IN HEAVEN, ALL WHO CALL JESUS 'LORD!'

Will you prepare, with the help of God the Holy Spirit, to come to Christ's Table?:

The Law Read and Confession Made

The Lord Jesus Christ has said to us: "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great

commandment. The second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Shall we pray:

LORD, YOU KNOW US BETTER THAN WE KNOW OURSELVES. YOU KNOW WE CANNOT LOVE YOU AS WE SHOULD APART FROM YOUR GRACE. YOU KNOW WE SOMETIMES SLIP INTO SELFISH WAYS, AND WE NEED YOUR LOVE TO ENABLE US TO LOVE EACH OTHER AS WE SHOULD. Forgive us where we have been selfish, or insensitive, or sinful in any way.

Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to draw us near to Himself so that we can come to his table with confidence.

We do not presume to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

O LORD GOD, FORGIVE THOSE WHO ARE WILLING TO ACKNOWLEDGE THEIR NEED OF GRACE.

WE ACCEPT YOUR GRACE OF FORGIVENESS JUST NOW.

LET US CONFESS OUR FAITH:

The Apostles' Creed (STL # 8)

The Informal Invitation ("This is not my table . . . ")

The Words of Institution

On the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat: THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me. After supper he took the cup and when he had give thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in

The Great Invitation

remembrance of me: Amen O GOD, We praise you for the mystery of our salvation!
We truly believe Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

Bless these emblems, O God, and make them to us the Body and Blood of your Son,
spiritual food, and spiritual drink of new and unending life in Jesus Christ.

And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us:

Our Father which art in heaven . . . (partake together // instructions if otherwise)

Now, humbly we receive the Gifts of God for the People of God

The Outsider

Good News! There's Hope!

September 7, 1997

Mark 7:24-30 The Syro-Phoenician woman with a daughter distressed with an unclean spirit.

This has been a week we will remember a long, long time. The death of the Princess of Wales has caught the attention of many millions of people around the world. At the outpouring of words that immediately followed the news of Diana's death, I think I was most impressed that Mother Teresa of Calcutta had loved Diana, and had said, among other things, that Diana "was in love with the poor" of the world. And then Friday afternoon we heard: Mother Teresa was gone!

Two women, so very different— one 37, and tall and stately and beautiful— one 87, and tiny and wrinkled and, yes, beautiful, too, in her own wonderful way. One born to great riches, and living in the glare of the spotlight. One with absolutely nothing of this world's goods to call her own, under a vow of chastity, poverty, obedience, and of service to the poor.

[[[Diana Frances Spencer was born on the first of July 1961, just over 36 years ago and married Charles Philip Arthur George, the Prince of Wales, in a spectacular wedding in St. Paul's Cathedral on July 29, 1981. Mother Teresa was born, Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu on the 27th of August 1910 to Albanian parents in what was then Serbia. She was called "Mother" but was a nun for 69 years.]]]

Two women very different— and yet both of them remembered with love for one thing: they made the people they met feel valued and respected. They somehow carried the message: "Whoever you are, you matter!" And in so far as they carried that message, they were messengers of truth. This world is starved for genuine love. We need to hear the message "You are a person of worth! You matter!"

The first message that God wants this world to hear is that same message: **YOU MATTER TO GOD!** Before they can really understand anything else of spiritual worth, they need to know that God cares about who we are and how we live.

It may not be the first message the church thinks the world needs. We begin with Lesson Two or Lesson Three. We attack the evils of our culture, and get wrapped up in boycotts and legislation, and no doubt there is a place for all of that and much, much more. (After all, Mother Teresa took every occasion she could to speak out against abortion. But first she paid her dues; first she saw in every face she met the image of God— her base from which she worked was: **YOU MATTER TO GOD!**) We tell the world "Change the way you're living, and God will accept you, and you will be saved!" We say, "Confess your sins— and turn to Jesus and be saved!" and of course this is the very heart of what we are here for— but first, "Lesson ONE" is the message the world needs to hear: God cares about you! You matter! You are of worth to Him!

It seems so simple, perhaps. We've heard it so many times. But the fact is, there are times when we need to hear this first word again. But if we, who know our Bibles, and know something of God's love need this, how much more people who have never met Jesus Christ need to hear the good news of strong hope— that God loves them, and that **THEY MATTER TO GOD!**

In the gospel lesson today a woman, a foreigner, heard that Jesus was nearby, in the coastal town of Tyre. This woman was an outsider so far as the pious Jews were concerned. She had two big strikes against her, maybe even three. She was a woman in a society where all the religious leaders were male; she was a Syrophoenecian, a sort of half-breed foreigner who was despised by the pure orthodox Hebrews. This woman had a daughter in deep trouble, deep spiritual trouble.

This outsider thought she saw in Jesus that same quality we have been speaking about— the love and respect for all people that drew people to Diana and Mother Teresa. Jesus had actually crossed a political and religious boundary in entering Tyre, a city in Gentile territory. It seems as though Jesus was trying to get a little

down time— a tiny vacation, but it doesn't work and people flood in to ask for his help.

The Syrophenecian woman came to where Jesus was trying to rest, and she watched for a while as people came and went, and saw his kindness and power and healing compassion. Then she, too, asks for help with those who are breaking into his time of rest.

Mark doesn't tell us, but Matthew does, that this woman was noisily bothering the disciples and that they wanted Jesus to send her away. He doesn't do that however, and I wonder if maybe the interesting interchange between Jesus and the woman is more for the disciples (read "us") than it was for the woman.

But this "outsider" saw what we all will see if we will look and live— she saw that no one who ever came to Jesus was turned away, except those who came in hypocrisy to defeat Him. By his own words we know "The one that comes to me I will in no way (ever) cast out!" This "outsider" saw that compassion, and dared to ask for help. And she found that she mattered to God. She got the help she needed.

YOU MATTER TO GOD! That is Good News!

Do you really believe that? You don't have to break down doors and try to persuade God you are worthy to be loved by him. He loves you just as you are! He cares about you! He wants to come into your life and brings HIS HOPE to bear on all that you are and do.

YOUR NEIGHBOR MATTERS TO GOD!

How are you going to tell him/her? Probably imperfectly, if you're like the rest of us. But it will begin with an attitude.

James has some suggestions in our epistle lesson. He tells us that we had better stop deciding who is "in" and who is "out." He says if a person with money starts attending, and we act as though she matters more than another person who is poor, we are missing the message: you matter to God.

Don't get me wrong— rich people need to hear this message, too. Don't despise your neighbor because he may have more than you do. The message is the same: you matter to God!

(Conclusion:) Not one of us here will ever catch the attention of the entire world like Diana or Mother Teresa. We won't have the spotlight in which to tell people that they count, they are important. We probably can be thankful that we don't. But we will all have the privilege, first of all, to know that fact for ourselves. IN JESUS CHRIST WE HAVE A DOOR TO AN ETERNAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD! We matter! We are as important to God as anyone who ever lived!

And then we have the privilege and the duty to begin where we can by spreading the word far and near: YOU matter to God! You are NOT an "outsider" to him! That is the message of our church! Will you help tell it this week?

Prayer

Hymn #543 - *Let Your Heart Be Broken*

Come Follow Me

September 14, 1997

Mark 8:27-38

Lead-in ... John Filsak, a minister in Nottingham, was watching his son play with a 'virtual pet.' He came up with a very funny, yet sad and very biting piece of satire—he wrote about a "Cyber-Jesus," a virtual salvation that could be hung on a chain and manipulated with buttons.

OF course the reason this is so absurd is that we know Jesus is NOT someone we manipulate. Yet how often we think of him only in terms of what he can do for us. The whole point is: if you have a Savior, a Messiah that you can use for your own convenience, you do not really know the Savior.

In our Gospel lesson today Jesus asked the disciples two questions; (1) who do people say that I am? and, (2) who do YOU say that I am? These questions come very close to being the most important questions we will ever have to address. I would rephrase them just a little bit and ask them again just now:

THE TWO GREAT QUESTIONS

WHO IS JESUS?

If you really want to know who Jesus is, this becomes "a revelation question." It does not come from much study, and human persuasion. It comes from God the Father revealing the truth: JESUS IS THE CHRIST, THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD.

The correct answer is that Jesus is who he said he is: the Son of God, the living Word. But believe it or not, to answer this correctly is NOT the end of the search for salvation.

WHO IS JESUS TO YOU?

To answer this one is not quite so simple. For to say who Jesus is TO YOU requires a moral decision. It is a gift of God to have the faith to believe that Jesus is the Christ,

the Son of the living God. but that faith does NOT, I repeat, to believe that Jesus is God's Son does NOT in and of itself save you. Jesus is Messiah! The devils know that and believe it, even though they hate it.

To answer "Who is Jesus to ME?" is to make a statement about whether or not we are willing to act on God's revelation. To follow Jesus is more than believing Jesus is who he says he is, but it is saying that we want to follow him, and trust him for our salvation. In some wonderful, even mysterious way, God gives us the power to respond— to choose 'Who will Jesus be TO ME!'

A THREE-FOLD INVITATION

[An OPEN invitation: "If any one will come after me... "]But, too, the scriptures say Many are called— but few are chosen. The reason is— this is not merely a "mental assent to propositional truth." It is a response to a Living Lord: a three-fold challenge:

DENY SELF

"I am NOT my own God!" "I give up my own attempts to save myself!" The most difficult master to escape is the tyranny of self-rule. To deny self is to accept the fact that Jesus is the Way, Truth, Life— and say, "God helping me, Jesus shall be my Lord! I will obey HIM!"

EMBRACE THE CROSS

"Come and die!" A willingness to follow Jesus to the very death!

The world ridicules the cross. Even children can get the wrong idea. "An elementary teacher in a public school was a devout Roman Catholic. She had studied to be a nun but decided that she was better suited for a lay vocation. She was teaching a class in reading, but she told the children, "You don't have to write or talk sometimes to get your point across." By way of example she stuck out her thumb and asked, "What does this mean?" The students all said, "I want a ride."

Then she asked, "What does this mean?" (She held her finger up across her mouth.) They all said, "Be quiet." Then she turned to one child and asked, "What can you say

using signs?" He held up his hand flat to say stop. She asked another little boy to do one, and he gave the Catholic sign of the Cross, touching his forehead and crossing his chest. That just thrilled this devout teacher. She said, "Jerry, what does that mean?" He said, "That means I'm gonna shoot a free throw." 2

To take up the cross is more than wearing a religious symbol— however seriously we take it. To take up our cross is to accept the fact that there will be hard times, and suffering in the pathway of obedience.

[Believe me— you will not be able to dodge suffering, no matter what road you follow. But following Jesus transforms life's hard places into opportunities to lift Him up.]

There is a third part to this challenge to follow Jesus. It is the BEST part:

FOLLOW JESUS

We don't have to simply DENY SELF and TAKE UP THE CROSS. We also have the privilege of FOLLOWING JESUS. And as we follow, that relationship becomes closer, and more and more precious. Not necessarily EASIER.. but

JESUS HAS PROMISED NEVER TO LEAVE US .. TO THE VERY END!

CONCLUSION

It is hard to come to the close of a sermon this morning and not think of the events of this week: I'm speaking, of course, of a certain Roman Catholic nun whose funeral was this Saturday Mother Theresa.

In following Jesus Mother Theresa incarnated this three-fold invitation: deny self, take up the cross— follow Jesus. Following Jesus for her meant that she devoted her life to the poor and sick. She went through the streets of Calcutta in India, physically picking up the skin and bones people and carrying them into her hospice. She went around the world setting up hospices where her many followers could do the same.

Mother Theresa didn't complain when she found a sick person. Like St. James, she counted it all joy that she could be there to help that person, for in that person she

saw Jesus. She often said that she was so happy because she was able to do the work she was doing, caring for the sick and poor.

A reporter asked to see Mother Theresa. The nun who answered the door said Mother couldn't come. The reporter waited and finally asked what Mother was doing. The nun said, "Mother is cleaning the toilets and has asked that she not be called away from her work.

When reporters went to interview Mother Theresa, she immediately put them to work in her hospice. They ended up feeding a dying person by hand or washing someone, or in other ways performing the same work that Mother Theresa did, and her nuns do day by day. In this way only, Mother Theresa believed, could anyone come to an idea of her work.

When opened up a hospice in Brooklyn with her nuns, the authorities were worried that there was nothing like central heating or television. Mother Theresa said they would not need such things, for the poor did not have them.

Someone asked Mother Theresa once about being successful and Mother Theresa answered, "We are not called to be successful; we are called to be faithful." She followed Jesus!

Jesus wasn't some kind of masochist who enjoyed suffering. He even said in the Garden of Olives before his passion and death: "Father, if this cup [of suffering] can not pass, but I must drink it, then your will be done, not mine." But the point Jesus would bring us to in our following him with our cross is that we become so pliable to the Holy Spirit in our life that we welcome whatever comes along, because by accepting it, we become like Jesus. Jesus will transform our lives and join them with his own— and we will know HIS JOY!

"If any want to become my followers

There is an open invitation. Whosoever will may come!

552 O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee

But We See Jesus

October 5, 1997

Hebrews 1,2; Mark 10:15

Last week Norman McCullough was talking grandfather talk about his little grandson, Kevin. He, Kevin, had been reading (a dinosaur book) in the middle of the living room floor when he stopped and folded his hands and appeared to be praying. When it seemed he had finished his grandmother, Nancy, asked him gently what he had been doing.

"Well," he said, "Dad told me I should be praying and I was praying."

"What were you asking God for?" asked Nancy.

"I wasn't asking for anything," said little Kevin. "I was just listening."

GOD HAS SPOKEN

(HOW) In many ways across the centuries, our scripture tells us, God has spoken. God has spoken in majestic power, in the beauty of the cosmos and creation. God has spoken by prophets of an ideal of justice, and has given us the Commandments as a Guide to real Life. But, the scripture emphasizes, God has given His highest Word in His Son, Jesus Christ— a Word of LOVE and redemption and LIFE!

(WHAT) God has said several important things to us:

1. I AM THAT I AM! Don't try to "box me in" or "define me."
2. I LOVE YOU! I hear you when you cry! I am a God who will respond!
3. IN CHRIST 'ALL THINGS' WILL FINALLY 'MAKE SENSE'

WE DO NOT YET SEE . . .

The scripture is quick to say "We do not yet see all that has been promised!" There is a need for God's people to trust him— to HOPE in his word! (more on that perhaps this evening as we look into Job)

Frankly, life as we see and know it is not always "fair." We do not yet see the 'millennial reign' where the lion lies down with the lamb" (... even in the Church— the lamb is always very, very nervous!)

BUT WE (DO) SEE JESUS

Jesus is God's ETERNAL Word! Jesus is always near (by His Spirit!)

He is present NOW by His Spirit to guide. He is speaking if only we, like Norman's little grandson, will make the effort to LISTEN!

In the Gospel Lesson Jesus has said: Unless and until we can come as little children— we cannot begin to understand His love— we cannot inherit his kingdom.

God has spoken ... God is speaking! And one wonderful way God wants to speak to us today is through

THE HOLY COMMUNION

Communion, a sacrament of the church, gives us opportunity to listen for God's voice, and to affirm that we are one with all people around the world who say by the Spirit, "Jesus is Lord!" This sacrament both looks back to the Cross and forward to the Great Banquet when the redeemed of all ages will celebrate Life together in the glorious Light of God's immediate Presence.

Will you prepare, with the help of God the Holy Spirit, to come to Christ's Table?:

The Law Read and Confession Made

The Lord Jesus Christ has said to us: "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Shall we pray:

Search us, O God, and know our most private thoughts. Try us, and show unto us the deepest motives, the real state of our hearts. Forgive us where we have been selfish,

or insensitive, or sinful in any way. We cannot keep the Great Commandment, and truly love You, O God, with all our heart, soul, and mind unless You in mercy grant to us the grace of Your indwelling Spirit. We cannot love each other as we should unless Your love is shed abroad in our hearts.

Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to draw us near to Himself so that we can come to his table with confidence.

We do not presume to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

Let us confess our faith:

The Apostles' Creed (STL # 8) OR [Nicene Creed #14]

The Informal Invitation ("This is not my table . . . ")

Holy and gracious Father; in your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin, and were worthy of death and hell, you, in your mercy sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to You, the God and Father of all.

He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

The Words of Institution

On the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had give thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat: THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

After supper he took the cup and when he had give thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me: Amen

But We See Jesus

We praise you for the mystery of our salvation! We truly believe

- Christ has died!
- Christ is risen!
- Christ will come again!

Bless these emblems, O God, and make them to us the Body and Blood of your Son, spiritual food, and spiritual drink of new and unending life in Jesus Christ.

And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us:

Our Father which art in heaven . . . (partake together // instructions if otherwise) Now, humbly we receive the Gifts of God for the People of God

Empty Your Hands

October 12, 1997

Mark 10:17-31; Job 23:1-9 (also overview of Job 1)

Psalm 90; Ephesians 3:10

Our Gospel lesson today tells of a man dashing up to Jesus to inquire about finding eternal life. "EMPTY YOUR HANDS, COME, FOLLOW ME!" It is significant that the Bible pictures this eager person as a good man. Jesus did not challenge his statement that he had kept the Commandments from the time he was very young. In fact, the word is that "Jesus loved him!" God's great, free grace was very, very near.

But Jesus said, "You cannot really follow me if your life is centered on other things!" It wasn't wrong that the man had great possessions; what was wrong was that this man's possessions had him. Jesus was saying, "Empty your hands, and come, follow me!"

And the rich young ruler by his actions said, "The price is more than I can pay!" He turned and went sadly away. Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for people with great wealth to enter the kingdom of heaven!"

The disciples were literalists. They valued wealth, just as you and I do as well. "Who then can be saved?" they asked. Jesus said, "Nobody in the world, if they try simply on their own— with man it is impossible. But anyone who seeks God can be saved if they come in His terms— for all things are possible with God!"

My thoughts today about this Gospel lesson are very personal, and center about a story, not of a Rich Young Ruler, of a story of A Rich Young Woman, who also came to Jesus seeking eternal life. She, like the man in the story asked what was required, and determined to follow whatever the cost.

The name Walter Johannes Damrosch probably doesn't mean a thing to anyone here this morning. If you were to look in an encyclopedia you would find that he was a conductor of the Metropolitan Opera in New York City and founder of his own Opera

Company, as well as for many years the conductor of the National Broadcasting Company Symphony before Arturo Toscanini. I drop his name as emphasis for the story with which I close:

Actually, the 'rich young woman' in my story wasn't really rich, but she did have a real treasure. She had discovered God had endowed her with a world-class contralto voice, and the musical ability to use it. Even as a teenager she became well known in the Lansing, Michigan, local music scene with concerts and solo work in oratorio and cantata presentations. Then through her local music teachers she received an invitation to come to New York City to audition and study with the great Walter Damrosch. It was the chance of a lifetime.

About this time this young woman with a treasure came face to face with Jesus Christ in a revival meeting in the Methodist Church where she was a member. She was saved, and joined a class meeting— a small group specifically designed for spiritual nurture which vital Methodist churches often used. She became aware that God was asking her to go to a Christian college and prepare for special ministry in His kingdom. And so it was that this young woman took her talents to Taylor University, a Christian college in Indiana affiliated with the Methodist church to which she belonged.

As much as she loved opera, and classical music, Leona felt that God was calling her into an even higher musical ministry. She literally gave her treasure to God, and worked her way through Taylor, where she sang solo parts in Elijah and Messiah and all the standard Christian vocals of her time.

There are still a very few people alive today that can remember Leona Metcalfe's musical power and ministry. In my very prejudiced view her contribution to worship and evangelism in camp meetings, assemblies, and revivals large and small was considerable. But she died in a little room in a nursing home, far away from her beloved Ohio. She might have echoed Peter, in our Gospel lesson: "Lord, we have left all— we have given up OUR WAY for YOURS! IS IT WORTH IT?" I am confident she would answer that question: YES, A THOUSAND TIMES OVER! For as with every one of us, in the end, who she was became far more important than simply what she

had done. My mother followed Jesus, and came to know and love and serve him for many, many years. At her graveside in Ohio last Thursday four pastors came to bear testimony to a life that counted for God and the kingdom.

I don't know if we really realize that, or believe it! Salvation is free, for the asking. Grace is offered to the whosoever. But to make Jesus Christ Lord, and to follow him requires that we be willing to come with empty hands, and a willingness to follow Him. Whatever it takes to walk with Jesus— to follow him— is worth it. Whatever we may have in our hands, our cluttering up our lives, that would push him away from the center— even good things— are not worth the cost. For Jesus will be Lord of all, or he will not be Lord at all.

And many Christians tempt grace and shortchange the great love with which Christ would bless them by hesitating to follow without question— for as Jesus said:

"Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first!" What can this mean?

COSMIC ECHOES, 'WELL DONE, GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANT!' The Old Testament lessons that accompany our Gospel studies for three or four weeks have been selections from the Book of Job. Job was a wealthy man whose riches did not keep him from being a man who feared God and hated evil, and walked blamelessly before God.

The "Job experience." Sooner or later it happens to every one of us! Summarizing quickly: God was proud of Job. The Adversary asked the question: "Does Job serve God for love or for profit?" Then came what is often call 'The Wager.' God said, in effect: "I trust Job! He loved Me because I am God and because he believes I am GOOD!" We often think the Book of Job is about the eternal questions that arise around human pain and suffering. But to that question there is no satisfactory resolution, no cheap answer.

What we can see from the Book of Job is that God takes an interest in the people who seek Him with integrity and faith. Job's love and trust meant a great deal to God— in the story. And the Bible indicates that God treasures that love and trust in every one of us! Sooner or later every one of us will have our Job experiences, and I believe

Empty Your Hands

that when we respond with trust in God there are reverberations in heaven! God is proud of the man or woman that puts Him first!

Ephesians 3:10 is a verse that I see as very significant— and I can never get people excited about it. But I believe it says that when a young person is tempted to cheat, and no one would ever know, but she does not because she knows she belongs to God— that act of righteousness by faith has cosmic echoes! Before the angels God is proud of the person that follows him, even though no one else may know!

A young adult is checking his e-mail and has opportunity to open his mind to pictures and voices rated with triple "X" and hits the "delete" button— and no one knows or cares— except God! Before God says, "See, love IS stronger than hate! People DO serve me because it is good and right!"

An older person is tempted to be fault-finding and bitter, and prays for grace to be able to tell people that God is good. And there are cosmic echoes! When God says, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" it is no little thing! Beyond the agendas that we can see, God is showcasing his love and grace in the trust He places in you and me, and he challenges us to empty our hands, and take up our crosses, and follow after the Christ!

That verse in Ephesians reads like this: "(God's) intent is that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms!"

PRAYER

Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be willing and able to empty our hands and follow you and lovingly serve you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

538 I'll Go Where You Want Me to Go or 541 Jesus Calls Us

The Joy of Serving

October 19, 1997

Acts 20:35 *It is more blessed to give than to receive.*

Mark 10:35-45 and supplemental texts

(It wasn't exactly James' and John's most shining hour. Looking back later they were probably ashamed. They were trying to pull an 'end run' around their fellow disciples...) In this Gospel passage I am interested in the response of Jesus to an obvious power play. "We've got a favor to ask," they began.

JESUS MET THEM WITH THE QUESTION:

WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU?

(That is the question that intrigues me! How would you answer that question if Jesus put it to you directly? And as a matter of fact Jesus IS asking that question of every one of us— and we are answering it every day whether we even know it or not!)

"Let us sit up front with you," James and John asked. "When you're finally doing the great things of the kingdom, we'd like to be right there, on your right hand and on your left!"

They knew they were walking with a winner. They wanted to absolutely get in on the best of the best. James and John were seeking one of the most attractive— if not the most attractive thing in the world. They wanted power. Of course they would use that power to the best purposes! "With us in the CEO positions," they might have said, " we'll make Your kingdom really efficient!"

Jesus loved James and John. He listened to what they had to say. He asked them a few questions. But before he granted them their petition he told them:

"You don't really know what it is that you're asking!"

YOU HAVE INSUFFICIENT DATA TO MAKE A LIFE-CHANGING REQUEST

"You don't really know what it is that you're asking!" As a matter of fact, when Jesus came to the absolute completion of his battle with evil, it was on a cross, and on his right hand and on his left were two criminals. For Jesus was lifted up on a cross. It was not at that time considered a place of honor.

"But that isn't what we meant!"

"Of course not ... but that is what I've come to show you!" Then Jesus went on to say that his kingdom was not to be like the power-structures of the world.

The power structures of the First Century were despotic, grand, top-down. Caesar Augustus, Nero, Galba— all were examples of top-down power. Jesus said that he would build his kingdom on servant power, and that he, himself, would be servant of all. That is something we have a hard time understanding.

Dick Rice is a counselor in the St. Paul Minneapolis area. He had the opportunity to interview Mother Teresa, and he asked her, "Mother, what is, would you say, your most difficult problem?" Immediately, he felt maybe he shouldn't have asked the question.

But Mother Teresa came right back and said, "Professionalism." Rice blinked and repeated "Professionalism?" "Yes," said Mother Teresa. "When I send a sister off to school to become a nurse or a doctor, she returns with her degrees and diplomas, I always have to interrupt her after a while in her work. She has become too intellectual about her work. She has lost the personal touch. So I send her down to the ward where we have people with advanced diseases who are dying. I tell her to just sit with them, empty their bedpans, hold their hand, feed them. Then, after a couple of months I let her go back to her work." If anyone was ever a no-nonsense person, but a happy person, it was Mother Teresa. In her reply she got to the heart of what Jesus was saying to James and John when they craved power.

JESUS KNEW THE JOY OF SERVING

Jesus came to turn the structures of this world— the accepted norms and values— upside down. He said (Acts 20:35) "It is more blessed to give than it is to receive!"

There is JOY in being able to give, to serve, to get the center of the Universe somewhere out beyond our own navel.

Did you ever hear of the McLandress Coefficient? When I was studying pastoral care many years ago I read about the "McLandress Coefficient;" Herschel McLandress was a professor of psychiatric measurement at Harvard Medical School, and he developed a way to measure a person's degree of self absorption. In spoken and written material he measured the use of "I," "me," and "my" and the "Coefficient" was the longest span of time a person can remain diverted from himself.

Eleanor Roosevelt was supposed to have a McLandress coefficient of two hours; John F. Kennedy's was twenty nine minutes, and Elizabeth Taylor's was three minutes. The reason I don't dare fill in God's blank check and ask for "power" or "glory" for myself could just be that I need to talk about me, when maybe Jesus wants to talk about something else. How is your McLandress Coefficient?

Could we take the McLandress Coefficient another step, and see how long we can go after getting up in the morning without thinking about God and grace and the love that surrounds us?

Could we even take it further and see how far we might be able to go into the day and week without ever once thinking about the needs of those we meet?

I only really became aware of the remarkable spirit of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, of Chicago, last year as he was diagnosed with inoperable cancer but refused to feel sorry for himself— and continued his ministry of preaching the grace of Christ to others who were dying. I was impressed by a spirit of serving that reached across barriers. Then I found out that ten years before his death just this year Joseph Bernadin had written a little book, *Christ Lives in Me*, words he had evidently found grace to live and die by:

"As a people redeemed by Jesus' blood, we are called to a radically new way of life in which the criteria of success are totally different from the world's criteria. Now that the Word has become flesh, we cannot be overly concerned with ourselves... our petty vanities and prejudices, our hostilities and fleeting attachments... our vision must not be limited... we are a people called to a new intimacy and friendship with God. We are a people who reflect, with new brightness and beauty, the image and likeness of God; a people, who in the totality of our humanity are expected to express the values which Jesus realized in his own life. We are a people to whom much has been given and from whom much will be expected."

"Joseph Bernardin left behind more than words. I believe that he aspired to and achieved this true gospel greatness that Jesus was speaking about; he spent himself in the service of others.

How can we claim to be Christ's when everything we do and say revolves around US? Even in our worship and praying we cannot escape this selfish way of living. How do we escape our "Self?"

We admire those who are servants. like, say, our own 'Mother Teresa,' Esther Sanger, and the lowly servant path she walked, and we are sure she was a saint; but the desire for center stage and for power runs deep. Deep down inside we are fascinated by raw power and wealth and respect and notoriety, wherever its source. So the question:

WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU? is there for us to face. (Already, by our lives and prayers and attitudes, we are answering Christ's question!) If God would grant you your one heart petition— what would it be? Be careful— for it might just happen!

Do you dare to say - Lord, YOU be the center of my life?

Lord, help me think of You in all I am - YOU fill in the blank check you've offered to me! Let me dare to follow you and be like you!

PRAYER - Almighty and everlasting God, who in your Son, the Suffering Servant Jesus Christ has shown to us the way of love: Grant that we Your church may

persevere in that servant love to confess You before three worlds*; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. (*Ephesians 3:10 again!)

490 - *O to be Like Thee* then 535 - *Make Me a Servant*

I Believe in the Church

Reformation Sunday

October 26, 1997

Lectionary Text, Mark 10:46-52; Hebrews 7:21-27

INTRODUCTION

This is Reformation Sunday. In October of 1517 a Roman Catholic monk and priest and professor of theology named Martin Luther nailed a list of 95 subjects for debate or complaints against his church to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral in Germany, and the Protestant Reformation was officially begun. We have been trying to sort out the results of the resulting dynamics in all branches of the church ever since.

Martin Luther's zeal split the visible, organized ranks of Christendom. But like all true reformers he had an underlying love for the Church of Jesus Christ. I believe Luther did what he did out of a deep faith not only in God, but in the church itself. Faith in the Church that Jesus Himself is building is a basic part of our faith, and is clearly stated in the ancient creeds that unite all who say by the Holy Spirit that Jesus is Lord.

In one of the last of his writings published before his death last year, Henri Nouwen wrote about this love for the church:

The Church is an object of faith. In the Apostles Creed we (affirm) "I believe in God the Father ... in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord ... in the Holy Spirit. (But we also say,) "I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." We must believe in the church! The Apostles Creed does not say that the church is an organization that helps us to believe in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.. No, we are called to believe in the church with the same faith we believe in God.

Often it seems harder to believe in the Church than to believe in God. But whenever we separate our belief in God from our belief in the Church, we become unbelievers.

God has given us the church as the place where God becomes God-with-us.- in Bread for the Journey

We are the church! The church is not a denomination, large or small. The Church is made up of all those now living, and those who have died in the faith, who say from their hearts, by the Holy Spirit, "Jesus is Lord!" to the glory of God the Father. On this Reformation Sunday we are all called to love the church, to be concerned about keeping faith with the church.

It is this wonderful confession that in some measure defines the church. Open your hearts with me just now as we consider the great confession of the church:

THE CONFESSION OF THE CHURCH: "JESUS IS LORD!"

JESUS IS LORD -THE MYSTICAL ELEMENT - 2 Timothy 2:19 "...the solid foundation of God stand, having this seal: 'The Lord knoweth those who are his.,' and 'Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.'"

The church is a holy mystery. The Lordship of Jesus Christ is a powerful uniting force between otherwise widely divergent points of view. If we ask a diverse group of Christians what they believe a discussion will certainly follow, and tension and disagreement. But if we ask them who they love and follow there is an instant bonding and fellowship.

A distinguishing characteristic of the universal church, however, is a changed life. "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity." The Church is not the world. The Church is IN the world, but not dominated by the values of the world. It is not for us or for anyone to define what is or is not the church. We cannot despise another who says "Jesus is Lord!" But there will be this wonderful, mysterious cry from within every heart, "Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done! Lead us NOT into temptation! Deliver us from evil!"

JESUS IS LORD -THE CREATIVE WORK OF THE SPIRIT

1 Corinthians 12:3 "no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit"

The church is God's own creation. We can form organizations, and take in members, and call them members of the church. But no one can really add or subtract members from the one holy apostolic universal church except God Himself. When the confession is made with conviction, "Jesus is LORD!" a divine work of creation is taking place. Someone's world is shaking, and changing centers; instead of self being the cruel taskmaster, God in Christ is moved to the center, and "old things pass away, and all things are made new." (2 Co. 5:17) You cannot simply "join" the church; you have to be "born" into it— you must know the convicting, convincing power of the Holy Spirit that enables you to say, and to know, "Jesus IS Lord of MY life!"

JESUS IS LORD -THE PRESENT GRACE OF CONFESSION

Romans 10:9 (8-11) "(But what does it say? the Word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart [that is the word of faith which we preach]) that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

The church is alive in the very act of confession. The WORD is near. the confession is not simply an event or one-time thing. It is a living connection to a loving relationship. [The Gospel being read from the center of the church— in the middle aisle— is for a reason: it is a reminder every Sunday that the Living Word of the Gospels, Jesus Christ, who is GOD-WITH-US— the Word who became flesh— is even at this very moment very near to each one of us!] When we confess "Jesus is Lord!" we connect with the great High Priest of the Church! Where Jesus is, THERE is the church! The very name "Jesus" means "Jehovah Saves!" To invoke that name in prayer is to call on the Great High Priest of the church!

THE HIGH PRIEST OF THE CHURCH: - "HAVE MERCY, SON OF DAVID!"

THE GOSPEL STORY OF BARTIMAEUS

In the Gospel lesson blind Bartimaeus seized an opportunity when he knew that Jesus, the Living Word, was near. He cried out "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" That was a profound prayer!

The blind man cried. Those nearby thought the shouting was out of order. But Bartimaeus was in earnest. "Help me!" Jesus heard! He stopped. He called for the blind man. In his haste, blind Bartimaeus left his precious cloak behind as he ran and stumbled and hurried as best he could to where the Living Word waited.

Then came that question again: "What do you want me to do for you?" Bartimaeus was in the hands of the one person in all the Universe who could save him to the uttermost!

THE ASSURANCE OF HEBREWS

7:25 "(Our High Priest) is able to save to the uttermost them that come unto God by him, seeing he ever lives to make intercession for them."

Bartimaeus had come to the one person who could not only sympathize but effectively do something about his deepest needs. The Living Word is the great High Priest, the powerful Advocate in the Presence of the Father. Our text says, "HE IS ABLE!"

"HE IS ABLE TO SAVE!"

"HE IS ABLE TO SAVE TO THE UTTERMOST!"

THE JESUS PRAYER

Bartimaeus' prayer has become a model for the entire Church down across the ages. The devout Jews had been (rightly) taught such great respect and awe for the name of God that it was not to be spoken by human lips. (O.T. Jews read the word Yahweh with their eyes and said the word "Adonai" with their lips. God was known as GOOD, but too high and holy to be easily approached.) But by assuming our humanity, and becoming one with us— our Brother, the Word of God hands that great Name over to us, and we can use that holy name in prayer: JESUS means Jahweh Saves! The name "Jesus" breathed in prayer contains the whole economy of creation and salvation! Whoever prays, "Jesus, Son of God, have mercy!" is welcoming the Son of God who loved us and gave Himself up for us!

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"... "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us sinners!"— this can be the humble, joyful, continual cry of our hearts as we celebrate who we are in Christ. And in that confession of Jesus as Lord the Church lives on forever!

CONCLUSION - Martin Luther and John Wesley are long since dead, but the "reformation" goes on— in your heart and mine— in our congregation as we sincerely seek to confess with our worship, with our words, and also with our attitudes and actions that Jesus is Lord. He is opening our eyes to the glory of his grace.

Prayer - Lord Jesus Christ, whose very name has been given to us to make us your church, open our eyes and help us to see You, and help us to love You better, to the glory of God the Father, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God high and holy, world without end. Amen.

Hymn- Mini-worship sequence, read 144 and sing 1,4 of 145 *Glorious Is Thy Name*

The Promise of Heaven

All Saints Sunday

November 2, 1997

Revelation 21:1-6 *And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth are passed away; and the sea is no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven of God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a great voice out of the throne saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he shall dwell with them, and they shall be his peoples, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God: 4 and he shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain, any more: the first things are passed away. 5 And he that sitteth on the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he saith, Write: for these words are faithful and true. 6 And he said unto me, They are come to pass. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.*

John 11:32-44 *32 Mary therefore, when she came where Jesus was, and saw him, fell down at his feet, saying unto him, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. 33 When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping who came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled, 34 and said, Where have ye laid him? They say unto him, Lord, come and see.*

35 Jesus wept.

36 The Jews therefore said, Behold how he loved him! 37 But some of them said, Could not this man, who opened the eyes of him that was blind, have caused that this man also should not die? 38 Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone lay against it. 39 Jesus saith, Take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time the body decayeth; for he hath been dead four days. 40 Jesus saith unto her, Said I not unto thee, that, if thou believedst, thou shouldest see the glory of God? 41 So they

took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hearest me. 42 And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the multitude that standeth around I said it, that they may believe that thou didst send me. 43 And when he had thus spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. 44 He that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave-clothes; and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go.

MAYBE I WAS MORE SENSITIVE this year than before... but it seems to me that Halloween was more pagan and repulsive this year than ever before. Oh, don't think I'm against innocent fun: I have no problem with Beggars' Night and Masquerades—we've been doing that forever. But this year glorifying the macabre, and emphasizing ignorant statements about life after death, and especially emphases on witches and the occult have been, to my mind, in very poor taste to say the least. Most people have forgotten, if they ever knew, that day on the ancient church calendars which was the real cause for celebration. Hallowe'en means, of course, 'The Eve of All Hallow's Day,' or All Saints Day. All Saints and All Souls were days to especially remember that those who have died in the Lord are not lost and gone, but are very much alive.

It certainly is true that death and what lies beyond is a great mystery. But it seems to me that we could better celebrate Christ's promise of eternal life, and celebrate the one holy church that is made up of those here struggling on earth, and those victorious in the glory of heaven. All Saints is a time to celebrate the promise of eternal life—the promise Jesus gave us of heaven.

THE PROMISE OF HEAVEN IS GOD HIMSELF

When we think of heaven we think in terms of what we shall see, and what we shall do—the golden streets, the mansions Jesus has gone to prepare. And that is understandable. But first of all, heaven is eternal life, and that life is Jesus Christ Himself. "I AM the resurrection and the life!" His words.

The earnest (or guarantee) of heaven is the Presence here in this imperfect world. Certainly life here and now is filled with both pain and pleasure— a full mixture of good and evil. But heaven's reality is never far away, for we have an High Priest who knows and cares how we feel— who has said "I will never leave you." This is NOT heaven— we weep, we hurt, we suffer, we die. people fail us— we fail ourselves sometimes. Jesus feels and cares. Jesus stood and wept at the sorrow of Martha and Mary.

Heaven is where faith becomes sight, and there comes an unveiled beholding of the Presence. A hymn writer wrote:

*"How happy are the saints above
Who once went sorr'ing here
For now they taste unmingled love
And joy without a tear."*

THE PROMISE OF HEAVEN IS FELLOWSHIP WITH THE TRUTH

Death is our enemy, and when it comes there is separation and there is sadness. But for those who trust in God, death is a defeated enemy. In Jesus Christ death has been conquered. We face death with hope— and that makes all the difference. Far from the macabre or the occult, John's glimpse through the door left ajar into heaven in his Revelation sounds like this:

*"The home of God is with mortals. He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his people, and God himself shall be with them; he will wipe
every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying
and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away . . . I am
Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end."*

Heaven will be a place of true fellowship. We will be 'for real,' there, and everyone we see and talk to will be 'for real' as well. No hidden agendas, no back-biting, no slander, no jealousy— no envy! How do I know this? Listen to these words from this same 21st Chapter:

The Promise of Heaven

But for the fearful, and unbelieving, and abominable, and murderers, and fornicators, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars,— their part shall be in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone; which is the second death.

There is a place of eternal separation from God and good. There is reason to view death and the hereafter with serious concern. It is not the subject for costumes and jokes. The perfect fellowship promised in heaven will be far different from the imperfect, flawed fellowship we know here. And what causes the most concern is the fact that I have lied! I may not fill all that list in personal testimony— but I certainly have been afraid! Have you ever lied? Have you ever been afraid to be all you knew God wanted you to be?

But then I think of Paul's words: "But such were some of you!" No, I would say, 'But such were ALL of us!' That is where God's great saving grace comes in! And that is where the witness of the Spirit becomes our promise of eternal life:

THE PROMISE OF HEAVEN IS COMMUNION BEGUN BELOW

Prayer

Investment with a Future

Good News—there's Hope!

November 9, 1997

Mark 12:38-44

A farmer went out walking early one morning, so the old story goes, and on his way to the barn passed a hen and a pig. He said right out loud so the animals could hear him, "I think I'd like some ham and eggs for breakfast."

"That sounds all right by me," said the hen. "No problem."

"Easy for you to say," said the pig. "For you his breakfast is a contribution. For me it is a total commitment."

Our gospel lesson this morning sorts out the difference between a donation and a commitment, which might just be one way to define the difference between faith and mental assent. The account Mark gives tells us that

JESUS OBSERVED THE WAY RELIGIOUS LEADERS MISUSED THEIR OFFICE

Some religious leaders 'just make a donation' of going through the motions, rather than give themselves wholly to God's service. The offenses of the religious leaders are listed:

1. they love attention in the marketplaces

when religious draws attention to itself it is always out of order religious people, or better, people of real faith, are God-centered, not self-centered we wouldn't wear pulpit robes down to Friendly's— but that probably isn't what Jesus is condemning; that is too obvious we can/and sometimes DO wear our 'holiness' on our sleeve

2. They assume the best seats in the synagogue and celebrations

when our relationship to God and the church makes us feel superior and self-righteous it is not from God.

3. they devour widow's houses

it is right and proper for temple workers to be supported by the temple. but temple money is sacred money. it never belongs to the temple workers. this is not "my" property. nor yours, either. it is sacred to God.

4. they for pretense make long prayers

worship can never be pretence. there is a kinship in play-acting and dramatic presentation of the Word. (Donny Woodbridge demonstrated that just this past week) but when we say one thing with our mouth and believe another with our hearts— when the impact of what we say is coolly calculated for the benefit it will bring to us it is very dangerous. [a young preacher needs to settle it that he/she will never say something just to enhance his/her won reputation. there is always the temptation to add something that will "impress" others how smart/ pious/ religious we are. Runaway from that!]

JESUS SAT AND WATCHED THE WAY PEOPLE REALLY WERE AS THEY GAVE

Jesus observed giving styles:

Ted Turner, it is reported, has said he will donate \$1 b (1 followed by 9 zeroes!) to a charity of his choice across ten years: 100 million a year! That may not be impressive to you. But then, too, Ted Turner is reported to have said that he wouldn't miss a "b" or two. A donation? or a commitment??

Jesus observed amounts given, some with a flair, some to be seen. But the only made comments on one gift.

JESUS SEEMED TO SAY THE SMALLEST OFFERING COULD ALSO BE THE LARGEST

It reflected a commitment, not just a donation:

It was a gift of faith in God, beyond the human machinery of the temple

It was an act of worship that symbolized the gift of all her very life.

Was Jesus saying large gifts are not important or necessary? Or was he saying that any time any person gives "self" away to God it is a gift larger than the world can understand?

It was a widow— 'whose houses are devoured by the corrupt religious leaders' So why would a poor widow cast in all she had?

Didn't she know about the corruption in the temple?

Didn't she hate the changes being made in the worship services?

Didn't she know the next generation was missing it?

Why did Jesus make comment? ... didn't the woman know her commitment wouldn't make a difference? ... maybe the giving was doing something for HER

William Willimon told about a man in his early seventies who found himself in a nursing home under supervised care. Rev. Willimon couldn't tell there was anything wrong with him— but then he found out the man had begun working in soup kitchens after his retirement— helping the poor. I suppose that was fine with his family. But then one day he wrote out a check for \$100,000 and gave it to the soup kitchen. Right out of his savings. He couldn't be in his right mind!

Signe Porter's tithes and offerings. In a nursing home 120 miles removed from her church family— pleasant enough— but remote— I would make the trip just to see her. She would give me an envelope for the offering— just a few dollars. And I would take it. It wouldn't come near to covering the cost of the fuel to drive, nor the time it took. But every time I placed that money on the offering plates the next Sunday I had the sense of taking part in something wonderful and holy. It was something, I believe, of the same spirit of this poor widow woman Jesus was watching. She was where we all are, except she knew it— and she dared to give her all.

Whether in ministry— the ministry of our time and life, ordained or lay— or whether with our time and money— Jesus knows the difference between giving for lesser reasons and giving out of faith and love. I want to give God all that I am, and all that I have! How about you?

Prayer

Father in Heaven, You have given us your Son. You have given us Life. Thank you.
Please give us grace to be like You, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hymn - 463 *More Love to Thee, O Christ*

The Story of Ruth

November 9, 1997

Ruth 1:19 *So they two went until they came to Bethlehem.*

The story of Ruth is one of the most beautiful and romantic stories ever written. In fact, when Benjamin Franklin was United States Ambassador to France, he would occasionally attend the Infidels Club - a group of men who spent most of their time searching for and reading literary masterpieces. On one occasion Franklin read the book of Ruth to the club when it was gathered together, but changed the names in it so it would not be recognized as a book of the Bible. When he finished, they were unanimous in their praise. They said it was one of the most beautiful short stories that they had ever heard.

They demanded that he tell them where he had run across such a remarkable literary masterpiece. It was his great delight to tell them that it was from the Bible, which they professed to regard with great scorn and derision.

Well, anyway— the Book of Ruth is just four short chapters you can read in half an hour or so— and I recommend it as a 'good read.'

It starts out sort of like 'The Grapes of Wrath' with a family in trouble because of a drought and because it looked like a lot of people might die of starvation. So one man took his wife and two teenage sons and went looking for relief. He went eastward from Bethlehem and Jerusalem into the mountains of Moab. {You can see Moab from the hill around Jerusalem— and the hills look white as though they were snow-covered. But there is no snow— it is desert and hot— just light colored rock and sand.}

Anyway the family in the story moved to Moab but they never really made it very big. The two sons got old enough to marry, and married local girls, but then the father died. And before either son had become a father they both died and left the mother alone with her two Moabite daughters-in-law.

The Story of Ruth

It was a bad scene. She didn't have any means of support— she couldn't keep up the rent and put food on the table. So she said, "I'm going back home to Bethlehem. I have a few relatives there. That is where home for me will always be." And she got ready to leave.

Now this had to be a pretty remarkable woman, because when she got ready to go back to Bethlehem, which would be a foreign country to her daughters-in-law, BOTH of them said immediately, "We want to come along with you!" And they got their few little possessions together and started out.

But the woman— her name was Naomi— didn't want to impose her will on the girls. She told them, "You are both young and attractive. You won't have any trouble marrying again, here among your own people. Bethlehem is a long, long way from here and a lot different in many ways. Go on back and start over!"

It made a lot of sense, really. And one of the young widows, named Orpah, took Naomi's good advice. She hugged her mother-in-law and kissed her goodbye, and cried, and went back to her father's house in Moab. But the other young widow, Ruth— for whom the book is named— made a little speech that has become more famous than the Gettysburg Address. It goes something like this:

"Don't ask me to leave you or turn back from going with you, for where you go, I will go; wherever you lodge I will lodge; your people will be my people; your God will be my God; where you die, I will die and there I will be buried. The Lord be my witness that I mean it— nothing but death will ever part you and me!" Wow!

Then the Bible records (1:19) "So they two went on until they came to Bethlehem." And it turns out that Bethlehem became a 'house of bread' for them— it really became their home.

What happened just after they came to Bethlehem is part of that fascinating love story. Naomi told Ruth how to make herself attractive to the richest man in town, who just happened to be a bachelor relative of their late husbands. It sounds terribly manipulative, but actually it was pretty wonderful. I won't ruin all the good parts, but some of her advice was, "Now here's how we'll go about it:

"First, take a bath." I don't know what their bathing customs were back then. Once a month? Once a week? Maybe it wasn't the time for it, but go ahead anyway.

"Second, dab on some perfume." Wonder what it was? Chanel No. 1? Naomi's Mystique for Moabite Maidens? Not TOO much, now or it might give him a headache!

"Third, put on your best clothes." Wonder what the style was?

"Fourth, you go to the threshing floor and wait until he's had his fill of meat and drink." Naomi evidently believed that a man cannot think about love on an empty stomach, or at least can only think of one thing at a time.

"Fifth—" ... well I'm not going to tell you the rest of her advice because, well, just because!!

Actually all this advice was to enable Ruth to ask Boaz to be the go'el, the redeemer kinsman, to marry her and fulfill the Levite vows as found in Deut 25:5-10. And what do you know? It worked! Boaz, the confirmed bachelor, was smitten hard! He proposed on the spot— and one of the happiest marriages you can imagine was the result. And both Boaz and Ruth loved mother Naomi, and she got to enjoy her grandchildren.

And do you know what? This alien woman— this widow Moabite became the direct ancestor, the great-grandmother, of David the king, and is listed as a 'fore-mother' of Jesus Christ the Messiah Himself!

Now good story tellers just tell a story and let it go at that. But this one is too rich in one area for me to just let go. I need to say that Ruth left her home so she could go home. She needed to find Bethlehem— the 'house of bread' where she could live. Finding a HOME is a journey every one of us needs to make: The Necessity of Going to Bethlehem

Bethlehem means 'house of bread.' It is "home" or the place where we are fed. To be 'fed' means to me 'nourishment,' and is more than physical.

Where is your home? Where do you go? Where do you stay? Who are your people?
Where is your God? WHERE IS YOUR HOME?

The Story of Ruth

Every home is different. Yet those faithful people who try to put God at the center of their lives, to make God's will essential and not just convenient have one thing in common: there is a commitment, centered in the integrity of God. Spoken or unspoken there is a commitment to hang in there with God and with one another! "Where you go—I go!"

Every one of us decides where we will live, and what we will settle for as "home." Every one of us will be called on to leave, or at least, to go on past the home in which we were born and shaped. If you had strong Christian parents you may be daunted at ever living up to their standard.

If you had, God forbid, insincere parents who were Christian at church and something less at home you may be tempted to think there is nothing to this 'game' of being a Christian. If your home, like Ruth's, was not a believing home you may have to find help in your journey to Bethlehem.

But yes, there is a Bethlehem! There is a house of bread where you can live. There is a family that will take you in! And where that family is found— there is Bethlehem for you!

The church is our Bethlehem, or can be and should be. Our individual homes can become true Bethlehems, 'houses of bread' where we nurture and care for each other. (For a period in my life E.N.C. was a Bethlehem to me!)

Let me say it again: Everyone's home is different. Yet those faithful people who try to put God at the center of their lives, to make God's will essential and not just convenient have one thing in common: there is a commitment, centered in the integrity of God. There is the stability and comfort of love that goes beyond selfishness. "Bethlehem" doesn't depend on wealth or titles. It is where there is love.

I'm reminded of the story of a little girl on the first day of school. She was new in town and the teacher asked her where she lived. The little girl said that Mother and Father were still looking for a place to live. The teacher asked, "You mean you don't have a home?" And the little girl replied, "Oh, yes, teacher! We have a home; we just don't have a house to put it in yet."

- Make your spiritual home with God's people!
- Make the home where you live right now a place of trust and love!
- Stay on the road to Bethlehem all your life!
- Let God build your home!

Read #684 verses 1 & 2 then Sing #734 *Prayer of St. Francis*

The King and the Kingdom

November 23, 1997

Matthew 6:33 *But seek first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness...*

We've come full circle through another church year. But we aren't simply going around in circles. God's people are headed for glory! Real faith is going somewhere! And the reason is— JESUS CHRIST IS KING OF KINGS!

The idea of God as Sovereign is not particularly popular because it reveals God as God not the servant of man's ambitions. Even though God is love, and gave Jesus to die for us, WE are not the center of the Universe! This is a God-centered creation! It is RIGHT for us to worship and bow down before our great KING!

Three Old Testament psalms, Psalm 93, 97 and 99 all begin with the same phrase, "The Lord reigns! The Lord is KING!" Then each one reveals a different facet of the glory that is our King. First— the simple statement itself: The Lord reigns! To think of God as King to say that Jesus Christ is the King of Kings may not have the impact that the words deserve.

I. THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

"The LORD reigneth!" [Jesus said: "All authority is given unto Me in heaven and in earth" (Matthew 28:18)]

- A. This is present tense truth Not "shall one day reign" ... but even NOW He is in charge. Certainly that raises many questions. We hold God accountable for all the injustices of the world in our puny courts of logic. I do not defend god that is as foolish as defending the sun when people throw mud at it. And I know it is a statement of faith, but I do declare: God IS and God is GOOD!
- B. The LORD himself is in charge Not some intermediate power, and not some impersonal force. Jesus declares that the authority is given to Him! It makes a difference when we pray.

God cares when we speak with Him. The cry of our hearts is heard at the center of all authority.

- C. To believe otherwise is to live in a pre-Copernican age, spiritually.

We have a God centered universe. The Universe is not centered around ME, or around YOU or even around the human race!

Even though the finest minds in philosophy and science cannot finally provide adequate theories to allow us to understand unifying patterns of all we can observe of creation, the Bible gives us this word which we may choose to believe: The LORD is in charge of His universe!

II. THE MAJESTY OF GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

"He is clothed with majesty!" (Psalm 93:1) [Jesus declared: "Before Abraham was, I AM! (John 8:58)]

- A. How can we speak of the transcendent majesty of God? I pity those who cannot see His hand in the heavens. We do not worship creation. But creation speaks to us of a Creator. (The beauty all around us speaks to us of God!)
- B. The Psalmist sees God as unperturbed by the noise of many waters. He is not a figurehead ruler; the disasters and appalling happenings that threaten our very sanity are not beyond His control. (93:5) We may depend on God's WORD!

III. THE MERCY OF GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

- "Let the earth rejoice! (97:1)" [Jesus said: "I am come that they might have life..." (John 10:10)]

- A. [Majesty is not always synonymous with caring, but] THIS majestic (transcendent) One is also involved with a people which He calls His own. This great God "preserves the soul of His saints"(v10) Certainly there is MYSTERY here! But God will make Himself known to us all. If we SEEK, we shall FIND. IF we will listen, God will speak.

B. This great God "preserves the soul of His saints"(v10) He takes care of His own!

1. To say that God overcomes evil is not a simplistic statement. We may never understand all that is involved here. I sincerely believe that we do not need to become experts in evil but true Christians are specialists in belonging to God] God's people are called to a clear clean separation from evil (v 10) "Ye that love the Lord, hate evil." [It is a mark of low spiritual attainment to continually ask 'What is wrong with this?' or 'Can I do that and be a Christian?' The person who loves the Lord lives in order to draw nearer to Him. What offends the Holy Spirit offends those who are His temple.]

The LORD (Himself) is the touchstone of that righteousness. (v 12) "Rejoice in the LORD!" Not in the certainty that "we are right."

2. I am interested in democratic process and in doing what I can in saving the United States of America. But God is NOT American, and He is not committed to preserving our way of life as WE see fit. God may well be more interested in you than he is in any institution! If I understand the teachings of Jesus, YOU will be alive and conscious long after the United States of America is ancient history! The church of Jesus Christ will be Christ's BODY eternally! Are you in tune with that fact?

IV. THE MIGHT OF GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

"Let the people tremble! (99:1)" (From Revelation 1:17 18) John the Beloved says "I fell at His feet as a dead man" And Jesus, the glorified Savior King lays his hand on John and says: Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last, and the Living One; and I was dead, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades."

- A. The Old Testament Psalm gives us just a glimpse of God seated between the cherubim. Majestic, YES! LOVING, certainly! But staggering the earth in His holiness. He is executing judgment in Jacob (v 4) The God who is faithful in nature and in creation ... faithful in mercy and loving-kindness .. faithful and just to forgive when we confess our sins ... is also faithful in judgment.

The first part of the New Testament is mostly about the earthly ministry of Jesus, the meek and lowly Nazarene. But that is not how the New Testament ends!

- B. All mankind shall be judged by our response to the Word Christ brought into this world, A word of love and of justice. Christ's love and Christ's justice are not decided democratically. We begin to define them and to understand them only as we come down off the throne of our own kingdoms, and acknowledge Him Lord. There is NO holiness apart from God. ONLY God is holy! All holiness is HIS! But there is GRACE! God accepts sinners! In fact He ONLY accepts sinners!

CONCLUSION: Why speak of this [God's Sovereignty] at all?

- A. Maybe I am reminding myself, (and maybe you, too) as I think again of the greatness and goodness and holiness of God, that whatever it takes, I need to seek repentance and a drawing near to Him. This great king is available to us—
- B. Certainly as an act of worship! I have tried in a pitifully small way to lift up the sovereignty of God so that we might desire to exercise our highest privilege, of (ongoing) worship.

We do not have to wait until Sunday to tell God we love Him! We don't have to wait until we die to sing God's praises! Somehow I feel that when a humble boy or girl or man or woman really worships, there is an echo that sounds throughout eternity! GOD TAKES NOTICE!

"So you are a king?" These words by Pontius Pilate seems so far removed from the questions we ask today about Jesus. Because of our culture and who we are, the idea of kingship doesn't compute very well and, in some cases for some people, it is an abhorrent term. Yet, isn't this the question we all ask about Jesus, in one way or another? "Are you a king?" And whether Christ is King or not, depends upon how we answer our own question. It was only a few weeks ago that Jesus said this to his disciples "Who do people say that I am?" (Mark 8:27) He then turned the same question directly upon them, "But who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:28) Pilate says, "So you are a king?" To Pilate, he didn't seem to be a King but, is he king? What do you say? Is He king?

What would it mean to you and me if Jesus Christ was king just NOW in our lives? What would mean here in our church if we made Jesus Christ king? Would it make any difference? What about in our denomination? What would it mean to Quincy and Boston and the surrounding towns, if Jesus Christ was recognized as `king'? How I would like to know!!

PRAYER (contemporary language)

Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords: grant that all the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

The Hope of Redemption

Advent I - The Feast of St. Andrew

November 30, 1997

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21:28 *Raise your heads!*

Your redemption is drawing near.

Three simple statements about God emerge from the scriptures for this first Sunday of Advent. "Advent," the word, is about anticipation: appearance, approach, arrival, coming, commencement. The basic message of the Bible is that we have a God who comes to where we are. The three wonderful statements, then, about our God are simply: God comes! God comes looking! God comes loving!

I. GOD COMES

If you can believe that, then every other question is secondary, and can be dealt with later. If God gets involved in human affairs there is hope. If you do NOT believe that, if God never comes to where we are, then everything else is chaos, and we may as well go home now.

The miracle of miracles is that God IS, and that he associates with his creation. If you believe Genesis 1:1, and John 3:16, then the words of our text from the lips of Jesus: "Look up! Your redemption is near!" can also be believed.

The miracle of miracles is that God has made us, and has made us for himself. We may not know where we are in either time or space, but God comes! God knows! God cares! God knows where this tiny planet earth orbits a little star in a small galaxy among countless galaxies— and more than that, God knows and cares where you slept last night, and why you came to church this morning! Our God comes!

II. GOD COMES LOOKING

In the Beginning -In the creation story, in the Garden of Eden, after man and woman had lost their innocence God came striding through the green glory of his creation calling, "Adam! Where are you?" God was very evidently calling in love. The story makes it clear that Adam and Eve and God had had some sort of fellowship; walking in the cool of the day. After the guilty pair had hidden in shame God came looking for them. There was an accountability, yes. But there was concern, and love, and provision.

Not Just in the Beginning - That call to Adam and Eve is repeated in your life and mine over and over again. If we stop just for a moment, even if we are hiding somewhere in shame, we hear that Voice calling our name! God comes looking! God comes calling! The First Advent of Jesus was when God came looking for every one of us. By the Cross of Christ where Jesus died for our sins, and by his Holy Spirit God still comes looking for men and women who will walk with him.

At the End of Time as We Know it - Advent reminds us that there will be a Parousia—a time of revealing, when all the world will hear the call: "ADAM! WHERE ARE YOU?" That is what the Luke 21 passage is saying. These words of Jesus have been a source of controversy across the centuries. Distress, and fear, and the shaking of the very powers of heaven, and in the same breath redemption and great glory. Taken literally, they seem to say that before the people Jesus was talking to had died the end of the world would come. Two thousand years later, the earth is still here. Still Jesus said: Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. We can get hung up in trying to find some esoteric code, or we can plunge into the truth that we live by trusting Jesus, and He is coming again to meet every one of us.

One person's hope is another person's terror. When Jesus calls we will run with joy to meet him, or we will go looking for fig leaves to cover our nakedness.

Jesus wants us to lift up our heads and greet Him with joy!

III. GOD COMES LOVING!

How do we go about lifting up our heads— anticipating our meeting with God with JOY?

This whole Christmas Season is about one kind or other of anticipation— or, in most cases, some mixture of both kinds. The climax of the Christmas Parade this afternoon is the coming of Santa. Santa has a list, and he checks it twice— to see who is naughty and nice. But it doesn't matter— he is always jolly, and doesn't really intrude into your personal life.

The climax of Advent anticipation is a little different. One who came as a Baby in a Manger is coming this Second Time as a King. The king is coming— he is coming, looking for you. He is coming in love, calling your name and mine! "Adam! Where are you?"

One person's dread is another person's anticipation. People who tell exactly how the Second Coming will take place will always have a following— and will always be wrong. [The end was eminent in Scotland in the year 700 A.D., in Italy in 1260; in Holland in 1533; in England in 1843; in New York City in 1914; London in 1934 and in Grannis, Arkansas in 1976. A person named "Edgar Whisenut" wrote a book called 88 reasons why Jesus will come in '88— September 11,12, or 13!! But NO ONE except the Father, can know the time and place when Jesus will come.] Before Paul had written 1 Thessalonians people had already started having trouble with the idea of Christ's Coming. Peter also spoke exactly to this mystery: (He wrote)

(2 Peter 3:3-) "... scoffers will come . . .saying 'Where is the promise of his coming? ...all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation...' But then he goes on to say, "But beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness, but is long-suffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."

A key word in both Paul's and Peter's handling of the Second Coming is the word blameless. They both tell us exactly HOW we can we genuinely look forward to

The Hope of Redemption

meeting Jesus Christ face to face without shame! "Add that which is lacking in your faith," writes Paul (I Thess 3:10), "so that you can be blameless at Christ's coming." Peter says exactly the same thing: (2 Peter 1:1-5) He writes: "Add to your faith!"

Are these men saying we aren't saved if we aren't perfect and complete? Are they saying we need something beside faith to be saved? No, rather they are saying a genuine faith will be a living, growing thing. If our faith brings us into saving relationship with God, then it will be a living, growing faith.

Peter says, "Add to your faith virtue— and to virtue knowledge, and to knowledge self-control, and to self-control perseverance, and to perseverance godliness, and to godliness brotherly kindness— and top it all off with love, genuine love!

There is a great deal of difference between being blameless and faultless. By God's grace we can run to meet this God who comes when he comes calling for us! God comes! He comes looking! He comes looking for your love!!

Prayer

O Father God, grant us grace to turn away from all the works of darkness, and put upon us the armor of light. Now in this mortal life, in which your Son Jesus Christ came be one with us in great humility, help us know and love you; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge all the peoples of the earth, living and dead, we may rise unashamed to join him in the life eternal; through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, now and for ever. Amen. (prayer adapted from American BCP)

#554 - It is Well with my Soul (or, Jesus, You are My Life)

Highway of Hope

Advent II

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord"

December 7, 1997

Luke 3:1-6

Advent is a time to prepare.

Exactly fifty-six years ago December 7 was also a Sunday. Although I don't remember it, our family went to church in the morning, went home to Sunday dinner, and I suppose for us it was just another ordinary Sunday. My father never allowed us to listen to the radio on Sunday, although he made an exception for Toscaninni and the NBC symphony in the afternoon. So we had no way of knowing what was going on half way around the world. But fifty-six years later I can still remember exactly where I was, as we came down the church stairs into the 'NYPS auditorium,' and I can still remember what time it was and who told us that our nation had been attacked at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, and that we were now at war. Today is the 56th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

History tells us that our admirals and generals knew of the danger of such an attack but they did not take it seriously. Radar was in its infancy, but the radar outposts clearly saw squadrons of airplanes approaching Hawaii from the north that were not from any American carrier or base. Still none of the warnings was considered seriously. And so a tragedy occurred which led to the deaths of thousands of American young men in uniform.

Advent is a little like a warning— it tells of a God who comes looking for our love. There is ample warning and enough time for us to get ready to greet this God with joy. The key to whether or not his coming is a time for hiding or a time for fellowship lies in the kind of preparation we are willing to make.

1. A Savior at a particular time in a particular place: The gospel lesson today introduces John the Baptist. The writer, Luke, emphasizes the exact time when John was preaching and the political circumstances into which Jesus entered the world arena. It's important that Luke is so specific in times and dates; he intends us to see that God came down at a particular time into a very specific political situation. The Baptist told the people that soon they would meet Messiah, and that Messiah wanted to baptize them all with the Holy Spirit and fire. But first they needed to prepare. And many of them did just that. They confessed their sins, they repented, they were baptized as a sign they were looking for Messiah's coming.

Last week, on the first Sunday in Advent, we said that God comes, and that he comes looking, calling "Adam! Where are you?!" He comes calling your name and mine. The message of John the Baptist, that God's imminent coming is a time for preparing, is still as valid today as it was when he first preached it. The need for repentance extends to all mankind.

Repentance basically means "a turning." It means a change of directions, or a willingness to change the directions of our lives.

2. God comes looking. The initiative is his. He is looking for a response of trust, of love, of turning. He comes to us so we can be together. But the turning is on our part (Amos 3:3 "Can two walk together unless they are agreed?") We need to agree with God. Perhaps we think we don't have many (if any) sins. But maybe we need to clean our spiritual eyeglasses.

Remember a couple of years ago the problem with the Hubble Space Telescope—it had a flaw in a mirror which prevented it from focusing clearly? The manufacturer's mistake had rendered the \$1.5 billion telescope almost useless. After a 5-month investigation, a NASA panel uncovered what had gone wrong. The NASA engineers learned of the flaw before Hubble was launched because of a test by a "null corrector," as it is called. It is the principal optical instrument used to test the telescope and measure the progress of the polishing. They discounted the results of the test, however, because "engineers working on the mirror were confident that

their primary test instrument had been assembled so carefully that it could not be giving false readings." But it was giving false readings, they learned too late. Their testing instrument, in which they had placed complete trust, so much so that they refused to consider the warning signs that it had not been "so carefully" assembled.

There's an Advent message here. Within us there is a spiritual "instrument" that tells us, if we'll heed it, that the time has come for us to admit our flaws, to confess our sins, and so to prepare to meet the Savior.

If you thinks sins are first of all what you DO— you might think again! Your sins may be attitudes— they might be who or what is really at the center of your life— creeping into crowd out the Life God wants to share...anything and everything that makes meeting this God who is coming something to fear instead of something to anticipate with joy.

3. God comes to us along the highway of our simply turning to him.

Reporter Terry Anderson was imprisoned in Lebanon for more than six and a half years, 2,454 days, ending in 1985. At first he was blindfolded most of the time and held in chains. He was losing his capacity to think. When asked what he wanted, he replied that he wanted a Bible. An object thumped onto his bed. He removed his blindfold and found a Bible. He began to read, starting with Genesis.

Terry Anderson was raised as a Roman Catholic but had not been practicing his faith for many years. That Bible was like a gift from heaven. He read and read, and thought about his life. He had lots of time to think. He wanted to confess that he had hurt his first wife and daughter. He wanted to confess his many mistakes and his arrogance. He wasn't sure that people liked him and he certainly didn't like himself very much.

Later in the first year of his captivity, Terry Anderson became aware that other hostages were living next door. One was a priest, Father Lawrence Jenco. He asked the guards if he could see the priest. "I am a Catholic and I

want to make a confession," he said. His captors agreed and Father Jenco came to Terry Anderson's room. Both men took off their blindfolds. It had been 25 years since he had made a confession. Father Jenco gently encouraged him. Terry Anderson began telling the priest of his sins. There was much to confess! A bad marriage. Casing other women. Drinking. It was a tremendously emotional experience. When he had finished, both he and Father Jenco were in tears. Father Jenco then laid his right hand upon Anderson's head and proclaimed, "In the name of a gentle, loving God, you are forgiven." This was a turning point in Terry Anderson's life. His faith deepened. He had begun the process of turning around, leaving the darkness and facing the light. This is what repentance is like.

When the Bible says that John came preaching "Good news," we wonder how Luke can call confessing our sins and repentance "good news." Then we see that it is only in confessing our sins and repenting that we open the way for Jesus to come to us. He is waiting to hear us say, "Come, O Christ! I need You! I want You to take away my sin and walk with me!" Do you see that in this light, repentance is truly "good news,?" It becomes the Highway of Hope, because it opens us up to life with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We still have: A Savior at a particular time in a particular place:

John told the people there at the Jordan River that if they would repent Messiah would come! This same Jesus Christ is just as interested in your life and mine— and by His Spirit He is here just now in this Advent service. I know we are "anticipating" his coming. But don't miss the full message— he came, he comes, he is coming again— and he comes where meek souls will receive him. Not receive a creed or a doctrine— no matter how true or important— nor receive a fellowship in a church, although that will come in due time— but first of all— make a way to receive this Savior and Friend into your life right where you are today!

Joy in His Coming

December 14, 1997

Luke 3:18 (John) preached good news unto the people

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Everybody ought to have at least one friend like John the Baptist. I know this is the man who wore strange clothing, and who ate locusts and wild honey. This is the man who shouted at people, and strode through the desert regions crying, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" But when I say we could use a friend like John, it isn't his appearance or his diet, or even the fact that he was a great prophet or preacher that I'm thinking about. Just what kind of friend do I think that John the Baptist might be?

That friend would have the courage to be real. He would accept me as I was, but at the same time, he would have enough respect for me to tell me where he thought I might be headed for trouble. A friend like John the Baptist would lay it on the line: "This is how it is!" But the best thing about a friend like John the Baptist, if we ever had one, would be a confidence that God wanted to make a difference in my life! With a friend like that there would always be room for HOPE! Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a friend like that?

Today's Theme for Advent is JOY! The scripture readings are all about casting away fears, and rejoicing because the King of Kings has promised to come to be with his people.

Zephaniah (3:14) says "Sing aloud! Be glad, rejoice- the King is here and we won't see evil any more!" Isaiah (12:2) shouts: "God is my salvation! I will trust and not be afraid! With JOY we draw water from the wells of salvation!" And from his jail cell where he wrote the letter to the Philippians, (4), Paul tells us all: "Rejoice! Rejoice!! The LORD is near! Don't be care-full and troubled, but instead cast your worry on the Lord!"(par.) The theme for the day is joy!

So when we first read it, then, John's words in the wilderness, calling people "snakes" and threatening God's judgment seems not to fit at all with "Rejoice in the Lord always," and "Rejoice and exult with all your heart," and "Shout aloud and sing for joy," these other readings for this Sunday, the Sunday of Joy, (or "Gaudete" Sunday, from the Latin term for "rejoice.") So, is John the Baptist and his rugged message out of place here? Not at all!!

Like a true friend, John is preparing us to meet God with JOY instead of shame. John is telling us that true repentance is not just saying you're sorry! Gospel repentance involves a change in the way you live your life.

If we are resisting God's love, and don't want to change our ways to walk with Him, John's message will seem harsh and mean spirited. If we realize our friend is telling us that God is coming, calling for us, and this is how we get ready to meet Him, then John's call to repentance really GOOD NEWS! It is an invitation to a permanent relationship with the King of Kings.

Everybody ought to have at least one friend like John the Baptist.

John did not try to impress people or 'make points' for himself— a friend like him would be a HUMBLE friend! ("He must increase— I must decrease") John was not afraid to tell the truth wherever he was— he would be an HONEST friend. (It got him into big trouble; but not with God!)

But John was also SENSITIVE and even GENTLE. He did not expect all the people to be like he was— pacing through the desert. His message was SIMPLE: Let LOVE change your life! Share your wealth! Give clothing— give food!

John said: Start where you are and live out your repentance! The people said, "What does that mean?" John said, "Loving is giving and sharing!" Then the (reviled) tax collectors said, "What about us?" John did NOT tell them to enter a monastery. He did not even tell them to quit their hated jobs. He just said, "Bring God's fairness into where you work!" Then even soldiers— armed and trained warriors— said, "What about us?" John said, "You don't have to wear camel hair clothes and eat bugs like me— just be good, honest, just soldiers!"

No wonder the people came! Just getting ready for Messiah— even before he comes— gets to be exciting! God is pleased!! and this is JOY: THIS IS GOOD NEWS!

Everybody ought to have at least one friend like John the Baptist.

John was the Introducer— the Announcer— the one who says, "Heeerrre's JESUS!" He told the people: Behold! The Lamb of God! He introduced people to Jesus, and Jesus brought them life and light and joy!

There is a sense in which we do have a friend like John the Baptist! We have the Holy Spirit, the Bible, and the church to tell us that God comes calling "Adam! Where are you?" Comes calling out your name and mine. All the graces of the Body of Christ combine to bring Jesus near to you and me. We have heard the word: Repent! Turn! Lay aside lesser loves! Share what you are! Share what you have! Behold! The Lamb of God! We hear it again in the scripture today. Everybody ought to have at least one friend like John the Baptist.

I have had people who have been for me my John the Baptist! I have had a friend or two that could look me in the eye and say, "You need to change your direction!" Have you had a John the Baptist in your life? If you have, you are blessed!

By the grace of God it may be that you and I can grow to be someone's John the Baptist! Maybe we could, by the help of the Holy Spirit, be real— and loving— and honest— and caring— until we could introduce people to Jesus.

If we can ourselves prepare, and draw near, and seek God's face during these days of Advent, and if our repentance filters out into sharing and caring— then we just might find as we try to help others that we, ourselves, will find a deeper blessing this Christmas than we have known before! And that just might be why we can call this Sunday a time for rejoicing.

Prayer

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we have no power or strength of ourselves, let your bountiful grace and mercy lead us in your will and way, and deliver us from evil; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom,

Joy in His Coming

with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen. Hymn:
Open My Eyes #461 Silently now I wait for Thee

Responsible Love: The Gift of God

December 21, 1997

Advent IV

Ephesians 3:17 ... so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith

3:19 ... that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God

Ephesians 3:17 21

Introduction

Christmas is a lot of different things to every one of us! Christmas is wonderful!

Christmas is exhausting! Christmas is expensive! Christmas is expectations!

Christmas is love! Christmas can and often does reflect the many sides of what we mean when we say the word "love."

I. CHRISTMAS AND LOVE AND GIVING

- A. CONDESCENDING LOVE - Like a parent to a small child: sometimes love at Christmas means saying "It's wonderful!" when you open a present.

Some of the presents I made or bought for my father and mother when I was small were pretty awful. But somehow they actually seemed to cherish them. What you really mean is "It's wonderful that you thought enough of me to give me a present but, really, what do we need an ash tray for when nobody smokes in our house?"

- B. REFLECTED LOVE - There is a joy in seeing other people who seem to be happy. Sometimes love at Christmas means nearly bursting with joy when the beautiful boys and girls of the Sunday School sing about the Babe in the manger.

- C. COMPASSIONATE LOVE - Sometimes love at Christmas means thinking about Mary and Joseph and what it means even in our time to desperately need a place to stay the night. That kind of love might make an on-going gift to the Quincy Crisis Center (shameless plug!)

- D. "PRESENCE! KIND OF LOVE!" - With loved ones, of course! But best of all with God Himself! Emmanuel! Sometimes the deepest significance of the Season dawns on us once again! Sometimes we have a "holy moment," when it seems that God Himself draws near, and we know that He really does love us tenderly. And what more could we ever ask? There is a higher level of love!
- E. RESPONSIBLE LOVE! (cf Maddox Responsible Grace) Maybe sometimes, just sometimes, love at Christmas might be saying, "Thank You God! You seem to have done all the giving! What can I get You for Christmas??" Maybe that the best Christmas love is not expressed until "gifts are exchanged" at this highest relationship of all! God's wonderful, gracious Gift to us may be echoed by the gift of our love and our trust to God! [What do you get a God who has everything?] - The life of Mary, the Mother of Our Lord, tells us how God needs human love to carry his gift of Life to the world He loves so very much.

II. THE RESPONSIBLE LOVE OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

- A. She was the first one to know that there was going to be that First Christ-mas. We call the occasion when Mary found out "THE ANNUNCIATION." God sent an angel, Gabriel, to visit Mary. The story is found in Luke 1:26-38:

Now in the sixth month [of Elizabeth's pregnancy] the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee, called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

And coming in, he said to her, "Hail, O woman richly blessed! The Lord is with you!"

But she was greatly troubled at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus.

"He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end."

And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I know no man?"

And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God.

"And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. For nothing will be impossible with God."

And Mary said, "Behold the bondservant of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

- B. THIS STORY IS "HOLY GROUND" to me. We stand in awe of the way God chose to become one with us; it was a unique a ONE TIME HAPPENING in the history of our world. I believe it literally, actually, physically and spiritually took place: God became incarnate in the womb of a virgin. GOD COULD HAVE SENT His Son full grown, a perfect Man formed from nothing; He chose instead to ask a beautiful teenager if she would be the mother of a very special, very human baby Boy.
- C. This is deeply significant: GOD CHOSE TO BRING HIS WORD TO EARTH THROUGH A COMBINATION OF SUPERNATURAL AND VERY HUMAN MEANS.
 - 1. The Annunciation was divine miracle. But Mary had to make a very human decision. Mary made that decision: she said, "Behold the handmaiden of the Lord!"
 - 2. The Conception was a divine miracle; the Baby grew within her, the Gift of the Ages was, like all babies, a miracle of creation beyond her understanding or ability.
 - 3. GOD STILL ENLISTS A COMBINATION OF SUPERNATURAL AND VERY HUMAN MEANS WHENEVER HE REVEALS HIMSELF and His love to this needy world! God could preach sermons and bind up wounds and speak out against evil by sending fantastic creatures; He chooses to use human, imperfect, stum-bling men and women like you and me.

D. MARY'S WILLINGNESS IS A VITAL LINK IN GOD'S PLAN.

Yes, Mary was blessed and highly favored. But God's purpose was not for Mary's benefit alone. The Gift was for the whole world, to the glory of God. Mary reflects this in "THE MAGNIFICAT" [the response she gave to the affirmation or worship of her unborn child she received from her cousin, Elizabeth: Luke 1:46 55:]

And Mary said: "My soul exalts the Lord. And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant; For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed. For the Mighty One has done great things for me; and Holy is His Name. AND HIS MERCY IS UPON GENERATION AFTER GENERATION TOWARD THOSE WHO FEAR HIM. He has done mighty things with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and He has exalted those who were humble. He has filled the hungry with good things; And sent the rich away empty handed. He has given help to Israel His servant, In remembrance of His mercy, As He spoke to our fathers, To Abraham and his offspring forever."

As she praises God, Mary is grateful for what has happened to her, and that is only right; but THE CENTER OF HER PRAISE IS GOD HIMSELF.

III. OUR CHALLENGE TO RESPONSIBLE LOVE TO GOD

- A. IT IS NOT A NEW THOUGHT that at Christmas we should let the Christ "be born in us today!" In fact, it is a common theme among Christians: Let Jesus in! Make room for Jesus in our hearts! One poet put it this way:

*Though Christ a thousand times
In Bethlehem be born,
Yet not within your heart
Your heart is still forlorn!*

IT IS NOT A NEW THOUGHT that Christ within is the Source of Life and Light and all spiritual blessing. We say: "Yes! There is room in our hearts! Be born in us!" We rejoice in the Name "God with us! Emmanuel!" But this is all about our salvation— about what God is doing for us!

B. What we dare not forget is that like Mary, WE MUST ACCEPT THE

RESPONSIBILITY AS WELL AS THE HONOR OF SHARING THE LIFE of Christ that God has placed within us! There is only one Blessed Virgin Mary, and she is unique in her place of honor. But believe it or not, God comes to every one of us who will listen, and asks us if we will bring Christ into the world!

I know that is almost sounds sacrilegious to say it, BUT GOD STILL USES A COMBINATION OF SUPERNATURAL AND VERY HUMAN MEANS TO BRING HIS WORD, HIS SON JESUS TO THOSE WHO NEED HIM!

What do we give a God who fills the Universe? Remember the words to the carol "In the Bleak Midwinter" ??

*What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd I would bring him a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;
Yet what can I give him give him my heart.*

SOMEHOW YOUR WILLINGNESS IS VITAL TO GOD'S PLAN. IT WON'T MAKE LIFE EASIER, OR LESS COMPLICATED. IT DIDN'T MAKE MARY'S LIFE EASIER!!

CHRIST WITHIN YOU AND ME WILL MEAN SOME MISUNDERSTANDING AND SOME BURDENS FOR US AS WELL.

The Apostle Paul prayed that the Church the church of HIS time as well as YOU and ME this very day might know this miracle. Ephesians (3:17 21). I read from the translation by Eugene H. Peterson called The Message:

I ask (the Father) to strengthen you by his Spirit— not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength— that Christ will live in you as you open the door

and invite him in. And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to take in with all Christians the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.

God can do anything, you know— far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us.

Glory to God in the church!

Glory to God in the Messiah, in Jesus!

Glory down through all the generations!

Glory through all millennia! Oh, yes!

Conclusion:

There is no question about the wonderful Gift God has given to us all at Christmas! We have the gift of grace of life eternal through the gift of God's Son.

But may there be a gift exchange as well! May we say with all the love we can bring to prayer: Behold the handmaid of the Lord! Behold the bondservant of the Lord! Lord, Here's my heart! Love this world through me! Amen!

Prayer

(Will you join me in a time of prayer— just a bit longer than usual at the end of a sermon: Will you pray in your heart— and thank God for His gift of grace to you?)

We thank you for coming to Mary, and for her willingness to obey Your Holy will whatever the cost might be to her.

We thank you for coming to us— and unworthy as we may be, we ask for grace to respond to your love. We ask you to have your holy way in all our lives. Let us magnify the Lord, and exalt His name together!

Bless us this Christmas Week - - grant safe travel to those coming and going to meet with loved ones - - grant to those who are in the darkness of despair, or of want, or need of any kind a new light in their darkness.

Lord God, hear the hearts of this congregation today!

Accept the responsible love of our hearts!

169 StL *O Little Town of Bethlehem*

Word of Life

Christmas Eve Homily

December 24, 1997

Luke 2; John 1

A simple story is what has brought us together here tonight. Christmas is so many big and wonderful things we sometimes forget how small and wonderful was the beginning.

A worried husband trying to find a place for his wife, who is about to have her first baby. A young mother in a cave-stable behind a small town inn. A brand new baby Boy. And then angels and shepherds. And later a Star, and wise men. And now, 2,000 years later hundreds of carols, and thousands of different Christmas traditions, and literally millions of personal memories.

The prophets told how there would be a light shining for people who sat in darkness. And then Luke told this simple story. Scriptures clearly said to look for One whose name would be 'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.' And then came this simple story. The world looked for a conqueror. God sent a Baby.

That Baby was God's final Word. By 'final' I do not mean a threat or an ultimatum, or anything like that. I simply mean that what God has to say to the world, to you and to me, He has finally said, and is still saying, in Life that began in that stable on the first Christmas so long ago.

Luke tells the simple story from birth to the Cross to the Ascension. John begins his story by calling this One who was born in Bethlehem, "the Word!" He writes: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

When we put these two introductions of Jesus Christ together the story grows and glows until we find that every one of us has the privilege to take a place in the Reality of God's great Gift!

In this Baby of Bethlehem, John tells us, God has lighted a light that shines to every person in all Creation. "That was the light," John wrote, "that lights everyone who has come into the earth." The WORD of LIGHT is not limited to Jewish people at Christ's time, nor to Catholics or to Protestants, or to any race or nation. God's WORD is meant to shine wherever there is darkness.

[Whatever darkness there may be in YOUR life just now, this WORD is more than a good feeling at holiday time! Good news! The Baby of Bethlehem is very much alive, and through Him God is shining into dark places!]

In this Christmas Story, John tells us, God is speaking a word of LOVE and of FAMILY. "As many as receive HIM," John wrote, "to THEM he gives the privilege to become sons and daughters of God Himself!" The WORD of LOVE and FAMILY says to all people everywhere that they can come to know God, and to call Him "Father." Through this Baby of Bethlehem we are offered the blessings of ADOPTION, and of NEW LIFE along with the assurance of FORGIVENESS OF SINS! All that from the simple story of one Baby's birth!

[There is an alone-ness and a loneliness to being human. We become separated from loved ones by distance. We become separated by silly quarrels and misunderstanding. We separate ourselves by stupid quirks of disposition. In our society divorce often does great damage with irreparable tears in relationships. For many of us here this evening, our loved ones have been removed from our presence by death. God Himself cannot change what has been done— but in this Babe of Bethlehem there IS the promise: "If you will let Me enter your life, you can be part of My Family! My Father will be YOUR Father! My brothers and sisters will be YOUR brothers and sisters! You will never be alone again!]

God has spoken a Word. It is a Word of Light. It is a Word of Life. It is a Word of LOVE. It is a FAMILY Word! Christmas is a truth for real people!

But the Christmas story is never complete until it has been received. If you have never welcomed Jesus Christ into your life, you can receive Him right now! December 24, 1997 in the Wollaston Church of the Nazarene you can receive the Lord Jesus Christ into your personal history. Receive Him as you are- Receive Him as you are led of God's Spirit.

The invitation to the Lord's Table is open to all who will come humbly to receive Him! Receive Him by yourself - with a friend - with your entire family. Receive Him, be a part of God's family!!

—

December 24, 1997

THE HOLY COMMUNION for Christmas Eve

All who truly repent of your sins, and who truly seek to worship the Lord Christ, and all who will acknowledge Jesus Christ 'Lord,' and all who desire to walk in His ways—draw near with faith and receive this Holy Sacrament to your soul's comfort.

The Lord Jesus Christ has said: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is ONE. Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. The second commandment is like unto the first: Thou shalt love your neighbor as yourself. On these hang all the law and the prophets. Shall we pray:

Search us, O God, and know our most private thoughts. Try us, and show unto us the deepest motives, the real state of our hearts. Forgive us where we have been selfish, or insensitive, or sinful in any way. We cannot keep the Great Commandment, and truly love You, O God, with all our heart, soul, and mind unless You in mercy grant to us the grace of Your indwelling Spirit. We cannot love each other as we should unless Your love is shed abroad in our hearts.

Prayer of Confession and Absolution (in lieu of printed confession, on behalf of all truly taking part)

Lord, You see us here as we are. We confess that we need your grace: we have left undone those things which we ought to have done; we have done those things which we ought not to have done— there is no health in us.

But You, Lord, are gracious, and plenteous in grace and mercy. Forgive us all our transgressions, and grant to us Your great peace.

Lord, You have said that You are faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. You do forgive all those who confess to You, and who come to You in humble faith. Help us to draw near to You this Christmas Eve we pray. Let us Affirm our faith:

#67 STL (Responsive Te Deum Laudamus)

The Words of Institution

Father God: The same night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat: THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

Likewise after supper he took the cup and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me:

We praise you for the mystery of our salvation! We truly believe Christ has died! - Christ is Risen! - Christ will come again! Amen

The Informal Invitation

("This is not my table . . .wherever you are in your spiritual journey, if the Host invites you, Come! Let us pray:)

We do not presume to come to this table trusting in our own righteousness. But your Word tells us, Holy and gracious Father, that in your infinite love you sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to reconcile us to You, the God and Father of all.

This same Jesus, born in Bethlehem, has said to us, "Come unto Me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest!

And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us: Our Father which art in heaven . . .

Now, humbly we receive the Gifts of God for the People of God

A Glimpse into the Silent Years

Wisdom from the Holy Family

December 28, 1997

Samuel; Psalm 148; Colossians; Luke

Between the Birth of Jesus and his public ministry there is a period of thirty years. In all these thirty years, while the Baby became a boy and then a man, we have just one brief opportunity to look in on the life of the Holy Family. When Jesus turned twelve the scriptures take us along as Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem, where he was admitted to the status of manhood. In modern terms we might understand that this was his bar mitzvah. Perhaps Jesus had been along on other trips to Jerusalem during the High Holy Days, but this was different. He would read from Torah, and prove he understood what he had read.

Certainly there could never be a better mother or father-figure than Mary and Joseph. Scriptures tell us Joseph was a devout man, and we know that he was a man who obeyed God's clear will. And Mary— well, she was Mary! Most highly favored of all the women of the earth, certainly she was a perfect mother. And yet, amazingly, the holy family had problems. It ought to make us all feel better that if Mary and Joseph could get 'bent out of shape' on occasion, maybe there is hope for us all.

I. Jesus Is Missing

You know the story— in the holiday/Holy Day crush in Jerusalem the caravan back to Galilee got started, and Mary assumed Joseph knew where Jesus was, perhaps with cousins— and Joseph presumed that Jesus had told Mary where he would be, and so they went the whole day without either of them seeing him. That night as they got ready to sleep they realized their wonderful son was not with them. They panicked! Jesus was "lost!"

The key word here for us is "presumed." They "took for granted." No, it was not a fatal blunder. Yes, it turned out all right. And certainly, if the holy family did it we do

worse, on occasion. But is always dangerous to "take for granted," which is not the same thing as living by trust and faith. We do assume some things because we trust the integrity of another's covenant promise. But to "assume" that loved ones always know what we mean, or why we do what we do, or take for granted they know we love them without ever telling them— to "presume" that they will be all right even if we miss an important event— there is a danger here.

Which brings us to the next key word; the story goes on to say that they "sought, anxiously." Their love sprang into action right here. Joseph and Mary were willing to expend any energy in order to restore normal family fellowship. They spent an anxious day on the road back to Jerusalem, and then at least part of a third day in the city looking, asking, searching. Finally they found him in the last place they looked, of course: in the Temple where he had gone in the first place. he was not just answering rudimentary questions now; Jesus was both listening and asking astounding questions of the doctors of philosophy and religion.

Every parent ever living has known something of this searching and this anxiety. When our children are young the searching is more literal and physical. Maybe as they get older we need to try to see where their questions are coming from, and find where they are in a spiritual sense.

[Our own Stephen (now 40 with children of his own) got lost in the Museum of Natural History; we were on a 'family safari;' I suppose Steve was about nine; we all six of us by the saber-tooth tiger display and then I suppose we 'presumed;' Steve came up missing and we spent half an Hour of the most desperate searching imaginable there in one of the largest museums in the world. We 'sought anxiously;' and when we found the little fellow sitting in the sub-basement train station wiping his eye with his sleeve, we certainly asked each other "why?" Actually Steve's first words were "Where were you!" !!]

Finally, a very revealing word came from Mary's lips: "Son, why?" If Mary the mother of Jesus couldn't understand her Son's behavior, then God have mercy on us all!! Was there some sort of 'generation gap' manifesting itself here? Every last parent with teens and near-teens in the whole world has asked this question in one way or

many. It is almost a "given" that generations need a lot of mutual understanding and love!

II. Three Wondrous Gifts/Resources

...for extending the LOVE in our Families (from the Colossian text:) The "given" is love. [[Love, the other-centered, indefinable glue that sticks families together— in danger of being fragmented by so many shouting voices, attractive games, selfish vices— etc.]]

The three Resources to strengthen any family love are: the peace of God, the Word of God, the Name of the Lord Jesus. They are practical gifts, and here is how you open them and use them:

[I'll take them in reverse order— as it were I'm working from the ground up— :]

The foundation is the name of Jesus. We are Christians. Christ-ones. So let it be foundational to all we are and do that we live in relationship to Him. "Do all that you do in Jesus' name!" Anything and everything that you cannot do with the approval of Jesus must be discarded. (Where that leaves games of killing and mayhem, well...I leave that to you just now... I know we have come a long way from strict guides of conduct—) Jesus will not discard you when you fail him. But

The house on the foundation is the Word of God. "Let the Word of God dwell in you richly." The way we know Jesus is through the Bible. The way we understand God's will is to read the Bible, and to think seriously about how the Bible speaks to your situation and mine.

The way we live in that house is the Peace of God. "Let the Peace of God rule!"

When we are "operating on all cylinders" in our walk with God we have (*Romans 14:16 "Love, peace, and JOY in the Holy Ghost.) Then when there is any sort of backsliding they seem to depart in that same reverse order: first the JOY goes— then the PEACE.

When the PEACE of God is disturbed, there is a reason that must be sought out!

III. You Can't Have The Peace Of God Apart From The God Of Peace.

Wherever you are on your spiritual journey you can stop and invite the God of Peace to enter your situation and begin to bring His peace to bear on your relationships, beginning with you, yourself.

God's peace does not come from theory or doctrine— but from BEING RIGHT WITH GOD! God HIMSELF is the Source of Peace! He wants to be your Friend— and He IS— if you will

Prayer

Father, help us to live as the holy family, united in respect and love.

Bring us to the joy and peace of Your eternal home. Grant Your blessing to all families everywhere so that they may enter into the Christmas joy that came down to us through Christ's birth. We ask this in Jesus Name. Amen.

#97 Be Still, My Soul

Prayer of the Day: Almighty God, you have made yourself known in your Son, Jesus, and redeemer of the world. We pray that his birth as a human child will set us free from the old slavery of our sin; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Path of Life

Faith in the Presence of Fear

December 28, 1997

John 20:19-31; Psalm 16

We stand on the threshold of a New Year. The record of 1997 is largely written. What's done is done; what's left undone is left undone, and there's no changing that. This is a time to look ahead, a time to anticipate and to plan for the future.

As we stand between the once was and the is not yet, what sort of claim do you suppose God might claim for your life and mine?

What is there in the months ahead that God would have us do individually and as a this church? How do you suppose we can bear witness to God's saving power? How can we help our Chinese ministry? What sort of New Mission do you suppose God intends for us to take on?

Psalm 16 begins, "Protect me, O Lord God, for I am trusting in you!" The Psalmist, David, is using what seems to me the language of fear. He probably had good reason to fear, for his life was often in danger. There could have been a tendency to simply play a defensive role— drop back and hold on to the good and let God's call come to him. There could have been a temptation to operate out of fear.

I. WE ALL FACE FEAR'S CHALLENGE IN OUR DARK HOURS OF THE SOUL

Do you ever feel fear? Is it a sin to feel negative emotions? Is it evil to have questions or even doubts when it seems everyone else is so certain about so many things?

Can the feeling of FEAR keep me out of heaven? Feelings are emotions feelings are results, not causes and God is not seeking reasons to exclude, but to INCLUDE. He is not willing that ANY should perish. NO FEELING will keep you or me out of heaven. In

the Gospel Thomas is afraid to believe and Jesus comes to him in the Psalm David is afraid, and he cries out "O God help me!"

Still, there IS a fear that can keep us from taking hold of the gift of LIFE. And there is an unbelief that is not of the mind but of the heart that says, "I will not submit to God even when He speaks clearly to me."

After the resurrection the disciples were afraid to believe. They thought: "It is too good to be true!" Jesus came and dispelled their fears somewhat it took a while. But Thomas wasn't there. He said, "I have to SEE for myself." He was afraid to let himself get built up just to be let down again.

Looking again to Psalm 16, David prays for God's mercy, but even as he prays he recognizes how audacious it is to talk to God. He says, "MY GOODNESS EXTENDETH NOT TO THEE." In another place (Psalm 8) David says, "WHEN I CONSIDER THE HEAVENS, WHAT IS MAN THAT YOU ARE MINDFUL OF HIM?"

BUT THE GOD OF THE BIBLE WHO TRULY IS BIGGER THAN WE CAN IMAGINE HAS SPOKEN TO US IN THE LIFE AND DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF HIS SON JESUS CHRIST!

That message is understandable even though we can never understand WHY God should love us! That message IS: GOD LOVES YOU!

Jesus said: "Thomas, I'll help you believe! FAITH WITHIN US SAYS: Jesus really DOES know and care about ME!

As they faced an unknown future

Jesus told them how to overcome fear with faith. First:

Jesus BREATHED ON THEM, and said: RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT!

I'm sure they did not grasp it fully then nor even fifty days later at Pentecost but the disciples and you and I are to be the place where God lives on this earth. We are God's housing! Do YOU think of yourself as a tabernacle of God? Is God welcome in

YOUR body? In your relationships? is that a new thought to you? Is it a bit frightening?

Then, Jesus told them to tell people their sins were forgiven:

This is mysterious, and not easy to understand: "Those whose sins you forgive they will be forgiven... those whose sins you don't forgive they will remain..." We can stop and get hung up on the translation of words here OR we can understand that WE have a part in sharing the Good News of Salvation.

FEAR said, that night, "Lord Jesus we have all been afraid! We have all forsaken you and run away! How can WE ever accept such an assignment?" But FAITH SAID: "YOU CAN SHOW ME HOW TO BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT!"

II. SOMETIMES WE ARE AFRAID TO BELIEVE HOW MUCH GOD LOVES US

Our souls somehow become the battlefield of fear versus faith.

The Adult Class taught by Ruth Cameron has been studying Job. Job's soul certainly was a battlefield! Job loved God and refused to believe God was anything but GOOD! He certainly did not understand what was going on. But Job said, "GOD KNOWS! I WILL TRUST HIM!" Faith went beyond what it could see, and even what it could NOT see and reached for the hand of God.

In some of Britain's darkest hours in WW II, the people listened by their radios on New Year's Eve as their king, King George VI, gave his annual greeting to his people over BBC. It was truly a fearsome time. The very existence of their nation was at risk. And the king that night quoted words that have since become famous. he said:

"I said to the man who stands at the Gate of the Year, 'Give me light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied, 'Step into the darkness, put your hand into the hand of God, and that will be to you better than a light and safer than a known way.'"

David said, "In your Presence is joy! If I can just BE WITH YOU I will be all right!" We do not have to wait until we die and go to heaven to know God's Presence. he is near, He is with us today. If we will let Him he will live within us, and walk with us. We may

The Path of Life

not know all about Him, but we may know Him. He loves us, and his perfect love cast out fear.

Prayer

Hymn (Chorus) #626 *Gentle Shepherd Come and Lead Us*

For the Love of God

Keynote to Say Yes '98

The Gospel of Luke ~ An Introduction

January 4, 1998

Luke 10:25-37

During most of this year we will be coming back again and again to the Gospel of Luke for our worship, our lessons and our sermons.

The Gospel of Luke was written by a companion of the Apostle Paul, the only Gentile writer of the New Testament. He was a physician, a medical doctor, and it seems to me something of a sensitive and poetic soul. In his Gospel we pick up details a musician might notice. There are songs of Mary, of Zachariah, of the angels announcing Jesus' birth, and old Simeon in the Temple.

The Gospel of Luke was written to a man called Theophilus. The Gospel, "Luke," is really Volume One of a two part work; "The Book of Acts" is the Second Volume, also written to Theophilus. Whoever Theophilus was, Theophilus is also anyone who would be a Friend of God.

One story in Luke's Gospel today represents the spirit of the whole: the parable of the Good Samaritan is a great launching pad not only for Say Yes '98 but the entire year's vision for ministry as well. The story was a response to two important questions a very keen person asked Jesus.

The first question is "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus answered in two terse sentences: Love God with all your being. Love your neighbor as yourself. Actually the lawyer said the answer and Jesus simply agreed. Then he said, "If you do that, you will live!"

But that brought up the second question. Maybe the lawyer was thinking: "If I am to love my neighbor as myself, just who might be 'my neighbor?' Next door neighbor?"

Or within the block on which I live? People I know?" So he said to Jesus: Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus answered with the familiar story:

A man walking the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is attacked, beaten, robbed, and left bleeding beside the road. A Priest comes by, and goes to the other side of the road. A Levite— professionally religious person— comes next, and he, too, does not get involved. Then finally an "outsider," a half-Gentile, if there was such a thing— a hated Samaritan comes along. He stops—gives first aid. Then he puts the wounded man on his donkey and takes him to a place of shelter. He promises to come back and take care of any costs involved with care.

And then, having told the story Jesus asked a question of his own: "Which of these three was neighbor to the man in need?"

The correct answer was given, of course: "The one who showed mercy! He was the neighbor!"

Then Jesus said to the lawyer, and the people listening, and to all Christians down across the centuries: Go and do likewise!

That is our keynote! All we have to do is love God—

— and love our neighbor

—and ask God to define the lines of our neighborhood!

Two things I underscore from an overview of the Gospel of Luke, this year's study, for our keynote attention this first day of Say Yes '98:

ONE WE HAVE A UNIVERSAL GOSPEL

[A brief paragraph about Luke's Gospel to state that it is 'the gospel for the Gentiles' for the "outsiders ... with God there are no outsiders]

Our "neighborhood" is wherever God permits us to be. There is no shortage of need for mercy and kindness and grace and love. The Gospel is for ALL people.

During this month we will see that our neighborhood can be half way around the world helping people we may never see until we meet around God's Great White Throne. People like the Stotlers and the Karahadians and the Slingerlands can help us see that very real people with very real needs can have their lives changed because we love God and love them, too!

During this month we may see that our neighborhood can be people with various kinds of needs here in Quincy or Boston, or in New York City or other needy places here in our own homeland. Our own Chinese ministry is reaching neighbors and showing love and concern. God may speak to you about ways you can help now or in the days to come.

During this month God will help us to see again that every person we meet, whether an old seasoned Christian or a hard-to-love next door neighbor or even someone who doesn't like us— every person we meet needs God's love. During this month God will show us that there are ways we can show other people right where we live that God loves them.

The wonderful thing is, we don't have this great assignment/responsibility to do in our own puny strength! For the second part to this humble keynote is:

WE HAVE AN INEXHAUSTIBLE PROMISE

[A brief paragraph about the importance of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts. From the first chapter of Luke to the final chapter of Acts there are many references to the dynamic inter-action of God the Holy Spirit in the everyday lives of people who will cooperate with God. From chapter one of the Gospel to the last chapter of Acts the Holy Spirit, God at work making his will clear, energizing, empowering, doing whatever is necessary to bring heaven and earth together.]

Two key verses from the Gospel, in this brief introduction-overview-keynote, are practical verses that unpack this promise of an indwelling God in our carrying out of His will.

In Luke 11:13 is the promise: "If you being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" In some way, some practical way, Jesus is saying that God's empowering indwelling Presence can be ours for the asking.

And then in the closing paragraph of the Gospel (24:49) there it is again: "Behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high."

I ask you this first Sunday of SAY YES '98:

Are you welcoming the Holy Spirit into your life, where you live?

1. In a new way of living?

This promise can be, even must be, answered in a time of crisis prayer and faith receiving. The Holy Spirit comes to bring salvation, life, spiritual appetite, when we turn from sin and come to receive assurance of salvation.

2. In an entire consecration?

The promise of the Holy Spirit Jesus was speaking about in the closing paragraph of Luke was fulfilled for the disciples on the Day of Pentecost as they waited for the fullness of the Spirit to come and cleanse and empower them.

Have you made a total dedication of your life to God for time and for eternity? There is a fullness of the Spirit that comes only in this crisis of entire sanctification.

3. Then— the Holy Spirit is given for everyday victory; in day-by-day asking and receiving!

PRAYER (For the Early Service ONLY)

O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Prayer (Second Service:)

Hymn #308 *Come, Holy Spirit*

The Baptisms of Jesus

January 11, 1998

Luke 3:15-17;21-22

One of the benefits of following the church year (as well as the lectionary) is that we trace again every scriptural record of our Lord's humanity, from his birth and infancy, a brief glimpse into his youth when he was twelve, in the temple, right through choosing the apostles, his teaching and healing ministry, his death and resurrection and ascension to the father. Now in Session at the right hand of God, we remember that Jesus Christ is very God of very God, but we also remember with gratitude that he is as human as we are ourselves.

So it is that this day we remember that Jesus came to the Jordan River and was baptized by his cousin, John the Baptist. The significance of this baptism is both profound and precious. By coming with sinners who were repenting, Jesus was identifying with us. John recognized that Jesus did not need to repent, and that the washing of water which stood for cleansing from sin and turning to God for everyone else had to mean something else for Jesus. "I have need to be baptized of You," is what John said to Jesus. But Jesus said, "Even though you don't understand it, do it anyway!"

Behold the Lamb of God! While everyone else was applying for grace to forgive their sins, Jesus, Himself, the Grace of God personified, was coming to receive the load of guilt and blame on himself so that God could forgive them. We cannot pretend to understand the 'how,' but as the songwriter put it: "He took my sins and my sorrows, he made them his very own; he bore the burden to Calvary, and suffered and died alone."

When we of the great condescension of Jesus we usually think only of the Cross and the passion of our Lord, how he suffered and died. But every step along the pathway from heaven's glory to earth's sorrow and sin was indescribable humility on our Savior's part, as outlined in Philippians 2, beginning with verse 5— "Let this mind be

The Baptisms of Jesus

in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God, yet made himself of no reputation, and being found in form as a man, humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

I think again of a little poem by Dorothy Sayers called Christmas Eve:

*Tomorrow You are born again
Who died so many times
Do You like the candle light?
Do you like the chimes?
Do You stoop to wonder
Why men never see
How very closely Bethlehem
Approaches Calvary?"*

But not just Bethlehem and the Virgin's womb; the baptism of Jesus was another of those giant steps down, down, down until He was where He could reach out and touch us— speak to us in language we know. He was baptized, and then tempted and tested in all ways as we are— "yet without sin," the Bible says.

John the Baptist had been telling everyone that Messiah was coming. But when he finally came even John was surprised. Jesus always surprises us— we can't predict or dictate how He will come. The key word in getting ready is the same word John the Baptist used: "Prepare the way of the Lord! Repent! Be willing to change your direction so you can get in step with Jesus!" And then Jesus came and got in step with those who were lining up to go down into the waters of baptism. When we step out to do the right thing, and go the right direction, Jesus is already i step with us, and invites us to get in step with Him!

John the Baptist said another thing about Messiah. He said that when Messiah came he would Himself be a Baptizer! Jesus was baptized to identify with us. But the Baptized was to become the Baptizer. One baptism— the baptism of Jesus by John

identifies Jesus with us. But the other baptism— the baptism which Jesus gives to us, our baptism by Christ— identifies us with Him.

We, too, have been baptized with water and with the Holy Spirit. We have the privilege not only of repenting, and following Jesus, but actually sharing His life, and having His Spirit witness within us that we are children of God. We have responded in repentance. We have responded in consecration and faith. We are responding to the baptism of Jesus as we seek His face today; as we come to this table and share the sacrament.

Then is some wonderful way, when we are baptized in water and in the fullness of the Spirit then we, too, are called to be baptizers. In his assignment to the church Jesus said, "Go— teach all nations— baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Holy Spirit! And lo! I, the Baptizer, am with you to the very end of the age!

Prayer:

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting.

The Confession of Peter

January 18, 1998

Matthew 16:13-20

The regular lectionary lessons for this day are from John, chapter 2, and the first miracle of Jesus: changing water into wine. But also this 18th of January is a day to remember the great confession of Peter, as found in Matthew 16, the passage that has just been read. Obviously, I have chosen this latter text as the focus of this homily.

Evidently it was important that the disciples be aware of what people thought of their Master. It is important for us as well. This is a 'watershed question,' perhaps the 'watershed question' of all time. Thousands of books have been written to answer this question. I read a very fine one this week— maybe the best I have ever read: Philip Yancey's *The Jesus I Never Knew*. It was a blessing to me.

Ultimately what people say about Jesus to other people says more about them than it really does about Jesus Himself. A basic 'litmus test' of whether or not a church or denomination or para-church group is even Christian or not, at least from where I stand, is how they answer this first question: "Who do you say that Jesus is?" But that first question was just a preliminary for the one that followed. It may be important to hear what and who from other people. But Jesus looked at His own dear friends and asked them:

"But who do you say that I am?"

Peter answered it right. And if and when we answer it right it is a revelation question. Flesh and blood and apologetic and keen arguments and godly parents and long altar calls do not finally reveal to us who Jesus is. "Blessed are you, Simon, son of John, because flesh and blood has not revealed this unto you, but My Father who is in heaven!" When we answer it right it is a revelation! A penetration of faith! It was more than adding up the facts and making a judgment call. The disciples knew they

The Confession of Peter

were dealing with divinity. Jesus was pleased with Peter's answer, although in just a few moments he was scolding Peter for leaving revelation and going to his own ideas.

I suppose pastors are supposed to be specialists in telling people who Jesus is— but in a sense that is always another answer to the "Who does someone else say that I am?" question. Jesus is still asking us that second question— asking you, and as a matter of fact, asking me. It makes an honest pastor stop and think.

One reason I have stayed with the confession of Peter on this Sunday is that this second question comes again today on a sort of anniversary for me— actually a VERY BIG DAY of remembrance.

For it was exactly 50 years ago this very day, January 18, 1948, which was also a Sunday that year, that I came as a seventeen-year-old backslider to an altar of prayer and renewed a covenant with God that I had made as a child, and remade and stumbled over many times as a wayward teen—

— anyway from that night at 9:09 PM until today I have not once wavered in my determination to be God's. If I could go back and do it all over I might change some decisions, with hindsight. But God being my witness, I have been obedient to the call God has given me, and have no real regrets. But still this question deserves an answer that is here and now— up-to-date: Who is Jesus to me? —to you?

I have heard "Jesus" all my life, and I am comfortable in this faith as I have learned it, culturally and doctrinally, and all the other overlays of learning we could add. I am a Christian by birth, and a willing Christian by choice, baptized and to a point disciplined in devotional habits and the like.

Who is Jesus to me? How can I tell you honestly? ...

My God! Jesus is a PRESENCE! I have never seen him, but I cannot imagine life without Him. I talk to Him. I listen for him. I wish I could hear his voice but he does speak to me from time to time, as I'm sure he does to you as well.

A mystery - Awe and fear; or over-familiarity? Do I spend enough time reading the Source Book itself, and not just about it, or do I only read popularized stuff to make it

more palatable? We can find a doctrine that makes us comfortable if we look— or we can pursue the knowledge of who Jesus really IS!

My Friend! Jesus is A FRIEND. But a friend with a capital "F." He is not my peer. He is not someone I consult with before I decide whether or not to do his will. There are many decisions I have to make, and Jesus lets me make them, along with my share of mistakes. But when I know when Jesus makes it clear that this is or is not his will there is no decision further. I have already decided years ago that I will follow my Friend. Openness and Growing Intimacy Jesus LOVES ME! I confess I don't know why. It is sometimes hard for me to believe. But I DO believe it! I learned "Jesus loves me this I know" before I can remember. I never knew a time when I didn't know that and sing that. But this love has been dawning on me, little by little, more and more, for all the years of my life! I really want to return that love!

My Unquestioned Master! Savior and Lord A settled relationship of obedience and trust. One way of looking at the sanctified life is that provisionally decisions are already made before we come to them; not, of course in the sense that we don't have to sweat out choices, and take all factors into consideration when we face those decisions— but the Christian has already decided whose side he will come down on; he never says again "Shall I do God's will?" but always the question simply is "What is God's will?" and then I will do it!!

WHO IS JESUS... REALLY... TO YOU, AND ME?

OUR WITNESS, IF NOT OUR SALVATION, hangs on how we answer that question Jesus asked the disciples so many years ago. WHO DO YOU SAY JESUS IS?

- With your understanding: Do you believe he is God's Son?
- With your emotions: Do you say you LOVE Jesus?
- With you WILL: Do you accept Jesus as your Master and Lord?

HOW DO YOU ANSWER IT, PERSONALLY?

Prayers (contemporary language)

The Confession of Peter

Almighty Father, who inspired Simon Peter, first among the apostles, to confess Jesus as Messiah and Son of the Living God: Keep your Church steadfast upon the rock of this faith, that in unity and peace we may proclaim the one truth and follow the one Lord, our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

The Conversion of Paul

...was a team effort!

January 25, 1998

Acts 9:1-19

The story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, the brilliant young Pharisee persecutor of the early church into St. Paul, the missionary and theologian and author of a dozen books in the New Testament is truly remarkable. The Scriptures show us that in this remarkable transformation God used over a period of time the ministry of three separate lay Christians who probably did not even know each other. Without two men named Stephen and Ananias the story of St. Paul probably never would have even begun. And without a wonderful, gentle man named Joseph, whom the early church nicknamed 'Barnabus,' or "son of consolation," Saul might never have found his calling as a missionary and apostle.

Stephen's impact on Paul came first: it is found in the book of Acts, Chapter 7, at the unspeakably violent scene of a mob killing. A lay deacon table server, Stephen, was stoned to death. The thugs who were doing the actual killing did not want their clothes ruined with blood spatters, so they laid them at the feet Saul of Tarsus. This arrogant young Pharisee was in full accord with what was going on, but was too proud to take part in the actual manual labor of lifting stones and throwing them.

Stephen SAID some tremendous things about the nature of God and what it means to worship. He said that from the beginning of time human beings have made substitutions for God they have worshiped creation instead of the creator. He also said that God Himself will speak to us if we will only listen. He said that finally the Word God speaks is not simply a lesson or a religion, but a Person. This Person Stephen declared to be Jesus Christ of Nazareth. He said that the proof of this truth is the fact that Jesus was crucified and died and was buried and that he rose again from the dead.

The Conversion of Paul

But Stephen's witness was in two parts: what he said AND THE SPIRIT IN WHICH HE SAID IT. The scripture says that the people there saw his face like the face of an angel. They heard his last words, not now a sermon, but a prayer: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge!"

Saul of Tarsus, who became the great missionary apostle Paul, heard this sermon and saw this dying spirit. The church spread outward from Judea and Galilee, fueled by the threat of persecution that began with Stephen's martyrdom. It was as though the floodgates of anger and resistance broke and Acts 8:1 tells us that the whole church was scattered except the apostles.

How it was that the church reached Damascus in Syria we don't know. Evidently there was a healthy church there because the anti Christian forces in Jerusalem were sufficiently concerned to authorize an armed force to go and extradite them back to Jerusalem for trial, conviction, and execution. Saul of Tarsus had legal papers making him the equivalent of an ancient bounty hunter. He set off to Syria and Damascus with a vengeance.

We are all well acquainted with Saul's dramatic conversion aren't we? Jesus the risen Lord met Saul in the middle of the road to hell and knocked him off his feet with a challenge to turn his life around. Saul got up, groping, blinded, willing but bewildered. Who ARE You, Lord? But that is NOT Paul the Apostle speaking! He is still Saul of Tarsus and still on the outside of the fellowship looking in!

Enter the second witness: Ananias of Damascus! He was THERE. The Lord spoke to him "Ananias!" And Ananias answered: "Here I am, Lord!" It's a great way to begin every day! "Here I am, reporting for duty! What do you want me to do today?" On this day the "duty" was not routine: "Get up and go over to Straight Street to the house of Judas and look for a man from Tarsus, whose name is Saul. He is praying right at this moment and I told him a man named Ananias was on the way over to pray for him to get his sight back."

"Lord, I know about this man. He has legal authority to arrest Christians and take them back to Jerusalem."

God gave Ananias assurance. And Ananias was OBEDIENT. But I'm also sure he was BRAVE, too. The trip over to Straight Street must have been what athletes call a "gut check." But when Ananias got there, once again the SPIRIT OF JESUS shone through. "BROTHER Saul ..." As Ananias prayed Saul was healed. Saul was baptized they didn't wait around in the New Testament church. And then Ananias of Damascus sort of fades out of the story. He was soon forgotten, out of the way gone but WE know how vital a part Ananias played.

There was one other person that should get a share in Paul's ministry. His name was Barnabus, and he took up where Ananias left off. Later in the chapter when Paul, or rather Saul had come to Jerusalem (and that is another adventure story in itself) he tried to join the church there. But (26) they were all afraid of him. But Barnabus (27) took Saul, brought him to the apostles. The church enjoyed a time of peace but Saul/Paul was sent back to his home city, and actually went to the Arabian desert to study for three years. We don't see him again until Acts 11, when the church in Antioch had a revival and the Jerusalem people sent Barnabus there to lead.

It was then that Barnabus went to Tarsus (11:25) to look for that keen young man that the others hadn't really trusted Saul. Then in 13:2, in the Antioch church, the Holy Spirit said: "Set apart Barnabus and Saul for my work!"

During that first assignment Saul became Paul and the team changed from Barnabus and Saul to Paul and Barnabus and later on they split up over Barnabus's habit of siding with the underdog (Mark.) But if it had not been for Barnabus a man willing to do whatever was necessary to encourage Saul we would not have heard of the great Apostle to the Gentiles.

This hasn't been a sermon it has been a sort of lesson. We aren't all like PAUL. (Maybe Charles Coleson?) We aren't all like STEPHEN (aren't you glad of that!) But when unfair things happen, how do (I) we respond? We can't all be like ANANIAS. But we can get up in the morning and say, "Here I am, Lord!" We can't all be like BARNABUS. But I sure do wish we had a few more like him around, don't you?

And we can have the same two dynamic elements of witness:

The Conversion of Paul

1. WE CAN KNOW THAT JESUS IS ALIVE. Not as a textbook fact

But we can KNOW Jesus. Nothing less will do, if we are to witness. And

2. WE CAN HAVE THE SPIRIT OF THE RISEN LORD. These men were not simply "nice people." They were HOLY people. They were people who had been filled with the Holy Spirit. They were people who were living Hebrews 12:14 even before it had been written! When our words and our spirit unite with the mighty Spirit of God, then we can join the ranks of the Stephens and the Ananias and the Barnabuses. And Jesus will build His church. And there will be joy!

Prayer: O God, who by the preaching of your apostle Paul have caused the light of the Gospel to shine throughout the world: Grant, we pray, that we, having his wonderful conversion in remembrance, may show ourselves thankful to you by following his holy teaching; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

Living by Faith

February 1, 1998

Genesis 15:6

All our lives we have heard, "Saved by faith, not by works!" But let me go out on a limb and say that faith does not save anyone. Ultimately we are saved by God's love, by God's grace extended to us in Jesus Christ. So we are saved by Jesus, and faith is the God-given gift that enables us to receive that salvation.

Faith is more than believing what is true, even more than believing what is scripturally true about Jesus Christ. Faith is more than believing in true doctrine or true propositions and in the infallibility of the scriptures. Faith that saves us is finally coming to trust in a Person.

The story of Abraham, about 4,000 years old, is amazingly fresh when it comes to giving insight into faith. The verse that is used by New Testament writers to describe faith is found in Genesis 15:6 Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness.

What led to that statement? What came next? What is covenant faith? God is a what?

Faith is not a cold, impersonal experiment. God does not "perform" in a test tube, but God does respond to honest questions and doubt if we are willing to obey when he speaks. Faith is revealed to faith.

Faith is finally person to Person, or, Person to person. It is consummated in covenant. God will keep his side of the covenant.

Faith is made apparent in faithfulness. It will be tested. In any covenant relationship there will be stress. in Marriage. In our walk with God.

What does it mean: "We are saved by faith?" NOT necessarily that we have all the questions answered! Not that "our" doctrine is better than the Baptists (or Catholics,

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or whatever...) ((Of course it is!! :-))) But 'have you encountered the living God?
Have you started out? Are you following? God won't quit on you!

Abraham BELIEVED God! We can believe HIM, too!

Step Back into Grace

February 1, 1998

Now the Word of the LORD came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Then I said, "Alas, Lord GOD! Behold I do not know how to speak, because I am (only) a (boy.)"

But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am (only) a (boy,)' because everywhere I send you, you shall go, and all that I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I AM with you to deliver you," declares the LORD.

Then the LORD stretched out His hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me, "Behold, I have put My words in your mouth. See I have appointed you this day over the nations and over the kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." Jeremiah 1:4-10

The personal word that I got from the month of Say Yes has been very encouraging. Even though it came from a dozen different speakers, the Word was remarkably unified to my ears. I heard that God's blessing will follow simple obedience to Him. I heard that love and humility can release God's power into hopeless situations even when high powered human resources fall short. I got the word— "Step back! Humble yourself before God! Let Him lead! Build up the community of faith! Ask God for what you really need to do His will! Ask God for His Holy Spirit!" General Superintendent Jim Bond said it in the Chinese service last Sunday: "The secret of a fruitful church is Spirit-filled members!"

The word came through Dale and Pat Stotler: When they were about worn out and almost discouraged with the impossible size of their task they seemed to hear God saying, "Back off! Don't try so hard! Trust Me! Pray! Keep your eyes open, but don't worry!"

Almost by what seemed an accident an opportunity to hold a few services in a women's prison. A number of women found Christ, and the atmosphere of the prison was changed. Contacts from that humble start have opened up channels for God's Spirit to move where Dale and Pat never imagined they could or would go. Don't make any mistake— these people are heroes of the faith! They are humbly doing what most of us could never do— and going where most of us will never go. But what they are seeing done is NOT simply human; they are tapping into God, into His Spirit, and He is leading them in answer to prayer!

The messages of Chuck Zink, our district superintendent, and of Milton Karahadian, and of Dean Flemming were encouraging reminders that God answers prayer. Dean Flemming kept reminding us that God helps us tear down walls, and build bridges. He sometimes gets very specific in answers, as Milton found; he sometimes surprises and comes from a different direction as Jack and Natalie Holstead testified.

I was tremendously encouraged by the message and spirit of General Superintendent Jim Bond. It was refreshing to hear a top leader put our great denomination in humble perspective as 'just a tiny segment, a tiny piece of the great pie' that is God great Church— and at the same time say from his heart that we have a vital and important task in that one great Church of Jesus Christ. No blinders on that good and great man. He has seen his role as a vision-caster, and not just a keeper of the status quo or a ecclesiastical bean-counter.

Maybe the most refreshing word I heard was on the last Wednesday of Say Yes, when John Calhoun, the pastor of the Lamb's Church of the Nazarene, was with us. Operating from a building just off Times Square in New York City, he has perhaps, as daunting a task as any pastor in the entire world! 20,000,000 people go within a block of his church every year— and they are just the tourists that visit Time's Square. In his parish are rich businessmen and street walkers and college kids looking for an adventurous way to serve the Lord and homeless people who live in cardboard boxes over sidewalk gratings. He told us with a wry smile that he is getting used to operating on the brink of financial disaster. But he was far from defeated!

So— what was his victorious testimony? God has showed him that his first task as pastor is to step back into God's love. The only way he has found to effectively minister is out of a loving, trusting, genuine community. The obvious thing to do in the midst of such great need is to plunge in and begin spending and being spent— laboring with all the strength he has. But instead, the word John Calhoun has heard and passed on is that the Christian's task— his task— and our task— is to listen carefully

Today's scripture 'connects' with the message we have been hearing. In Jeremiah the young prophet says, "I am only a boy!" And God tells him, "Don't say 'only a boy!'" The passage from I Corinthians reminds us that finally only love makes everything worth while. And the gospel story, from Luke 4, where Jesus preached in Nazareth and was almost lynched, shows the other side of this truth— that when people think they know who Jesus is, when at the same time they doare not willing to really love Him and call Him 'Lord;' when they think they know all what Jesus can or can not do, even God can't change their sinful unbelief.

These lessons encourage me, remind me again, reinforce the truth that GOD'S CALL IS TO MORE THAN WE ARE OF OURSELVES

Jeremiah is just one in a long line of people God has called— right down to this very moment— that said to God, "But LORD! I am only" In a way that is a standard, and even GOOD reaction! HUMILITY is a virtue that opens the doors of prayer! When we are so cock-sure that we are the ones! we are disqualified!

GOD'S WORD TO JEREMIAH WAS: DO NOT SAY 'I AM ONLY . . . '

But more, these lessons reminds us that GOD LISTENS WHEN WE VOICE OUR DOUBTS

It is not a sin to have an honest dialogue with God. There is a difference between doubt and unbelief! God doesn't ask us to believe the absurd or obviously untrue— he does ask us to trust Him!

GOD'S CALL IS GOD'S ASSURANCE OF GOD'S PRESENCE

Step Back into Grace

WHERE FAITH COMES IN IS DARING TO GIVE OUR ALL AND TRUSTING GOD WILL MAKE THE DIFFERENCE . . . and if He has called, God WILL! The story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 is in all four Gospels, and we know it was a miracle that took five loaves and two fish and fed the multitude.

But only John told us where the five and two came from: a lad— "only a boy" — had enough for himself and maybe his little sister. But he gave his all to Andrew, who in turn brought them to Jesus— and the rest is history ![Maybe I need to remind some of us to bring our five loaves and two fish to Faith Promise yet!] GOD IS WORKING ON US . . . TO MAKE US INTO A COMMUNITY OF LOVE AND FELLOWSHIP THAT WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE RIGHT HERE IN OUR WORLD, WHERE WE LIVE

PRAYER

OH, FATHER, HELP US TO 'STEP BACK INTO GRACE', AND LET YOU MAKE US INTO THE KIND OF LOVING COMMUNITY THAT YOU CAN USE TO LET YOU CHANGE OUR WORLD IN OUR GENERATION.

THIS WE ASK IN THE NAME OF YOUR SON, OUR LORD, WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD, WORLD WITHOUT END. AMEN

COMMUNION IS A WITNESS TO GOD'S PRESENCE

THE HOLY COMMUNION

Wherever you are on your Spiritual Journey - If you believe God is seeking fellowship with you— and if you want to turn to Him, I invite you to come in faith to the Table of the Lord. Draw near with faith and take this Sacrament to your comfort, and make your humble confession to Almighty God in humility before Him. - The Apostles Creed #8 in Sing to the Lord

The Law Read and Confession Made - The Lord Jesus Christ has said to us: "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to draw us near to Himself so that we can come to his table with confidence.

(Reading No. 750) A prayer in unison, from scripture:

Unison: Search me, O God, and know my heart; Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me. Lead me in the way everlasting. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Pastor: Hear what our Lord has said: Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. And he has also said, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Prayer: Thank you. O God, for your forgiving us when we come humbly to you. We do not presume to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

(In Place of Gloria Patri) sing "Father, I Adore You, Lay my life before You How I love you!

"Jesus, I adore you . . ." and :Spirit, I adore you . . ."

The Informal Invitation

("This is not my table . . ." Do not come irreverently. Do not come because someone else expects it. But if the Host invites you, and you want to walk with Him, then you are welcome at His table...)

The Words of Institution

Step Back into Grace

On the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat: THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me. After supper he took the cup and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me: Amen

We praise you for the mystery of our salvation! We truly believe Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

Bless these emblems, O God, and make them to us the Body and Blood of your Son, spiritual food, and spiritual drink of new and unending life in Jesus Christ.

And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us:

Our Father which art in heaven . . .

Now, humbly come and receive the Gifts of God for the People of God [January 4, 1998 - also February 1, 1998]

#754 God of the Ages

Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession

ASHES TO FIRE Series 1 of 14

1. **Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession**
2. Believing Have Life
3. Repentance
4. The Unfinished Story
5. Humility The Root Virtue
6. Veiled Majesty
7. A Story of Faith
8. Obedience and the Other Witness
9. Reaching Out: The First Breakfast
10. A Shepherd and a Promise
11. Love: A New Covenant
12. Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times
13. Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost
14. Fire: Pentecost is the Norm

Lent 1—March 1, 1998

The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart . . . because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. - Romans 10:8b-10

Beginning today, over the next seven Sundays until Easter, and after that the next seven Sundays until Pentecost, I would invite you to come with me on a journey of intentional and intensive fellowship with Jesus. Each week we will lift just one single, simple point of contact with God in Christ out of the scriptures for a focus. We are assured that if we will draw near to God he will surely draw near to us, and that if we

diligently seek after God He will reward us with Himself. Today the focus of our meeting with Jesus is found in the word confession, and all that that word means.

CONFESSING IS ONE PLACE WHERE GOD IS NEAR

The text says "The word is near you, in your heart, on your lips"

CONFESSING IS ALWAYS GOD-ENABLED (God initiates every meeting with Himself)
AND YET 'WHOSOEVER WILL' MAY COME !

If you have any desire to God, you are welcome on this wonderful journey!

CONFESSION—"JESUS IS LORD!"— IS THE 'LAUNCHING PAD TO LIFE'

To say "Jesus is Lord!" is the beginning point of an eternal Friendship (but)
CONFESSION SHOULD ALSO BECOME A WAY OF LIFE "Jesus is Lord!" is not a one-time statement! (We say "I love you!" at the altar when we get married— but that shouldn't be the only time that we say it!!)

CONFESSION IS SIMPLE, YET IT IS GOD-ENABLED!

This verse is wonderful for what it DOES NOT say!

It does not say "If you believe like ME you will be saved ... or If you become a seasoned Christian and get your act together you will be saved . . . or "If you tithe" or "If you join a particular church"

No, it simply says if you (recognize how near God is and) say with your mouth JESUS IS LORD! and (truly) believe in your heart JESUS IS ALIVE: you will be saved!

Romans 12:3 says "No one can say "Jesus is LORD!" in this way except by the Holy Spirit! WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

CONFESSION IS MORE THAN JUST THE WORDS BEING SAID

More than a creedal confession (that is necessary) It is a heart confession— it becomes a covenant confession!

CONFESSION IS LIKE THIS:

- Abandonment of all other means of salvation "No other gods!" Jesus is our ONLY Savior!
- Admission of personal inadequacy "I am not my own master— JESUS is Lord!"
- Confession means admitting our need, our sin against God - It will involve "confession" in the other sense of the word
- Confession will mean restitution "confessing Jesus" before those we have wronged . . . paying back what we have stolen; not as a 'works' to earn salvation, but as part of the confession of Jesus as Lord (Zaccheus/ RYR)

CONFESSION IN THE CHRISTIAN'S LIFE

We confess our Lord when we are baptized, and when we take communion; the SACRAMENTS of the church become meeting points; God comes very near!

Testimony and witnessing are also ways in which we confess "Jesus is Lord!" We need to tell other Christians! We also want to tell those who do not yet believe!

Confession is a constant "course correction" to keep us in step with Jesus.

I John 1:9; 2:1,2 is for Christians!

CONFESSION IS 'AN OVERCOMING GRACE'

The Gospel lesson for today is about the wilderness temptation of Jesus. If we believe that story— and with all my heart I tell you that it is true— if we believe that story that Jesus was tempted and overcame by the word of his own testimony then we too, in covenant with Him and by the same power He used and gives us we can overcome sin and temptation in our lives.

Jesus could say "No!" because He had already said a greater "YES!" to the Father's will. He would not break covenant with the Father.

WE can say "No!" to temptation and sin through the power of CONFESSION! When we say "YES!" to God by confessing 'JESUS IS LORD!'

497 "*I'll Live for Him*" is both a prayer to Jesus AND a confession that Jesus is Lord

Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession

Confession means abandoning all other hope Confession means covenant Confession means admitting need Confession involves admitting sin Confession includes Confessing Jesus as Lord is one of the holy places where God and man meet.

Every meeting with God is always initiated by Him. Apart from grace we are helpless even to reach out to receive His touch. The way we have confidence to confess Jesus, and draw near to God through him is by the gift of faith.

Confessing faith in Jesus Christ is the launching pad of the journey into life.

If you have any desire, any interest at all, the scriptures make it clear that you're welcome to come and begin to get to know God. This is an adventure on which every one of us is invited. Every one of us has a tiny bit of 'faith' in us— a 'God-responder' that is God's gift.

Confessing Jesus is not human effort or works.

Confessing Christ as Lord comes as a response to the gift of God's love: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Our scripture text says, "If we believe in our hearts Jesus is alive— and if we say with our mouths that He is Lord, we shall be saved. That is what confessing Christ is.

It seems too simple to say, "Jesus is Lord!" as the basis for our salvation. But in fact it is a miracle of grace when those words are spoken from a God-given faith. The only way we know we can confess Jesus is by this gift of faith. We confess with our mouth, but we believe with our heart. Both of these are involved in confession— the outward testimony and the inward persuasion. If we have been granted the conviction that Jesus came, and died, and rose again for our salvation- - if we truly believe in our hearts that God has raised Jesus from the dead— then that inner persuasion is revealed truth. It is a gift of God.

It seems so simple just to say: Jesus is Lord! And yet a wonderful miracle happens when for the first time someone deliberately says that from the heart. A permanent covenant is established. Jesus Himself said, "I say unto you, everyone who

confesses me before men, the Son of Man shall confess him before the angels of God; but he who denies me before men shall be denied before the angels of God."

Believing Have Life

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Lent 2—March 8, 1998

John 20:31 "...and that believing ye may have life through (Jesus') name!"

Last year a group of 34 students from two state universities in Washington State took a study trip into the Amazon jungles of South America. They were led on the last part of their journey by Stephen E. Saint, who happens to be the son of Nate Saint, one of the five Auca martyrs, (Jim Elliot, Pete Fleming, Ed McCulley, Roger Youderian, and Nate Saint,) killed 40 years ago as they tried to make contact with the Aucas, properly now called 'Huaorani'. What has happened since that first day has been a miracle story. This last fascinating glimpse into the miracle was reported in just this week's Christianity Today (3/2/98).

This group of 34 had come to study what they thought would be Stone Age people. Steve Saint has a home among the Huaorani. Some of the very men that speared his father and the others have become like adopted grandfathers to his own children. He has been helping the Huaorani develop ways of raising money for self-sufficiency, and he met this group himself.

The 34 students were taken by jungle bus deep into the forests as far as roads would go, where they were met by three Huaorani men, who led them on a 14-hour hike through jungle trails, followed by a journey in large dugout canoes to a campsite along a jungle river, where they were joined by other members of the Huaorani tribe.

The students quickly learned to respect and enjoy the warmth of the men who guided them. They were welcomed at the camp site, and were so comfortable with their new friends that they asked Steve when they would meet the Stone Age savages they had travelled so far to meet. Steve told them that they had been traveling with them— and they were now surrounded by them. The students did not believe him. So Steve Saint suggested that they ask any of the older people where their fathers might be.

One student took the challenge and nodded to one woman. Steve translated her reply something like: "My father is already dead a long time ago; having been speared he died." Four other Huaorani told the same story. One woman that had really "charmed" the students with her kindness, a very warm and friendly mother of ten, pointed to an old man in the circle: "He hated my family and killed all of them!"

The students were stunned. They had second thoughts about their own safety.

Then Dawa, one of the quietest women spoke up. Pointing at the grandfatherly old man sitting next to Steve Saint she told the students: "He is Kimo. He hating my family speared my father and mother and brothers and sisters and took me for his wife." That really stunned the students. They were deep in the jungle. They had to depend on these people to get them out again. Steve Saint said he thought of what they must be thinking right about then. It occurred to him they didn't know the story we have heard so many times in Christian circles.

Steve put his arm around the old man Kimo's shoulders and told the students, "He killed my father, too." Then there was stunned silence.

At last someone found courage to ask: "What changed these people?"

Steve Saint repeated the question in the language of the Huaorani. The Stone Age people tried to tell the students how it used to be before they changed. They threw babies away when they were a trouble. They buried people alive so their spirits would not be able to return to torment them. Some had strangled their own children with their own hands. But then they tried to explain WHAT THEY BELIEVE about a God they knew as the Man-Maker the missionaries told them about, who had sent his Son to die for people who were full of fear and hate and revenge.

Then Dawa, the wife of Kimo spoke. I quote from Steve Saint's article: "Badly, badly we lived back then," Dawa said. "Now, walking God's trail which he has marked for us on paper (meaning the Bible,) we live well. All people will die, but if living you follow God's trail, then dying will lead you to heaven. But only one trail leads there. All other trails lead to where God will never be after death."

The students were silent. But then Dawa went on to give her own version of an altar call: "Have you heard me well? Which one of you wants to follow God's trail, living well?" The students were silent again— and then one hand was raised.

Steve said that Dawa understood what that raised hand meant, and clapped her hands and said, "Now I see you well. Leaving we will see each other again in God's place some day!" Then she looked at the other 33 and said "Dying I will never see you again if you don't follow God's trail. Think well on what I have spoken so that dying we can live happily together in heaven."

Thirty-four students of anthropology, from Washington State, had traveled thousands of miles into a South American rain-forest to hear from primitive people about the most powerful life changing force in the Universe. They had heard how believing in the God of love and grace can release life-changing power that can only be called miraculous.

The emphasis this week in our intentional and intensive journey into fellowship with Jesus is summed up in this word "believing." The great text is outside our lectionary scriptures (John 20:31) but this is not an isolated, proof-text thing. This "believing" is at the very heart of our faith.

'BELIEVING' IS A STRONG WORD

In our English language "believe" can be a rather weak word. To say "I believe so" sounds a lot weaker than "I know so!" But the word translated "to believe" in both Old and New Testaments, in Hebrew and in Greek, has a much stronger meaning. It is not simply to "think" something, or even to be convinced of propositional truth—but rather it is to trust, to have confidence in, to put a complete reliance in the thing believed.

In Genesis 15:6 we read "Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness." the word there (aw-man) means 'to trust,' and is also interchangeable with a word that means 'to turn to the right hand.' Trusting means a willingness to change directions

In the New Testament the word is always, 'to commit one's trust to, to have confidence in the thing believed.

BELIEVING IS NOT trying with all your might to make yourself deny the obvious.

Believing is NOT saying "black is white" simply because someone has told you that is what Christians believe. Believing has a lot less to do with analysis and explanations and dogmatic statements about things nobody knows for sure than a lot of Christians feel comfortable admitting. There are people on all sides trying to explain away mysteries who simply have never fully surrendered to Jesus Christ. His loving Spirit is foreign to them.

BELIEVING IS DARING to say to the Christ of the Bible: "I believe You are who You say you are! I hear you say, 'Come unto Me!' Here I am! I believe YOU! I will follow You! If You will be my Lord and Savior, I will be Your man! Your woman! Your boy! Your girl! You be my Savior and my God!" THAT is what believing is about!

BELIEVING IS THE DOORWAY

Trusting Jesus brings us into the real world! In Acts 16 the Roman jailer came to the end of himself— and asked Paul and Silas, "What must I do to be saved?" They showed him the only way: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved along with your household!"

You can't wait to figure out all the mystery, or explain all the ways a great and holy God 'connects' with finite and sinful you and me. You CAN respond directly to the living Christ as God's gift of faith makes Him real to you.

BELIEVING IS MORE— IT IS THE PATHWAY (THE TRAIL) WHERE WE LIVE

Believing is dynamic. It is never static. It is relational. It contacts and keeps contact. (Genesis 15:6) "In the middle of things" Abraham believed God. He had started out— he had been blessed— but he needed to obey and keep on obeying! We are never saved by "works." But believing enables us TO LIVE differently from the way we were "before." The Huaorani peoples' change was dramatic— they quit killing and feuding. But OUR CHANGE is just as needful— and needs just as much a miracle! We can quit gossiping and hating and being jealous and become "Ephesians 4:32" but only through the power of BELIEVING!

James (chapter 2) comments on this text (from "The Message" by Eugene Peterson):

Isn't it obvious that faith and works are yoked partners, that faith expresses itself in works? That the "works" are "works of faith"? The full meaning of "believe" in the scripture sentence, 'Abraham believed God and was set right with Go,' includes his action. It's that mesh of believing and acting that got Abraham named "God's friend." Is it not evident that a person is made right with God not by a barren faith but by a faith fruitful in works?"

BELIEVING IS STAYING POWER

Psalm 27 closes by saying, "I would have fainted unless I had believed to see the hand of God in the land of the living!" When Abraham was ready to give up he came

with his complaint right back to God! Whenever we are in danger of being overwhelmed we can COME BACK TO GOD HIMSELF!

Wherever you are on your spiritual journey— wherever I am— we have the CHOICE to 'TRUST IN THE LORD WITH ALL OUR HEARTS' or to 'LEAN UNTO OUR OWN UNDERSTANDING!' We can BELIEVE the God who sent His Son to show us the way— OR We can waffle by using some lesser definition of what it means to BELIEVE.

Those thirty-four anthropology students from Washington State traveled thousands of miles to the Amazon rain-forest to hear about the miracle of God's love. They saw fear and hatred and revenge that had been exchanged for love and forgiveness and fellowship.

You and I know that same life-changing power is needed just as much right here where we live! Do you think it is easier to be Christ-like in our society? Where we LOVE THINGS and we USE PEOPLE— where we don't kill (usually) with spears— but we do kill with gossip and uncaring and selfishness.

The power of BELIEVING— in the full sense of trusting, relying on God— can work just that kind of miracle for us, here, as well as the Huaorani people. I Challenge you! This week— In your 'faith' go deeper than simply 'what' you believe (important as that is!) Go directly to God, through Jesus Christ! By faith look him in the face. Say simply, "I will trust you with all I am, now and for ever!"

437 Trust and Obey

Repentance

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Lent 3—March 15, 1998

Turning From—Turning To

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

The word for this week is "repentance".

Last weekend there was a blizzard over the Midwest and storms in the south. We got four inches of rain here; but it was a near-disaster 800 miles west of here. Chicago had a blizzard, and our church treasurer, Bill Esselstyn had to go out there for a business conference. One effect was that Bill got stranded in a luxury hotel and had to eat French gourmet food for two days.

Repentance

Bill description of O'Hare airport and the general state of the travelers' distress sounded like a zoo to me. He said some of his co-workers told of being in such violent turbulence that the doors on the overhead compartments flew open and luggage fell out on the passengers. I'm glad I wasn't on that flight.

I thought as I was reflecting on today's scripture lessons— on "repentance"— 'I wonder what sort of prayers were generated in that violently bouncing jet plane?' "Oh God! I'll be different! I promise! I'm sorry for all the sins I've ever done!"

Is that repentance? Would God hear a prayer like that? [He heard Walter S. MacPherson praying in a foxhole in World War I !!] When do you pray a prayer of repentance? Just what is repentance, anyway?

One simple definition I was taught as a young believer is that Repentance is a godly sorrow for sin. And true repentance certainly has that element. But a godly sorrow is more than sorrow over the pain or shame or results of sin— more than remorse for being caught. Repentance is turning away. Repentance always includes a desire to turn away from sin.

In our text today Isaiah cries: "Let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts!" Both the Old and New Testament words for "repent" have this concept of a change of direction. (Shuv=OT= disappointment// Metanoia=NT=turning)

Repentance is more than turning away— it is turning to! Isaiah goes on: "Let them return to the Lord, for He will have mercy— and to our God for He will abundantly pardon!"

Repentance FROM sin is never complete until the turning away— the godly sorrow- - "connects" with God's forgiveness and becomes a "turning to" the heavenly father. God stands waiting— ready to tell us we are already pardoned— and we come by the route of repentance— a willingness to turn away - and to turn to! That is how we enter God's family.

But did you know that repentance is not just for unbelievers and sinners? Many people will say, and I am one of them, "I am not a willful sinner! I do not live in known

sin!" With a Wesleyan definition of sin as 'a willful transgression of a known law of God,' we often relegate repentance strictly to the crisis of being saved— we confess and believe and repent once and for all.

But did you know that God's people find revival and renewal when they are willing to live in a spirit of repentance! This world is very much with us, and bangs on us relentlessly day after day. We get so used to living in Sodom and Gomorrah that we need to be careful to listen to the Still Small Voice. When we are careless we often get defensive, or we rationalize— excuse ourselves for our sins of neglect.

Paul sounds four warnings to Corinthian Christians. "Many who left Egypt and experienced God's miracles of the Exodus nevertheless died in the wilderness! WHY? Because they were not living to please God!" Those warnings are 2,000 years old, nearly— but they still call us to repentance:

Don't become idolaters: (7) Anything that threatens to take over our first allegiance we need to recognize as a potential idol— anything we hold so dear that we neglect God: prayer becomes a burden; the gathering together of God's people is easily shunned. Often good things become enemy of God's BEST. Even God's GIFTS cannot take God's place! Is it possible that we need to repent of any attitude that is close to idolatry?

Don't indulge in sexual immorality: (8) God's people are called to purity! Even God's people are tempted by our world to have a casual attitude toward what God intends to be sacred relationships. Statistics tell us that often attitudes of permissiveness and loose morals are inside the church as well as outside. If you are engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage you are sinning! You need to repent!

If you are entertaining and excusing unhealthy thoughts, you need to repent! "Let the unrighteous forsake their thoughts!" — not my sentence— it comes directly from God's Word.

Don't put Christ to the test: (9) is the next warning. Paul is not saying that Christ is not to be trusted in the crunch time. But he is saying that it is possible even to be selfish about the way we live the Christian life! We can seek to use Christ for the

Repentance

profit we think He brings— or for the health and good feelings we think is the height of spirituality - - or even for climbing the social ladder. If we think more of what Christ can do for us— and never of what we can do for Christ we need to repent!

Finally a sobering warning—

Don't be a complainer!: (10) When whining becomes a way of life we are certainly not where God can bless and use us!! Alongside bank robbing and murder, the sin of complaining and grumbling seems trivial indeed. Maybe you have never been guilty of it. But if we have— we need to repent!

When God's people are willing to turn as the Holy Spirit gently leads them— turn from unhealthy ways and turn to a deeper love of God and one another, then God can get through to us with his Spirit in ways that will surprise and delight us.

Do we ever get beyond the need for repentance? REPENTANCE - AS A WAY OF LIFE - BECOMES HUMILITY BEFORE GOD'S GREAT LOVE

As God walks with His people and they grow in love to Him REPENTANCE BECOMES MORE AND MORE A TURNING TO GOD'S POSSIBILITIES!

Until we get away from thinking of repentance as simply negative, or something to hit people over the head with, we will never find that banquet God is talking about (in Isaiah 55) "Listen carefully to me," God says, "and (you will) eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food!"

What do you suppose God could do with you if He had your full and complete attention? What do you suppose God could do with a congregation that said, "Lord we want to love You more than anything!"??

Deep repentance is NOT some exotic experience. It does not begin with celebration— although we have to celebrate along the way!! It begins with THE DESIRE TO DESIRE God's will above all others. Like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, this is coming to say, and asking God not to listen to how we feel, but what we are saying: "NOT MY WILL BUT YOURS BE DONE!"

It continues, then, by asking God to help us be OPEN TO GOD's POSSIBILITIES. It is what Bill Bright calls living in the "God room." I'm not always there, I confess. But I want to be led out beyond my own depth! It is what one saint called "being deeply sensitive to the ways and being of God." (Ignatian??)

Conclusion

Would God hear the anguished cry of a person in mortal trouble? Could we call that repentance? Is repentance just a fire escape? When people asked Jesus, "How did those people sin that the Tower fell on?" "What terrible thing did those people do that Herod murdered?" Jesus told the people, "Do you think they were better or worse than you are? Do you think YOU are better than they are?"

I like to think that wherever you are on your spiritual journey God hears the sincere cry for grace. But I don't just want a "fire-escape" salvation! I don't simply want to "turn from" sin in fear of death. God helping me, I want to see us turn TO God. If we will listen for God's voice I believe we can move toward being "deeply sensitive to the ways and being of God!"

Prayer

O Father God, I thank You that You are merciful, and quick to forgive all those who turn to You and who are willing to change their ways. Help us to draw near to You and listen, help us receive your promised gifts of life and blessing. By faith help us to hear Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, say to us, "Your sins are forgiven! Come, follow Me!" Amen.

324 Come, Every One Who is Thirsty

The Unfinished Story

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Lent 4—March 22, 1998

"Openness"

Luke 15 1,2; 11-32

A Picture, A Story

The sun has already set and daylight has mostly faded and gone. The big house is dimly outlined between tall old trees against the fading glow in the sky. But there is light piercing out into the darkness from the big house, shining from every window, and from an open door.

There is sound coming from the big house as well as light. It is the sound of music and of people laughing. Dishes are ringing together— it is a party!

The Unfinished Story

In the foreground of this picture stand two figures silhouetted in the light from the door. Two men are talking. As the light reflects on their faces we can see that they remarkably resemble each other. It is a father and a son. They are in serious conversation.

"I heard you were out here. Why don't you just come on in."

"You know why! *He's* in there!"

"He is your brother! You know how I love him. I'm so glad he is home!"

"How could you! love him?"

~ ~ ~

We came in, of course, near the end of this familiar story. The Prodigal Son has gone away, and has come home again. The Loving Father has permitted him to go, but has watched and waited and welcomed him home again with celebration. Now the Elder Brother wonders why.

How could God love like that? Is this really how God loves?

The answer is yes, God loves like that! Love like that is the heart of the Gospel. It is what Jesus is all about. Whoever you are, God loves you. Wherever you are, God's grace can reach you. John 3:16. Grace does not quit.

It is harder to be damned than you might think! You have to fight God's love. His love will follow you. His grace will meet you when you come to yourself. Love "like that" is great when you are a Prodigal Son or Daughter. You can come home again. That is what the story says. We are so familiar with it that we think that maybe that is the whole point of the story. (But do you remember to whom Jesus was telling that story— in fact the three stories of Luke 15?)

Love "like this" is NOT always welcome. It is surprisingly easy to resent it when God's grace goes to work in other people's lives. Resentment and envy and greed can close out the love and the grace that reaches clear around the world. Selfishness

closes the door to God's grace. We think the story is about a son who went away and was lost. But don't you think that the resentful brother was lost, too?

This story tells us that you don't have to run away to be lost. There are people right here, right now who are good people, and who have never caused a scandal, and who have never been in outward rebellion but inwardly they are lost.

We're the good child in the family. We've stayed at home. We deserve to be blessed. It is hard to not be resentful of God's grace at work in others. Doesn't God understand how hard we've worked to be good? Shouldn't we be rewarded for our efforts?

The answer is yes. But we are so often blind to truth that God has already blessed us with his presence in our lives. God is here with us, and always has been, and always will be. In our resentfulness, we fail to recognize this truth. And just about the time we know we are worthy— and certainly a lot more worthy than "those others" we are just as lost as they are!

~ ~ ~

We came in near the end of the story. The two men stand outside, now in darkness so deep the outline of the big house can no longer be seen. The bitterness has been poured out. The loving answer has been given in return. The lights still shine out—the laughter and the music still can be clearly heard.

"You have been here with me— I've been here for you all the time, son."

"You never had a party for me!"

"All that I have is always yours! Come on in!"

And there the story leaves off. This is a story that never really ends. Did the elder brother find grace to open his heart to the joy? Can he open his heart to forgive? Can he open to the possibilities of God?

The Unfinished Story

Maybe Jesus left the ending up to the Pharisees and scribes that day. Maybe one or two of them was smart enough to see himself in the elder brother and confess and believe and repent and swallow his pride and walk into the light and join the party!

Maybe Jesus left the ending off the story to see if maybe one or two of us is smart enough to see ourselves in the picture! Ernest Campbell said that the biggest problem with American Christianity is that we have a Loving Father Gospel in an Elder Brother Church.

In his wonderful little book about this story Henri J. M. Nouwen says that just maybe, at some time or other, each of us has some of the roles of each person in Jesus' story. I know I was the prodigal, and I know I have been welcomed home. Maybe there have been times I have been able to point someone to the Father, and help another find grace. But maybe, also, I have been closed in vision, closed in spirit- in the unattractive role of the son who stood outside and refused to come in.

The ending of the story, then, could be up to you and me.

Prayer

God of love beyond all our understanding, Through Jesus you enable us to be new people - part of your new creation. You have entrusted us with the task of being ambassadors of Christ. Loving God, we give you thanks for opening our hearts to yours, so that we can speak the words to others which you have spoken to us in Christ: "You are loved. You are forgiven. You are saved." We praise you and adore you, O God, as we pray in Jesus' name. Amen

#344 Jesus, I Come

Humility The Root Virtue

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1. Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession
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9. Reaching Out: The First Breakfast
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13. Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost
14. Fire: Pentecost is the Norm

Lent 5—March 29, 1998

The word this week: "HUMILITY" Philippians 3

HUMILITY: THE "ROOT VIRTUE" I want to know Christ . . . I have not yet attained "Humility" is the word this week— Confession—believing— repentance— openness— and now—humility!

This may be the hardest sermon to preach there can be! The reason is— we all think we have a measure of humility— and yet humility is so elusive!

In honesty— we all have ego, and plenty of it! (Even "inferiority complex is often simply pride turned inside out— occupation with "self.")

What is this elusive thing called "humility"? I am haunted by a line in an old classic by R Newton Flew, it is on page 411, two-thirds of the way down the page on the right hand side where he says "Indeed it is possible that our worst sins are those of which we are unconscious." We've all known egotists, quarrelsome, selfish people who were altogether unconscious of how they were. Remember the McLandress syndrome?

So I begin with a classic old story I heard years ago, about a little boy was very ill and had an operation and desperately needed a transfusion of whole blood. His big sister, herself just a child, matched his rare blood type. The doctors knew she could spare half a pint, and they asked if she would give her blood to her baby brother. She was naturally quite apprehensive, but still quite readily agreed, for she loved her baby brother very much.

Giving blood is really pretty painless, and the little girl watched every step of the procedure. When it was all over, so the old story goes, she asked, "Now when do I die?" She had thought all along that giving her blood would be the end of her life. She loved her own life— but she had gone outside herself with her love.

It may be that old story is not a perfect illustration of the word "humility." But it comes very close.

TOWARD A DEFINITION

For humility is a very near relative of agape love, love that can center itself outside the self. Humility is akin to love. It is a climate in which agape love can grow.

Humility is the willingness and the ability to live beyond self-serving. A modern writer, Steven R. Covey, has said, "Humility is the mother of all virtue, courage is the father, the child is integrity, and the grandchild is wisdom." Humility is a willingness to learn. It is openness toward God. Humility is saying 'I am not God, and I will not try to act as though I were.'

Humility is a delicate thing— and believe me, it is not often the central subject of sermon. Just the same, it is almost impossible to over-estimate the importance of

humility. Humility is what I would call a "root virtue." That is, humility is the root out of which other virtues can grow.

I. HUMILITY AS "A ROOT VIRTUE"

You can think of humility as "a root virtue."

- A. There are root sins — sins of the spirit out of which all other sins spring. The violent and disgusting and horrifying sins that make the headlines seem to make sins of the spirit hardly worth mentioning. But the fact remains that in back of every sin that is ever committed are the sins of PRIDE and UNBELIEF. (It is hard to over-estimate the lessons of Genesis 3 and the Garden of Eden!)

PRIDE is the exact opposite of humility. Pride is not just 'healthy self-esteem.' Pride says "I will put my SELF first, ahead of society, ahead of family, ahead of covenants—ahead of God Himself!"

UNBELIEF is the opposite of faith. Unbelief says "I refuse to acknowledge God's Word! It does not apply to me! God can't tell ME what to do!"

- B. But there are also root virtues: virtues out of which all other virtues can grow — they are HUMILITY and FAITH!

HUMILITY is an attitude of OPENNESS — being able to be taught

FAITH is a desire to believe God. It is the willingness to trust God as He makes His Word plain. Root virtues, like root sins, may not be very spectacular. But HUMILITY and FAITH are absolutely vital.

II. HUMILITY IS A MOVING TARGET

The epistle lesson says two big things: (1) Paul wants to know Jesus, and be like him, and (2) Paul does NOT consider himself to have reached the goal.

Philippians 3:10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ

Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

However Paul does give us some clear directions in seeking to find these root virtues:

A. I want TO KNOW CHRIST!

This is "teleo"— and means to know a person— not just know about a person— it means getting more and more intimately acquainted. It comes with the same concept as the OT word "to know" that is used for husband and wife— INTIMATELY!

B. I want to know THE POWER OF HIS RESURRECTION!

This is "dunamis"- -the living Christ— a guarantee of the importance of LIFE both now, and in the ages to come. The resurrection of Christ, William Barclay says, is the guarantee that life is worth living and the physical body is sacred; it is the guarantee that death is not the end of life and that there is a world beyond; it is the guarantee that nothing in life or death can separate us from (Jesus).

C. I (even) want to know THE FELLOWSHIP OF CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS!

William Barclay says, We share the way Christ walked— we share the cross he bore— we share the death he died— and finally we share the life he lives evermore!

We can come to know Jesus Christ just as surely as we know our friends here on earth. We can come to share our days and nights with Him. We can go beyond theories and book knowledge. By his Spirit, we can say "I know Jesus!" But at the same time we can say, "I am COMING to know Jesus!" We have a long, wonderful way to go!

III. HUMILITY IS A KEY TO KNOWING AND LOVING JESUS

I believe that HUMILITY enables us sometimes to see what is really important. We live so much to the spectacular— we miss God's grace in life's 'ordinary days.'

It was just an ordinary day— or so it seemed— at the Bethany home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus— they could not know how near the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. But Mary did NOT miss an opportunity to turn an ordinary day into one the world will never forget!

Do you remember Thornton Wilder's play Our Town that you (probably) studied in the tenth or eleventh grade:

Emily Webb Gibbs gets a wish to come back to visit Grover's Corner, New Hampshire, on her twelfth birthday just to observe "an ordinary day:" Here are some words from that old play:

EMILY (beginning softly but urgently): Oh, Mama, just look at me one minute as though you really saw me. Mama, fourteen years have gone by. I'm dead. You're a grandmother, Mama. I married George Gibbs, Mama. Wally's dead, too. Mama, his appendix burst on a camping trip to North Conway. We felt just terrible about it — don't you remember? But, just for a moment now we're all together. Mama, just for a moment we're happy. Let's look at one another.

And later

EMILY: (In aloud voice to the STAGE MANAGER.) I can't. I can't go on. Oh! Oh. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another.

(She breaks down sobbing. At a gesture from the STAGE MANAGER, MRS. WEBB disappears.)

I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back — up the hill — to my grave. But first: Wait! One more look. Good-by, Good- by, world. Good-by, Grover's Corners . . . Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking.. . and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee.

*And new-ironed dresses and hot baths. . . and sleeping and waking up.
Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you.*

(She looks toward the STAGE MANAGER and asks abruptly, through her tears.)

Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? every, every minute?

STAGE MANAGER: No. (Pause.) The saints and poets, maybe — they do some.

EMILY: I'm ready to go back

Somehow the REAL WORK of the church comes very near when HUMILITY enables us to see the GOOD and even the HOLY in what seem to be ordinary days of our lives.

Am I too mystic here? Am I dreaming?

Judas couldn't understand how a lavish display of love to Jesus could be reconciled with Mary lavished fragrant perfume on Jesus. Judas missed any possible good that could come from such extravagant behavior. The significance was not that this was near the end of the ministry, or that the crucifixion was near— Mary could not have known that. This simply meant that Mary loved OUTSIDE her own little self- - she had been touched by the divine...

Prayer

Closing Hymn

Footnote:

Did you ever hear of the McLandress Coefficient? When I was studying pastoral care many years ago I read about the "McLandress Coefficient;"

Herschel McLandress was a professor of psychiatric measurement at Harvard Medical School, and he developed a way to measure a person's degree of self-absorption. In spoken and written material he measured the use of "I," "me," and

"my" and the "Coefficient" was the longest span of time a person can remain diverted from himself.

Eleanor Roosevelt was supposed to have a McLandress coefficient of two hours; John F. Kennedy's was twenty-nine minutes, and Elizabeth Taylor's was three minutes. The reason I don't dare fill in God's blank check and ask for "power" or "glory" for myself could just be that I need to talk about me, when maybe Jesus wants to talk about something else. How is your McLandress Coefficient?

Could we take the McLandress Coefficient another step, and see how long we can go after getting up in the morning without thinking about God and grace and the love that surrounds us?

Could we even take it further and see how far we might be able to go into the day and week without ever once thinking about the needs of those we meet?

Veiled Majesty

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Palm Sunday—April 5, 1998

Luke 19:29,41,45; Revelation 19

Intro:

Passover . . . moments of solemnity and sheer awe . . . hours and days of fun and sheer fellowship. People WALKED great distances to be there . . . TALKED together. SANG the "songs of ascents"

[Ps 122 "I was glad when they said unto me let us go to the house of the Lord"]

Abraham walked up [Zion] with Isaac... David bought Aurauna's threshingfloor there and made an altar ... Solomon built his magnificent Temple there: IT IS AN

INDESCRIBABLE FEELING TO JOIN THE GENERATIONS COMING TO THE HOLY CITY TO MEET WITH GOD.

This Passover was different from all others before or since! ALL the prophecies of ALL the scriptures would focus on a CROSS just five days hence.

THIS IS THE CONTEXT OF THAT TRIUMPHAL ENTRY:

I. THE VEILED MAJESTY OF PALM SUNDAY

(What did Jesus DO ?)

- A. He accepted (imperfect) praise! (1) They anticipated victory they THOUGHT they understood (19:11) (2) They rejoiced in the miracles they had seen (19:37) (3) They could not grasp the great SACRIFICE; the tremendous STRUGGLE; the VICTORY JUST AHEAD!
- B. (19:41) The king showed great compassion; He wept! Because He would be rejected and suffer? NO! Because THEY rejected Him, and THEY would suffer and die!

(Illustration: Note the sheer beauty of Boston - - what do we see? Now, what does Jesus see?)
- C. (19:45) The KING must be JUST!

Here is just a hint of what the CONQUERING KING will do to this universe when our probation TIME is ended! "Temple" does not mean church building (to me;) it means Shekinah— your heart— our worship together!

II. THIS IS AN UNFINISHED, INCOMPLETE MESSAGE TODAY.

ANY PALM SUNDAY MESSAGE IS AN UNFINISHED MESSAGE

- A. JESUS IS STILL ENCOURAGING OUR PRAISE...

...even though it is still incomplete and partial. We THINK we have a handle on the truth— and we DO have the advantage of two thousand years' worth of perspective. By now Tony Campolo's sermon "It's Friday— but Sunday's coming!" is famous...and rightly so! But even knowing now what we know,

and being invited to be a part of Christ's ministry, we are reminded that the story is unfinished! And at the same time...

B. JESUS IS STILL WEeping OVER THE LOST!

It is NOT wrong to say that we must praise and be joyful, and at the same time we must have the Lord's compassion and share in His suffering.

C. JESUS WANTS TO CLEANSE YOUR HOLY PLACE

...and He wants to cleanse mine! It is important that the temple of our hearts, the place where God's glory can dwell, be cleansed. And when pure hearts come together in worship, THERE is the Church! THEN God's kingdom is carried forward!

CONCLUSION:

III. AND ONE DAY THIS PALM SUNDAY MESSAGE WILL BE COMPLETED.

One day the whole world will see THE MAJESTY OF JESUS! The Palm Sunday's Triumphal March was followed in five short days by another kind of procession, still led by our King. He was led forth to die! But it is important to remember that Jesus was NO martyr!

In Luke 24 we read that even as He was going to Calvary Jesus said to the people that were crying out and weeping: "Don't weep for Me! Weep for yourselves! Weep for Jerusalem! Weep for those upon whom judgment shall fall!" For Jesus was and is the Lamb of God. The Lamb before Whom the powerful of this earth will flee to the rocks and mountains because of His wrath! The same!

(Revelation 6:16 Cry to the mountains, 'Fall on us! And hide us from the wrath of the Lamb!')

But there is yet to be still another procession!

The story is not finished on Palm Sunday, nor Good Friday— nor even Easter— nor even Pentecost! This same Jesus, who entered Jerusalem on a gentle donkey to the

shouts of children waving palm branches is coming again in a different sort of majesty!

Hear the words from the closing chapters of the Bible:

(Rev. 19:11-16;22:10-13) And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and He that sat upon him was called. Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew but he himself. And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. And (the angel) saith unto me, Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand. He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still. And behold I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be. I AM Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.

As we walk with Jesus this Holy Week, as we take Communion with Him Thursday evening, and as we remember Calvary— in it all Jesus is King! And even beyond Easter and Pentecost— remember... one day all this Universe will know and acknowledge the majesty of our KING!

Let us pray:

One day every knee shall bow! Today help OUR tongues to confess that Jesus Christ is LORD, to the glory of God the Father! Amen!

A Story of Faith

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Easter Sunday—April 12, 1998
(April 11, 1993)

Living Hope

John 20:9 *He saw and believed.*

The seeds of life had been sown.

Wonderful, living words.

Wonderful loving deeds

The seeds fell on warm hearts and cold hearts.

They fell on good ground and stony ground.

And there the seeds of life waited

*Now the Sower was gone.
All of a sudden it was winter,
It was night,
And it had never been this dark, this bleak,
Ever, ever before*

*Then, suddenly the Sun came up,
And it was springtime.
Some of the seeds began to feel the stirrings of life.
Some of the seeds knew they must respond.*

The WORD was calling them to LIFE!

BELIEVING WITHOUT WORDS

The first person to believe in the Risen Savior was John the Beloved. His coming to this living faith is stated in just four words. He saw and believed. (8)

John is modest to a fault. He never calls himself by name throughout the book. But he does not deny what happened in his heart when he looked into the empty tomb. He had not yet even seen the risen Jesus. That would come later, and John would meet Jesus again and again. John's vision of the glorified and risen Jesus would finally surpass every vision, at least until we all behold Him face to face.

But that first beginning is recorded so simply that it is easy to pass over as insignificant. John saw and John believed.

John saw what? The empty tomb. The empty grave-clothes. And that was all John needed. He remembered Jesus had said, "I will rise again the third day!" He remembered Jesus had said, "I will not leave you comfortless!" The seed has been planted in pure and fertile soil, and a miracle took place: John believed! That was it!

Mary's revelation is so much more dramatic. A sinner, a notorious sinner, she was the first to see the Savior! But John was good ground. The seed had lodged well.

John stands for millions of believers who have been implanted with the Good Seed of the Gospel before they ever came to rebellion, or before they knew enough to doubt.

John stands for many who know that Jesus is alive long before they reach the age of full understanding.

John stands for those who are so inclined to believe in Jesus that they know even before they know HOW they know! And never despise such faith! It will mature. It will be tested. It will have its revelations.

John was first!

FAITH IN THE GARDEN

The first person to see the risen Savior was a woman. She was without doubt a remarkable woman, with a strong character that had been refined and prepared for faith by the redeeming grace of Jesus. Her past keeps coming back to us; when she first met the Nazarene she had been possessed of seven devils. Jesus had set her free, and she had been a part of the faithful few that went all the way to the cross with Him.

But after the crucifixion Mary came to a dead stop. Her life was totally circumscribed by a visible, tangible Authority. She would gladly have died for Him, but she had not fully grasped how He had died for her! Her hope was in a living Messiah. And she had seen Him die on a cross.

She loved Him so much she wanted to go as far as she could in showing Him respect and honor. But all the words He had spoken, and all the things He had done were history now. Except that she still was free of the demons.

She went to honor a dead Jesus, but she went with love. And the hunger and cry and aching of her heart were answered in a way she never could have imagined. It is one of the most beautiful scenes in all holy writ.

Jesus, Himself, came to the Garden where she was. He came near and spoke her name. "Mary!" And within her the dormant seed of faith sprang to life!

"Master!"

Mary stands for the millions who have come to faith through love of a Christ they have been seeking. Perhaps we all have sought in the wrong places at times for Jesus. It may be that we have "supposed" and have almost mistaken the truth in the error of our suppositions. And then the living, risen Savior has spoken our name! I know you! And you know Me, too!

Mary stands for those who go looking with love for the Master.

FAITH THAT CAME IN TIME

It was a different kind of 'coming to faith' that John used for the very climax of his Gospel.

Thomas was a man who missed church on the first Easter Sunday. Perhaps if he had been there it might have been different. But it wouldn't have been so good for you and me if we didn't know this story of Thomas.

Thomas seemed to be that sort of person who is cursed with a gloomy outlook on life. But at the same time he seemed to be as honest as he knew how to be.

Remember how at a time late in Jesus' ministry when Jesus said He was going to Jerusalem, and the other disciples tried to tell Jesus not to go, that it was dangerous? Remember who spoke up, and what he said? It was Thomas who said, "Well, let's go with Him and die!" He loved Jesus enough to follow Him even when he, Thomas, thought He was probably wrong!

Anyway, Thomas didn't see, so he wouldn't believe. I get the idea that Thomas didn't dare to try to believe, because he didn't want to be disappointed again. And besides, Thomas couldn't see how things had changed. They were still a powerless little band of outsiders in their society.

Thomas represents honest doubt. Thomas stands for millions who have been persuaded that all religions are made of smoke and mirrors, and that believing in an unseen God probably is delusion. (Who was it that said an agnostic is a person with no invisible means of support?)

Thomas would like Jesus to prove to him personally that He is relevant in a hostile world.

One thing comes through in this story. Jesus really loved Thomas. He may have been stubborn. He may have been unable to join in the celebration because he couldn't believe what he hadn't seen. Jesus still loved Thomas.

And Jesus found Thomas. And when Jesus came to where Thomas was, the arguments Thomas had insisted he would make were never made!

"Come, put your hand in my side!", said the Savior. Thomas never did! Instead he fell to his knees. The seed of faith sprang to life!

"My Lord and my God!" said Thomas.

It is a wonderful thing to know the story of Jesus. It is a wonderful thing to come to love Him and to believe in Him as the Christ of the Bible. Jesus said that the Good News of the Gospel is the Seed of Life, and to know about Jesus is to receive that seed into the heart.

But it is an infinitely more wonderful thing to believe! To believe, to be persuaded deep in one's heart that Christ is alive, and to make Him our own personal Lord and Savior.

Believing, in this sense, does not come from knowing more and more. Believing does not come by winning arguments, or human understanding. Believing comes when people meet the risen Jesus!

A church where Jesus is alive can be a place where Jesus meets with people, and brings the seeds of faith to life. A heart where Jesus lives can take the risen Savior to neighbors at school or in the work place. God help you and me to let the living Savior shine through our lives!

Whether we are like John, or like Mary, or like Thomas, if we will let Him, Jesus will come to where we are. He will speak the word that calls our seeking to a living faith: we can believe!

*Now the Sower was gone.
All of a sudden it was winter,
It was night,
And it had never been this dark, this bleak,
Ever, ever before.*

*Then, suddenly the Sun came up,
And it was springtime.
Some of the seeds began to feel the stirrings of life.
Some of the seeds knew they must respond.
The WORD was calling them to LIFE!*

StL #261 *Christ is Risen, Christ is Living*

StL #262 *He Lives*

StL #264 *Thine is the Glory*

Almighty God, who through thine only-begotten Son Jesus Christ hast overcome death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of the Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by thy life-giving Spirit; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit ever, one God, world without end.

Postscript:

This week in the US, PBS carried 4 hours of programming on the rise of Christianity from the 1st to the 4th Centuries CE. The programs began with the statement (as the camera pans through a Gothic style church): Every Sunday, in every corner of the world, people gather to hear a story. For nearly two thousand years that story has been told and retold

- HOW DO WE KNOW JESUS ROSE?
- WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?
- HOW CAN OTHERS KNOW JESUS IS ALIVE?

Several years ago a group of salesmen went to a regional sales convention in Chicago. They assured their wives that they would be home in plenty of time for Friday's supper. One thing led to another and the meeting ran overtime so the men had to race to the airport, tickets in hand. As they barged through the terminal, one man inadvertently kicked over a table supporting a basket of apples. Without stopping they all reached the plane in time and boarded it with a sigh of relief. All but one. He paused, got in touch with his feelings, and experienced a twinge of compassion for the girl whose apple-stand had been overturned. He waved goodbye to his companions and returned to the terminal. He was glad he did. The ten-year-old girl was blind. The salesman gathered up the apples and noticed that several of them were battered and bruised. He reached into his wallet and said to the girl, "Here, please take this ten dollars for the damage we did. I hope it didn't spoil your day." As he started to walk away, the bewildered girl called out to him, "Are you Jesus?" (1)

(1) Reference

1. *Are You Jesus?* By Brennan Manning. From *More Sower's Seeds, Second Planting*, copyright 1994 by Brian Cavanaugh, T.O.R., p. 13. Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ 07430.

Obedience and the Other Witness

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April 19, 1998

And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him. Acts 5:32

AT THE END OF THE EXODUS

God's chosen leader-successor to Moses, Joshua, led the Israelites into Canaan, the Promised Land. By a miracle very much like the miracle that delivered them from Egypt, the waters of the Jordan, swollen at flood level, had parted while the entire young nation marched across into land in which Abraham had sojourned. It was a thrilling time. Joshua was being brave and very courageous, as he had been told by God to be.

But just at this time Joshua met God in a new way. In a new, unrecognized form God met Joshua along the way— as a man with a drawn sword. Joshua, in his boldness asked this wonderful being "Are you for us? or are you for our adversaries?" It is something we would all like to know. Is God on our side?

Now God is "for" every man and woman on the face of the earth, in that God loves us, and He wills life and goodness for us. But God is not "for" any person or group of persons in serving their goals, being "used" to bring about health, and wealth, and success. As Abraham Lincoln wisely said, "I am not concerned if God is on our side; I am concerned that I be on God's side."

Joshua got this answer:

No! As the captain of the Lord's hosts I have come!

Joshua immediately did the right thing. He realized he was in God's presence. He fell on his face and worshiped. The God spoke to Joshua in much the same way he had called Moses more than 40 years before, from the burning bush. "Take your sandals off your feet! You are in God's Presence! This is holy ground!"

Joshua was being fine tuned for obedience here. Joshua was God's choice as leader, but Joshua was not to be calling the turns. Joshua was not himself to be "in charge." Joshua was learning that his power was only in his obedience to God's revealed will.

Just a few days later in the next chapter or so of this history is the famous battle that is still celebrated in spiritual and song— the battle of Jericho. It was a strange campaign, that. You know the story— marching around the walls in silence seven days. The seventh day multiple marches and then sudden blowing of the ram's horns. It was a miraculous victory that put the fear of God into the enemies of Israel. Once again success was dangerous, however. For the very next battle was against a small tribal kingdom called Ai. This enemy army was so small that just a few regiments were sent to bring them under control.

But instead of smashing victory there was shameful defeat. The reason, as it was discovered, was that among the soldiers was willful disobedience and defiance of God's will. A man called Achan had deliberately kept spoils to his personal use. God

refused to bless the efforts of the Israeli army until they had repented and returned to the ways of obedience.

What Joshua learned that day as he met the Captain of the Lord's hosts was that obedience is what wins the day! It pays to stay in touch with God— in tune with His will.

Fifteen-hundred years later this principle was still very much in force. In obedience to Christ's command the disciples waited in Jerusalem and the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost and filled them with power. The very first day it was not the walls of Jericho, but the gates of hell that were shaken, as 3,000 souls entered the kingdom under the preaching of Peter and the witness of the 120 spilling out of the Upper Room.

The disciples had their set-backs. They didn't have an Achan in the Early Church, but they did have Ananias and Sapphira, who lied to the Holy Spirit, and lost their lives because of their wrong spirit. But as long as the disciples were careful to seek and obey God's leading, they were unstoppable.

In the passage read this morning, the disciples have been arrested and warned—they have been arrested again and jailed—they have been set free by God's intervention, and have gone back to the Temple area to preach again about the resurrection power of God in Jesus Christ. As they obey God they are unstoppable!

Brought before the authorities they are commanded again not to speak in Jesus' name. Then comes this text. WE MUST OBEY GOD, RATHER THAN HUMAN AUTHORITY!

Now 2,000 years later it speaks the truth to us in our march from "Ashes to Fire!" This text says four important things:

1. We must obey God, not human authority. We need to believe that what we are doing is God's will. We don't ask God's blessing on OUR ideas and plans— instead we submit our will to HIS.

2. We are speaking what we have experienced. "Witnesses" can only say what they know for themselves Our "witness" has to be first-hand: MY sins have been forgiven. MY life is being changed! Jesus Christ IS MY Lord!
3. The Holy Spirit is validating our witness. When we try to tell others about Jesus we can be sure that we are NOT alone! The Holy Spirit Himself backs up testimony! HE is what gives witness power to reach into hearts and change lives!
4. The Holy Spirit is given to those who obey him. Here is the KEY! The "Other Witness"— the Holy Spirit— is given to those who actively, deliberately are OBEYING God!

WE ARE ON OUR WAY TO NEW FULLNESS.

We are walking with Jesus from "Ashes to Fire!" We have believed. We have confessed. We have repented.

We have sought to be open and transparent before God. We have prayed for true humility. We have followed Jesus to the Cross, and we have rejoiced in his resurrection power. BUT WE AREN'T THERE YET! There is greater fullness ahead!!

We may be tempted to "use" these steps to "improve" our way of life— to make us "better people"— to fulfill our goals. God, are you with us? Are you for us? Will you help us do as we think You should?

The response is the same as it was to Joshua 3,500 years ago: "Come to holy ground! Know Me! Obey me! You will be MY witnesses! And so will the Holy Spirit through you!"

What sort of obedience is God seeking? We may be surprised in that God is not always promoting BIG and DRAMATIC scenes for us. God begins with the inner life:

Are you living in any known sin? Do you have unconfessed sin in your life? Is there someone who has wronged you that you have not forgiven? Do you secretly harbor hatred in your heart? Do you entertain lustful thoughts? Do you look at or read filth?

God can not bless us, no matter how gifted, or how doctrinally true or eloquent, if we are speaking from disobedient lips!

The "Other Witness"— God's Holy Spirit— is ready and waiting to work with us to carry forward the work of Christ in our homes, in our neighborhoods— through the work of this church! He is more loving, more powerful, more capable than we will ever be.

But that "Other Witness" will only come where we are willing to OBEY GOD!

Prayer

O Father God— we want to know You better. Whatever the cost, help us to be your people. Do with us what you will, only teach us to please you and do your will. We ask this in Jesus' name, who with the Holy Spirit lives and reigns with you, one God, forever and ever. Amen

Hymn 329 *Is Thy Heart Right with God?*

Reaching Out: The First Breakfast

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2. Believing Have Life
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Annual Meeting Sunday—April 26, 1998

Acts 9; John 21

Our God is a bridge builder. In all his thoughts and actions toward us he is reaching out to let us know that in this vast and mysterious universe we are not alone. In the first pages of scripture God is seen as looking for Adam and Eve in the Garden, calling, reaching out. The final words of Revelation are reaching out words: "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come! And let anyone that hears say, 'Come!' And let anyone that is thirsting come! Whosoever will, let them take of the water of life freely.'" Those are bridge-building words!

God wants his people to be bridge builders as well. If we want to be better friends to God we can learn from Him to reach out. It is God-like not simply to "win souls," but to "be there" for others with God's caring love.

Our scriptures today tell the stories of two bridges being built. The first story is about a man who had already met Jesus, but now he was potentially the loneliest man in the world. If Saul became a Christian his old friends would hate him— even kill him. But Saul had been so vicious the Christians felt they could never trust him. For three days Saul of Tarsus sat in a daze in a house on Straight Street absolutely in the dark. Then along came a bridge builder named Ananias, who lived in the ancient city of Damascus, Syria.

It is easy to read the Book of Acts and see the stars. Peter and Paul dominate the action, and there is no doubt they were the stars- they were great! But it is also easy to read the Book of Acts and overlook the bridge builders. If it weren't for a praying church, and a house prayer meeting, and a big-hearted disciple named Barnabas, and faithful martyrs like James and Stephen there wouldn't have been any stars. When God was reaching out to Paul he used a bridge builder named Ananias.

Ananias was in touch with God; he was "connected." God called his name: "Ananias!" The answer came back immediately! "Present! Here I am!"

"I have an assignment for you! Over at Judas' house on Straight Street is a man named Saul. He needs a man like you!"

Ananias loved and trusted God. He could (in a sense) argue lovingly with Him. "Is this really what YOU want me to do? You know who this Saul of Tarsus is!" God gave him assurance; this was what Ananias was to do.

Ananias was absolutely obedient when he knew it was God's will. There was no hesitation once it was established: this is God's will! Sanctifying grace will do that for you— it takes the "Shall I do God's will?" question, and replaces it simply with "What IS God's will?" It is already settled that there will be obedience!

Ananias carried through in spirit as well as letter. "Brother Saul!" And before Ananias was through Saul-Paul was "connected" to the believers. Another bridge-builder took

over later, a man named Barnabas. If there had not been a bridge builder, a person to "reach out", Paul could not have become the great missionary he became.

God needs great men like Peter and Paul. But in his providence he doesn't anoint many apostles. There simply aren't many Billy Grahams and Chuck Colesons. And maybe the church has as many as it can use. They are the "stars." But the church desperately needs more men and women like Ananias of Damascus, and Barnabas the Son of Consolation. It needs people who are willing to build bridges— to reach out with God's love, to go one-on-one with people who are trying to find their way. We have some people like that right here this morning! Thank God!

(I was blessed this morning as I thought of people in this church who have been bridge builders: Carol Mann, Loretta Fish, Lois Howard, Esther Sanger; I thought across the years to people who have been for me like Barnabus and Ananias: Walter Edsall, George Anderson; you have had them, too; maybe you have been there for others as well . . .as a church we are called to that sort of ministry.)

—

The second reaching out story is a fishing story. Well, it starts out about fish, but it sort of ends up about sheep. It is one of the most beautiful stories in the Bible. It is a sort of add-on after the climax of the Gospels and Thomas' confession of Jesus: "My Lord and my God!" and John put it there to show how Jesus is at building bridges.

The disciples had gone back to Galilee as Jesus had told them. No Jesus. After a few days Peter declared, "I'm going fishing!"

I don't fault Peter one bit for going fishing. It doesn't mean he didn't love Jesus. It doesn't mean he wasn't willing to do the right thing. Fishing is an exercise in hope, when you come to think of it. Like McCawber in David Copperfield, the true fisherman always is saying down in his heart, "Something will turn up!" And besides that people have to eat. So Peter and six others went fishing. They fished all night. And something did turn up. Or I should say, Someone.

It may have seemed unreal at first. Three years before they had fished all night long and caught nothing. Then a non-fisherman— a Carpenter, had told them to push out

into the deep and let down their nets for a draft. Now once again after fishing all night without catching a single fish they see this solitary Figure on the shore who calls, "Cast your nets on the other side of the boat!" And immediately they have several hundred pounds of very lively fish in their nets. One-hundred-fifty-three big ones, to be precise. And believe me, every fisherman knows exactly how big, how many, what bait, and where!

From a hundred yards offshore John recognized the Stranger. "It is the Lord!" With that Peter grabbed a tunic and over the side he went swimming and wading ashore. He was so glad to see Jesus! But then just about the time he stepped out of the water Peter remembered. He had let Jesus down. In his time of greatest pain he had denied that he ever knew Jesus. Peter wondered what to say, and so he just turned and helped pull the heavy nets on shore.

If the Passover that was transformed into a sacrament is called "The Last Supper," maybe this story ought to be called, "The First Breakfast." It says a lot without words to think that the risen Lord of the Universe would meet seven tired and hungry fishermen with a hot bed of coals for a delicious morning fish fry. You might say we have a Savior who comes to breakfast. But the bridge building, the reaching out—that is what this chapter is really about.

After breakfast Jesus called Peter a little way apart from the rest. Nosy John tagged along, and I'm glad he did for several reasons. John heard Jesus ask Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you (still) love me more than these (other fellow disciples)?"

The competitive spirit, at least against his fellow Christians, had gone from Peter. Chastened he answered, "Lord, I am your loving friend!"

Jesus came back: "Feed my lambs!" There are tender hearts who need your redeemed, restored ministry.

Jesus bored in again, "Simon, do you love me?"

A little more quietly, a little more subdued, Peter responds: "Lord, you know that I love you!" "Feed my sheep," came back the command again.

But Jesus was building a strong bridge to Peter. A third time Jesus came back, this time in Peter's own word for love: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" And this time Peter is totally broken. He knows Jesus has forgiven him. He understands a little of the great love that is reaching out to where he is right now. I am certain tears were flowing as Peter said the third time, "Lord, you know all things: you know that I love you!"

Jesus did not deny Peter's statement. But again he came back as if to say, "The only way you are going to prove that love to me is by caring for my sheep!" And then Jesus told Peter there would come a time when he would prove that love even by dying for Him. It was a sobering moment.

(Incidentally, a modern-day Christian teacher, the late Henri Nouwen left a tenured position at Harvard University and became a servant to severely retarded people on the strength of that challenge in verse 18 to Peter.)

The bridge was built. Jesus had reached out. Contact! But the story was not quite over. For John had tagged along. John had gotten Peter into the high priest's courtyard the night Jesus was arrested. John had run away, too. John didn't seem to need a bridge. Peter was human. He asked, "What about him, Lord?"

Peter heard the final word— for him and for us. "What is that to you? You follow ME!" And that is exactly what Peter did. His call was renewed. the fisherman became a bridge builder. He spent the rest of his life reaching out. He became a mighty preacher and soul winner. He became a representative of Jesus in healing miracles— even raising one young lady from the dead.

God needs us to be bridge builders, people who will reach out. Jesus will meet with us at the place of reaching out in fellowship to one another within the church. And he certainly will meet with us at the place where we are willing to reach out to those who do not yet know this Savior.

We are not saved in order to shut and lock the door against the world, circle the wagons and wait for the Rapture. We have been reached by grace so that we, too,

Reaching Out: The First Breakfast

can be bridge builders. Wherever God sends us, he will meet us and go along with us. We meet him at the place of reaching out.

Prayer - Lord in some small measure we have sought to reach out to our brothers and sisters, and to those in our community who may not yet know you, and by prayer and faith, to reach out even around the world. grant to us that we can be like You, bridge builders— bringing your body together in love, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen

702 Christ for the World We Sing

A Shepherd and a Promise

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May 3, 1998

John 10:11-33; Psalm 23

Our Faith is about:

David says "The LORD is my shepherd . . ."

Jesus says, "I AM the Good Shepherd." "I lay down my life for my sheep. No one can pluck them out of my hands."

Such a PERSONAL thing! "MY" shepherd! Our faith begins and ends with Jesus! In the latest Christian Century is an article about being apprenticed to Jesus. We can tell whether our faith is on bedrock or "on stilts" if the emphasis is on Jesus! more than it is on secondary issues.

A Shepherd and a Promise

A valley and a presence:

In reality we are not always "up." "I shall not want" does not mean we will never go through valleys. Scary places. Dangerous places. But there is that promise: "I know that you will be with me! I know that you ARE with me!" "No one can pluck me out of your hand!"

A table and enemies:

When we are in the valley— when the pressure is on— the Lord has promised to feed us— to sustain us. (Of course he feeds us when we're picnicing on the mountainside as well. But feed us He does! That's His job!)

Our "enemies" will see this. It is not a "nah-nah-nah-nah-nah!" flaunting— eating in the presence of enemies. Rather it is being held, sustained—maintaining a love and Christ-like caring that the "enemies" can see!

Wherever you are on your Spiritual Journey the Presence is available to you. God's table can sustain you. Today's place of meeting Jesus in our Ashes to Fire is "Wounded Healers." We meet Jesus when we share His table before our enemies; we meet Jesus when we are at our strongest and share with others. But perhaps we meet Jesus more than we can ever know when we share our faith with others when we are at our very lowest- our weakest.

Barbara Howard's death left a fragrance; was a renewal—almost a revival!

I invite you to covenant again with Jesus at His table:

THE HOLY COMMUNION

Wherever you are on your Spiritual Journey:

If you believe God is seeking fellowship with you— and if you want to turn to Him, I invite you to come in faith to the Table of the Lord. Draw near with faith and take this Sacrament to your comfort, and make your humble confession to Almighty God in humility before Him.

(The Apostles Creed — #8 in Sing to the Lord)

The Law Read and Confession Made

The Lord Jesus Christ has said to us: "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to draw us near to Himself so that we can come to his table with confidence.

(Reading No. 750 — A prayer in unison, from scripture:)

Unison: Search me, O God, and know my heart; Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me. Lead me in the way everlasting.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Pastor: Hear what our Lord has said: Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. And he has also said, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Thank you. O God, for your forgiving us when we come humbly to you. We do not presume to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

(In Place of Gloria Patri) sing

"Father, I Adore You, Lay my life before You How I love you!"

"Jesus, I adore you . . ." and : "Spirit, I adore you . . ."

The Informal Invitation

("This is not my table . . ." Do not come irreverently. Do not come because someone else expects it. But if the Host invites you, and you want to walk with Him, then you are welcome at His table...)

The Words of Institution

On the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat: THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

After supper he took the cup and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me: Amen

We praise you for the mystery of our salvation! We truly believe Christ has died!
Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

Bless these emblems, O God, and make them to us the Body and Blood of your Son, spiritual food, and spiritual drink of new and unending life in Jesus Christ.

And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us: Our Father which art in heaven . . .

Now, humbly we receive the Gifts of God for the People of God

Love: A New Covenant

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May 10, 1998

John 13:31-35

There are many ways to look at Mother's Day. I see it as an opportunity to celebrate family love. It doesn't have to just be birth mothers that we honor. At least we can think again about how important our loved ones are to us.

Children often see things a little differently from what we might think. David Heller wrote a book called *DEAR GOD: CHILDREN'S LETTERS TO GOD*. He eavesdrops on some children's prayer-letters in which they talk about family. For example:

Dear God, Thank you for my parents, my sister Anita, and for my grandma

and grandpa. They are real warm and special. I forgive you for my brother Phil. I guess you didn't finish working on him. Sean (age 12)

Dear God, My mom is acting weird because she is getting old. Can you take back a few gray hairs? That would help bring back the house to normal. Thanks for what you can do. Mike (age 9)

Dear God, You light up my life. So do mom and dad. I hope you like this. I am not sure what it means. Luv, Toni (age 7)

Dear God, My mom tells me a story about you every night. Last night she told me how you always remember your mother on her birthday. And you give her divine gifts. I think she was kidding me and herself. Love, Holden (age 7)

In my early years we always had carnations on Mother's Day. We may not have had any money, but my mother saw to it that my sister Ruth and I had red carnations to show OUR mother was alive— and she and Dad wore white carnations in honor of their mothers who had died. It seemed somehow sacred and "official"— that was the way to observe Mother's day.

Mother's Day still is a good way to honor all that is best about mother love and family love. But it has to be much more than carnations and cards. Anna Jarvis, the West Virginia woman whose crusading got her state to adopt Mother's Day in 1910, and the whole nation to adopt by 1914 later became very bitter over the heavy commercialization of Mother's day. She told a reporter she was sorry she ever started Mother's day. In fact she was arrested for disturbing the peace at a War Mother's Rally when she protested the sale of carnations. "This is not what I intended," she was quoted as saying. "I wanted it to be a day of sentiment, not profit."

Mother's Day is an opportunity to honor far more than just birth mothers. Anna Jarvis herself, the founder of Mother's Day, never was a birth mother. And one of the most beautiful real-life stories in our nation's history was about a boy who was born in Kentucky, moved early to southern Indiana where his mother died. When his father

brought home a new bride the little boy was very upset, almost frantic. He didn't want to accept a step-mother. he was afraid he would forget his birth mother.

But the boy's step-mother was a kind Christian woman. She read to him every night. She nursed him when he was sick, and held him on her lap a lot. As time went by he came to realize he could love this new mother without losing his love for the mother who had died. He came to call his step mother his "Angel Mother." Later on Abraham Lincoln would say, as 16th President of the United States, "All that I am or ever hope to be I owe to my angel mother."

This day of celebration of family love falls on the 11th Sunday in our Ashes to Fire Pilgrimage with Jesus, and is the day when we hear His greatest commandment— what some call, "The Eleventh Commandment." "A new commandment I give you," Jesus said, "That you love one another."

In two brief sentences that commandment is spoken three times, just to make sure the disciples would hear and understand.

First Jesus said it: This is my command! Love one another!

Then Jesus told them HOW they should go about it: As I have loved you, so you are to love one another! Like Jesus! As He loved!

Finally Jesus told them that this was to be their identification badge: By THIS, He said— by THIS shall all know that you are MY disciples— if you have love one for another!

Wonderful are the steps we have been following— we began with believing, then confessing, then repenting. We went on with openness or vulnerability before God, with humility, and to complete surrender. We rejoiced in the resurrection, and went on to obedience, and to reaching out to others. last Sunday night we talked about wounded healers. but now we are at the heart of the whole scheme: WE ARE TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS JESUS HAS LOVED US!

This is on a different plane now even from The Golden Rule. Jesus is not saying, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!" He is saying, "Love one another

as I have loved you!" He has just finished washing his disciples' feet. He is about to die on the cross of Calvary for their sins, and for yours and mine as well. And he says to them and to us: LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE LOVED YOU.

This kind of self-giving love is what soul-health is all about! It lifts us out of self-pity and self-absorption, and brings us into a working partnership with Jesus Himself. I close with a little story by Eddie Ogan:

I'll never forget Easter 1946. I was 14, my little sister Ocy was 12, and my older sister Darlene 16. We lived at home with our mother, and the four of us knew what it was to do without many things. My dad had died five years before, leaving Mom with seven school kids to raise and no money. By 1946 my older sisters were married and my brothers had left home.

A month before Easter the pastor of our church announced that a special Easter offering would be taken to help a poor family. He asked everyone to save and give sacrificially. When we got home, we talked about what we could do. We decided to buy 50 pounds of potatoes and live on them for a month. This would allow us to save \$20 of our grocery money for the offering. When we thought that if we kept our electric lights turned out as much as possible and didn't listen to the radio, we'd save money on that month's electric bill. Darlene got as many house and yard cleaning jobs as possible, and both of us babysat for everyone we could. For 15 cents we could buy enough cotton loops to make three pot holders to sell for \$1. We made \$20 on pot holders.

That month was one of the best of our lives. Every day we counted the money to see how much we had saved. At night we'd sit in the dark and talk about how the poor family was going to enjoy having the money the church would give them. We had about 80 people in church, so figured that whatever amount of money we had to give, the offering would surely be 20 times that much. After all, every Sunday the pastor had reminded everyone to save for the sacrificial offering. The day before Easter, Ocy

and I walked to the grocery store and got the manager to give us three crisp \$20 bills and one \$10 bill for all our change. We ran all the way home to show Mom and Darlene. We had never had so much money before. That night we were so excited we could hardly sleep. We didn't care that we wouldn't have new clothes for Easter; we had \$70 for the sacrificial offering. We could hardly wait to get to church!

On Sunday morning, rain was pouring. We didn't own an umbrella, and the church was over a mile from our home, but it didn't seem to matter how wet we got. Darlene had cardboard in her shoes to fill the holes. The cardboard came apart, and her feet got wet. But we sat in church proudly. I heard some teenagers talking about the Smith girls having on their old dresses. I looked at them in their new clothes, and I felt rich. When the sacrificial offering was taken, we were sitting on the second row from the front. Mom put in the \$10 bill, and each of us kids put in a \$20. As we walked home after church, we sang all the way. At lunch Mom had a surprise for us. She had bought a dozen eggs, and we had boiled Easter eggs with our fried potatoes!

Late that afternoon the minister drove up in his car. Mom went to the door, talked with him for a moment, and then came back with an envelope in her hand. We asked what it was, but she didn't say a word. She opened the envelope and out fell a bunch of money. There were three crisp \$20 bills, one \$10 and seventeen \$1 bills. Mom put the money back in the envelope. We didn't talk, just sat and stared at the floor. We had gone from feeling like millionaires to feeling like poor white trash.

We kids had such a happy life that we felt sorry for anyone who didn't have our Mom and Dad for parents and a house full of brothers and sisters and other kids visiting constantly. We thought it was fun to share silverware and see whether we got the spoon or the fork that night. We had two knives that we passed around to whoever needed them. I knew

we didn't have a lot of things that other people had, but I'd never thought we were poor. That Easter day I found out we were. The minister had brought us the money for the poor family, so we must be poor.

I didn't like being poor. I looked at my dress and worn out shoes and felt so ashamed I didn't even want to go back to church. Everyone there probably already knew we were poor! I thought about school. I was in the ninth grade and at the top of my class of over 100 students. I wondered if the kids at school knew that we were poor. I decided that I could quit school since I had finished the eighth grade. That was all the law required at that time.

We sat in silence for a long time. Then it got dark, and we went to bed. All that week, we girls went to school and came home, and no one talked much. Finally on Saturday, Mom asked us what we wanted to do with the money. What did poor people do with money? We didn't know. We'd never known we were poor.

We didn't want to go to church on Sunday, but Mom said we had to. Although it was a sunny day, we didn't talk on the way. Mom started to sing, but no one joined in and she only sang one verse.

At church we had a missionary speaker. He talked about how churches in Africa made buildings out of sun dried bricks, but they needed money to buy roofs. He said \$100 would put a roof on a church. The minister said, "Can't we all sacrifice to help these poor people?" We looked at each other and smiled for the first time in a week.

Mom reached into her purse and pulled out the envelope. She passed it to Darlene. Darlene gave it to me, and I handed it to Ocy. Ocy put it in the offering. When the offering was counted, the minister announced that it was a little over \$100. The missionary was excited. He hadn't expected such a large offering from our small church. He said, "You must have some rich people in this church."

Suddenly it struck us! We had given \$87 of that "little over \$100." We were the richest family in our church! Hadn't the missionary said so? From that day on I've never been poor again. I've always remembered how rich I am because I have Jesus!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, You have shown your great love to us by giving us your Son, Jesus Christ, who has himself loved us and given himself for us. By your grace, help us to obey this Great Commandment, and love as Jesus has shown us so to do. This we ask in His Name who with the Holy Spirit lives and reigns with You, One God, world without end. Amen

Closing Chorus

Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times

Ashes to Fire #12 of 14

1. Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession
2. Believing Have Life
3. Repentance
4. The Unfinished Story
5. Humility The Root Virtue
6. Veiled Majesty
7. A Story of Faith
8. Obedience and the Other Witness
9. Reaching Out: The First Breakfast
10. A Shepherd and a Promise
11. Love: A New Covenant
12. **Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times**
13. Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost
14. Fire: Pentecost is the Norm

May 17, 1998

John 14:23-29; Acts 16:9-15

The period between Easter and Pentecost is divided into two distinct periods, punctuated by the Ascension of Jesus at the end of forty days. The final ten days were given a sharp focus by the final command of Jesus to wait in Jerusalem for the "promise" (Promise) of the Father. Those ten days were certainly an "in-between time."

The first forty days after the resurrection were not quite so clearly focused. Those days were even more of an 'in-between time,' for things were certainly not the same as they had been before. They would never be the same again. Jesus was alive, but

he did not now speak publicly, or show himself to unbelievers. The disciples knew things had to change, but they didn't know what to expect. In their wildest dreams they could not have imagined what lay ahead. They could not know what the Promise would mean to them, personally. They could not know where the indwelling Spirit would take them.

During this in-between time it seems Jesus was concerned mainly with shaping and guiding the faith of his beloved disciples. He made himself known to his own. They had known him before, yes. But now there was a new dimension. Their Lord had been crucified, dead and buried. He had returned with a new and glorious body that seemed to appear and disappear, and yet was very, very real. That body itself was a promise of what the disciples one day would be.

In making himself known, the emphasis was on faith to faith. Where his disciples talked about him, Jesus showed up: Emmaus and the breaking of the bread; Galilee, and the restoration of Peter; More than 500 believers at one time and place saw and touched and fellowshiped with the risen Lord. But always in this in-between time the emphasis was on faith: "I am he that lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore!"

Jesus during this time reinforced the role and purpose of the scriptures. he had already stated clearly to the religious scholars (John 5:39) that the purpose of the scriptures was not in and of themselves to give eternal life, but rather to testify to the Living Word who himself IS life. Now the risen Lord became the Teacher, and beginning with Moses and all the Old Testament prophets— which was all the Bible then extant— Jesus expounded to the disciples the things concerned Himself. And as he did their hearts were warmed, and their faith lifted. In the in-between times they found strength in seeing Christ in the Word.

Jesus also during this in-between time reminded them that the Promise was God indwelling them. Jesus had told them that when the Spirit came he would do two things: (1) guide the believers, and (2) convince the WORLD that He, Jesus, is the Christ!

How does this apply to our own "in-between times"? Those times when our next step is not quite clear, or, if it is more sharply focused, at least we do not know exactly how to take that next step? What can we learn from the word today?

Maybe we all are always in "in-between times." but there are especially difficult times that could only be described as transition periods. New choices to make. Decisions to be made. (How I HATED the East after I got here!!)

- Which college shall I attend?
- Which grad school would be God's choice for me?
- Should I marry him? her?
- What career is really best for me?
- Does God really "have a plan for my life?"

The lesson from Acts is an object lesson of "in-between time" decision making in the life of the greatest missionary who ever lived, the Apostle Paul.

1. He decided to go east. Nothing wrong with the decision— except— the Lord blocked him twice- so—
2. A closed door is an answer; not a final answer, but an answer all the same
3. Paul had a vision. That could be in itself dangerous. But then came an open door—
4. They moved through, believing God was leading Their spirit is everything here. It is not arrogance or self-seeking. If they get in trouble honestly and openly, it still comes under Romans 8:28 which had not yet been written but which is true eternally!
5. They met Lydia— everything starts out great— they even have a victory over evil— and
6. They end up in prison, at midnight, in stocks in the inner prison— but that is another great story!

Two things in final challenge:

In the in-between times God is still with us; we can deliberately seek to be his witnesses. Chinese people showing us the way! I challenge us to tell people: "God is good! God loves YOU!"

In the in-between times God will never abandon us!

One of the great In-Between Times in this century was during World War II, when the Nazis were bombing London every night, and the outcome of the war was very much unknown. At the end of each year the British sovereign would address his people over radio, and during those dark days King George VI, the father of the present queen strengthened his people with this saying that has since become well known:

"I said to the man who stands at the Gate of the Year, 'Give me light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied, 'Step into the darkness, put your hand into the hand of God, and that will be to you better than a light, and safer than a known way.'"

In the in-between times we have the Promise that the Holy Spirit will come, he will teach us, and reminds us of everything Jesus said, and lead us in His peace. Amen

Prayer

Eternal Father, just as you made clear your will to Paul and Silas in calling them to Macedonia, we ask that you will make your will clear to those who seek you in the in-between times of life. Give us the assurance that your Presence is with us, and by your Holy Spirit teach us and empower us to know and do your will, in Jesus' holy name, who with you and the Holy Spirit reigns forever, One God, world without end. Amen

Hymn *Have Thine Own Way, Lord* #480 or *I Give All to You* #482

Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost

ASHES TO FIRE Series 13 of 14

1. Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession
2. Believing Have Life
3. Repentance
4. The Unfinished Story
5. Humility The Root Virtue
6. Veiled Majesty
7. A Story of Faith
8. Obedience and the Other Witness
9. Reaching Out: The First Breakfast
10. A Shepherd and a Promise
11. Love: A New Covenant
12. Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times
13. **Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost**
14. Fire: Pentecost is the Norm

May 24, 1998

John 17:20-26

THERE WAS A BIG HOLE IN THE SKY. A loud silence! Jesus was gone! They stood there with their faces turned up and their mouths open. Two shining beings brought them confirmation of what somehow they already knew: they knew this was a forever kind of change. Things were never going to be the same ever again.

Jesus was gone, but he did leave definite instructions: Don't leave town! Jesus had told them, "Go into all the world! Begin in Jerusalem and go to Judea and Samaria and to the uttermost part of the earth— but for NOW— don't leave town!" I have Something— Someone— that I want to give you! I promise!

So in obedience the disciples went back to Jerusalem. They waited. And they prayed. During the next ten days there was a focus in their faith that brought them to where the scriptures say they were "in one place in one accord."

WHAT OR WHERE IS THIS PLACE WHERE PENTECOST COMES?

For the disciples it was the Upper Room, the place where they had had Communion with Jesus. That place became a place of unity of PURPOSE and OBEDIENCE.

Everything else went "on hold" until God came as He had promised. It was also a place of unity in FAITH and TRUST. The Resurrection had given them faith to know that Jesus is as good as His Word! That living faith was enough for them to hold them steady if they had to wait one day or ten days or more.

A place where Jesus' own prayer is answered: During the ten days they did wait the disciples certainly remembered the last prayer Jesus had prayed when they were together in this same Upper Room. It was a prayer for Himself: "Father, glorify me with the glory I had before the world!" It became a prayer for them: "Father, let these my friends share that glory, too!" But wonder of wonders, that High Priestly Prayer is a prayer for you and me! We, too, can come to the place where Pentecost happens!

It was a prayer for unity: "Make them one, Father! One with us— one with one another!" That prayer for unity was a feature of the High Priestly prayer that hits us right in the face. It is inescapable.

CAN PENTECOST BE REPEATED?

It has been many times, in many places. In one real sense Pentecost happens every time a soul is born into the Kingdom, or every time a believer is filled with the Holy Spirit. But as a mighty moving of God on His church? Can that happen again? I believe the answer is "Yes!" I also believe it is the only hope for the church to survive as the church and make any impact at all on this generation. "Yes!"

CAN WE MAKE PENTECOST HAPPEN AGAIN?

The answer absolutely is "No!" We are so self-confident in our age we think all we have to do is get in the right speaker— organize the right kind of rally— discipline ourselves, pray more— and we can have Pentecost again any time we want!

But that is all backwards! No one commands the Holy Spirit! He is not a captive of any sect or denomination. The Spirit's coming is always of grace! He responds when believers believe Jesus' Promise, and obey His command to wait.

CAN YOU AND I, CAN WE COME TO THE PLACE WHERE PENTECOST COMES?

We have been pointing toward Pentecost for 13 weeks now: Confessing... believing... repenting... in humility... obedience... in reaching out... in Christ-like love and anticipation... we have been pointing toward Pentecost! We want to know what it means to be awakened by God's Spirit!

Whatever took place those ten days— we don't know— but human effort— even human prayer was not what brought the Spirit. The Spirit's coming was all of grace. It was attractive. It was powerful. It was also frightening, awesome, and wonderful beyond description. It was the first mighty Awakening of the Holy Spirit. It has been repeated over and over again where God's people have come simply agreeing that they want God more than they want anything else!

When the church across the centuries has sought for God as more than a fire-escape, or more than a therapeutic convenience to enhance our life-style— when the church has given up its own selfish ways, God has been found!

THE SPIRIT IS A GIFT OF GOD'S GRACE!

It is hard to grasp, but Jesus said that if we simply ask the Father, He will give us the Holy Spirit as the free gift of His grace. Jesus said that as imperfect and self-centered as we can be, if we enjoy giving good and necessary things to our children— then HOW MUCH MORE WILL THE HEAVENLY FATHER GIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT TO THOSE WHO ASK? What would happen if we really believed that?

HOW ONE MAN CAME TO ASSURANCE:

In England one man had been seeking God's Spirit to witness with his own spirit that he was a child of God. Exactly 260 years ago this very day a 35-year old Anglican priest opened his Testament at five in the morning to the words: "There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, even that ye should be partakers of the divine nature." (2 Peter 1:4,) and then saw the words "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." In the afternoon he went to Vespers at St. Paul's, and the anthem sung there was:

"Out of the deep have I called unto Thee, O Lord: Lord, hear my voice. O Let thine ears consider well the voice of my complaint. If thou, Lord, wilt mark evil, O Lord, who can abide it? For there is mercy with thee; therefore shalt thou be feared... And he shall redeem Israel from all his sins."

And then in his journal that Anglican priest wrote these famous words: "In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate-Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." This was the Holy Spirit's enlightenment to John Wesley. In his own words: "before I had served with the faith of a servant— now I could serve as a son."

God used Wesley's dynamic energy, and his methodistic approach to life, and certainly Wesley's genius for organizing believers into small groups for accountability. But it was not until Wesley saw that salvation was all of grace, and surrendered even his ambition and considerable strength of will that God brought powerful assurance, and the Wesleyan Revival that saved Britain from untold loss was begun. And at the heart of Wesley's newfound Holy Spirit assurance was a spirit that called for unity and love as well as renewal and revival throughout the Church of Jesus Christ:

On Wesley's Day— Aldersgate Day we might well ponder his words: John Wesley himself said: "By... a living faith... we labour to distinguish ourselves from the unbelieving world. ... But from real Christians, of whatsoever denomination they be, we earnestly desire not to be distinguished at all; not from any who sincerely follow after what they know they have not yet attained. ... Is thy heart right, as my heart is with thine? I ask no farther question. If it be, give me thy hand. For opinions, or terms, let us not destroy the work of God. Dost thou love and serve God? It is enough. I give thee the right hand of fellowship." ... (3)

Wesley came to the place where God could come on His terms, and the rest is history:

CAN YOU AND I, CAN WE COME TO THE PLACE WHERE PENTECOST COMES?

Prayer

Lord, Bring us to the place where Pentecost can come! We do not pray for uniformity, O God. We do not expect to agree on so many things of life. But, O great Father, we hunger and thirst for YOU! We want to be Your dwelling place! We unite our hearts in asking for the Holy Spirit in His fullness— the Promise Jesus made, and the prayer for us He prayed.

This we ask in His name, who with You and the Holy Spirit reign forever and ever, One God, world without end. Amen

Hymn "*Come, Holy Spirit, I Need You*"

Fire: Pentecost is the Norm

ASHES TO FIRE Series 14 of 14

1. Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession
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14. **Fire: Pentecost is the Norm**

May 31, 1998

In the last days, God declares, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh ... Acts 2:17

Today we celebrate one of the three great days of the entire church year. Everyone celebrates Christmas, and most people even know that it has to do with the birth of Jesus, whether or not they call Him God and Lord. Most people celebrate Easter, and some of them know that Easter, too, has to do with Jesus, and His victory over death and sin.

But then, at least in our country, comes Thanksgiving, (when we do have ecumenical services; and that is good, although most Americans are more tuned into football

and a big family reunion and meal), and then Super Bowl, and of course the Fourth of July.

But what is Pentecost? Why should anyone call it one of the "big three" Christian holy days? Do you know? To begin with:

PENTECOST IS (ANOTHER) TRANSFORMED JEWISH HOLY DAY

We say Pentecost is ANOTHER transformed Jewish holy day because Christians have seen Christ as the fulfillment behind just about all the Old Testament. Jesus is our Passover Lamb, and Jesus is our Seder Host, transforming the Passover Meal into the Communion we will share this morning. And so Passover, too, takes on fulfilling significance to Christians.

Pentecost was and is a Jewish feast day celebrating two things. Called "Pesach" or "Pentecost" because it follows fifty days after Passover and the High Holy Days, Pentecost was first a celebration of the first harvesting of summer fruits. It anticipates the later, greater harvest of the autumn season. Pentecost also in later times came to be a commemoration of the giving of the law to Moses on Sinai. Devout Jews praised God for giving guidance to all mankind on how to live lives of order and righteousness. The giving of the Law can be contrasted with the giving of confusion at Babel, when God confused those who were trying to reach heaven on their own wisdom; the giving of the Law is God's way of bringing order out of chaos.

WHAT HAPPENED THAT FIRST PENTECOST?

First of all, what happened on Pentecost was that the gathered disciples received the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the Church as Christ's body came into existence. It was the birthday of the church.

Christians believe that on the Jewish feast of Pentecost that came 50 days after Jesus rose from the dead, and ten days after He ascended to the Father, Jesus, HAVING RECEIVED THE FULLNESS OF GLORY, for which he prayed in John 17: 1, Jesus then poured that Spirit He had received out upon his beloved disciples.

This was THE FIRST FRUITS of a great harvest which was to come. As a matter of fact that FIRST FRUIT CELEBRATION that day netted 3,000 new believers in Jesus Christ! It is a celebration of FIRST FRUITS.

The Christian Pentecost might seem to have little to do with the second aspect of the Jewish celebration: the giving of the law to Moses on the mount. But actually, here was a fulfillment of the promise that God would pour out His Spirit on all flesh, and as Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 3:3 God wrote his law now not on tables of stone, but on fleshy tables of the human heart. And instead of confusion of languages, now everyone could hear God's plan of salvation in a language they could understand. In the words of a Sandi Patti song: "Fluent LOVE is spoken here!"

There were other, dramatic things that happened that day of Pentecost. There was mighty, shaking, fearsome sound of hurricane force wind. There were licking, flaming, forked tongues of fire. And there were languages spoken in order that every person who came to see what was happening could understand who Jesus is, and how he can deliver from sin.

Once again here was a direct contrast with Babel: where Babel had been confusion and misunderstanding, Pentecost was God's law in the hearts, God's law of LOVE, and the opposite of confusion: interpretation: everyone heard in his own language the message of salvation.

We have been trained to think of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit only in the rushing wind, and the tongues of fire, and the exotic gifts of language or experience. But first of all the coming of the Spirit is God loving us, and coming to make his home in us so that we can be at home in him on our way home.

THE NEED FOR PENTECOST TODAY

This is the NORM for our Christian existence. The Holy Spirit IS the life of the Church. No Spirit- no life! The Spirit fills every believer to the extent of his/her capacity. There is a deeper life for those who will seek the fullness of the Spirit's blessing. There are wonderful benefits to be received from living the life of full surrender to God's will. But it begins with the Holy Spirit coming to live in you and me and

together making us the Church. Welcome the Holy Spirit into your inner being this very day!

Pentecost, or the descent of the Holy Spirit into the human heart, is NOT a doctrine or belief system to defend, but a reality to know and live out. As humanly understood belief systems, even the precious doctrines of our church, even holiness doctrines, are fallible— they are subject to the shortcomings of human understanding that mark all human belief systems. But as a living encounter with God holiness, being filled with God Himself, transforms lives and changes the course of human history. Almighty God actually DOES come to live in His people, and together God's people ARE the Church.

Faith in God must permeate the whole of my being and yours, not simply logically exist in my thinking, or excitedly flood my emotions, or even determinedly rest in my human will. God must be made welcome at the center of all I am and all I do! As a Person God can make Himself known to me, and can dominate my living and your living. And together you and I are the living Church of Pentecost. That is what Pentecost is all about: that is why is a BIG DAY!

PETER'S SERMON

That day Peter stood up and declared the glory and love and power of Jesus Christ. He told the devout Jews assembled that they needed to change their direction: "Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, for the forgiveness of your sins!"

Then he told them: "This God-shared LOVE, this Holy Spirit is to every one of you who will believe!

[HERE DEPARTURE FROM '95 TEXT]

[[Gordon Ramsey's '98 ideas here:]]

I don't know how many different meanings and lessons we are able to pick up from the coming of the Holy Spirit, as we celebrate it at Pentecost. Every time we discover one meaning, there seems to be 3 or 4 more, jumping out at us as well!

But that in itself is something about Pentecost: it is about ABUNDANCE. When the spirit of God is involved, there is always MORE THAN ENOUGH!

Enough for males and for females enough for young and for old enough for slaves and for free people enough for Jews and all the nations under the earth.

And as the life of the early church demonstrated, this over-abundance flowed on into all other aspects of their life - land, property, food, shelter, community.

Whenever people in the NT times talk about experiencing God's spirit, their language demonstrates the abundance that God provides. In all ways people have "more than enough".

The Spirit is the spirit of life and the fullness of life.

From the very first day, however, the spirit of abundance had its knockers. Cynicism reared its ugly head, standing, as it always does, against the movement of God's Spirit.

"They're just drunk" some said.

"The writers got carried away" others still say. "It isn't the same now. Can't be"

But the cynics miss the point of Pentecost. It is a reality of abundance, just as God is the God of reality and the God who is given to excess!. But the more we dismiss it as "idealistic" or "unrealistic" the more we move away from the pouring of the Spirit and the experience of God's excessive grace. So how is there really more than enough?

Firstly, Pentecost is grounded in Easter. It makes sense once people have been freed from the grip of death and destruction. You see, once people are no longer menaced by the threat of death, we are freed to live. Death is ultimately a denial of all things needed for our life: but the resurrection proclaims that Jesus has overcome that which robs us of life our entire lives are transformed into an experience of divine life

Secondly, and going on a step, we are remember that the early followers of Jesus were said to be "Of one heart and mind" That is part of what Pentecost means: The spirit who comes to us is the Spirit of Unity God's Spirit overcomes the division, the

power struggles, the hatred and suspicions. The Spirit does not remove the differences but an openness to the Spirit means that the differences do not lead to a struggle for superiority over those who are different. When we are no longer afraid of one another, looking for people's "hidden agenda" we are freed to enjoy a depth of life and discover God. And there is always more than enough.

And thirdly, again from the life of the early church, we are reminded that "no one claimed things as their own, but shared everything in common" The most down to earth outcome is the most striking! As we discover the freedom for life and for unity we are freed from the spirit of accumulation that dogs us in this world. Freed from the fear of death and anxiety about life, life is transformed for each of us. And it doesn't just stop with "our own people". (If it did, it wouldn't be Christian) Even 300 years later, emperor Julian comments: "These Christians do not merely feed their own poor; they feed the poor of the whole city"

The cynic, the staunch 'capitalist', within us says that there is NOT enough for everyone. And so we must constantly compete for that which is there. In fact there is part within us and around us that declares that the world works best with competition But it is that drive for competition which works so effectively against the spirit of God.

We compete for goods, for schools, for marks, for jobs, for income, for friends and it is this incessant competition which divides us and fragments community. As we compete, we divide into nations, class, race, gender, age, background And as we believe that there is not enough, and it is "everyone for themselves" We forget the fact that at Pentecost the prophecy of inclusive acceptance was fulfilled: "My Spirit will come on ALL people - young, old, male, female, slaves, free ..."

The Spirit of Pentecost, the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit bring us back to discovering the joy of abundance in life and the rediscovery of what life is. For Pentecost re-opens to us the joy, the delight, the extravagance and the responsibility that we have to re-build community to share our life with one another. For as we build and live in community, we discover true richness. Christian community can become the source of reforming the rest of society.

It is our joy to discover new life by the Spirit, and to live by that discovery.

The Spirit has given us all gifts. Let us use them. Pentecost is about pooling our gifts humbly and selflessly so that we can build a way to reach God. It is about building a house that leaves no one homeless—a Church.

Into Communion:

- First Preparing
- Next Choir (we ALL sing verse 4)
- Then Creed #8
- Then Prayers
- Then #304 (*Sweet, Sweet Spirit*) leads into Offering

NOTE: Much of this sermon was preached on June 4, 1995 in a text by the same title. Look for it under "The Norm: Pentecost."

Pentecost: God in the Present Tense

Pentecost Sunday

May 31, 1998 PM

John 14:8-27

I. PENTECOST: GOD IN THE PRESENT TENSE

The closing chapters of Revelation contain these words of promise:

"Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.' Everything in the scriptures point to this. This is the reason that God the Son left the glory of heaven, so that he might make a way for us to be at home with him.

We read these words sometimes at funerals, because we really believe that when believers die they don't cease to exist— they don't die— they simply enter the Presence of God in a new and wonderful way. And that is true. But the good news is that we don't have to wait until we die in order to be at home with God.

Millions of people know this wonderful truth. "He lives! He lives! Christ Jesus lives today! He walks with me! He talks with me! You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart!" That is what Pentecost is really all about.

For fourteen weeks we've been pointing to this day— what it signifies: the fire of God's life within. And several small groups have also been studying for fourteen weeks "The Jesus I Never Knew" (by Philip Yancey)— but what we've really been doing is just coming to know better "the Jesus we already knew" or "the Jesus we've 'always' known," because the weakest and the dumbest believer still has the Holy

Spirit, and even when our knowledge is incomplete it is still the knowledge of a God who comes "into my heart to dwell."

This is what happened one late spring day nearly 2,000 years ago.

II. PENTECOST THEN

1. Pentecost was and is a Jewish Holy Day. It is another of the Old Covenant observances that Jesus infused with new meaning (just as he did with the "letter of the law" which he summed up in "Love the Lord, and love one another as I have loved you"; and also: Passover/Communion, and Atonement/Lamb of God.)

Pentecost was (1) a Feast of Thanksgiving for First Fruits. It was late spring when some of the early crops could be harvested, with the promise of much more to come. It was also in later years (2) a Celebration of the Giving of the Law to Moses on Sinai.

On that first "Christian Pentecost" there was a great harvest of "first fruits" into the body of Christ, as Peter preached and 3,000 people were baptized and brought into the newly born church. Also on that great day the law which had been written by God on tablets of stone were now begun to be written on human hearts. Christ had been with them, but now by the Holy Spirit, he was IN them, teaching them, guiding them, as well as giving them the power to do as he would lead.

2. Pentecost was Babel in reverse. You remember the Genesis account of the Tower of Babel when with carnal pride, hubris, actually, humankind sought to reach the heavens and find God on their own, and the result was confusion. The confusion of languages was something C.S. Lewis picked up on trying to describe the horror of hell in "That Hideous Strength" when everyone spoke a language all his own and no one understood or cared about anyone else.

That first Day of the Church there was a universal understanding. Everyone heard the good news that God is available to old and young, men and women, and heard it in their own tongue. Everyone can understand the universal language of genuine love!

3. Pentecost was communication of Good News. The word was: "You, too, can be united with God! Through Jesus the Crucified! Jesus the Living! By His Gift of the Holy Spirit we all can be "at one— at home with God" right here and now!

III. PENTECOST NOW

That was Pentecost THEN. But what is Pentecost NOW? What should it be?

1. Pentecost is already here! We have much more than we realize! Certainly there are great faults in every human organization, and great need for this or that. But there are millions of people who say from their hearts, "Jesus is Lord!" and mean it! Where there is ANY spiritual life whatsoever, there is Pentecost! Life in Christ is always and only by the Holy Spirit of God who was poured out on the church first at Pentecost!

Often when we speak of Pentecost we think ONLY of entire sanctification, or of powerful, spectacular service for God. We make it sound as though the Holy Spirit is reserved for the super-Christians. We may even hear thoughts expressed like, "I'm no saint! I'm only saved!" But that is not a small thing!

2. Pentecost as fullness is to be "the norm" for all Christians. Bill and Gloria Gaither's hymn to the Holy Spirit says, "Come, Holy Spirit, I need You— come in your own GENTLE way!" It isn't always in spectacular, emotional, thrilling ways the Spirit takes full control of us. He comes where he is asked, where he is permitted to come. He comes in answer to Jesus' promise (Luke 11:13.) He is the Gift of the Father. He comes and he comes!

Sometimes — often— I believe that we settle for less of God than we have available. Simply by not asking, we lose the keen edge from our walk with God. (Did I ever tell you the TRUE story of my Uncle Bert and Aunt Mertie, my granddad's brother— they lived in the woods in northern Michigan. When electricity first went through they were afraid it would cost too much or that it might burn their houses down. So they used tiny little fifteen-watt bulbs and continued to stumble in the darkness! There're more stories about them— but I won't burden you now! (Also: "I can't help it if I never come up to average!"))

Pentecost: God in the Present Tense

3. Pentecost is also a repeatable pattern for the church! Can we see times of great harvest again?

The answer is "YES!" Pentecost-like visitations of the Spirit have come many times across the centuries. Our own Wesleyan connection was born in the 18th century Spiritual Awakening in which Wesley and Whitfield were God's instruments.

The answer is also "NO!" if we think that WE can repeat Pentecost by anything WE deserve, or work for, or merit. The Holy Spirit is a Gift of God's grace.

But the answer is "YES! YES!" if we are willing to come to the place where Pentecost CAN come! We have to believe that God is more willing to pour out his Spirit than we are to receive Him. We need to believe Christ's promise and welcome His Gift. Celebrate the fact that the Spirit has come! He is now in you! if you are a Christian! What do you suppose God could or would do with you if he had ALL of you?

Dwight L. Moody, a shoe salesman here in Boston, is said to have said one time: "The world has yet to see what God will do with someone who is totally given to Him. I intend to be that man!" What do you suppose the Lord would do with a CHURCH if he had ALL OF US?

Pentecost is God in the Present Tense!

Jesus, by his Holy Spirit, is with us even today as we worship. How do we move forward into Pentecost? Well, all things spiritual begin and end in prayer. But you say how do we begin to pray like the waiting saints at that first Pentecost? Simply we continue to wait on God to move, and we continue to pray. Open your hearts to His fullness:

Prayer

In your Holy Gospel, O Father, in the words of Jesus Christ your Son, you have told us that we may have the other Comforter, the Holy Spirit, to make us ONE with You,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit. You have said (John 14:17) This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

We believe that You have sent Him, as you promised. We believe that we have received Him, for we are alive in You by His Presence. We ask this day that you will help us open our hearts wide for the fullness of Your Spirit, to do with us as You will. Help us in Him to bear much fruit to Your Glory, and to prove to the world that Jesus Christ is our Lord. In His name, Amen

Celebrate the Church

June 14, 1998

Ephesians 4

Just about 70 years ago a young Lutheran evangelical pastor began a sermon with words something like this (translated, of course:)

"There is a word that, when a Catholic hears it, kindles all his feelings of love and bliss; that stirs all the depths of his religious sensibility, from dread and awe of the Last Judgment to the sweetness of God's presence; and that certainly awakens in him the feeling of home; the feeling that only a child has in relation to its mother, made up of gratitude, reverence, and devoted love . . .

"And there is a word that to Protestants has the sound of something infinitely commonplace, more or less indifferent and superfluous, that does not make their heart beat faster; something with which a sense of boredom is so often associated. . .

"And yet our fate is sealed, if we are unable again to attach a new, or perhaps a very old meaning to it. Woe to us if that word does not become important to us soon again. . . . Yes, the word to which I am referring is church." [1]

What comes to your mind first of all when you hear that "c" word? Is it a warm fuzzy? Or is it boredom or something completely different? An honest answer here might give more insight into yourself than into your definition of "church"! The word "church" means different things, perhaps, to different people at different times. Often people come into this sanctuary and say, "What a beautiful church you have!" I always smile and say, "Yes. This building is beautiful, too." We all know that first of all somehow the church is people. The Bible tells us the church is composed of people to whom God has given eternal life and called his own.

This chapter (Ephesians 4) is a Golden Chapter of the Bible. It is a rich description of the church as the body of Christ on earth. It is also a practical prescription for being

and becoming an integral part of that body. I commend it to your study and meditation at least for some portion of this summer's reading.

From this chapter are derived the basic doctrines of the church. Although there is great diversity in expression and interpretation, all orthodox Christendom, from Roman Catholic to Anabaptist, from Eastern Rite to Pentecostal, from Calvinist to Wesleyan-Arminian— all of Christendom agree that the marks of the church are four. (Learn them well!) The church is one, holy, catholic, apostolic.

Other working definitions help give insight. Luther said the church is 'where the gospel is preached and the sacraments duly administered.' Wesley would agree. My own humble thought is that the church is wherever God meets his assembled people who have come to worship Him. (Store fronts, cathedrals, house churches, underground meetings . . .) But at the risk of making the pulpit sound like a lecture podium, it might be profitable to think briefly on the four marks of the church.

- The church is **ONE**.

There are many manifestations, many denominations. Many of them claim to be the one true church. But the scripture makes it clear that there is only one God, one Lord, and all who call Jesus Lord are members of the one church. No true reformer ever started a new church, nor intended to start a new church. No denomination is the true church. No human institution can make that holy claim. Timothy George speaks well when he says that all too often we evangelicals "have sinned against the body of Christ by confusing loyalty to the truth with party spirit, and kingdom advancement with self-promotion."

- The church is **HOLY**.

Of course only God Himself is holy in an underived and absolute sense. And of course the church is made up of imperfect and even sinful human beings like you and me. But we are called to live holy lives, that is— lives dedicated to obedience of God's will. And one powerful definition of holy is "that which belongs to a holy God." The true church belongs to God, and it is HIS!

- The church is **CATHOLIC**.

Many contemporary evangelical fellowships have abandoned the word "catholic" and have even altered the traditional wording of the creeds so they don't have to say the word. But that does not change the fact: if we belong to Christ's church we are catholic. The church is world-wide. It fits the cultures, it reaches humanity wherever it goes. We worry about being confused with Roman Catholics. But in a sense Roman modifies Catholic and is to that extent less than truly universal. Don't be afraid of the word. Christ's church is world-wide. It is catholic.

- The church is **APOSTOLIC**.

"Built on the foundation of the apostles" (Eph 2:20) Some branches of denominations take this to mean an unbroken line of authority handed down from the apostles, particularly Peter, the first church leader. But there are serious problems with this definition. No one could be absolutely sure the line is pure and unbroken. And it is NOT this succession that gives the church its vitality. For apostolic refers to the same pure foundation of a gospel which was delivered by the Risen Lord to his disciples. By the power of the living Spirit we have the assurance that that same message is alive and well in the church today!

These marks of the church lift our perspective of what the church really IS from the partial and often imperfect impressions we may receive in our own spiritual journey. Wherever we begin our walk with God we have come by way of some expression of the church. We think "THIS is the church!" And it IS! But that expression may well be incomplete and even inconsistent. But it is the Spirit— Christ's Spirit— that validates our experience, and helps us build our understanding of how rich the church really is.

What was your experience of the church when you found Christ? Where did you begin? As a boy of six or seven, my parents landed in a city church not far from the factories of north Lansing, Michigan. It was a plain tabernacle of a building. The aisles had hard rubber runners instead of carpets. Most of the members were "blue collar", although there was a sprinkling of all kinds of people. But they were all fiercely

serious about their faith. It had old theatre seats with arms that sometimes came off and when you turned them over they looked sort of like a boat and you could play with them while service was going on and on and on.

I know that often the sermons were extreme, and I often went home frightened that something terrible might happen, I wasn't sure just what. But I also know that the gospel was proclaimed, and I know that there were people in that fellowship that absolutely knew Jesus! They had His love radiating in their lives. They were the ones that helped reach me, not the fear, nor even the facts— but the love. Not the distinctive doctrines, now, either— but the Person of the Risen Lord.

I was eight years old when I joined that tabernacle church. I knew what I was doing— and yet I couldn't know ALL that it meant that day. I do recall many times thinking as a boy of ten or twelve when I would hear what had to be the finger of suspicion pointed at other Christian churches— how could it be that out of all this big world we Nazarenes have the very corner on truth! I knew my aunts and uncles knew Jesus, too. And some of them were Methodists and some were Baptists. I don't think I knew any Catholics. But the seeds were already there to believe that Christ's church is not some little sectarian group somewhere.

Our salvation is not based first of all on what we know, or even the purity of our understanding, but rather on Who we trust Before the doctrine comes the convicting, converting Spirit. After the doctrine, again, the Spirit! Keen observation by Rob Staples in latest *Herald of Holiness*.

"In Fundamentalism knowledge is the foundation, and salvation is the superstructure. In Wesleyanism, the opposite is the case- salvation is the foundation and knowledge is the superstructure." Once our hearts have been warmed by his assurance, then we can, as Peter says,

"Add to your faith— virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, and agape love or charity!" (2 Peter 1:5-8) This Golden Chapter closes, not with a doctrinal lesson of profound truth about the church, but with some absolutely essential steps to making our local fellowship a living,

vital part of the one, holy, catholic apostolic church to which we already belong. You might say that Paul could paraphrase President Kennedy's famous Inaugural challenge by saying:

"Ask NOT what your church can be doing for you! Ask what YOU can be doing for Christ's church!"

NO UNWHOLESOME WORDS BE SENSITIVE TO THE HOLY SPIRIT (Don't grieve Him! By dividing the church!) KINDNESS! Ephesians 4:32 TRY TO BE LIKE FATHER GOD! We're his dear children! PUT ON CHARITY! Place the center outside yourself!

Conclusion

What comes to your mind first of all when you hear that "c" word? Is it a warm fuzzy? Or is it boredom or something completely different?

[Bishop Michael Baughan spoke here several years ago. He told of 300 churches in the See of Chester, England, which are under his care, that use the same form or liturgy. But Bishop Baughan said that as he went from one church to the next, on church would "worship" and another would simply go through a form. The difference was the evident Presence of the Living Word among those worshiping.]

Prayer - Lord Jesus Christ, whose very name has been given to us to make us your church, open our eyes and help us to see You, and help us to love You better, to the glory of God the Father, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God high and holy, world without end. Amen.

Hymn

A Lesson in Praying

July 26, 1998

Luke 11:1-13

Everybody prays. It seems as though prayer is built into our make-up, a part of being human. Some prayers may be more direct and honest than others.

Consider some of these by little people: (Children's amusing prayers)

*Dear GOD, I would like to live 900 years like the guy in the Bible. Love,
Chris*

*Dear GOD, If you watch me in church Sunday, I'll show You my new shoes.
- Mickey D.*

*Dear GOD, I bet it is very hard for You to love all of everybody in the
whole world. There are only 4 people in our family and I can never do it. -
Nan*

*Dear GOD, Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a
puppy. - Joyce*

*Dear GOD, It rained for our whole vacation and is my father mad! He said
something about You that people are not supposed to say, but I hope you
will not hurt him anyway. Your friend. (But I am not going to tell you who I
am.)*

Dear GOD, My brother is a rat. You should give him a tail. Ha-ha. -Danny

*Dear GOD, Please send me a pony. I never asked for anything before, You
can look it up. - Bruce*

Everybody prays. Not everybody prays well or even knowing why they pray.

WHY PRAY?

If God already knows everything, then prayer isn't in order to inform Him.

And if God already has things all 'set in cement' then prayer can't change things.

There are several scriptural reasons why we should pray, and why we should keep learning to pray better and better. Prayer DOES make a difference : there have been too many solid examples of how prayer has made a difference. Let me challenge you to think about several reasons WHY we need to pray:

A. Prayer communicates love to God.

The first and great Commandment is: "Thou shalt LOVE the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. God is a Person, not a "Force." Salvation - faith is ultimately a relationship, not a doctrine or list of rules. The way we keep love going is called "communication."

Prayer is communication with God. It isn't easy or simple to love someone as big and as mysterious as God. But he has promised if we will reach out to Him he will reach out to us. And so maybe it IS simple: we just keep talking to God. Tell Him everything! Little by little we come to realize that He really is our Great Friend for time and eternity.

B. Prayer 'conducts' God's love to others.

Prayer not only is communication with God, it can bring God and those we pray for together. Prayer becomes a conduit or conductor' of God's love.

When you pray for others, you can release God's love in their lives. Especially when you sense the prompting of the Spirit, prayer can be a powerful release of blessing in other's lives.

Prayer is mysterious in some ways. We do not always see how it works. But James tells us that the effectual fervent prayer of God's people avails much.

Jim Couchenour said "Prayer does not make the work of the church go forward prayer IS the work of the church. After we have prayed the rest is just mopping up!"

When our Chinese work goes forward when our missionaries find strength to carry on when we see new avenues of ministry, perhaps in the inner city it

will be because in prayer God has shown us how to conduct his love to others.

C. Prayer changes the pray-er.

Finally, prayer keeps us growing. It changes us!

[Sermon-within-the-sermon: The essence of the Lord's Prayer has the potential of keeping the spirit free and pure. In the epistle lesson for the morning (Colossians 2) Paul says three important negative statements:

1. Don't let anyone CONFUSE you with vain or important sounding speculation.
2. Don't let anyone CONDEMN you because you don't follow THEIR church calendar
3. Don't let anyone SIDETRACK YOUR FAITH with a show of humility, telling you that you don't really know how to worship (esoteric knowledge). What the pattern of prayer Jesus taught will do if it is used consistently and honestly and humbly is KEEP FAITH SWEET AND SIMPLE! Keep the
4. Prayer changes 'things.'

THE LESSON JESUS GIVES US

A. **The pattern:** It isn't the exact words that become a magic formula, although the exact words keep the focus sharp. Rather, it is the pattern: God First, Others and self next in God's care.

1. 1. God's name, worship, praise.
2. 2. God's kingdom bringing order out of chaos.
3. 3. God's will, in all the earth and in the details of *my* life.
4. 4. THEN, "its all right" to say (a) GIVE and (b) FORGIVE and (c) LEAD and (d) DELIVER.

B. **The persistence:** On the occasion of this lesson (in Luke's gospel) Jesus added the emphasis of persistency. Here is where we too often fall down. It is human to start BIG and then lose interest and energy and... then... start BIG all over again.

God's ideal is for us to grow IN BETWEEN the camp meetings and the revivals. We do that by talking EVERY DAY with the Father. We need to encourage each other. We need to pray when we feel like praying. And we need to pray when we DON'T feel like praying! Maybe that kind of prayer means the most both to God AND to ourselves!

As We Come to the Close of Worship Today

Let's pray again together, with the pattern of the Lord's Prayer in mind: God is here. Bow your head, close your eyes, and let God sit down beside you there.

1. In your heart tell Him you love Him, and are proud to be His child. Think of how this world will be when hatred and selfishness cease. Tell God you want His kingdom of peace.
2. Tell Him you will be part of His kingdom right now.
3. Tell Him He can tell you what to do, and you'll do it!
4. Now think of the people who are dear to you. Family. Children. Parents. Tell God you want Him to bless them. Give them the gift of God's love in your prayer just now.
5. Let the face of a person who has hurt you come to mind... Tell that name silently to God... Ask God to help you forgive that person. Give them the blessing of God's love in your forgiveness.

Silently think of any failure in your life right now. Do you dare to name the sin right now in your life that you feel you most need to confess to God... Tell God right now! Confess it... Ask God to forgive you; and you know what? He will! He does!

6. What is the daily bread that you need God to give right now?... Ask God for it; trust that He will guide you!
7. You have very much needed God's guidance on some decision and situation in your life... Tell God right now... Ask to know the will of God for you.

Amen.

Lord, teach us to pray! Help us to pray. Help us to know You, and love You. IN Jesus' name. Amen

Hymn (STL) #630 *Be Still and Know*

Tell It To Jesus

Another Family Dispute

Holy Communion

August 2, 1998

Colossians 3; Luke 12

This wasn't the first time for this sort of thing. For the second time in just a little while Jesus was asked to step into a family disagreement. First it was Martha and Mary. Now it was a brother against his brother over settling an inheritance. People have a way of wanting to use Jesus to put their relatives in line.

There certainly isn't anything wrong with telling Jesus when you have a problem with someone. Particularly someone close. In fact that is what we always ought to do first. It is not wrong to hate injustice. It is human to have feelings hurt. It doesn't mean you're not holy enough yet. Anyone that says he never feels slighted about anything has a real problem.

The only thing is when we tell Jesus about someone else, Jesus looks deep inside of us and knows what is really troubling us. He may or may not go to work in answer to prayer to straighten out the other person or persons involved. We have to leave that up to him. But you can be sure that he hears us, that he loves us, and his answer will begin with the one who is troubled.

As you certainly remember, Martha was upset because she thought Mary ought to be helping her in the kitchen. Jesus told Martha she didn't need to be troubled. He spoke to her about good, better, and best. This brother was upset because he thought he was being cheated. "Lord, make my brother divide the inheritance with me!" He probably had a legitimate problem. Somehow Jesus saw that he had a deeper problem than being cheated. He was in danger of corroding his own soul in hatred and greed. So instead of a "ruling" or a judgment," Jesus told him a story. We call the story the parable of the rich fool.'

Maybe we can focus too much on the details of the story itself. We think it is about rich people. Bill Gates. PowerBall winners. But the man in Jesus' parable wasn't a fool because he was rich. He was a fool because he forgot what was really important. He was a fool because he decided for himself what was really important. He was a fool because he thought and acted as if there were no God but himself. "I've done all this! I will pull down these warehouses, and build bigger!" [There is a bumper sticker that reads, "The one who dies with the most toys WINS!" Jesus might have had a bumper sticker: "The one who dies with the most toys DIES!"] There is no sadder name for a person than fool. Jesus ended the story by saying: "So is everyone who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

Martha got a word about focus. This wounded brother got a word about perspective.

Colossians chapter 3 has an interesting idea about perspective. It says as Christians we are raised up with Christ. We are so to identify with our Lord that we can find and accept HIS way of looking at life. We know that he died for us, and we die with him in baptism. We know he rose again from the dead, and we are alive in him to God and the things of the Spirit. But that is not all that this means:

"If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God."

We are raised to God with Christ! God's own way of seeing things! What is important to God becomes important to God's people! In Ephesians 2 it is even clearer; there we read: "Even when we were dead in our transgressions (God) made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus."

Life in Christ is really all about finding the proper perspective.

Some ways of looking at life will corrode and destroy instead of strengthen. Self-centered living at any level is corrosive. There are attitudes that will destroy us spiritually. Even when we are in the right as far as the dispute is concerned. It goes without saying there are some attitudes that are always sinful, some actions that are simply wrong: "Put to death," the Bible says, "sexual immorality, uncleanness, sinful

passion, evil desire, and greed." But there are also some legitimate, humanly understandable feelings that need to be dealt with and put aside as well, feelings that come when injustice is done, especially when the injustice is done to you or yours. The Bible puts it this way: "Put these aside also: anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive speech from your mouth."

It isn't easy or natural to have God's perspective on life. God loves. God loves you. God loves your sister, your brother. God loves your enemy. When we identify with Jesus Christ we have been chosen to "put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." Instead of a life-view that will destroy us spiritually, we have the view from the Throne! It sounds impossible. It is impossible, apart from the indwelling Holy Spirit!

It isn't easy or natural to have God's perspective on life. We are born into earth-bound circles, and have earth-sensitive sense receptors. We see and hear things from where we happen to be.

When all the world around us is celebrating self-worship, Jesus' call to follow Him and take up a cross sounds stupid. When money and youth and power are what count, and people are valued because they can make their own rules it seems backwards to value the poor, and care about the helpless.

[Rudyard Kipling was addressing a graduating class once and said "You will go out from here and very likely you'll make a lot of money, and one day you'll meet someone for whom that means very little. Then you will know how poor you are." - Leadership 1995]

Fools act as if there is no God. They build and tear down on their own advice. They make plans that don't take God into the equation at all. Self is the center and circumference of living.

God's life within and His love come with God's enabling gifts: the peace of God, the Word of God, and the name of Jesus. It goes beyond both the time restraints and the parameters of the epistle lesson to develop fully these gifts to us that give us the divine perspective. But in this same third chapter of Colossians we read:

Let the peace of God rule in your hearts. When we come to God humbly to receive life in him our sins are forgiven, and we have peace with God. As we walk with Him increasingly we know the peace of God. Whatever disturbs that peace we need to take seriously. Check out everything that disturbs your conscience. Don't let me or anyone else condemn you but let the peace of God rule.

Let the Word of God dwell in your richly as you worship privately and together with fellow Christians. The Word of God is our living guide for living. No one becomes a strong mature Christian who does not spend time with the Word until the Word becomes at home' in every part of living.

(Finally) Let the name of Jesus dominate everything you do! If you can't do it in the company of Jesus, don't do it! Jesus' name is more than just an ending for our prayers. It is the signature at the bottom of God's checking account for all you need to do His holy will. But it is also our family name,' that we uphold with honor everywhere we go.

What would happen if every time we had a disagreement in our families we brought our grievances to Jesus? As a matter of fact that is exactly what we need to do! Tell Jesus how angry we are! Tell Him exactly how we feel!

But then, let's wait and listen as Jesus talks to us about US! We can pray until we have rolled the burden over on Jesus but Jesus won't let us get away just feeling sorry for ourselves . . .

Let's remember his gifts: his peace, his Word, his Name! And by God's help let's remember where we really are: Seated with Jesus in the heavenlies! "Keep looking down!"

Prayer

The Constant

August 30, 1998

Hebrews 13:8 *Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, and today, and forever.*

CHANGING SCENES, CHANGELESS CHRIST

A couple of weeks ago I visited the house I left to come to E.N.C. as a freshman student 49 years ago this week. I found the house, even though the neighborhood has changed dramatically. It was painted a bright, shocking blue!

I met, too, with a number of friends I hadn't seen too often in the last 40 years. There were several who were members of the youth group; we had grown up as teens together. We laughed and remembered the good times and the dumb things we had done. But somehow THEY had all changed, too. They looked different, even though we recognized each other. I know that I have changed a lot, too.

But there was a constant. Our old friends had come to be with us to remember my father, who died earlier in the month. As we prayed the Lord's Prayer together Jesus Himself was there. Things had changed, we had changed, but Jesus had never left us, not one!

The fact that we were burying my father, who was born in 1901, really underscored the idea of "change." We had to laugh a little bit because Dad died in Texas, and we flew him back to Ohio to the family plot to be buried. And that was the first time Dad ever flew. He was born November 15, 1901, a month before the Wright Brothers made the first powered airplane flight. Dad was one of those who knew that if God had intended us to fly...

It is almost impossible to imagine the changes in the way we live and move and have our being that took place in this one century. But through those changing years, there was one constant: Jesus never left us!

It is a simple, powerful statement we are asked to believe: "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, and today, and forever." The same Jesus we know that the writer of

Hebrews knew as he wrote those words. The same Jesus no matter where we come from, or what race we represent, or what our I.Q. might be, or how important our place in life is supposed to be. The same Jesus regardless of what our doctrines SAY about Him; because Jesus is not the product of our understanding: Jesus IS.

He is YHWH, the "I AM THAT I AM" who spoke to Moses from the burning bush. The "Alpha and Omega" who frightened John half to death on the Island of Exile. He is the same Jesus you learned to pray to when you said, "Now I lay me down to sleep" and he will be the same Jesus if you ever live to be 96 and close your eyes and die like my father did two weeks ago. In changing times, you can count on it: the one unchanging CONSTANT in this universe is Jesus Christ.

CONTRASTING GOALS, CHOICES FOR ETERNITY

I am probably pretty naive, but I'll say it anyway: There are just two kinds of people in this world . . . only two kinds of life-goals:

1. Those who believe that Jesus IS — is there for them to build their lives on . . . AND
2. Those who think they can "fit Jesus in", that Jesus changes with the times.

It may come as a shock to you, but YOU CAN'T FIT JESUS INTO YOUR LIFE PLANS! He always gets in the way. Jesus is the "odd-shaped cornerstone" that only works ONE WAY: You can trust Him, and build on Him, and He will never let you down as long as you live!

The first kind of people are people who really believe that Jesus doesn't change, and so they dare to follow him through the changing scenes of life. They believe that Jesus is NOT simply who we make Him out to be. He is not the private, personal "God of our choice", but the God that IS! He is YHWH!

The second kind of people are people who act as if Jesus Christ is in the same category as Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. They may never admit it out loud, but instead of staying in personal touch with Jesus they begin to accept what the experts say about Him, or they stop talking to Him because that is what little kids and old,

old people do. And so they change their god to fit their world instead of the other way around.

THAT is what Jeremiah was talking about when he put God's words like this: "My people have done two big sins! They have left ME! They have constructed pitiful substitutes that will never work!"

COMPREHENSIVE PROMISE: A LIFE-TIME GUARANTEE

The Hebrews passage is a conversation. It is a dialogue we can play back when we need help in changing times. The conversation starts with God. God says, "I will never leave you or forsake you!" Then the response we are challenged to make is: "I will not be afraid!"

This doesn't mean I will not FEEL afraid. We can't always help how we feel. It doesn't mean we will never fall down and cry in fear at times. But it does mean: "I will not be afraid to build my life on my relationship with You, Father God!" I will not be afraid to look the values and non-values of this world straight in the face and say "If they don't fit with Jesus, they don't come into my life!"

I have a final challenge, to us all, but particularly to our kids who have had such a great time this summer at camps and on spiritual retreats. That challenge in a phrase is this:

Begin with your experience and turn it into relationship.

Being saved is wonderful; but it is not the end of the line. Having your sins forgiven is great; but that is not all there is. Experience can be essentially "me-centered." Have you been saved? Do you have the Holy Spirit? Are your sins forgiven? All these are necessary and wonderful...

But the secret of joy in the Christian Way is this: Everything God does for you, he does so that you can be his child and his friend. Being a child and a friend are not always one and the same thing. I hear that a lot in my journeys around our church. We LOVE our families; but we aren't always really FRIENDS!

The Constant

Prayer: Lord we come to You, the Eternal God! We thank You we can dare to build our lives on You. Give us grace to make and keep covenant with You and live to please You. In Jesus' name, AMEN

Closing Hymn

145 (STL) *Glorious Is Thy Name* (IF the brass can be ready!) After last verse go into #146 (STL) *There is Strength in the Name of the Lord*

A Plea for Useful

September 6, 1998

8:45 & 11 o'clock services

Wollaston Church of the Nazarene

-Philemon 10-

If you fish or sail in salt water you need to know at least something about tides and currents and channels. When I first went fishing on my own for flounder - you can ask my sons John and Steve - I nearly got stranded on shoal. But I'm a fast learner, and soon I learned a little about reading tide charts and watching weather fronts and seasons of the moon. It was all new and wonderful for a mid-westerner like me.

For years I owned a little boat. (I named it Conference. That way the office people could say that the pastor was in Conference for the rest of the afternoon.) I found that TIDES AND CURRENTS DO NOT DETERMINE DESTINATIONS. That is what rudders and engines and sails are for. While you don't dare ignore the tides and currents, you also never get anywhere if you let them dictate where you go and how you fish. When you can, you make them serve you. When you can't go with or against them, you cut across as best you can with your destination in mind.

[When one nor'easter threatened my boat at mooring at Squantum Yacht Club, I took the launch out to the mooring, and slipped the cable and started around Moon Island for the boat ramp at Boston Gas ramp in Dorchester. Just as I started from the mooring I saw a man waving his arms at me back at the Yacht Club dock, and maneuvered back to pick up John Stark. John has forgotten more about salt water and boats and fishing than I will ever know, and he wanted to go along for the fun of the roller coaster ride into the nor'easter. Just as we were about to go out of sight around Moon island one of the club members said to Jim Stark, who was watching his dad and me through binoculars, "Look at those two fools out there!" Jim said, "That is my pastor and my father!" We respected the elements, but were willing to take the risk for the safety of the boat and because we really enjoyed the ride!]

THE TIDES AND CURRENTS OF LIFE CANNOT DETERMINE OUR ULTIMATE DESTINATIONS. WE CAN GO WHERE GOD INTENDS FOR US TO GO!

IN THE TINY BOOK OF THE BIBLE, PHILEMON, which is actually a personal letter from the first century we have the story of how two men were challenged to take a voyage across the strong currents of their day. Behind this personal and private letter is the story of Onesimus and Philemon and the course they felt they had to take across the tides and currents of their culture.

TO THE CITY OF COLOSSE in western Asia Minor THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST CAME ONE DAY in the message of Paul the apostle. A church was established Among the households affected was that of a wealthy man named Philemon.

In that day when a man converted so did his whole household, his wife, children, servants, and relatives. Among the servants slaves, really- was Onesimus. Whatever his real name had been, he has been named "Useful."

"Useful" may have been officially baptized, but he watched his chance and one day he escaped, and took with him a sum of his master's money. He made his way into Europe, to Rome a thousand miles from Colosse. In that huge city slaves could melt into the population and be free forever. But there in Rome Onesimus, Useful, just happened to meet again the very preacher who had baptized him back in Colosse.

It is impossible for me, or for you or anyone to know what the tides and currents of culture were really like back then. We don't know, either, how Onesimus decided he needed to go the thousand miles back to the east to face Philemon. The Bible does not condone slavery in any form. But evidently Jesus was making demands on Philemon that seemed hard if not impossible. Onesimus knew he had to make good what he had stolen. And so Paul wrote this letter. And Onesimus set off to deliver it himself.

Think of the cost these men had to pay to face the tides and currents! The cost to Onesimus is obvious. He risked his freedom and his life. But the cost to Philemon was great as well. He would be branded as a slave-coddler. He would be vilified by other wealthy people in his society. He might even encourage slave-revolt.

Jesus made demands on both these men because he knew they could make the destination he set for them. The letter doesn't tell us what happened next. But tradition tells us that not only was Onesimus received and forgiven, but that he became the pastor in Colosse. Onesimus was one of the early bishops in Asia Minor.

JESUS HAS A WAY OF CHALLENGING EVERY ONE OF US to cut across the popular currents and tides of our times. The strong tides today tell us it is fine to be religious, but that we don't need to get carried away by our faith. It is not the central thing around which to build our lives.

The strong currents today say that morality is relative and comparative. "I may not be perfectly honest in my dealings, but I am not nearly as bad as my neighbors."

The accepted channels even in evangelical circles tell us that if we have the proper views on abortion and say the right words about family values then we are spiritual, and good Christians. Jesus challenges us to dare to be honest with ourselves and with Him, and with one another! Our faith must move beyond "experience" into the realm of relationship. He asks us to dare to follow Him no matter which way the tides are running and the wind is blowing.

(CONCLUSION)

It only makes common sense if you are fishing or sailing in salt water to know something about the tides and currents. It only makes good sense if you are living for Jesus in a secular, pluralistic world to understand a little bit about the way the winds blow. You may have to run for cover some times. You may have to wait while a northeaster blows over. But the winds and tides do not determine your final destination.

WHEN WE WERE BUILDING THIS SANCTUARY eighteen years ago we had quite a discussion over just how the steeple would be. We all agreed this building should be a testimony in itself to the worship of God and the fellowship of the church. It is Georgian Colonial in architecture inside and out and (except for the elevator and wall-to-wall carpeting) as authentic as some gifted members of our building committee could make it.

That committee thought a nice weather vane on the steeple would add a great authentic touch to a New England house of worship. Protestant churches in colonial times did not have crosses on their steeples. But in my stubborn way I insisted I did not want a church that seemed to say to the neighborhood "This is the way the winds are blowing just now!"

A church is not primarily to tell people which way the wind is blowing, but which way it is to heaven. So without any visible hard feelings the steeple went up without a weather vane and without a cross. I confess I may have hidden some pain! And the steeple really looked "bare" up there 100 feet in the air!

But then Wesley Angell, a great member of our board who knew more about building than anyone, noticed that the steeple was not perfectly straight. Sure enough, it had been damaged in the installation, and no one had seen it but Wesley. The steeple had to come down for repairs. And in the meantime the committee got back together. They inquired how much a cross would cost. And you can see what happened!

Since that day when a crane carried the cross 104 feet to the top of the steeple more than 6,500 days and nights have passed. There have been hurricanes and blizzards and foggy nights and blistering hot days. The wind has blown from every point of the compass and with every intensity from dead calm to full hurricane. But the cross stands there reminding us that there is a Way to heaven, and that if we will follow Jesus nothing can ultimately defeat us from the destination He has for us here in this life, and in the one to come.

Prayer

Hymn #97 *Be Still My Soul*

The Crooked Yoke

September 3, 1998

May 6, 1990 (pm)

2 Corinthians 6:14; 7:1

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temples of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."

"Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters," says the Lord Almighty.

Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Introduction

The message of Jesus Christ to fallen mankind is a message of liberation, of hope, and of freedom. In Colossians (2:20 3:1) Paul writes: "If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees ... in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? ... If then you have been raised with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God."

And so a message which says "Do!" or "Don't!" seems to be a contradiction to that freedom and liberty. [It is NOT! Trust the Spirit! He hates legalism and grudging service! He is the Spirit of Christ and of God and of love!]

What does it mean to obey: Come out from among them and be separate? Is this valid for today? Is this a "Nazarene" problem? Clarify "separate" and the motivations for "separation."

I. THIS IS A MESSAGE OF LOVE, NOT LIMITATION

- A. This message is not to unbelievers but to God's children. God doesn't begin His great salvation by saying: "I want to make you my child, so for the rest of your life you have to be different from everybody else (different=wierd)!" He starts by saying: "I DON'T WANT YOU IN BONDAGE TO ANYONE!"

The people who are in bondage in this world are those who have never met God in Jesus Christ. The Bible says that all sinners are slaves to sin!

- B. THE MESSAGE IS MORE A STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLE THAN A LIST OF RULES.

1. There is probably a proper time for all children to learn life rules; growing up in our society or any society we teach children, "DO this because I say so!" or "DON'T do that!" We don't let six year olds get driver's license we don't allow thirteen year olds to marry, usually. There are good reasons.
2. But with growing maturity comes growing personal responsibility for personal choices. We think: "Now I am able to make my own choices!"

- C. BUT IT IS CLEAR, AND STRAIGHT: COME OUT FROM AMONG THEM AND BE SEPARATE! DO NOT BE UNEQUALLY YOKED TOGETHER WITH UNBELIEVERS!

1. How are we to receive such a word? The message of separation is spoken to believers.
2. It is not a message of salvation. We do not separate in order to be saved. We are saved by grace: "just as I am, without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me."

[In answering that question ("How shall we receive such a word...") Paul asks several questions. One of them is ...]

- D. WHAT DOES A BELIEVER HAVE IN COMMON WITH AN UNBELIEVER?

1. One answer is ... quite a bit, actually! We are human ... we have families to raise ... we hurt the same ways.

2. Perhaps in our day the question might be turned around: What does a believer NOT have in common? What is it that is offended by being unequally yoked?

That one sacred thing A LOYALTY TO GOD AS FATHER AND A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST AS SAVIOR.

THE PERSONAL LOVE OF GOD! IT IS LIFE, ETERNAL LIFE the reality of knowing God. It is precious. It must be nourished. To "believe" is not just a matter of facts we know To believe to be able to believe is precious! It must be nourished.

It is hard to describe, perhaps but it is unmistakable:

[I ran into Mrs. M. It was a thrill to sense the acceptance and oneness of this Protestant pastor and that very Catholic lay woman.]

II. THIS PASSAGE IS A CALL TO LIBERATION, NOT TO BONDAGE

- A. The command is: DON'T BE YOKED! ["Don't stick your neck in a noose!"] WHAT DOES BEING YOKED MEAN? Certainly it is neither possible nor desirable to have nothing to do with unbelievers.

But to be YOKED means to enter into binding, intimate, partnership relationships with people that fundamentally disagree with what is most important and vital to our very lives!

One kind of UNEQUAL YOKE would be to marry someone who did not love Christ! This all too often leads to real sorrow!

But there are many relationships and intimacies that will challenge the firstness of the Christ relationship. We are called to take Jesus Christ with us into every part of our lives.

OUR INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS MUST NOT DENY WHAT WE REALLY ARE!

[Another question asked here is:]

- B. WHAT AGREEMENT IS THERE BETWEEN THE TEMPLE OF GOD AND IDOLS?
How is this question relevant?

We know:

1. the temple is not a building. But perhaps the building itself can illustrate the point. Would we have purely social times in this building? Would we allow worship of idols?
2. there are things which are appropriate at certain times and in certain places. there are other things which are never appropriate, anywhere, ever. We need to be careful in blurring all distinctions between "sacred" and "profane" that we do not "homogenize life" in a way that is theoretical and sad and deadly.
 - a. 1. is there a sacred and a profane?
 - b. 2. if all of life is sacred, what do we do with vulgarity?
 - c. 3. where do we put the garbage cans?
 - d. 4. what is the difference between garbage and poison? Both must be disposed of one is deadly.
3. Is bringing someone else's idol into the house of God ever appropriate? ... under what circumstances?

[Properly, I would be angry to have someone promote worship of some 'deity ' that pretends to equality with Jesus Christ. I would not tolerate it here in this place, dedicated to the worship of God. But ...]
4. If we wouldn't feel comfortable about doing some things here in God's "house" what, then, about bringing profanity and vulgarity and values antagonistic to Jesus into the corridors of our minds? What about holding on and letting go of questionable things? What about toying with X rated videos? What about tolerating suggestive thoughts? What about greed and envy and hatred? DO WE HAVE TO SIN IN THOUGHT? IS IT REALLY NECESSARY TO COMMIT ADULTERY OR TO COVET OR TO HATE IN OUR MINDS SIMPLY BECAUSE WE ARE 'HUMAN'?

[**Transition:** SO, WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO OBEY: COME OUT FROM AMONG THEM AND BE SEPARATE? Is this valid for today? Is this a "Nazarene" problem? Is it even a

viable possibility, to think that we can separate our minds and bodies from the filth of the pervading sins of our time?]

[Of course it is possible! I CLOSE WITH AN OBVIOUS OUTLINE FROM II COR. 7:1
"Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God."]

III. THE CALL AND THE PROMISE ARE FOR CLEANSING

[How may we begin to comprehend the richness of being a child of God, in good standing and fellowship, having His divine approval on our lives? How may we be so unbelieving as to think it makes no difference how we live in relation to how we fellowship with the Father? How may we expect to be life sharing, world changing, Christ revealing people when we are absolutely no different from the world we seek to serve? How can we call ourselves God's children when we, ourselves, sit upon the throne of our little kingdoms, and refuse to have God tell us anything we do not first want to hear?]

- A. As believers we are called to A PURIFYING! ("Having these promised, BELOVED, let us cleanse ourselves ...")

Such a cleansing is possible, or the imperative would not be here. We can be set free from the garbage piles of the day and age into the freedom of pure fellowship with God.

- B. We are called to be active in this cleansing process: Only God can sanctify but here the imperative is "Purify yourselves!" Take some initiative! Get out of the manure piles of the world!
- C. The secret to cleansing is CONTROL! Dare to turn things over to God! We think we have a Nazarene problem... when in fact we have a "control" problem. We (naturally) do not want ANYONE to tell us what is good for us. If we will cooperate with God, He will purify from "all defilement;" OF FLESH (anything that keeps us from pleasing God in our "BODY", FLESH") AND SPIRIT! (God can even deal with our attitudes and motives!)

CONCLUSION: Listen to these words again not as a challenge, now, to reprobate sinners, or to rebels but as a loving call to God's own dear children:

"Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Will you ask God to perfect His work of holiness in your heart and life, beginning just now?

#246 Is Thy Heart Right With God?

Amazing Grace

September 13, 1998

1 Timothy 1:6-17

I hope you were watching TV the other night when Mark McGwire hit #62. I'm preaching about "grace" this morning, and grace is attractive wherever it is found, on whatever level. Professional sports is usually not the place to look for grace but there it was: a multi-millionaire baseball player actually putting people first on the list of priorities!

[Both McGwire and Sammy Sosa have done themselves proud! Sosa, when he passed the old NL home run record was surprised when the fan who caught it returned the ball. What did Sosa do? He signed the ball and gave it back to the fan! Maybe not earth-shattering. Maybe not even worth putting in a sermon. But to me an example of grace!]

On a more serious note, I heard a piper skirling "Amazing Grace" on the rocks at Peggy's Cove, and saw a Baptist choir and pastor ministering to people there in mourning. Once again, it may not have been "saving grace," but somehow God's love was being shown.

GRACE IS JUST ABOUT THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WORD IN OUR LANGUAGE OR ANY LANGUAGE! No wonder that the song Amazing Grace is maybe the most beloved of all hymns. It was written by a man who had been engaged in a wretched, sinful, sickening business. John Newton was in the shipping business: his cargo was human life! He was a slave trader. No wonder he wrote "Amazing Grace . . . that saved a wretch like me!"

PAUL WROTE in this letter to live by: "Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners!" Then Paul added, "I am the chief of sinners!" But along with John Newton, Paul could testify, "I once was lost, but now I'm found!"

THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO BE LOST

(cf txt in Luke 15)

In Luke 15 Jesus tells three "lost and found" stories.

The first is about the ninety and nine sheep in the fold, and the one sheep out on the hillside lost. Grace searches and brings the lost sheep back and there is rejoicing.

The second parable is about nine silver coins in a purse, but one that has gotten lost in a crack or crevice somewhere. Grace sweeps and scours and looks and the coin is found and there is more rejoicing.

The last and most famous of the "lost and found" stories is the Prodigal Son story and when the son comes home grace is waiting and there is a celebration.

Different stories. Somehow it seems different ways to be lost. You have to look for a sheep. You also have to look for a coin. You have to pray and watch and wait for a son to come home. But being lost is still a helpless state. Grace is the "help" that reaches out and brings the lost back home. There are many ways to be lost.

THERE IS JUST ONE WAY TO BE FOUND: GRACE!

In our arrogance we say "I found the Lord!" We don't mean it for arrogance. But in reality whenever we meet with God, GRACE has been active and the Lord has found us! That grace is active here today! Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, God's grace is actively seeking to draw you nearer to God!

- If you are "lost" grace knows where you are!
- If you are in the midst of a struggle grace knows that, too!
- If you think everything is absolutely perfect give God's GRACE the praise!

TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT AMAZING GRACE

Paul writes "The grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love" (1 Tim 1:14) Paul, like John Newton, said he had been engaged in terrible sin. He had been a blasphemer, a persecutor of believers. He had been full of arrogance and pride. But Paul had been confronted by GRACE!

GRACE IS SEEN IN JESUS, AND PEOPLE THAT LET JESUS LIVE IN THEM

Grace is truth about God. It is words (like this sermon)— but more: It has to get wrapped in flesh, somehow. It has to be incarnate. Jesus is the Source of all saving grace. But Jesus is seen in his body, the church!

Paul saw Jesus in the people he persecuted. He saw grace in Stephen the martyr. He saw grace in Ananias of Damascus! He saw the love of God incarnate in Barnabas.

If you let Jesus live in you, you can be a channel of God's grace! Scary, isn't it!!

GRACE IS FREE . . . BUT IT IS NEVER CHEAP

There seems to be a qualifier in Paul's testimony: "I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief!" Is this saying God never forgives willful sin?

The answer I would give this question is: There is NO sin which God will not forgive except the sin we put beyond his grace by our own pernicious unbelief!

But this IS a warning against counterfeit grace! Grace is a very dangerous thing to play with! Playing with grace as though it is a license to go on sinning is foolhardy business!

To search our hearts and come to communion bringing our failures and sins is one thing. To try to use the means of grace as a fire-escape without any real intention to change is quite another thing entirely.

JOHN THE BAPTIST SAID RUGGED WORDS "Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth the fruits of repentance!"

We are not saved by repentance. We cannot turn our own lives around. But we will not be saved unless by God's grace we DO repent!

GRACE NEVER EXCUSES SIN, BUT GRACE IS GREATER THAN ALL OUR SIN!

In my second pastorate I made friends with a man who had made a mess of his life. I went hunting with him many times. I came to love him and his wife, who by the way

was his third wife. I came to understand that he thought he had committed the unpardonable sin because he couldn't go back and undo the mess he had made.

But one day grace broke through that black gloom, and I had the privilege of kneeling beside that man nearly old enough to be my father and holding his arm as we prayed together and he shook and wept and confessed and found clear forgiveness and grace! He lived a number of years after that with a clear witness that he was a child of God!

(Conclusion)

I began this message with glimpses of grace as it connected with stories in the news this week. But we are all well aware that the one story that has been overshadowing all others, at least for us Americans, is one almost too painful to talk about.

It seems as though everyone has an opinion about the sorry mess that has been revealed at the center of our government. At the very least we have been embarrassed by the actions of our nation's leader.

Is God capable of forgiving him? Of course he is. Has he truly confessed and repented? That is not for you or me to say, ultimately. Should he face the consequences of his wrongdoing? We have to leave that to those who have that heavy responsibility.

In the Book of Nehemiah, who lived under conditions perhaps worse than we can comprehend, is his testimony of what he, Nehemiah, did when he found the wall of Jerusalem had been broken and the gates burned:

"And it came to pass when I heard these words that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven . . .and said I beseech You O Lord God of heaven, who keeps covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments . . let your ear now be attentive and your eyes open that you may hear the prayer of your servant: I confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against you: both I and my father's house

have sinned... grant... mercy."

Let the people of God unite in prayer for our nation! Not to picket and parade in the streets. Not to lobby in political power. This is a time to plead for God's Amazing Grace! Pray for our President. Pray for our nation.

Prayer

Hymn

Health and Wholeness

A Story of Healing

October 11, 1998

Luke 17:11-19

A story in Luke's Gospel- an incident that happened 2,000 years ago- may seem pretty disconnected to life as we live it here in the close of the 20th century. But there are windows in this particular story that let light shine on the pathways we all must walk. The story of the healing of ten lepers is not as remote as you might think.

I. WHEN THEY CALLED OUT, JESUS RESPONDED

Hopeless, isolated by law, absorbed by their own troubles a small band of lepers skulked around the borders of Galilee and Samaria in the northern regions of the Holy Land. They were not only sick with an incurable disease, they were marked as untouchables, kicked out of fellowship with anyone except other lepers. They foraged for food. They begged at a distance for anything and everything they needed. But the one thing they really needed, the one thing that makes life worth living— hope— was already lost.

Until Jesus came along, that is. A tiny spark of hope prompted the ten lepers to approach as near as they could and make a long distance shout for help.

"Jesus, master, have mercy on us!"

It may have been just a tiny spark of hope. It may have been just a long distance prayer. But that cry was heard.

The response from Jesus was not as spectacular as they might have hoped. But it was a response. Jesus heard. And Jesus told them what to do. It was a "next step." It had to do with getting legal permission to re-enter society.

"Go show yourselves to the priests!"

This window in the story lets the light in that reveals this truth: Wherever you are God's Word can reach you. You don't need to be lost one more day.

II. AS THEY WENT THEY WERE MADE CLEAN

The story next tells us that as they went, they were cleansed. They had called. Jesus had responded with a brief command. After he spoke they may have looked at their leper sores. Just after Jesus spoke they were exactly the same as they were before he spoke. They were still unclean lepers. But Jesus had told them what to do. They decided they had nothing to lose. They started out to find a priest. And as they went . . . as they walked along . . . they sensed something wonderful was taking place. They were changing.

The shaft of sunlight through this window shows us that: Obedience is faith in action; we cannot obey God and stay in bondage.

The healing of the lepers is remarkably like one of our Old Testament favorites, the story of Naaman and Elijah. Naaman was not poor and socially outcast like these ten lepers. He was a wealthy Syrian warrior. But the fact remains he was a leper and knew he was going to die.

You remember the story: when Naaman finally found the prophet of God, or rather, found where he lived, the prophet, Elijah, sent his servant out to tell this wealthy leper to go and dip himself seven times in the Jordan River.

No dramatics. No incantations. Just a word to obey. It seemed too easy: simply wash and be clean. Naaman struggled with the simplicity of it. But it was God's Word. And as he obeyed, Naaman was made clean of his leprosy.

It seems so simple to call out to God and be saved. It seems too easy just to confess our sins and trust that God is as good as his word and will forgive and cleanse us. Do you remember the lines from that old gospel song?:

*Chiefest of sinners Jesus will save
All He has promised that will he do.
Wash in the fountain opened for sin
"And I will pass, will pass over you."*

III. ONE CLEANSED LEPER RETURNED TO GIVE PRAISE TO GOD

There is one more window open in this narrative: The importance of worship.

Sickness has a way of turning us in on ourselves. We become absorbed with our symptoms. We tell about our hospital procedures. Sickness is often very self-centered. (I plead guilty from time to time.) Wellness is more than an absence of illness. It is the quality of being vibrantly alive. God's goal for you and me is more than being free from sin. More than not suffering for our sins. It is wholeness.

The goal of God's grace is not simply to save us from the damage of sin, but to set us free from our own selfish ego. We are not just saved so we can pursue our own selfish agenda, but so that we can discover God, and take our place in the circle of His family.

God does not save us just to make us clean or good. He shares His life so that we can come into his home and be part of his family. He takes away our sin so we can be happy in his Presence. The end of salvation is more than forgiveness and cleansing, it is fellowship with God and the whole family of God.

"If we confess our sins, (God) is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (Then,) "If we walk in the light, as (Christ) is in the light we have fellowship one with another and the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us (**continually keeps us clean**) from all sin." (1 John 1:7,9)

This Samaritan outcast leper closed the circle of grace that day of his cleansing. He actually got out of his own way! The center of his existence was changed. Instead of orbiting around his illness, and his very considerable pain, now he worshiped the God who had set him free. And that gratitude completed his healing for the moment. As he worshiped he was made whole.

In the Old Testament story Naaman passed the gratitude test as well. He had been really reluctant to obey the simple command to wash and be clean. But then as he obeyed he was cleansed; and to his everlasting credit he did not simply rush back to Syria shouting and celebrating. Instead he returned to the home of Elijah to give thanks.

Health and Wholeness

This last window lets in the light that:

Worship, thanks, gratitude bring us near to our God.

(Conclusion)

If this seems too very simple, well maybe it is. But sometimes I need to remember the very most simple of lessons:

When I call Jesus hears me! (He will hear you, too, wherever you are!)

As I do what he shows me to do, I will be set free! (Are you walking in all the light you know?)

When I tell Him "Thank You!" I am made whole!

Prayer: Lord, Help us to give You thanks from our hearts! Amen

Hymn #356 (STL) *Then I Met Jesus*

With Jesus at the Well of Sychar

October 11, 1998 (pm)

(From March 10, 1996 Lent 3)

John 4:5-42

If ever anyone lived on a dead end street this was the person. And by dead end I don't mean a nice cul-de-sac where the kids can play and the traffic can turn around. I mean dead end like going nowhere, like abandon all hope. I don't know how, but she had run through five marriages. Five separate stories of tragedy.

It could have been tremendously bad luck, and her husbands had all died. It could have been simply the result of a kind of society where wives were throw-away items, where certainly all women were second class citizens. But anyone who has been married that many times has become very well acquainted with loss and failure.

Maybe the biggest loss of all was this person's loss of any sense of self esteem.

This passage has been studied so thoroughly that we all know, or think we know, how women in the middle east always went for their water early in the day, together, in a community time of fellowship. While the little children played and the latest village gossip was passed, the women carried home their water from the well in the cool of the morning. The scene here is in the blazing light of high noon, when there was usually no one at the well and she could come and go in her loneliness without the added pain of feeling she was part of the gossip being passed along.

I don't know that she was a greater sinner than any of the other men and women of her village. But in her isolation she certainly had to be right up there among the greatest in terms of her pain and needs.

When she arrived at the well she was annoyed just a bit. For there on the curbing of the well sat a stranger. By his dress and his bearing she knew him to be a Jew. She

had no idea that her life was about to change and that this man would be the most important person she would ever meet.

She had deliberately chosen this time to come to the well so she could stay away from people. This was a low time in her life. It was a time that she least expected to meet anyone, let alone someone very, very important. She certainly did not have in mind a challenge to her faith that would change her forever. She paused, not quite sure what to expect of this stranger.

The stranger surprised her by asking her for a drink. He looked a little tired, and he evidently was thirsty. The woman was not afraid to voice her surprise. "How come you even speak to me?" she asked.

Social rules were stronger then than we can understand in our society. Some things simply were not done. Jewish men would sooner suffer great thirst than ask a strange woman for a drink.

She let her water jar down and down into the deep well and watched it turn on its side and fill and sink. Then she hauled it hand over hand back to the well curb, and poured the cool water into the stranger's cupped hands. She was amazed that this Jew not only would speak to her, but drink from her water jar she was ceremonially untouchable, and she made the jar ceremonially unclean.

The stranger drank and drank, and then wiped his mouth.

Before he said another word this stranger had said a tremendous amount. He had said 'You are not worthless. You are someone who can help me. You are worth talking to.' He had said "I am not afraid to cross over barriers of gender and race that put people down.' He had even said 'It is all right to ask favors, and reach out to help and be helped by others.' And he said a lot more beside before he ever opened his mouth again.

But then Jesus DID open his mouth and say a whole lot. As a matter of fact, a part of this story is the longest conversation that is recorded that Jesus ever had with any one individual. And even though I hate to interrupt the flow of the drama, we do have

to look at what Jesus told this one shunned and rejected woman. Actually he told her two things that stand out to me, and a third thing than was stunning!

1. He told her something about how people worship. Whenever sincere people seek after God they come under one of the ways Jesus described to this one woman. I'd love to say more about this but there is more there than I can say now.

Jesus simply said "You Samaritans don't know ... we Jews have heard God's revelation and do know but there is coming– and now is a higher, deeper way to worship!"

2. And then Jesus spoke some of the most profound words that have ever been spoken on the subject of true worship, of worship as God intends it shall be the kind of worship, Jesus said, that the heavenly Father goes looking for. Maybe I can address that best by reading a short paragraph of Eugene H. Peterson's translation, *The Message*:

"It's who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That's the kind of people the Father is out looking for; those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration."

The longest conversation on record with a woman who lived on a dead end street, going nowhere! The most profound words about worship to a person who had probably never heard of philosophy or knew much about Torah.

3. Then most stunning of all the first declaration of his Messiahship recorded in the Gospel She says, "Well these are wonderful words and when Messiah comes I'm sure HE will make them plain!" And the amazing, head spinning reply she got, and that she believed, were the words: "I that speak unto you am HE!"

Well, that may not have been the end of our woman's hard times in life, but it certainly shattered her isolation. She left her precious water pot right where it was and headed into the village looking for the people she had been afraid of, the people who had scorned her. And they listened to her! There was something absolutely

fascinating to the village people about the genuine faith that had been kindled in this woman many of them knew had been a loser in so many ways. The village emptied at noonday, and streamed out to the edge of town to the well of Sychar, the well of Jacob their forefather. They heard for themselves. They believed. A genuine turning to God of a whole town began.

The transformation of a hopeless woman into a kind of evangel, the transformation of a Samaritan town into a worshiping community began when Jesus asked someone, someone on a dead end street, for a drink.

It makes me think there are no really dead end streets if Jesus is really there. We've probably all been to the well of Sychar at one time or other.

It makes me believe that in the least expected places, and in the strangest times Jesus shows up in the most unexpected ways. He treats us like people of worth for he values us. He asks us for our help if he needs it.

Then Jesus offers us in return the kind of respect we never thought we deserved. He gives us grace that the rich and famous can never buy with all their wealth, and the keenest scholars can never figure out with all their fabulous IQ, and the most powerful politicians cannot legislate with all their hot air. He offers us the knowledge of who we are, and the hope of who we can be. He helps us look Him in the face and see his purity and then look ourselves in the mirror and see our possibilities.

Then before we know it we are even looking our neighbors in the face, whether they are rich or poor, and telling them about a Man who makes us more alive than we ever thought we ever could be.

Prayer

Hymn Closer 458 (STL) *Fill My Cup, Lord*

The Faith Jesus Comes Looking For

October 18, 1998

Luke 18:1-8

It was the last of the ninth inning. The old days at Fenway. Red Sox versus Yankees. Red Sox batter steps into the batter's box and reaches out to make the sign of the cross on the plate. Yogi Berra reaches out with his big catcher's mitt and wipes off the plate. He says, "Why don't we let God just WATCH this game, OK?"

A God who just watches is probably good baseball theology. But it is a TERRIBLE theology for the way we live our lives every day. We believe that our God is a God that cares about every detail of our everyday living. We believe that it is right for us to pray about all things great and small. The text says we 'ought to pray all the time.' But the question is, HOW?

Prayer is not as simple as some people might want to make it. It is not like "writing a check on God's account," or running down a "wish list." You know, a 'little faith' gets a 'little item,' and a 'big faith' maybe gets a genuine miracle. We all know of miracles. We also all know about things we have desperately prayed for and have been denied.

One insight into this mystery of prayer and faith is this enigmatic story in Luke 18: 1-8. The story itself actually is NOT too difficult to understand:

I. THE STORY

The story is an encouragement to keep on doing the right thing. It is the same truth found in Galatians 6: 7 - 9. Don't quit when you know you are in the right spirit, and doing God's will!

Two or three years ago Kay Roberts was teaching English as a second language to a woman from Viet Nam. As often happens Kay began to get personally acquainted with her pupil. She found that at the close of hostilities in Viet Nam this woman's husband had been imprisoned by the Communists and was in serious trouble. Kay's pupil said that every day she would go to the prison, and knock on the office door,

and ask the officials to release her husband. She sat down on the steps of the prison. She would not go away. Day after day she went back to plead the innocence of her husband. And one day they simply went and got him out of his cell and let him go.

Here in the Gospel we have (1) a powerful but unfeeling, unfair, amoral judge. We have (2) a helpless but persistent widow. And finally, we have (3) a very satisfactory conclusion.

Of course this has to be seen as a story of contrast. Our God is NOT like the judge. This is a "how much more" situation, like the promise in Luke 11:13. Prayer is not as simple as some preachers want to make it. It is not like "writing a check on God's account," or running down a "wish list." You know, a 'little faith' gets a 'little item,' and a 'big faith' maybe gets a genuine miracle. We all know of miracles. We also all know about things we have desperately prayed for and have been denied.

Why, do you suppose, did Jesus tell this kind of story about prayer?

II. THE PURPOSE

Luke tells us 'up front' what Jesus had in mind when he told this story. (He was not describing God's nature as being unfeeling and hard-hearted.) Jesus was teaching two things which actually merge into just one:

A. LIVE IN GOD'S FACE ("we ought always to pray")

God is NOT simply WATCHING the game. God wants intimate access by our own consent to every part of our lives. When we think of God as a Sunday morning God, and think of our faith as a 'special occasion faith,' we are missing the very heart of God's love for us. God wants us to 'stay in His face' in the sense that we keep in contact with Him all the day long. Every burden, every joy— nothing too big, and nothing too small.

This seems to trivialize God to those who have great theories. But the only theologies that fit the way we are to live are those that bring us into a living relationship with God. Theologies that don't 'connect with life' don't do the widow woman any good.

Yes, God is great beyond all comprehension. Yes, when we try to describe Him we are in danger of creating our own idol. God is the great I AM THAT I AM. But God is also a Father who wants to know us by our own consent. That is the way God has designed His people should live. 'LIVE IN GOD'S FACE!'

B. NEVER, NEVER GIVE UP! ("... always to pray and not faint!")

Go is a covenant-making God. He has entered into covenant with you and me, that He will be our God, and that we will be His people. God will NEVER break that covenant.

We all too often think of prayer as successful or not successful as we get the thing we are asking for; i.e., we are looking for a miracle of physical healing, or a particular job opening, or an end to a source of pain. When that doesn't happen as we see it we believe that something is either defective in our faith, or else God is limited in his power, or in His love for us.

Jesus is telling us that if a poor, weak widow woman can persuade a powerful wicked judge, then we can be certain that persistent prayer by the Weakest of God's little children will never be unheard, and never in vain. You can be sure of it. God hears you! God cares!

But the story part of the Gospel text is not the end of the lesson. I wish I knew how Jesus asked this question . I wish I could have seen the expression on his face, and understood the concern he seems to express.

III. THE QUESTION

When he had told this story about persistent prayer Jesus asked what seems a surprising question: "NEVERTHELESS, WHEN THE SON OF MAN COMES, WILL HE FIND [THIS KIND OF PERSISTENT] FAITH ON THE EARTH?"

Why did Jesus put this question right here? I'm sure it is not a mistake.

- A. The days before we see Jesus will be testing days. It is probably as difficult right NOW for people to "live in God's face" as it ever has been in all history. Only a fool with his head in the sand cannot see how sinful our times are. It is not a simple thing, but little by little the

values we have been sure of have crumbled. We accept as normal things we would have been shocked about just a few years ago. Symptoms instead of causes, perhaps. Still, how easy is it for us to sense God's Presence all through our day?

- B. Staying in God's face is the ONLY way we can hope to come through this spiritual warfare. In our arrogance and conceit we think WE know what the church needs to survive. So we hold a few more seminars, and we arrange a few more studies of the latest spiritual fad. And we forget to stay kind and loving and tender and caring even for our own families. We know we ought to DO something.

[[British Prime Minister Winston Churchill failed eighth grade English three times but, during WW II, it was his eloquence over the radio that encouraged the huddled masses in bomb shelters to persevere. After the war Oxford University invited him to make a commencement address. He arrived on stage with his usual props: a cigar, a cane, and a top hat that accompanied the beloved Churchill everywhere he went. He stood confidently before his admirers. He removed his cigar and laid the top hat on the podium. All ears wondered what great things he would include in his speech. He gazed over his silent audience. A few seconds passed before his authoritative deep gravely voice said, "Never give up!" Again he waited a few seconds before he shouted, "Never, never give up!" His profound words thundered in their ears as everyone realized that their nation had been saved by such perseverance. There was deafening silence as Sir. Winston reached for his hat and cigar, steadied himself with his cane and walked off the podium, his commencement address finished.

This story has been redacted in our personal history all of our lives. Churchill, and the British peoples' fortitude has contributed greatly to our American ideal of stick-to-it-tive-ness.]]

But we DON'T know what we NEED! We DON'T have the answers! We DON'T DARE simply ask God to 'bless OUR plans!' IF EVERY ONE OF US DOES HIS/HER BEST TO BRING IN GOD'S KINGDOM WE WILL MISERABLY FAIL! Because PRAYER is where we begin! Being OPEN TO GOD is our only hope of finding justice. We cannot do anything until and unless we have prayed!

A GOD WHO SITS IN THE STANDS AND WATCHES, first base side,, front row– interested but impartial– that may be all right for baseball. (Especially since it is 'wait till next year' for the Red Sox.) But life is NOT a game of baseball. Unless we have a God who does more than just watch, then what is our faith all about?? We TALK too much about prayer and we PRAY too little. G. Campbell Morgan said, "Any study of prayer which does not result in praying is not only NOT helpful, it is HURTFUL!"

In this Gospel lesson YOU and I are the helpless widow woman! Unless God comes to our aid we are going to be finally lost and hopeless. Like dear Jim Couchenour has said more than once: "Prayer does not support the work of the church; prayer IS the work of the church!"

Our Lord is watching us– he is watching me as I type this message– watching YOU as you listen– watching to see if we will dare to be the kind of people who will live in God's face day in and day out. Stay in God's face for our children's salvation. Stay in God's face to find his best will for our lives. Stay in God's face to tell him we need him and we love him. Because THAT is the kind of faith Jesus is coming to look for!

Prayer

Father in Heaven, We, your church, want to be grateful for your many blessing. We want to keep covenant with you, and live as the people of God. Give us grace to love you above all else, and grace to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Grant that our times of worship may be a sanctuary in a very secular world. We pray that the Sunday School, Bible studies, and fellowship gatherings that bind us together as a community of believers will make us strong to do your will. And then in your mercy send us out of this sanctuary to dare to live in your face, and to be your Church. We ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, One God Holy and Eternal. Amen.

Song of Response - 477 - Oswald Smith's *Deeper and Deeper*

The Lord of All Saints

All Saints' Day

November 1, 1992

Luke 6:20-31; Ephesians 1:11-22

Ephesians 1:11 "In (Christ) we . . ."

On this All Saints' Day in the Christian calendar the Gospel lesson is the opening verses of Luke's record of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. It is stark and challenging, possibly even a bit more rugged than Matthew's version that we call the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says, "Blessed are you poor! Blessed are you who weep!" Then he says, "Love your enemies! Bless those who curse you! If anyone strikes you on the cheek offer the other!" "Do to others as you would have them do to you." The Golden Rule.

Is there any connection with the words of Jesus and the way life is supposed to be lived by ordinary Christians? Isn't this just an ideal? What does loving enemies have to do with ordinary people like you and me? We're not saints— are we?

There is! There is a connection! Of course WE can't live in the spirit of Jesus' kind of love in our own natural kind of power. That is the whole point. Jesus came to change us, and make us like Himself.

There is a word from the Lord which I've been listening to this week. It is a word for me, and I believe for the Church today, and it is summed up in the first three or four words of the epistle lesson, Ephesians 1:11: "In him we . . ." or "In Christ we have . . ."

- In Christ we have . . . obtained power and gifts for living.
- In Christ we have . . . a place or position of belonging.
- In Christ we have . . . Living relationship with all saints in God.

I. IN CHRIST ALL THE RICHES OF GOD AT OUR POTENTIAL COMMAND

In Christ we have all the gifts and blessings and graces that we need in order to carry out all that Christ calls us to do. In CHRIST, says Paul, we have obtained inheritance of Christ's hope, and his power, and his glory.

When I think of the phrase "In Christ" I think of Pastor Nielson's father,

Rev. John B. Nielson, who died in the summer of 1997. "In Christ" was not only the title of one of the books John B. wrote, it was the very signature phrase of John B.'s life and ministry.

Let me use some of John B. Nielson's favorite scripture references and then a quote or two to underscore the extent of our riches in Christ:

- *For as in Adam all die, even so IN CHRIST shall all be made alive.* 1 Corinthians 15:22
- *Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are IN CHRIST Jesus because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.* Romans 8:1,2
- *If anyone is IN CHRIST he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.* 2 Corinthians 5:17
- *But thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession IN CHRIST and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.* 2 Corinthians 2:14
- *And God raised us up with Christ . . . in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness to us IN CHRIST Jesus. For it is by grace we have been saved through faith—and this is not of ourselves, it is the gift of God— not of works so that no one may boast. For we are God's workmanship created IN CHRIST Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.* Ephesians 2: 6 - 10

From Rev. John B. Nielson's book *In Christ* these words, amplifying the power of our adequacy in Jesus. John B. had a vision of taking our inheritance IN CHRIST and turning our world upside down again with it:

God can overturn in a day . . . what it takes man's wisdom centuries to build. Paul saw the implications of Christ's presence in the world and sent them as harpoons into the prevailing culture and subjected it to Christ. What he did for his day must be done in our day. Someone with daring faith and confidence built on an experience of Christ must dismantle the bombs of our scientific self-confidence.

Even though it sounds like Jesus is challenging us to the impossible with his call to be saints, the fact is the resources are there for us in CHRIST — if we will ask for our inheritance.

(Transition) But maybe I should have emphasized the FIRST word first. The word IN Christ. The gifts of grace and the adequacy of God in CHRIST comes to those who are IN Christ.

II. IN CHRIST MEANS A PLACE, A POSITION, A BELONGING

Sainthood is not something we attain. It is not something we earn or merit or accomplish. Saints are those who are IN Christ.

In this Ephesians passage Paul puts it this way: You came IN Christ when you (1) heard the word of truth, and (2) believed in Jesus, and (3) were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit.

A definite experience of grace comes when the Gospel is HEARD. The Gospel simply put is that Jesus died for your sins, and lives for your eternal salvation.

A definite salvation takes place when the Gospel is BELIEVED. Romans 10:9,10 says : "If we confess with our mouth 'Jesus is Lord!' and if we believe in our heart (that) God has raised him from the dead, we shall be saved."

A definite position or place in Christ is sealed when BAPTISM is complete: I am not here preaching salvation by sacrament, but Paul says we are marked by the seal of the Holy Spirit. In baptism we obey Christ's command, and receive the symbol and sign of the inward Presence of God's own Life within.

[Exhortation: Have you put your trust in the shed blood of Calvary?

- Have you seen your Savior dying on the cross even for you?
- Have you called out in your heart to God for mercy in Jesus' name?
- Do you keep covenant with God in the New Testament in his blood?]

It is IN Christ we have life, and then access to standing grace and gifts.

But that is not quite the end of the message of the phrase "IN CHRIST WE HAVE obtained an inheritance . . ." That little word "WE" is very, very important!

III. IN CHRIST WE . . .

Together WE are Christ's body, the church. The church is mysterious and wonderful. It is made up of all who call Jesus Lord, both here on earth, and in heaven.

We are part of the church that we call "Triumphant." That 'great cloud of witnesses' mentioned in Hebrews 12 is pulling for us to be faithful. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper by faith we join with them in worshipping our Head. Today on All Saints' Day we are one great body with all those who have gone on before. They are not complete without us. But we certainly are not complete without them.

We are also part of the whole church Militant around the world. We are brothers and sisters to ALL SAINTS. The church is not complete without us. But it certainly is not complete without every African saint, every Asian believer, every Christian in the far flung islands of the sea, every child of the king of every race and language around the world. The church does not all worship as we worship. They do not sing as we sing, or pray as we pray. But together we who call God Father and Jesus Master are that "WE" that is IN CHRIST. Sometimes I think that God wants to re-introduce us into the family– the body of Christ– the fellowship of all saints.

We have been conditioned to think of salvation as not only highly personal but highly individual as well. We are loved and called by God one by one it is true. But then we think 'What does my relationship with God have to do with you, or you, or you?' We have come to think of salvation as a very private matter.

Isolation is finally sin's bottom line. Sin is the great isolator and separator. Hell is where no one speaks your language. Hell is where no one cares a thing about your

soul. Individualism is a selfish lie. God loves the individual. He makes characters out of each of us if we will let him. No one saint is a carbon copy of another.

Individuality is good. Individualism is something different. Denominations can be good. But DENOMINATIONALISM is something different. When one group of saints starts emphasizing its own purity as contrasted with all other groups in the body something seriously wrong is taking place. There may be room, even need for denominations. But the Church of Jesus Christ, his BODY, is more glorious and mysterious and complete and wonderful than any human organization can ever conceive.

The completeness we celebrate on All Saints' Day, the power to change our world, does not reside in any one group or individual. We have to do our individual best. We have to work to build up our local fellowship. But when the whole church begins to catch the vision of this greater "we" and dares to pray unselfishly "Thy kingdom come and Thy will be done" then perhaps Christ's prayer for all the saints will be answered as it never has been answered before!

Do we dare to pray that the Holy Spirit will come all throughout this world where people call Jesus Lord regardless of who gets the credit?

Prayer: O Lord our God, from whom neither life nor death can separate those who trust in thy love, and whose love holds in its embrace thy children in this world and the next; so unite us to thyself that in fellowship with thee we may always be united to our loved ones whether here or there; give us courage, constancy and hope; through him who died and was buried and rose again for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. [William Temple]

Hymn: 673 *The Apostles' Creed* (or)

Zaccheus

November 1, 1998 (pm) - Communion Service

Luke 19:1-10 (read)

INTRO: How would you preach this passage? What would you do if YOU were suddenly called on to bring this evening message? It happened to at least one young person:

The great London Baptist Preacher Charles Spurgeon had a school for preachers. Each day he would enter the chapel and call on one of the students to preach extemporaneously on a text or topic he would name. Mr. Jones lived in fear of the day his name would be called, and sure enough his morning came. Spurgeon walked in and facing the students announced "Mr. Jones your text is Luke 19:1-10. Preach us a sermon on Zaccheus."

Somehow Jones got up and made it to the pulpit where he held on for dear life, knuckles white and knees wobbling. With a squeak as his voice was breaking he began.

- "Zaccheus . . . (long pause)
- "Zaccheus was a small man . . . , and so am I.
- "Zaccheus was up a tree . . . , and so am I.
- "Zaccheus came down . . . , and so am I."

With that he quickly returned to his pew to await the judgement of the great preacher.

Spurgeon stepped forward to begin his lecture. He looked at the young Mr Jones and said quietly, "Young man, I think you'll do....."

This is a story of grace, and of humility, and of genuine change in the Presence of Jesus:

Zaccheus was small/ little / DIFFERENT. We make something of his short stature, but Zacchaeus had pretty much overcome that handicap in his own personal life. He was a success in many ways. But spiritually he knew a need. His desire to see Jesus and his inability on his own becomes a symbol of the inability every one of us has to see Jesus, to find God, without some kind of help. We call that help 'revelation.' It comes by the grace of God, through the Holy Spirit, by the Bible, by the truth, from the living Word.

Zaccheus was up a tree TO HIDE? TO SEE? Zacchaeus used the tree to see Jesus. But he might well have had the idea of being unobserved— a spectator, but not a participant. 'I'll just climb this tree and see and not be seen.' But Jesus made his tree a "corner" where he couldn't get away!

THE SEARCH FOR THE REAL JESUS

Luke 19:3 "And he (Zaccheus) was trying to see who Jesus was, and he was unable because of the crowd..." LOOKING FOR JESUS CAN BE A LONELY THING. There were people between Zaccheus and Jesus:

1. Bad people who hated him: Some possibly had reasons to hate a tax collector. Others simply put Zaccheus into a category, which is easier than dealing case by case. "All _____ are _____!" or, " _____ " was bad once, so he/she is " bad forever!!"
2. "Nice" people who "understood" him: how easy it can be to think we "understand" when we don't have any idea of the pain another is facing. We "explain things" very glibly at times; we make light of other peoples' struggles. It is no help to say, "Your situation is not all that bad!" Zaccheus may have had plenty of people to tell him what they thought he ought to do but he wanted to see for himself who Jesus was! "People" are supposed to be "witnesses," and God uses the Church to help bring people to the knowledge of Jesus. But can it be that we Christians have tried to be so nice and helpful that we have actually obscured Jesus from people who would see Him?

ONE MAN MADE A DETERMINATION TO FIND OUT WHO JESUS WAS/IS

The crowd, the many people, were confusing to Zaccheus. If everyone is busy describing Jesus to us, how can we ever come to find Him for ourselves? If we are always listening to this expert, or reading that latest book, do we take time to simply get alone and wait on God Himself? –

The student of Spurgeon was 'up a tree.' He was in a corner. We all get into places where we haven't planned to be, with results we could not foresee. It is amazing, then, when Jesus comes to exactly the branch on which we're sitting, peering through the leaves and "casually" looks up into our eyes and says, "I see you!" It could be disconcerting. Actually it is the most comforting thing in all the world!

JESUS CAME WHERE THE MAN SEEKING HIM WAS.

We don't "find Jesus;" The very hunger for God comes from Him. He finds us! THE SURPRISE: JESUS FOUND THE SEARCHER

Luke 19:5 "And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, 'Zaccheus...'"

[ON THIS 'ALL SAINTS DAY'] IT IS IMPORTANT TO SEE THAT GOD REVEALS HIMSELF TO US ONE ON ONE!

God is a Rewarder of them that diligently SEEK Him; but in the end we see that God Himself is the Seeker; Hebrews 11:6; and (2 Chronicles 16:9) "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward Him."

(WE NEED TO SEE JESUS FOR OURSELVES!)

The revelation of Jesus Christ to His Church, and then the Church's witness of that revelation to the whole world, is what the entire New Testament is all about. Jesus is "the AUTHOR and the PERFECTER of our faith." (Hebrews 12:2)

1. WE NEED A MIRACLE! Like Zaccheus, we will find it difficult to know just who this Jesus is, apart from a miracle. People will be happy to tell us who Jesus is, and that is all well and good to a point.

2. THE MIRACLE IS FAITH ITSELF! Jesus still comes where we are, by His Spirit! He stops under our tree, and says, "Come down!" This is reality! It has happened to every born again Christian. Some more spectacularly than others, perhaps (like Saul of Tarsus.) But I remember, don't you?!)

ZACCHEUS CAME DOWN.

He made an end of isolation. Jesus invited himself over for dinner!, and we to need to come down accepting God's love at the invitation of his son who ate with sinners.

GOD DOES NOT SAVE US INTO ISOLATION!

The fellowship of the Gospel: Zaccheus was not "enlightened" [touched by saving grace] and then put out on his own resources to make his own way. Jesus said, "I'M COMING TO YOUR HOUSE I'M COMING HOME WITH YOU!"

That morning Zaccheus set out to see who Jesus was and before the day was over Jesus was looking at him over the coffee cups!

I know it isn't quite that pat or simple but it still is true (Hebrews 11:6) that IF WE WON'T TAKE SECOND-HAND REPORTS ABOUT WHO JESUS IS, WE CAN FIND THAT HE WANTS TO BE OUR DAILY COMPANION.

Into Communion:

THE HOLY COMMUNION

Wherever you are on your Spiritual Journey - If you believe God is seeking fellowship with you— and if you want to turn to Him, I invite you to come in faith to the Table of the Lord. Draw near with faith and take this Sacrament to your comfort, and make your humble confession to Almighty God in humility before Him.

The Apostles Creed Inside back cover of Hymnal

The Law Read and Confession Made - The Lord Jesus Christ has said to us: "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like unto it: You

shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to draw us near to Himself so that we can come to his table with confidence.

(Reading No. 750) A prayer in unison, from scripture:

Unison: Search me, O God, and know my heart; Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me. Lead me in the way everlasting. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Pastor: Hear what our Lord has said: Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. And he has also said, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Prayer: Thank you. O God, for your forgiving us when we come humbly to you. We do not presume to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

(In Place of Gloria Patri) sing *"Father, I Adore You, Lay my life before You How I love you!"* , *"Jesus, I adore you . . ."* and *"Spirit, I adore you . . ."*

The Informal Invitation ("This is not my table . . ." Do not come irreverently. Do not come because someone else expects it. But if the Host invites you, and you want to walk with Him, then you are welcome at His table...)

The Words of Institution

On the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat: THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

After supper he took the cup and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me: Amen

We praise you for the mystery of our salvation! We truly believe Christ has died!
Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

Bless these emblems, O God, and make them to us the Body and Blood of your Son, spiritual food, and spiritual drink of new and unending life in Jesus Christ.

And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us:

Our Father which art in heaven . . .

Now, humbly come and receive the Gifts of God for the People of God

#754 God of the Ages

The God of Eternal Life

November 8, 1998 AM

Luke 20:27-38

The Sadducees came with trick questions . . . (To, two, too . . . 'Second day of week' ??) (Twenty-six/ twenty-sick sheep . . .) that are not expected to be answered . . . No straight answers possible . .

- What is the afterlife? What is heaven really like?
- We don't really know, at least from personal experience
- We have several sources from which we can choose the answers we want to hear:
 - Literalists - street of gold/ three layered universe
 - Near death experiences
 - Observing the dying - all these are tremendously subjective, unreliable

OR

- We have Jesus' word

To these Sadducees - in effect: you don't know what you are talking about.

Insights in the parables: particularly the talents; hints of useful work.

Direct words: Today you will be with me in Paradise / I go to prepare a place for you.

Eternal life is connected with God's integrity. He has made covenant with us, and we with Him. By grace we can keep covenant. I am willing to believe He will know me, and help me know Him in the great unknown that waits us every one.

I heard a story about Cecil B. De Mille recently; he told of canoeing on a lake in the northern woods. He observed a swarm of water beetles under the surface of the water near his canoe. One of the beetle contacted his canoe and crawled up the side right out of the water where it seemed to fasten itself and die. He forgot about it for a

time. But as the sunshine beamed down on it the shell of the beetle seemed to harden and crack, and out came a dragonfly. The gossamer wings unfolded, and dried, and the beautiful shimmering dragonfly took to the air. In one minute it flew farther and higher and faster than all its life as a beetle under the water.

De Mille imagined as it swooped down over the other beetles still under the surface that they could not have any clue as to what was happening in the world of sunlight and air, let alone that soon they would flit and dart and fly. He thought, "If God can do that for a beetle, what will He do for me?"

Prayer:

O God, whose Son came to this world to destroy the works of the devil and make us Your children and heirs of eternal life: Grant that we may take hold of this hope, and purify ourselves even as he is pure; that, when he comes again in power and great glory, we may be made like him in his eternal kingdom of glory; where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen

A Call to Stand on Holy Ground

November 15 PM

Exodus 3: 1 10

Most of the people you meet each day, good bad or indifferent, live by their wits in this dog eat dog world and never think about God at all. If they ever do consciously think of God they probably think in terms of restrictions and oughts and shoulds. But at the same time most of the people we meet each day at some time or other have stopped and asked themselves the question, "Is this what life is all about?"

For when we live by our wits or not, life is full of hard places.

If we were to be brutally honest, it isn't just the most of the people we meet that are frustrated with life at times and who do not think of God most of the time. People LIKE YOU AND ME who should know better, or who may have been taught better, or even people who in earlier times at a youth camp somewhere or a revival meeting or a VBS made a commitment to God find that they can live a whole day a whole week a whole month without ever looking to God, and then one day ask that same question, "Is this what life is all about? Isn't there more than this?"

THIS IS WHERE THE EXODUS STORY COMES IN....

In the most modern, progressive, intelligent civilization the world had known to that time a nation that had already produced man made wonders like the great pyramids of Giza that were evidence of knowledge of celestial orbits in that nation were several hundred thousand men, women and children who were descendants of the Hebrew Patriarchs. Four hundred years earlier Jacob had taken his tribe in a time of famine into Egypt, following his son Joseph who was viceroy of the entire land. They had been honored guests of the Pharaoh. At that time there were a total of 72 Hebrews.

But in the intervening 400 years governments had changed, and generations had passed and now the Egyptians had brutally dominated the Hebrews. The

descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were reduced to living by their wits in the absence of God or so they thought. But from time to time they raised their heads and hearts and voices and said, "O God! Is this all there is to life?" And so far as they knew nothing! Nothing happened! Day followed day, and nothing happened.

WHAT A GREAT STORY THIS IS!!

Just as these people were praying almost in despair several hundred miles to the southeast there was a solitary shepherd on the backside of the desert near a mountain called Horeb. He looked like any other shepherd, perhaps. He was a shepherd with a very interesting life story. He had been a prince. He tried being a hero. He became a fugitive. I have no idea what was going through this man's mind as he stood, a tiny isolated little speck of humanity in a vast dry wasteland south of the Negev. But Moses was about to have an encounter with God.

GOD MEETS ONE LONE MAN IN THE MIDDLE OF A BARREN DESERT

The man, Moses, saw a fire. It was a fire that burned and burned and burned. Moses turned aside to see it. (Significant!) The scripture says (4) "When the LORD saw that (Moses) turned aside..." then Moses was confronted with Almighty God. Moses was drawn, but he was also almost in terror. It was electrifying.

After more than 3,000 years this story has tremendous significance. For it tells in language deeper than words can express, to those who will listen, something about what happens when we come into living contact with God.

THE WONDER OF GOD REACHING TO A HUMAN BEING

[All Moses could do was "draw near"...not generate the experience; also extreme reverence of Jews for this name "YHWH" and LORD in our OT...]

Rudolph Otto, a respected German scholar, used three Latin adjectives to describe encounters with God in the Bible in general, and this Burning Bush story in particular. Those three words are tremendum, and mysterium, and fascinans.

Tremendum: Otto used the word tremendum to express three aspects of a divine human encounter. First, he said was (1) A sense of awe. It is, in his words, "a quite specific kind of emotional response, wholly distinct from that of being afraid, though it so far resembles it that the analogy of fear may be used to throw light upon its nature." The Scripture says "Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at God." Later, when God had brought all the people to this place again they, too, were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance.

But there is more. Tremendum means also (2) an overpowering, a majesty a majestic distance realizing the infinite difference between the ineffable God and our mortal humanity. The prophet Habakkuk said: "I hear, and I tremble within; my lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters my bones, and my steps tremble beneath me." Daniel said, "My strength left me, and my complexion grew pale, and I retained no strength." Both these men stated later that they felt greatly beloved and yet they were shaken physically and mentally and spiritually.

Finally tremendum has elements of what can only be described as (3) sheer "energy." The "energy" is sometimes represented in fantastic ways Ezekiel's wheels within wheels the four living creatures of Revelation even the picture of the living Savior in Revelation chapter one– (words like Psalm 29: 5 9)

The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, And Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire, The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voices of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!")

"Awe" like Abram in Genesis 15 when "a horror" came over him as God passed between the pieces of the sacrifice "Overpowering" like Habakkuk who says, "I hear, and I tremble within; my lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters my bones, and my steps tremble beneath me." Energy beyond any human generated excitement!

[THAT IS A LONG WAY FROM BODY SURFING AT A JESUS ROCK CONCERT]

But AWE is not all when God asks us to turn aside: [Another word:]

Mysterium: Encounters with God can never be really described. And they cannot be duplicated or summoned up at will. Ezekiel is never ever willing to say he saw God or even God's glory but he IS willing to say he saw something LIKE the glory of God:

And above the dome over their heads there was something LIKE a throne, in appearance LIKE a sapphire, and seated above the likeness of the throne was something that SEEMED like a human form..." and so on.

When the Bible tells about people coming into contact with God it never confuses this great I AM THAT I AM with the physical setting nor does it give any glory to the humans involved. God is not in the whirlwinds or the fire or in the burning bush or even in the mountain or the tablets of stone. Moses does not fast and pray until God has to do as Moses says. There is always mystery involved when the great God reaches out to communicate with people.

One might say God has a big problem. How does he get near to us without on the one hand consuming us with his energy, and on the other hand convince us that He really is interested in us if we will listen and respond in humility and faith. There will always be mystery.

[Finally and wonderfully there is another aspect:]

Fascinans: The final adjective Rudolph Otto uses to describe encounters with God is fascinans, or the root word for "fascination." There is a tremendous attraction within the human heart for the holiness of God. For God is white hot passionate caring LOVE. To think that someone just simply downright LOVES you is just about the most fascinating thing in the world.

"Love" of some kind or other is the dynamic that drives most of the dramas and novels of the world the concept of loving and being loved. But no love can compare with the purity and intensity of the LOVE that emanates from an encounter with God.

Awe. Mystery. Great fascination! Moses is awed. He covers his face. He certainly does not understand. But what is this this I AM THAT I AM finally saying to Moses?

THIS GREAT GOD CARES ABOUT PEOPLE

He is saying, to Moses, "I have been listening to a bunch of people who are living by their wits, and who haven't really ever thought much of Me, except that I am "absent" from their lives. I have been hearing them ask 'Is this all there is to life?' And I have even heard some of them cry poor, broken prayers like, "O God, if there IS a God like I have heard about in fairy tales and myths and stories about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob why don't you show up here and help me? ' Well, Moses, I AM is going to show up! And GUESS WHO is going to introduce ME and begin the process of answering their prayers??"

God went on to say that the proof that He was really God would be that right here right at the base of this mountain one day you will be standing with those very people who are praying to Me right now and together you will worship. And then, and then only, the fire disappeared. It did not "go out." It simply was gone, and there stood Moses all alone in the vast expanse of desert.

THERE IS A CONNECTION, OF COURSE, BETWEEN THE PEOPLE IN EGYPT ASKING "IS THIS ALL THERE IS TO LIFE?" AND THE BURNING BUSH EXPERIENCE OF MOSES DO YOU THINK THERE MIGHT BE A CONNECTION OF GENUINE WORSHIP AND GOD'S LOVE FOR PEOPLE "OUT THERE"??

A lot of things happened in the next few months to Moses and to Egypt and the people who were slaves but were to become the people of God. Great miracles took place. and God nearly destroyed Egypt getting the people out and away from their old masters. But the bottom line is this: one man met God Almighty God and obeyed Him. When this one man invited the slaves in Egypt to follow God they believed him, they responded to the promises of this God. And one day the living descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob stood at the Mountain of God, and they saw the fire and they experienced tremendum, and they experienced mysterium, and yet at the same time they knew fascinans.

When WE think of the Exodus we think of the details of the journey the parting of the sea, the manna, the water from the rock– and that is only natural.

But really Exodus is about a God of fire and holiness and mystery who calls people to look up and believe and to walk with Him and trust Him and find they have never been so free and so happy. Exodus is about being drawn out of life that goes around in circles into a life that ascends in spirals that never, ever, ever end. Exodus is about an invitation to fellowship with the eternal God, the I AM THAT I AM.

THE WONDER OF EXODUS IS THAT GOD WANTS TO COME NEAR HIS PEOPLE AND NEVER, NEVER LEAVE THEM AGAIN!

So who are we? and where is God? Are we saying "Is THIS all?" Can we ever see God inviting us to come nearer to Him? Will we take time to "turn aside"??

THE MESSAGE OF EXODUS IS THAT ORDINARY PEOPLE CAN EXPERIENCE THE TREMENDUM AND THE MYSTERIUM AND CERTAINLY THE FASCINANS OF COMING INTO GOD'S PRESENCE AND THAT ORDINARY PEOPLE CAN WALK WITH GOD AND NEVER NEED TO LEAVE HIS FELLOWSHIP EVER AGAIN.

Prayer 133 *I Love You Lord* [Alleluia! Alleluia!]

See: [A Call to Stand on Holy Ground](#) [MM: I think this is an early draft of that sermon.]

Encounter with God on a Desert

November 15, 1998

Wollaston 6 pm

Exodus 3:1- 10

Picture a broad vista – high shot – vast panorama of barren desert valley between two mountain ranges on each side. Sparse bushes here and there as far as the eye can see. Tiny specks moving below - - a shepherd and scattered flock of sheep. Not another living thing in sight.

In that vast emptiness of desert - - we zoom in and see a deeply tanned handsome Beduin-looking sort of man. Far from any other human being, let alone any civilization - - one of the world's most important events is about to take place:

A bush begins to burn. So ??

It keeps burning . . And burning . . . The man looks.

It burns but is not burned up. The man turns aside to see.

THE EXODUS STORY IS BEGINNING:

GOD MEETS ONE LONE MAN IN THE MIDDLE OF A BARREN DESERT

After more than 3,000 years this story has tremendous significance. For it tells in language deeper than words can express, to those who will listen, something about what happens when we come into living contact with God. The story is important because it tells something of THE WONDER OF GOD REACHING TO A HUMAN BEING.

[All Moses could do was "draw near"...not generate the experience; also extreme reverence of Jews for this name "YHWH" and LORD in our OT...]

Rudolph Otto, a respected German scholar, used three Latin adjectives to describe encounters with God in the Bible in general, and this Burning Bush story in particular. Those three words are **tremendum**, and **mysterium**, and **fascinans**.

Tremendum

(Roughly "awe".)

Otto used the word tremendum to express three aspects of a divine human encounter. First, he said was (1) A sense of awe. It is, in his words, "a quite specific kind of emotional response, wholly distinct from that of being afraid, though it so far resembles it that the analogy of fear may be used to throw light upon its nature." The Scripture says "Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at God." Later, when God had brought all the people to this place again they, too, were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance.

But there is more. Tremendum means also (2) an overpowering, a majesty a majestic distance realizing the infinite difference between the ineffable God and our mortal humanity. The prophet Habakkuk said: "I hear, and I tremble within; my lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters my bones, and my steps tremble beneath me." Daniel said, "My strength left me, and my complexion grew pale, and I retained no strength." Both these men stated later that they felt greatly beloved and yet they were shaken physically and mentally and spiritually.

Finally tremendum has elements of what can only be described as (3) sheer "energy." The "energy" is sometimes represented in fantastic ways Ezekiel's wheels within wheels the four living creatures of Revelation even the picture of the living Savior in Revelation chapter one (words like Psalm 29: 5 9)

*The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
And Sirion like a young wild ox.
The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire,
The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
The voices of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, "Glory!"*

To some extent I fear we have lost a capacity for awe. But AWE is not all that happens when it is GOD that calls to us: There was a second word

Mysterium

(Roughly: "Mystery!")

Encounters with God can never be really described. And they cannot be duplicated or summoned up at will. We are uncomfortable with what we cannot explain or control. God is always MORE than we can understand– OTHER than can be described.

When the Bible tells about people coming into contact with God it never confuses Him, the I-AM-THAT-I-AM, with the physical setting AND IT NEVER gives any glory to the humans involved. God is not in the whirlwinds or the fire or in the burning bush or even in the mountain or the tablets of stone. Moses does not fast and pray until God has to do as Moses says. There is always mystery involved when the great God reaches out to communicate with people.

One might say God has a big problem. How does he get near to us without on the one hand consuming us with his energy, and on the other hand convince us that He really is interested in us if we will listen and respond in humility and faith. There will always be mystery.

[Finally and wonderfully there is another aspect:]

Fascinans

(A translation could be "fascination" or "dazzling attraction.")

There is a tremendous attraction within the human heart for the holiness of God. For God is white hot passionate caring LOVE. To think that someone just simply downright LOVES you is just about the most fascinating thing in the world.

"Love" of some kind or other is the dynamic that drives most of the dramas and novels of the world the concept of loving and being loved. But no love can compare with the purity and intensity of the LOVE that emanates from an encounter with God.

Awe. Mystery. Great fascination! Moses somehow knew something of all three. He covers his face. He certainly does not understand. But what is this? What is the I AM THAT I AM finally saying to Moses? Out here on a barren desert THIS GREAT GOD MAKES IT CLEAR THAT HE CARES ABOUT PEOPLE. AND

ONE MAN SAYING YES TO GOD CHANGES THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD!

THERE IS A CONNECTION, OF COURSE, BETWEEN ONE MAN'S ENCOUNTER WITH GOD ON A BARREN DESERT AND 1,000,000 SLAVES CRY FOR HELP FROM A GOD THEY HARDLY KNEW . .

A lot of things happened in the next few months to Moses and to Egypt and the people who were slaves but were to become the people of God. Great miracles took place. and God nearly destroyed Egypt getting the people out and away from their old masters. But the bottom line is this: one man met God Almighty God and obeyed Him.

When this one man invited the slaves in Egypt to follow God they believed him, they responded to the promises of this God. And one day the living descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob stood at the Mountain of God, and they saw the fire and they experienced tremendum, and they experienced mysterium, and yet at the same time they knew fascinans.

When WE think of this story of Exodus we think of the details of the journey the parting of the sea, the manna, the water from the rock– and that is only natural.

But really this story is about a God of fire and holiness and mystery who calls people to look up and believe and to walk with Him and trust Him. And they find they have never been so free and so happy. Exodus is about being drawn out of life that goes around in circles into a life that ascends in spirals that never, ever, ever end. Exodus is about an invitation to fellowship with the eternal God, the I AM THAT I AM. THE WONDER OF EXODUS IS THAT GOD WANTS TO COME NEAR HIS PEOPLE AND NEVER, NEVER LEAVE THEM AGAIN!

Words for Crisis Times

-Jesus Says Four Things-

November 15, 1998

Luke 21:5-19

In his wonderful translation of the New Testament, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson titles this passage in Luke 21 "Watch Out for Doomsday Deceivers". It is a serious thing to be a religious Chicken Little. If it weren't so very serious it would be very funny.

You remember the story of Chicken Little? An acorn fell on her head, and so she ran around crying "The sky is falling!" And soon she had Henny Penny and Goosy Loosy and Foxy Loxy believing her. A Chicken Little theology of end times tends to bring the real business of God's kingdom to a screeching halt.

In the mid-1800s a man named William Miller convinced thousands of people to stand out on hillsides waiting the end of the world, or at least the rapture. It was supposed to happen October 22, 1844. It didn't. In my own personal experience I have heard dire predictions made with great intensity. As a sincere Christian in my teens it made me want to cut short the best and most thorough preparation in favor of immediate action.

The church and the world do go through shaking times. Everything we take for granted as solid and secure can be up for grabs in a very short time. I remember near-panic in 1973 when an oil embargo made it hard to buy gasoline. I recall some very uneasy people— myself one of them— about eight years ago in January when the Scud missiles started landing in Israel. The world held its breath and the word "Armageddon" was in the air.

This very day's news is disturbing: millions homeless in central America that a few short weeks ago had no cause to be alarmed; Saddam Hussain thumbing his nose at

U.N. sanctions; our own nation divided over things we would not have discussed in polite company just a few years ago. Are these signs of the end of the world?

Jesus was asked for specific time tables. Jesus never gave a formula for finding the time. But Jesus did say four things that we can take to the bank and live by:

1. he did NOT say "This is WHEN!"
2. he did NOT say "These will be the signs!"

but he DID say:

I. DON'T BE DECEIVED

Our clear call is to know and love God as he reveals himself to us in Jesus. Anything that takes us off that course is deception. There are many issues that are important, and many things worth taking a stand for. But there is only ONE ISSUE that is all-important: to know God, and to love and obey Him.

There are many mysteries involved in the Christian faith. There are many more things we don't know than we do. We can disagree and argue and split churches over important matters, and over not-very-important matters. It is all too easy to be deceived: Jesus says "Take care! Keep your spirit right! Stay close to Me!"

II. DON'T BE TERRIFIED

The second thing Jesus says is "Don't be afraid when the walls come tumbling down!" It is easier said than done! Fear as an emotion is not moral or im-moral. It is visceral.

Here's an old Texas story: Mother heard a commotion out in the chicken house and figured it was probably a chicken snake. She sent Bob and Billy out to kill it. They went in the hen house and looked all around; no snake. Then they got a box and started looking on the nesting shelves— and on the top shelf as they peeked over they came face to face with a big chicken snake.

Bob and Billy fell over each other and tried to get out the door at the same time in a panic, and as they burst out they met their mother, who reminded them that chicken snakes are harmless and never hurt people.

Bob looked at Billy, and Billy looked at Bob, and said, "Yes, ma'am, we know that but some things scare you so bad that you hurt yourself!"

Jesus didn't say things wouldn't be scary– in fact he knew they would be,. That's why he said, "Don't be afraid!" It is pretty scary to be arrested and put to death. But we can choose to believe that Jesus knows where we are, and that he will be with us. Jesus did say that even if we lost our lives for his sake and the Gospels' that not one hair of our heads would ever be finally misplaced and lost!

III. DO EXPECT A PRESENCE WHEN YOU NEED ONE

Crisis times are when Jesus expects us to let people know God loves them. We carry on doing what we believe God wants us to do. Someone asked Martin Luther what he would do if he knew the world would end tomorrow. He said, "I would plant a tree!"

The word Jesus gives us may be as small as a smile to your mail carrier. It may be showing a good spirit when you don't feel very much like it. We never know when God will take something very small and insignificant and change a life.

A little more than fifteen years ago a member of this congregation had a burden for people in crisis. She was past fifty years old, maybe five feet tall– no, maybe four-eleven. She had had her own share of crises. She was well-educated in social services and was a registered nurse, and cared for a number of our elderly people even to their death.

But God had a "word" for Esther Sanger to say– and she said it in a very small, almost insignificant way: she put a phone number on sheets of paper with the word "If you are in crisis call this number". The phone started ringing. It has never stopped. The Quincy Crisis Center touched hundreds of families, and continues as the Sanger Center to this very day. No one could have dreamed how to begin such a work.

IV. DON'T EVER GIVE UP YOUR FAITH

Jesus said "When the going gets tough, stick with Me! I'll stay with you to the end of the age!"

Conclusion

We have plenty of frightening things happening in our world right now. What do they MEAN? How should we act and re-act in our time on the human stage? In addition to world crises– there are personal crises represented here today. Nobody may know it– but perhaps YOU are going through what seems like the very end of the world for you! What shall we do?

1. Keep the long view: don't be deceived!

Don't listen to the date-setters. Don't get off course. Take time to make thorough preparation. Treat the earth the way your children and grandchildren would hope that you have treated it!

2. On the other hand live so you won't be ashamed to be surprised to meet Jesus face-to-face!

Our dog– actually my wife's dog, Schatzi, has a very sensitive doggy conscience. Not that she lives by her conscience at all– for she is not above falling into doggy sin any time she thinks she can get away with it.

But a funny thing is, we can tell if she has been a bad dog or a good dog by the way she greets us when we come home. Usually she is right at the door, smiling a doggy smile and wagging her tail. That means she hasn't done anything worse than sleeping on the sofa or drinking out of the you-know-what. But if she does NOT come to the door we know she has really been bad. She has gotten into the garbage, or opened the cupboard. Once she ate two pounds of Oreos.

Maybe that isn't a good example of facing the crises of life– but at the same time, the attitude you and I have right now as we think about that time when we will meet our Lord might just tell us something about what is or is not important in our lives just now.

3. Fifteen weeks ago today I was taking a couple MIT students home after Sunday dinner; I had just dropped them off at their dorm near Kresge Auditorium and turned onto Memorial Drive and started to make a U-turn– I looked both ways– hesitated while I

watched a car coming east-bound, and without one split-second's warning I was broad-sided on my driver's door by a Subaru doing 45 miles an hour. I have thought about that split second a hundred times since then. There was no time to GET ready to meet my Maker.

That trauma has reenforced the truth of a cliché that I try to remember to live by: You can't GET ready when Jesus comes— you have to LIVE ready! Let your covenant with God dominate all the other relationships of your life! Amen

Prayer

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen

Angels in the Treetops

November 22, 1998, PM

(Some background: Exodus 16:2-15, Matthew 20:1-16)

Philippians 1:21-30

In January of 1956 I loaded up a U Haul and drove to the place where I was to begin my pastoral ministry. Cherry Valley is a tiny crossroad community, not even a village, in northeastern Ohio. I was twenty five years old. As I began to learn the wonders of the pastorate, I was blissfully unaware of many problems and pitfalls. Amazing grace kept me safe sometimes in dangers I remember, and no doubt many times when I didn't have sense enough to recognize real danger. I did things backwards, I'm sure. I remember times when I was dreadfully afraid, and many times when I probably did the wrong thing. But people in the community were saved. God blessed in many ways. God has been good to me, and given Helen and me four loving sons, and twelve wonderful grandchildren, and I have served churches where the congregations have treated me with love beyond what I deserve.

In that very same month, January 1956, a small group of young Christians just a little older than I were launching a new ministry as well. These were people with top notch college and seminary educations, the kind who go to the very top in any field they enter. The one thing that distinguished this group was that they had totally dedicated their ambition to God.

This particular group had come together because they believed God wanted them to take the gospel of Christ to a tribe in South America where the life expectancy was barely 30 years of age, and where revenge and murder was the accepted way of life. Five wonderful, bright young Christian families believed God was leading them to take His Good News to these primitive people. They prepared in the best imaginable ways. It was as sophisticated and yet as dedicated a missionary endeavor as you could imagine, using aircraft and radio contacts. And then in their very first contact with the dangerous tribe all five men were killed.

Why have I put these two beginnings side by side? Am I comparing myself to those great martyrs? No there is no comparison in my mind. I wouldn't change places with them, and I know they wouldn't change places with me. I have the CONTRAST in mind. Grace does not seem to treat us all alike, as the gospel lesson makes clear. But again today (as last week) we see several insights into the nature of God's grace:

Last week speaking particularly about **FORGIVENESS**, we said:

- I . GRACE IS OF GOD HE ACTS
- II. GRACE IS RELATIONAL WE RESPOND TO GOD AND TO OTHERS
- III. GRACE IS NOT 'FAIR' IT IS LIFE CHANGING

Today's "outline" is about **OBEEDIENCE**, and it is similar:

- I. GRACE IS GOD'S BUSINESS, ON HIS TERMS
- II. GRACE IS GOOD, BUT NOT TO OUR EXPECTATIONS
- III. GRACE IS NOT FAIR IT IS UNDESERVING, AND IT IS GOOD]

GRACE IS GOD'S BUSINESS, ON HIS TERMS

Our gospel lesson tells of contrasts in work and working conditions: "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who hired people in the morning who worked all day in the sun he hired them at nine, and noon, and three in the afternoon, and again he hired an hour before quitting time and they all got a day's wage. The all day workers cried foul. Humanly speaking, as the only way we can speak, it was unfair.

How God assigns, how God rewards, what God calls vital and important is finally His business. Our business is to follow the pillar of fire, the "Presence," where it leads. Our challenge is to believe, to trust that God will care for us.

GRACE IS GOOD, BUT IT DOESN'T MOVE TO OUR EXPECTATIONS

Exodus passage: underscores the very human traits of grumbling when things don't go as expected. What outside forces could NOT do—destroy the Exodus mission

internal dissension and bad will almost did do. The biggest headache Moses had was ...grumbling, complaining, murmuring—

The people experienced some hunger ... and expressed their discontent. They made unfair comparisons. They remembered best times of slavery Still on the journey, the Exodus, no one starved... but some died from snakebite.

Grace may be present and unrecognized, even despised; grace can be blacked out, even apparently defeated

The miracle of manna is how God chose to feed his people. It required both faith and obedience. That lesson is echoed every time we pray the Lord's Prayer: "Give us THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD! Faith and obedience connect with God's grace! We have provision for today to be what God would have us be today.

GRACE IS NOT FAIR. IT IS UNDESERVED. IT IS GOOD.

When the five missionary martyrs, died Life magazine carried pictures of red eyed widows, and corpses beginning to bloat in jungle heat. The reporters did make mention of the amazing calm of the women and children, and their lack of hatred and revenge spirit. But it was a sad, sad story. To a pure materialist there is no question that these people were deluded in the matter of life investment and spiritual reality. What a waste for people to study language and sociology, and to take expensive equipment into the moldy hot jungles only to be killed on their first encounter with their target tribe, and have their airplane torn apart.

The Christian world saw things somewhat differently from the start. It was not too long before the very same warriors who had killed the missionaries testified that the missionaries' God had conquered them, not with punishing power and vengeance, but with forgiveness and life changing love.

But just recently the whole story has emerged. In the latest Christianity Today is an article by Steve Saint, who was a baby when his father, Nate Saint, was killed by the people he was trying to reach with the love of Jesus. I read to you:

"Why didn't he flee into the jungle?" Mincaye emphatically asked me. "If he would have fled, surely he would have lived. Instead, he just waited for Kimo to wade out and spear him."

Dawa, one of the three women, told me she had hidden in the bush through the attack, hearing but not seeing the killing of the five men. She told me she had been hit by gun pellets in the wrist and just above the knee. (The obviously came from random warning shots fired to scare the attacker, because Dawa was hiding on the far side of the narrow river and the men could not have known of her presence.) She also told me that after the killing she saw COWODI (Auca word for foreigners) above the trees, singing.

She didn't know what this kind of music was until later she heard records of Aunt Rachel's and became familiar with the sound of a choir. Mincaye and Kimo confirmed that they heard the singing and saw what Dawa seems to describe as angels along the ridge above Palm Beach. Dyuwi verified hearing the strange music, though he describes what he saw more like lights, moving around and shining, a sky full of jungle beetles similar to fireflies with a light that is brighter and doesn't blink.

Apparently all the participants saw this bright multitude in the sky and felt they should be scared, because they knew it was something supernatural. Their only familiarity with the spiritual world was one of fear. Dawa has said that this supernatural experience was what drew her to God when she later heard of him from Dayuma. CT 9/16/96 26,7

[Supplemental story appended to this text at the end of the sermon]

Maybe that is something of what Paul meant when he wrote:

Philippians 1:20, 27-29 "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain. ... Only live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is the evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the

privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear I still have."

Did you get that one sentence?: For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well—

We don't know where God's grace will lead us when we start out.

AND THAT IS GOD'S BUSINESS! DO WE DARE TO FOLLOW?

Steve Saint closed the article he wrote about his martyr father with this short paragraph:

God took five common young men of uncommon commitment and used them for his own glory. They never had the privilege they so enthusiastically pursued to tell the Huarani of the God they loved and served. But for every Huarani who today follows God's trail there are a thousand COWODI who follow God's trail more resolutely because of their example. This success, withheld from them in life, God multiplied and continues to multiply as a memorial to their obedience and his faithfulness. CT 9/16/96 27

GRACE IS LOVE, IT IS HERE FOR US NOW IF WE WILL RECEIVE IT

If you decide to take the way of depending on God you may have forty years of ministry, or you may have a disaster so far as a humanist observer could see. Grace is not fair. Thank God it is not fair. But I feel sorry for the people who have no invisible means of support.

Prayer

Hymn # 443 I Know Whom I Have Believed

NATE SAINT AND OTHER MARTYRS OF THE ECUADOR MISSION

(8 JAN 1956)

In the dense rain forests of Ecuador, on the Pacific side of the Andes

Mountains, lives a tribe of Indians who call themselves the Huaorani ("people" in their language, Huao), but whose neighbors have called them the Aucas ("savages" in Quechua). For many generations they have been completely isolated from the outside world, disposed to kill any stranger on sight, and feared even by their head hunting neighbors, the Jivaro tribe.

In 1955, four missionaries from the United States who were working with the Quechas, Jivaros, and other Indians of the interior of Ecuador became persuaded that they were being called to preach the Gospel to the Huaorani as well.

Nate Saint was 32 years old (born 1923), and devoted to flying. He had taken flying lessons in high school and served in the Air Force in WWII. After the war, he enrolled in Wheaton College to prepare for foreign mission work but dropped out to join the Missionary Aviation Fellowship. With his wife, Marjorie Farris, he established a base at Shell Mera (an abandoned oil exploration camp in Ecuador) in September 1948, and flew short hops to keep missionaries supplied with medicines, mail, etc. Once his plane crashed, but a few weeks later he returned to work in a cast from his neck to his thighs.

The other three, Ed McCully, Jim Elliot, and Peter Fleming, all Plymouth Brethren, came to Ecuador in 1952 to work for CMMML (Christian Missions in Many Lands). Ed McCully was 28 years old (born 1927). He had been a football and track star at Wheaton College and president of his senior class. After Wheaton, he enrolled at Marquette to study law, but dropped out to go to Ecuador. He and his wife, Marilou Hobolth, worked with the Quechuas at Arajuno, a base near the Huaorani. Half a dozen Quechuas had been killed at the base by Huaorani in the previous year. Jim Elliot was 28 years old (born 1927) and an honors graduate of Wheaton College, where he had been a debater, public speaker, and champion wrestler. In

Ecuador, he married Elisabeth Howard . They did paramedic work, tending broken arms, malaria, snakebite. They taught sanitation, wrote books in Quechua, and taught literacy. Peter Fleming was 27 years old (born 1928), from the University of Washington, an honor student, and a linguist. With his wife, Olive Ainslie, he ran a literacy program among the Quechuas.

Nate and Ed found a Huaorani settlement from the air in late September 1955. Nate made four more flights on Thursday, 29 September, and found a settlement only fifteen minutes from their station. They told Jim and Pete, and the four planned their strategy. They would keep the project secret from everyone but their wives, to avoid being joined by adventurers and the press, with the chance that someone not dedicated to the mission would start shooting at the first sign of real or imagined danger, and destroy the project. They had one language resource, a Huaorani girl, Dayuma, who had fled from her tribe years earlier after her family was killed in a dispute. Dayuma, who spoke both Huao and Quechua, was now living with Nate's sister Rachel. From her the missionaries learned enough of the language to get started. They would fly over the village every Thursday and drop gifts as a means of making contact and establishing a friendly relationship. Eventually they would try for closer contact. Nate had discovered that, if he lowered a bucket on a line from the plane, and flew in tight circles, the bucket remained almost stationary, and could be used to lower objects to the ground. He had devised a mechanism to release the bucket when it touched down.

On Thursday, 6 October, one week after locating the village, they dropped an aluminum kettle into an apparently deserted village. On the next flight, several Huaorani were waiting, and the missionaries dropped a machete. On the third flight, they dropped another machete to a considerably larger crowd. Beginning with the fourth flight, they used a loudspeaker system to call out friendly messages in Huao. Soon the Huaorani were responding

with gifts of their own tied to the line: a woven headband, carved wooden combs, two live parrots, cooked fish, parcels of peanuts, a piece of smoked monkey tail.... They cleared a space near their village and built platforms to make the exchanges easier. After three months of air to ground contact, during which they made far more progress than they had hoped, the missionaries decided that it was time for ground contact. They feared that they could not keep their activities secret much longer, and that delay risked a hostile encounter between the Huaorani and some third party. They decided that the expedition needed a fifth man, so they brought in Roger Youderian, a 31 year old (born 1924) former paratrooper who had fought in the Battle of the Bulge (a major German offensive in Belgium in the last stages of WWII) and had been in General Eisenhower's honor guard. Roger and his wife, Barbara Orton, were working with the Jivaros, and Roger was thoroughly at home in the jungle, accustomed to living like the Jivaros and blessed with acute survival instincts.

They located a beach that would serve as a landing strip, about four miles from the village, and decided to go in on Tuesday, 3 January 1956. After some discussion, they decided to carry guns, having heard that the Huaorani never attacked anyone who was carrying a gun, and having resolved that they would, as a last resort, fire the guns into the air to ward off an attack, but would shoot no one, even to save their own lives.

On Tuesday they flew in and made camp, then flew over the village to invite the Huaorani to visit them. The first visitors showed up on Friday: a man, a woman, and a teen aged girl. They stayed for several hours in apparent friendliness, then left abruptly. On Saturday, no one showed, and when the plane flew over the village, the Huaorani seemed frightened at first, but lost their fright when presents were dropped. On Sunday afternoon, 8 January 1956, at about 3 PM, all five missionaries were speared to death at their camp. A search party the next day found no signs of a struggle, and the lookout who was to be stationed in a tree

house overlooking the camp at ground level had come down, so it appeared that the meeting had originally seemed friendly, and that the attack had been a surprise. Ed McCully's body was seen and identified, but was swept away by the river and not recovered. The other four, at the request of their wives, were buried at the site of the camp where they had died. Besides their wives, they left behind a total of nine children.

The effort to reach the Huaorani was not abandoned but rather intensified. Within three weeks, Johnny Keenan, another pilot of the Ecuador Mission, was continuing the flights over the Huaorani village. More than twenty fliers from the United States promptly applied to take Nate's place. More than 1000 college students volunteered for foreign missions in direct response to the story of the Five Martyrs. In Ecuador, Indian attendance at mission schools and church services reached record levels, and the number of conversions skyrocketed. A Jivaro undertook to go at once to another Jivaro tribe that had been at war with his own tribe for years, bearing the Christian message, and his visit brought peace between the two tribes. Truly, as Tertullian said 1800 years ago, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.

In less than three years, Rachel Saint (sister of Nate Saint) and Elisabeth Elliot (widow of Jim Elliot) had not only renewed contact but had established permanent residence in a Huaorani settlement, where they practiced basic medicine and began the process of developing a written form of the language. Nine years after the murder of the five missionaries, two of those who had killed Nate Saint and his companions baptized two of Nate's children, Kathy and Stephen Saint. In June 1995, at the request of the Huaorani, Nate's son Stephen moved to the settlement with his wife, Ginny, and their four children, to assist the Huaorani in developing greater internal leadership for a church committed to meeting the medical, economic, and social needs of their own people as a means of

showing them God's love and his desire to provide for their eternal needs as well.

Why did the Huaorani suddenly turn hostile? Much later, one of the Huaorani who had helped to kill the five martyrs explained that the tribe, who had had almost no contact with outsiders that did not involve killing or attempted killing on one side or another, wondered why the whites wanted to make contact with them; and while they wanted to believe that their visitors were friendly, they feared a trap. After the killings, they realized their mistake. When they were attacked, one of the missionaries fired two shots as warnings, and one shot grazed a Huaorani who was hiding in the brush, unknown to the missionaries. It was therefore clear that the visitors had weapons, were capable of killing, and had chosen not to do so. Thus, the Huaorani realized that the visitors were indeed their friends, willing to die for them if necessary. When in subsequent months they heard the message that the Son of God had come down from heaven to reconcile men with God, and to die in order to bring about that reconciliation, they recognized that the message of the missionaries was the basis of what they had seen enacted in the lives of the missionaries. They believed the Gospel preached because they had seen the Gospel lived.

PRAYERS

Almighty God, who called your faithful servants Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Jim Elliot, Peter Fleming, and Roger Youderian to be witnesses and martyrs to the Huaorani peoples in the rain forests of Ecuador, and by their labors and suffering raised up a people for your own possession: Pour forth your Holy Spirit upon your Church in every land, that by the service and sacrifice of many, your holy Name may be glorified and your kingdom enlarged; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Precious in your sight, O Lord, is the death of your saints, whose faithful witness, by your providence, has its great reward: We give you thanks for your martyrs Nate

Saint, Ed McCully, Jim Elliot, Peter Fleming, and Roger Youderian, who purchased with their blood a hearing for the Gospel among the forest dwellers of Ecuador, especially the Huaorani people, and for their wives and children, who shared with them in their work and witness; and we pray that with them we also may obtain the crown of righteousness which is laid up for all who love the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

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The King of Love, Our Shepherd

Christ the King

For November 22, 1998

Luke 23; Colossians 1

It is a statement of faith to say "Jesus is Lord!" Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer we mouth the words of God's purpose in Creation, and in making humankind. That will is that finally God's kingdom will come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven. But too often it seems that God's will clearly is not being done on earth as it is in heaven. Our century has seen more martyrs to the Christian faith than all the previous nineteen put together. The writer of Hebrews puts it this way (Hebrews 2: 8 - 11)

". . . now we see not yet all things put under him. 9 But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man. 10 For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. 11 For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren."

In the middle of the way things are— in the world— in our nation— and in our personal lives, it is a statement of faith to say, "Jesus is LORD!" It is the very heart of our faith to believe that God so loved the world that he sent us his Son, and to believe that Son of God is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

CHRIST IS KING

Colossians 1:11 20

Our King is God Almighty

The King of Love, Our Shepherd

In Colossians 1 Paul describes our 'incomparable Christ', our King. John calls Jesus 'the Word', Paul here calls him "the image of the invisible God." He says that all things were created by Him, and that he is the heir of all creation. He is the head of the church, the pioneer of resurrection from the dead, and through Him the Father holds all things together in heaven and on earth. As God our Lord Jesus Christ is Creator, Sustainer, and King of light and life.

- Our King was the power that created all things. He is before all things, and all things are held together in HIM. In our KING we have the WORD on God, on how to relate to the Eternal.

- Our King is Flesh and Blood

The passage also makes it plain that our King is fully human. (Col . 1:22 . . . He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body) He is the HOPE of what we shall be, and the means of our complete acceptance into the life and fellowship of the New Covenant. Through the whole year we celebrate the divinity and the humanity of our King. He was the Eternal Son, but he came to a manger to be One with us. He lived with us thirty-three years, and taught by living and speaking. And then . . .

- Our King was Crucified
- Our king died on a cross . . . but he was not a martyr.

Nor was he a victim. He was not helpless to save himself, as those who watched him die said.

- Our king showed us how to live, but that was not the heart of why he came.
- Our king showed us how to die, but that was not why he came, finally, either.
- Our king came to fight battles for us which we cannot comprehend. He came because he loves us, and I cannot understand that, either.
- Our King was Crucified- but that is not the end of the story.

CHRIST IS KING

It is interesting/ fascinating the way we humans understand time in relation to our God. We have a God who IS, and who WAS and who IS TO COME. We call him the Eternal. We speak of Christ's Coming, and of his Coming Again. We have a Christ who CAME, and who COMES, and who IS HERE, and yet WHO WILL COME. But we only need one tense to describe the reign of Jesus. Jesus IS Lord! JESUS IS KING! Jesus WAS KING when he lay in the manger in Bethlehem, and when his family fled Herod to Egypt. Jesus WILL BE KING when he comes in splendor and glory. But in Christ's kingdom, there is never a time when Jesus is NOT KING!

Still, I admit this passage from Luke seems a strange setting for celebrating "Christ the King Sunday." The picture is anything but regal and majestic. We see our great king in the midst of his greatest battle.

Some people thought he was merely weak. His whole mission was just empty words. Some people hurled abuse on him. Some said, "If he really was Messiah he would save himself." After he died even his executioner recognized he was a righteous man. But amid this scene I shrink back from trying to describe there was one person most unlikely to recognize the majesty of our king, and yet that person did just that. That person was 'Dismas', who was dying on a cross next to our Savior.

Dismas spoke these words: Lord, remember me! Remember me when you come into your KINGDOM! For Jesus was king even on that cross. Especially on that cross!

The word that Jesus spoke to Dismas in reply was IMMEDIACY! It was a promise of Presence! "I am here with you now. This very day you enter my kingdom." No chance to be baptized. Dismas was not a church member. He never had a chance to do any good works at all. He just said, "Lord, remember me!"

There is too much here for superficial comprehension. More than we can quickly grasp. Plenty to study and meditate about regarding our own crossing into 'eternity'. Jesus' body would be in a tomb before the day was finally ended. Yet Jesus said, "THIS DAY you will be with Me in Paradise!" Paradise is the word the Bible uses for the Garden of Eden. The Cross, and the Resurrection bring us full circle in Creation by a New Adam into New Life, and New Kingdom– not just some time in the misty

tomorrows– although that also is true– but the word from the king is, "Today you shall be with Me in Paradise!"

Nothing Jesus ever did was wasted. Nothing was left out that we need.

- It was not just the coming to us in our flesh, but that was necessary.
- It was not just the 'but I say unto you' authority that spoke of a New Covenant, but they were necessary also.
- It was not just the dying on the cross. Mystery, holy mystery! How necessary this is!
- It was not just the resurrection from the dead.
- It was not just the ascension to the Throne.

But it is all of these and more that are involved when we say by faith

Jesus is Lord, He is the King of Kings.

Do we dare say JESUS IS LORD in the light of what has happened this century? Of course we do! We do not dare to say anything less! There is POWER in the statement JESUS IS LORD!

JESUS CHRIST IS LORD!

There is POWER in the statement "JESUS IS LORD!" The thief prayed, "Lord, remember me!" "Remember me," is the cry of us all. In our King Jesus God is telling us that wherever we are we do not have to be forgotten. There is blessed assurance that TODAY WE CAN BE WITH JESUS. Wherever we are on our spiritual journey God is just a prayer away. On the stormy seas of life, in the calm seasons of prosperity and blessedness, or even on the cross of pain we can pray the prayer that Dismas prayed: LORD, REMEMBER ME! And we will ALWAYS receive the same reply that Dismas received; TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME! IN MY KINGDOM!

Do you dare to make that deliberate affirmation from the heart today:

JESUS IS LORD! JESUS IS MY LORD! I BELIEVE HE IS MY SAVIOR!

You may have known Jesus all your life– maybe you have been baptized as a child– maybe not– but you never have known the full and blessed assurance that you are saved totally by his grace, and not your own works.

Make Jesus KING of your life today! Say publicly, "Jesus is LORD!"

Pray with me: Bow your head, close your eyes: Maybe you have said from your heart before God: JESUS IS MY LORD! I BELIEVE HE IS THE SAVIOR WHO DIED AND ROSE AGAIN. BUT I NOW BELIEVE HE IS MY LORD!

Maybe you have said it many times but you do not have the blessed assurance. Say it with me again, all who will: 'JESUS IS LORD!

Would you like to publicly confess that NEW or RENEWED allegiance?

PRAYER

Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords: Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Ready for the Dawning of the Day

Wollaston Church of the Nazarene

November 29, 1998 AM

Matthew 24:36-44 36 "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day "Noah entered the ark", 39 and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41 Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. 42 Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

INTRODUCTION

This prophetic passage from Matthew 24 about the Lord's coming 'as a thief in the night' suggests a totally unexpected way of meeting God. It seems to indicate a discovery that things are changed; far different from what was assumed before:

FINDING THE REALITY OF GOD THE HARD WAY

An atheist was spending a quiet day fishing when suddenly his boat was attacked by the Loch Ness monster. In one easy flip, the beast tossed him and his boat high into

the air then opened its mouth to swallow both. As the man sailed head over heels, he cried out, "Oh, my God! Help me!"

At once, the ferocious attack scene froze in place and, as the atheist hung in mid air, a booming voice came down from the clouds. "I thought you didn't believe in Me!"

"Come on God, give me a break!," the man pleaded. "Two minutes ago I didn't believe in the Loch Ness monster either!"

The Atheist continued, "God, please let the Loch Ness Monster be a Christian."

God replied, "So be it." The scene starts up, atheist falling.

And so the Loch Ness Monster folded his claws together and said, "Lord, bless this food you have so graciously provided." —Many thanks to Hal Hancock

- a. BEGINNINGS - THE CHURCH YEAR - Happy New Year! This is the first Sunday in the Christian Year. The Christian Year is divided into two seasons, the "sacred seasons" and "ordinary time". The first part of the Christian Year is divided into "sacred seasons" in which we remind ourselves of who we are, and who's we are. The second part of the Christian Year is "ordinary time" during which we remind ourselves of what we are to do.
- b. THE LECTIONARY - The Lectionary for Sundays is a three year series of Bible readings for each Sunday of the Christian Year. The New Testament breaks down to five stories, twenty-one letters, and one epic poem. Each year we take one of the first three stories and use it as a "key" to the rest of the year. This year "Matthew." Today begins the first of the "sacred seasons": Advent
- c. THE ADVENT - This first Sunday of the Christian Year is the beginning of the Advent Season. "Advent" means "coming". One aspect of this "coming" is past tense, Christ came then. A second aspect of this Advent season of "coming" is present tense, Christ comes now. The third aspect of the "coming" that we celebrate at Advent is future tense, Christ will come again.

Christ came at Christmas in a particular time and place. It was a coming that in just about every way was what might be least expected. And yet it was 'in the fullness of time' that Jesus came. He emptied Himself of the glory of heaven, and came and

lived and taught and died and rose again to be our Champion, our Second Adam, our Lord and Savior.

Christ comes in our everyday lives as the power, wisdom, and model of God's perfect servant. By the Presence of his living Holy Spirit, Jesus is present in this world as he is present in your heart and mine. "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is giv'n; So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in." It is a miracle of grace, but it is reality: Jesus COMES! He is present with us even now as we

Christ will come at the end of history like a thief in the night to accomplish the completion of his will and purpose. Whatever and whenever the Great Return will be, it is a fact that EVERY ONE OF US WILL MEET THIS 'THIEF IN THE NIGHT!' He comes, he strikes at a time and in a way that is least expected.

LIVING IN ANTICIPATION / PRACTICING THE PRESENCE

(The Sermon)

I . It Is Never A "detour" To Follow The Way Of Loving God Through Service To Others:

[WAKING UP TO THE REALITY OF LIFE THROUGH FOCUSING ON THE TRULY IMPORTANT (and nothing is more important than loving service!)]

Pulitzer Prize winning author Anna Quindlen was nineteen when her mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and given only a few months to live.

Anna had just finished her freshman year of college, but being the oldest of five children, she left school and returned home to "make meatloaf and administer doses of morphine in a house in the suburbs." Ann returned home that September; her mother died in January.

Ms. Quindlen, now a parent herself, writes about that difficult time:

"It is amazing how much you can learn in one year. "I went back to

college and I looked around at all the kids who found life kind of a drag. and I knew I had undergone a sea change. Because I was never going to be able to see life as anything except a gift.

"Oh I've lost the feeling from time to time. Bad days and good days. Life cycles and dark moods....We've lived through a period in which pessimism was the fashionable mode, when the express purpose of fiction and films seemed to make you feel as terrible as possible...Our children die from neglect, abuse, sometimes simple ignorance and lack of interest. We live knowing that it would take a matter of seconds to wipe out the whole complicated mess.

"And yet...and yet. It's all so terrific the conversation and the relationships and the scenery in the midst of all our troubles. That's why we feel so deeply when it's endangered because, if we really think about life, we know how quietly wonderful it can be. We know that if we had only six months left, we'd hold on as tight as we could with both hands to every day, every hour...

"Sometimes we lose that wonder. And sometimes we regain it through hard lessons, the way I did. And sometimes it just comes to us slowly steadily, until we realize that, for all its horrors and injustices, the world is wonderful place.

"The year my mother died, I learned something enduring about life: that it is glorious, and we have no business taking it for granted." [1]

LIVING "READY" INVOLVES LOVING. Anna Quindlen took a risk in putting her life on hold to take care of her mother till death. Yet Anna speaks of how much richer her life is because she did so.

II. A relationship with God through Jesus Christ is far more important than all the prophecy in the Bible. (When we have Christ we have everything. We are ready.)

[FINDING EVERYTHING IN THE LOVE OF JESUS CHRIST]

There is a popular story about a wealthy man who found great joy in collecting fine art from all over the world. This man had a son. The son also grew to enjoy great art, and father and son spent many pleasant years collecting famous paintings for their mansion.

But one day, war broke out in their country, and the son went off to fight. A few weeks before Christmas, the young man was reported missing in action. The old man was filled with anxiety as he waited to hear of his son's fate. And then it came. Only days before Christmas, the news arrived that the art collector's son was dead. His son had died a hero. He had been trying to help a fallen comrade when he himself had been shot.

The old man didn't think he would survive his grief. He had loved his son more than life itself. He couldn't bring himself to celebrate Christmas. He barely felt alive. But a knock on the door roused him from his grief. The young soldier in the doorway introduced himself as the one whose life had been saved by the old man's son. He had come to express his appreciation and to give him a gift. The soldier explained that he, too, was an artist, and he had painted a picture of the man's son. The father was amazed by the life like quality of the painting. He hung it on the mantel of his study, and there it brought him great comfort. It became his most prized work of art.

A season passed, and the father died. Other art collectors around the world were excited to learn of the old man's death, for it meant that his collection would be up for sale. The day of the auction, people crowded into the mansion, eagerly waiting the chance to bid. A sigh of disappointment escaped the crowd when they realized that, per the old man's will, the picture of his son would be the first piece to be auctioned. The other collectors called out impatiently that they had come there to bid on the real art, not some sentimental piece. No one would make a bid.

Finally, a friend of the family bid ten dollars for the painting. He had been fond of the son, and he knew how much that piece meant to the father.

When his bid was accepted, all the other collectors cheered. Finally, they would get to bid for the important stuff. But the auctioneer put away his gavel and announced the bidding closed. The collectors were furious. Was he crazy? All they'd sold was a worthless picture of the old man's son.

What about the rest of the art? The auctioneer pulled out a draft of the old man's will and said, "It's very simple. According to the will of the father, whoever takes the son gets it all." [2]

When we have a know-so relationship with God through Jesus Christ we have it all! When we have anything and everything else BUT salvation we are still "sitting in the dark."

CONCLUSION

The silly joke about the atheist and the Loch Ness Monster may seem pretty remote from the "sophisticated understanding" of salvation we are so sure we have. But the fact is that without warning we could be face to face with the utter reality of God! "Like a thief in the night!" is how Jesus said it. (Shall we pray:)

PRAYER

O Lord, Hear the cry of our hearts this day! We think we know so much, and really we know so very little! So- above all else, help us to know You, and seek You, and belong to You, and be like You. We ask this in the name of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

HYMN #490 *O to Be Like Thee*

1) Family Circle, July 14, 1998, as quoted in "In defense of happiness," Connections, November 29, 1998, First Sunday of Advent (7 Lantern Lane, Londonderry, N.H. 03053 3905), Nov 1998.

2) Source unknown, "Rushing and realizing," Dynamic Preaching, 13 (4): 57 58, (Seven Worlds, 310F Simmons Road, Knoxville TN 37922), Nov 1998.

God's Adult Children

MATTHEW LECTINARY SOURCE

December 2, 1998 AM

Matthew 5:21-37, 48

There is nothing as wonderful and charming as a baby. When a baby is born into a home, or a new Christian comes into the fellowship of a church, there is a new life, and new life is almost always attractive.

God made little babies heart-smashing. They look at you and smile and its all over! "Gas pains, my eye! She SMILED at me!" Of course, when you consider what babies demand of their young parents, and the really basic things they do, it is a wonderful thing that babies CAN smash our hearts. They con us into taking care of them and loving it!

But perhaps the most wonderful thing about babies is that they start growing up, and they get housebroken before too many years they can even put on their own clothes. (Getting them to pick them up when they take them off may take a little longer!) One of the tragedies of life is when babies refuse to stop being babies.

In 1 Corinthians 3:1 Paul is addressing the fact that the Corinthians are not growing up. They are refusing to quit being babies. Paul is challenging them to move up, and get with it to grow up.

The Gospel lesson picks up this theme. Jesus says, "THAT is what you have heard THAT is what you learned then NOW HEAR THIS! THAT WAS THEN...THIS IS NOW!" The over and over Jesus repeats this formula: You have heard it said but I say unto you! You have lived by legalism, now you need to live in the spirit.

Another way to look at maturity in faith is to look at the difference between the Old and the New Covenants. The Old Testament has its oughts and shoulds and its promises and the New Testament has its promises, too but the oughts and shoulds now deal not only with actions, but with motivation with the spirit and the soul. Look

at the contrasts in the lessons for the day, the contrasts of Old and New, (and by application) of babes in Christ and mature Christians:

I. THERE IS A DIFFERENCE IN UNDERSTANDING THE PROMISES

In the OT the promises are literal, concrete, immediate.

[Little children need behavior reinforcement NOW Jacob was home this week and very restless. Then his teacher came with an "assignment" and the promise of a "star" if he took a nap. he did. He got his "star." And Grandma got a little rest!]

The ultimate promise is A LAND CALLED ISRAEL. Crops will grow, prosperity will follow if God is obeyed, and the Commandments are kept inviolate.

In the NT the promises are no less real, but they are somehow fuller and higher.

"Blessed" are the poor in spirit To be congratulated! A hint at eternity! {A willingness to trust for the "Well done! ??]}

The ultimate promise is AN ETERNAL KINGDOM CALLED PEACE. There is a Christ, a Master, who asks us to dare to love Him, and trust Him, and follow Him even though it means carrying a cross. The ultimate promise is that He will say "Well done!"

If we are constantly seeking prosperity as a goal in relation to our faith we are betraying Old Testament concepts and wrong application of those concepts at that!

II. THERE IS A DIFFERENCE IN THE DEMAND FOR OBEDIENCE

In the OT every nuance of performance is proscribed. Do this! Don't do that! You can walk this far on a Sabbath and not one step farther. You can carry this much weight and not one ounce more! You must tithe exactly ten percent and that meets your requirements.

[Little children like routine. They NEED sameness to help them learn stable character ways. Just try changing the words in a picture story book to a two year old sometime! You will be corrected!]

In Deuteronomy 30 Moses challenged a new generation of God's people to make covenant with God for themselves. And do you see HOW they were to begin? BY KEEPING LAWS! A very necessary part of preserving society is learning to obey laws. We don't reason with babies (at least not on an adult level) when we teach them not to play with fire, or to stay out of the traffic. We all have to pass through elementary school for law keeping before we graduate into maturity.

In the NT Jesus teaches us the importance of WHY we perform the way we do.

Rules, laws, regulations serve as the guides and norms. But growing up involves internalizing law and order the reason we do what we do becomes as important as the acts themselves.

In Matthew 5 Jesus challenges the cutting edge of the human spirit: Don't just keep the letter of the law! BE pure in heart! BE peacemakers! BE meek strength under control! Jesus was beginning the lesson that tells us only by internalizing discipline will we ever be truly free.

When we quit kicking against God's law quit seeing them as "restrictive," we find they release within us the love of God! We find we can "come of age" spiritually!

WE BEGIN TO BE GOD'S ADULT CHILDREN!

Which brings me to my last comparison of Old and New Covenant or more properly of babes in Christ and God's adult children:

III. THERE IS A DIFFERENCE IN RELATIONSHIP

In the OT there is almost a child's attitude: I CAN do this I CAN'T do that so let's see how far we can go up to the very limit!

[Have you ever seen how a little child will take literally what you say? Be careful what you promise! They won't forget!]

All too often the parent child relationship is ADVERSARIAL. Too often children and especially adolescents come to think of authority as adversarial, when in fact good

parental authority is loving and necessary. Remember SOCIETY DEPENDS ON CHILDREN LEARNING TO OBEY LAWS!

But all too often we never get past this inner rebellion it grows and grows into our teens and we transfer it to the heavenly Father. Sometimes people never do get over the idea that God is trying to curtail and limit and censor everything really GOOD!

Paul says: "I have brought the baby bottle with me all too often! You need to get on to more substantial fare!"

In the NT covenant Jesus introduces a COLLEGIAL RELATIONSHIP. He says to the disciples: "I have called you FRIENDS!"

Jesus closes this section of "You have heard it said ... but I say unto you" sayings with the remarkable verse (48) that is so often misunderstood, even by good scholars: BE YE THEREFORE PERFECT, EVEN AS YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN IS PERFECT! The word is "complete" or "mature." It doesn't mean absolute perfection, or perfect performance or even perfect love, as much as we would like to hear it say that. "Perfect" here means MATURE finally filling the purpose for which you and I are made of being GOD'S ADULT CHILDREN.

Closing Illustration

If you will pardon a very personal application: I sat with Charlie and Sherry Burt the other day celebrating the birth of Gerron's little brother, Nicholas Dean. It is hard to describe the joy we all feel when a baby is born into a family that loves it. A baby brings a joy that can hardly be described.

As I sat talking I thought of the generations, of Lowell and Dorla as themselves parents, and of Charlie and Sherry as children themselves. I thought of my own grandchildren, as wonderful as they are. And as I thought out loud with the Burts, I expressed a fact that only older people fully understand! ADULT CHILDREN ARE THE BEST OF ALL!!!

When your children are grown up and still love you and for the most part share your values not because "you" are right but because in maturity they have found Christ

for themselves THIS IS THE ULTIMATE RELATIONSHIP IN HUMAN CARING ... and it is what Paul is telling us GROW UP AND ENJOY THE BEST IN LIFE!

And somehow I am sure this is how the heavenly Father feels! When we begin to mature and love Him for himself and share His mind not because we HAVE to or we'll get spanked or because if we are good we will get a star but because he is who he is, and we are his children maybe we begin to understand what Jesus is telling us when he said "You have heard it said ... but NOW I say unto you!"

(Reprise: Jesus closed this section of the sermon with these words; BE PERFECT, EVEN AS YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN IS PERFECT! The word is TELIOS! God's adult children! His friends! No longer "babes!" but now (I Co 3:9) " Laborers together WITH the Father!" Amen!!

Let us pray:

Hymn: #461 *Open My Eyes, That I May See*

The Home of the Soul

Advent 2 - The Promise of Peace in a Troubled World

December 6, 1998 (cf 12/10/95)

Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12; Romans 15:4-13

Three years or so ago there was a front page picture in the newspaper along with a story that caught my attention. Briefly, the story was this: twin girls had been born 12 weeks premature, about two pounds each, and had been placed in separate bassinets in the Medical Center Hospital in Worcester. One started to do just fine—the other began slowly to fade. Her heart beat was rapid, she was visibly anxious, and nothing the nurses could do seemed to be able to stop what seemed like her inevitable death.

Then one nurse, Gayle Kasperian, remembered something she had read about treatment of preemies elsewhere in the world. As a sort of last resort the nurses put little Brielle, the weaker twin, right into the bassinet with Kyrie, her "big sister." (Kyrie was 3 ounces bigger!) In the words of Nurse Heidi Jackson, the results were immediate and dramatic. Little Brielle snuggled up to her sister, and her heart rate immediately slowed to normal. Her color came back. The baby visibly relaxed, almost it seemed with a sigh of relief. She accepted nourishment. The crisis was over. She would survive.

That tiny baby did not know who she was, or where she was. She did not know one word of any language to say what she needed. Indeed, she could not consciously know what she needed. But somehow tiny baby Brielle knew where she belonged. And she knew when she was where she belonged.

Our souls are like that. Deeper than words, back behind all conscious thought, our souls know what they need. Even when we cannot express or fully understand our hunger for God, that hunger remains. We are made for God, and we are made for fellowship with each other. When we are isolated and alone we are in trouble, serious trouble, like tiny two-pound Baby Brielle Jackson. We want to be close to someone

who loves us. We want to be close to God, and to know that we are a part of God's family.

Christmas is about getting close to God— or, more properly, it is about God who wants to come very close to us. Christmas is when we remember that one name for Messiah is Emmanuel, "God-With-Us." This doesn't make sense according to the wisdom of our world, but our souls know it is true. We are never really "at home" until we know God really has come to where we are. When we know God has come, then we begin to understand how there can be peace even in this troubled world.

TWO PROPHETS, TWO VISIONS OF PEACE

Our lessons today feature words from Isaiah and John the Baptist, two great prophets who spoke about Messiah's coming.

ISAIAH'S VISION IS VERY POETIC.

Isaiah saw all nature as changing at the coming of Messiah. He saw a world where natural enemies make peace and live in harmony together. We have heard this vision called "The Millennium." This vision of Isaiah is always depicted as "way out there in the future somewhere." [The 'prophecy experts' have worked it out a long time ago— haven't they? You know, "this is how it will happen" and "then that" and they have it all worked out cold.]

That all may well be. But when Jesus the Messiah moves into a community of people right now, today, in our troubled times what do you think ought to happen? What if this vision of Isaiah is what ought to happen right now in God's kingdom, at least in part?

It certainly isn't according to the nature we know for 'lions to lie down with lambs,' and when they do you can be sure that it is the lamb who is going to have a hard time getting to sleep. But if Messiah is really present, is it too much to expect that we can learn to love and trust each other? All different kinds of people make up the kingdom, the church. Can different generations find common ground? Is it too much to expect that Christian young people will find patience and understanding for their old-

fashioned parents? Do you think it is possible that older people might pray for and even enjoy the company of younger Christians?

Don't simply write off Isaiah's vision of peace for the far distant future. He has a vision of a place where people's purpose is "To know God, and to provide a climate in which each person can come to full spiritual potential in Jesus Christ!" Sound familiar?

JOHN THE BAPTIST'S MESSAGE IS MORE DIRECT, MORE PRACTICAL.

Instead of preaching about lions and lambs lying down together, John gathered the lions and lambs at the river, and told them all to REPENT. He preached to every level of society. He said "God's kingdom is close at hand! Make a path to your heart and Messiah will come!"

The common people came, and John said, "Repent!" The tax collectors came, and John said, "Repent!" Soldiers came, and John said, "Repent!" Pharisees and Sadducees all heard the same message: "Turn from YOUR way, and make room for the One who wants to come to where you are!"

This was NOT homogeneous grouping. (It defies church-growth accepted facts!) Where did we ever get the idea that when we come home to God we will all act the same, do the same things, look the same? Tax collectors came, and were baptized, and when they went home they were still tax collectors— only now they had made room for God. Soldiers came, and were baptized, and when they left they were still soldiers— only now they were living in harmony with God.

The Good News is that God invites us to come home into His house of peace right NOW, as we are. He loves us right now. God doesn't want to make lambs out of lions, or wolves out of kids. God wants to put his love into us until we can really be at home together in his kingdom.

Granted it takes a lot of work. There has never been a home where that is not true. But the vision of the prophets is not for "sometime, somewhere." God's call to come home is always NOW!

THERE IS A HOME OF THE SOUL THAT BRINGS PEACE AND COMMUNITY

Peace is Christ's legacy to his disciples.

"In the world you will have troubles, " Jesus said. He knew very well what this world is like. Still he told his disciples, and you and me: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you. I don't give as the world gives. Don't let your hearts be troubled. Don't let them be afraid." And when we understand that Jesus is really God With Us— then like Baby Brielle, we can breathe easier— we know we are going to make it all right. Peace is Christ's legacy to you and me right now, today.

But we need to be a willing to acknowledge our need of God. We need to give the God-hunger a name. Your soul cries out for the living God! We need to be willing to turn aside from doing "our own thing" and give God permission to come into our lives anywhere and everywhere He will. We can't live the Christian life on our own. We can't "prepare the way" by being good or nice so we deserve Him. But we can simply ask Him in! We prepare the way by saying from our hearts: Come, Lord Jesus! Be my Lord and savior! And you know what? He will come in! And he will bring God's peace with him!

I really hesitate to share my own experiences, and yet it came to me as I was thinking about the peace of belonging. When I was a child I traveled from place to place with my parents who were itinerant evangelist-singers. (I have alluded to this many times, I know, in the years I have been pastor here.) Whatever the positive benefits may have been, I harvested a great crop of hang-ups from being a child-evangelist, not the least was great insecurity in a great many ways.

One of these insecurities— I am not proud of this— nor asking for sympathy— was that I could never stand to be out of sight of my parents for any length of time. I would simply become very nervous, even agitated. This was embarrassing as a child, but as I started into my teens it became a major problem. Strangers usually were never aware of it, for I kept it hidden. But if my parents were due, say at 4 o'clock, and it came 4:15 or 4:30 I could think of absolutely nothing but that my world was

caving in. My aunts and uncles all had regular jobs, and lived in houses— not traveling in cars all the time. My home was my father and mother.

Then one day as my anxiety was mounting the thought came to me, what if dad and mother never do come back? I know my Uncle Andy and Aunt Blanche love me just like one of their own. I know they would take me into their home. And it was absolutely true, they would have! And you know what? I may still have a lot of hang-ups fifty years later— but that one— that insecurity— was gone forever!

In knowing I was loved and accepted in a secure, stable home I simply could relax. It was a conversion-like experience to realize I was accepted into a family that had a house and would make me a home.

Like Baby Brielle, we may not know how to say what we need. But our hearts know. And I want you to know that already YOU are accepted in the most wonderful family in the Universe! Our hearts don't need to fade and die because we can be united with the God who loves us so much he left heaven to come where we are. The home of the soul is where Jesus is. He is our peace.

Invitation: If you want me to pray for you— if your heart hungers to come home to God— would you like to stand where you are as I pray?

Prayer

Reprieve on Hymn #675 *The Kingdom of God* . . . (v3 only "Challenge and Choice")

- Segue into

THE HOLY COMMUNION

Wherever you are on your Spiritual Journey - If you believe God wants to come to you, and if you want to find your home in Him, I invite you to come in faith to the Table of the Lord. (Now -As an act of worship and commitment, let us confess our faith together :)

The Apostles Creed (Inside back cover of hymnal)

The Law Read:- The Lord Jesus Christ has said to us: "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Confession Made:- Before we come to the Table of the Lord, let us in humility pray that God will help us to come without any shadow of rebellion or wilful sin:

(Reading No. 750) A prayer in unison, from scripture:

Unison: Search me, O God, and know my heart; Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me. Lead me in the way everlasting. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to show you and me anything we need to confess— any "paths that must be made straight" so that we can come to His table in full harmony with His will: (silence)

Prayer: Thank you. O God, for your forgiving us when we come humbly to you. We do not presume to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

(In Place of Gloria Patri :)

Sing *"Father, I Adore You, Lay my life before You How I love you! "Jesus, I adore you . . . " and "Spirit, I adore you . . . "*

Pastor: Hear what our Lord has said: Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. And he has also said, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. ("This is not my table . . . " Do not come irreverently. Do not

come because someone else expects it. But if the Host invites you, and you want to walk with Him, then you are welcome at His table...)

The Words of Institution

On the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat: THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

After supper he took the cup and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me: Amen

We praise you for the mystery of our salvation! We truly believe Christ has died!
Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us: Our Father which art in heaven . . .

Now, humbly receive the Gifts of God for the People of God.

Good News in Strange Places

December 13, 1998

(cf [12/17/1995](#))

"And the poor have the gospel preached to them . . ." Matthew 11:5

IN the summer of 1986 a group of nine rich kids from a big Atlanta church got into a late-model rented Ford van and along with their pastor/sponsor drove to Appalachia, to a place called Barnes Mountain, Kentucky. The sponsor was Barbara Brown Taylor (no relation to the Bill and Barbara Taylor we knew), who is now quite a well-known author, teacher and preacher.

The rich kids didn't even know they were rich because their world was all they knew. They thought everyone got a new car on their 16th birthday. They thought every high school senior class party just might be held in the Bahamas.

Well, in Barnes Mountain, Kentucky, they came face to face with a different world. Their "job" that August was to finish chinking a log house for a mission director/minister to live in that fall. What Barbara Brown was hoping was that they could get a perspective on their material wealth. And Barnes Mountain certainly was a contrast to Atlanta.

Some local teens came around out of curiosity to watch the group work, and several stayed to help. One young man in particular caught the fancy of the Atlanta group. He was a sweet young man named Dwayne. The city teens were fascinated with Dwayne, and evidently Dwayne was fascinated with them as well. They told him about a restaurant on top of a hotel that revolved every hour. He told them about scary abandoned coal mine shafts. They told him about the Atlanta Braves. He told them about finding a baby owl and raising it.

Halfway through the week Dwayne made a great sacrifice: he let one of the girls give him a "city haircut." His shaggy, curly bangs were now a layered, cool look and Dwayne looked just like the nine city kids.

All that week the kids worked together. They played together, they shared what was important to them. And then before they parted, they prayed together. In that prayer the Atlanta Kids told God what a privilege it had been for them to serve the poor people in Barnes Mountain, and they asked God's special blessing on them. And the result, in Barbara Brown Taylor's own word, was "tragic".

Their prayer crushed Dwayne ! He said, "You all called me poor! I swear I never thought of myself that way until you said it. I have all these woods to run around in. I have a grandmama and a granddaddy who love me. I got a whole shed full of rabbits I can play with any time I want. Does that sound poor to you? It don't sound poor to me. You all should save your prayers for someone who needs them."

No one meant to hurt Dwayne, but their assumptions gave them away. Again in Barbara Brown Taylor's words:

We thought of "the poor" as people other than ourselves. We separated ourselves from Dwayne in our prayers, and our prayers stung him to the quick!" Their innocent prayer revealed how much the culture determines how we perceive reality, and how we value people not by God's standards but by our own ideas of worth.

OFTEN OUR VALUES ARE QUANTITATIVE, MATERIALISTIC: Christian faith is very materialistic. Nothing wrong with that.

It matters very much how we handle money and things. Jesus is not an Idea. He is a Person. He came in a particular time at a particular place. He taught us to pray daily for bread. He told us we ought to pay our tithes. His people share what they have with those who have less.

It is not possible to be a true Christian only in the mind and spirit. We are challenged to present our BODIES as living sacrifices to God. That means God cares what we do with things like money and possessions. But the Christian faith introduces a different sort of reality from the one that worships money and power and things.

IN JESUS' KINGDOM THINGS ARE USED, NOT LOVED. AND PEOPLE ARE LOVED, AND NEVER USED.'

In Jesus' kingdom the poor in spirit are blessed, and the last are first, and the lost are found, and material things become tools of the spirit. If the spirit is right we get the material things right. The spirit is everything.

Christian worship is of the spirit.

When we think of "rich" and "poor" we think of belongings. If we see a man who holds a lot of money or land or power, we say he is rich by this world's standards. We think if a lot of things "belong" to a person then he or she is rich.

We have heard Bible verses like "What shall it profit to gain the whole world and lose one's own soul." But still down inside we think we would be happy and rich if we had a few million, or if we had a lot of power.

Would you really like to change places with Bill Gates or Bill Clinton? Jesus has words that "fit" here:

And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth. (Luke 12: 15)

Things that "belong" to us can not really make us rich.

What we "belong to" is what really makes us rich. Or more precisely, whom we belong to - to be accepted into God's house, and be a part of His family. When we really know we are in His kingdom then we dare to believe that he will make all the pieces fit. Our Master said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and then all these things will take their proper place in line." (Matthew 6:33, free translation)

We think that if circumstances could just change then we would have faith. If only we could be free from this situation then we could begin to live. If only we had more money— If only. It is human to doubt and be tempted to look to things for security. But Jesus challenges us to follow Him and says he will care for us.

Maybe that was where John was that day when he sent his friends to ask Jesus, in effect: "Have I missed it? Are you really Messiah?"

Christian hope is for life as it really is lived.

The question from Matthew's Gospel came echoing out of a prison. It was asked by the greatest prophet in the Bible: Are you really Christ? Are you the Son of God? Why am I here in prison? Aren't you supposed to change things for the better?

Jesus answered John the Baptist's question in an oblique manner. He told John's disciples to go back and tell John what they were seeing.

The lame walk. The deaf hear. The blind see. And the poor have the Good News told to them. The kingdom was already here, and just as Isaiah had prophesied, was already changing lives.

I believe in that dungeon John the Baptist's spirit was renewed and revived. His Master had answered him. From a purely human point of view things were unchanged. John lost his life to a weak and vain King Herod. But John the Baptist was rich beyond understanding, and is wealthy today in ways we can only imagine. And in this country alone today millions of Christians follow John the Baptist in telling their world about the One who came, who comes, and who is to come.

Conclusion

A prison is a strange place to hear Good News. But God's Good News is made for strange places. Wherever YOU are in your spiritual journey today, there is GOOD NEWS! YOU are not a "mission project," but you are a candidate for acceptance into God's family. God's kingdom is here! I leave you with two thoughts:

1. Hear the Good News for yourself! Like the rich youngsters from Atlanta you may think of the poor and imprisoned as "others." But there are prisons and "strange places" here with us this morning:

There are childhood memories, memories of abuse or worse. There are sins that just won't go away, and keep coming back. There are "if only" situations of all kinds. Some of us face the burden of getting older. Some are wrestling with bereavement or depression or fear.

There are prisons of hurt feelings, or worse: of unforgiving hatred. We do NOT have to wait until the ideal time comes. We do not have to wait until we feel salvation to come to God and ask for grace. We come just as we are.

2. Pray that this Advent/Christmas we can be agents in the work of Christ. Think small! Think near at home. The blind and lame and deaf may be nearer than you think. A healing word. A prayer in the morning for filling, and then a watchful eye through the day for sharing.

Prayer:

O God our Father, who sent Christ's messenger before Him to prepare hearts to receive Him; Give us grace also to proclaim your Good News to the poor, whether they possess great worldly treasure or none at all. Turn the hearts of your people to true wisdom, so at Your Son's Coming Again we may be found faithful to the covenant of life You have made with us in the Cross of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, world without end. Amen

Hymn: Please join with me reflectively and sing the words of *Just as I Am* #343 to the Christmas Tune of #195 *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*

Joseph and The Naming of Jesus

December 20, 1998

Matthew 1:18-25

Two thoughts come to me this year from this familiar narrative on the birth of our Savior. One thought is about

THE KEY ROLE OF JOSEPH IN THIS WONDERFUL STORY

Joseph is the silent figure in the Manger Scene. Dressed in drab brown he looks down into the manger. We don't look twice at him. Mary gets a blue robe and a white shawl. Mary sings a Magnificent song that needs to be heard over and over again. Joseph just stands there.

There isn't a lot written about Joseph in the Bible. Much of what is preached about him is pure speculation. What the Bible does say, however, is pretty deep stuff.

The first word, aside from his engagement to Mary, is that Joseph was a just man. Just, as in righteous. Joseph loved God's holy law. He ordered his life by the Schema and the Ten Commandments. When Joseph's world began to crash in around his ears, and the woman he had counted on spending his life with seemed to have betrayed him (we know she hadn't but at the time Joseph believed she had) Joseph knew the law and intended to abide by it.

Which brings us to our second word on Joseph. Joseph was a considerate man. He was kind. Even though he was just he was not legalistic. The letter of the law said "put her away" or maybe even "put her to death." But Joseph was willing to forget his own pain and try to ease someone else's shame. He planned to put Mary away quietly, discretely, even while his own heart must have been very heavy.

But God had not forgotten Joseph (and he hasn't forgotten you, either!)

Finally, Joseph was a teachable and obedient man of faith. When God spoke to Joseph through his angel Joseph listened. He did as he was told. There was a

wedding. Joseph took Mary into his home. And when the time came, after the long journey to Bethlehem, and after the shepherds had come and gone, Joseph called a rabbi, and the Baby was circumcised, and Joseph had the privilege of giving the Messiah a name. When the time came Joseph declared: "His name is Jesus!"

Just and kind. Loving and obedient. Not a bad profile for the man who had the privilege of naming our Lord.

Which brings me to the other thought in this Gospel lesson. It has to do with the significance of the name of Jesus, or actually the TWO names in the passage.

THERE ARE TWO NAMES IN THIS PASSAGE

Matthew says this birth was to fulfill the centuries-old prophecy of Isaiah 7: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel" (v 23) But then it says Joseph was told to name the Baby "Jesus." Emmanuel and Jesus: those two names mean everything to us.

IN THE BIBLE NAMES ARE OFTEN VERY SIGNIFICANT:

[The way we name our children usually is not significant or truly meaningful; my name, Russell, means "red headed." But sometimes we give names to people; names of honor or fun or behind their backs names of mocking.

[In Africa it used to be at least that missionaries got names from their African co-workers that were more true than was sometimes comfortable: have it on first-hand sources that Elmer Smelzenbach's African name was Isisu Siyaduma, which being interpreted means "The Stomach that Thunders". Another missionary, Mary Cooper's African name was Mihlotini, or "In the Tears," because she often cried when she spoke. Oscar Stockwell's African name was Ntsua. Or "Mountain." Not because Oscar was a big man, but he had a big spirit and talked about Caleb in the Bible who said, "Give me this mountain." And that made Margery Stockwell (here with us this morning) Mamana Ntsua, or "Mother Mountain." Not a bad name at all!

We can actually learn how God relates to us from the names we see in the Bible. Some Old Testament names are: El Shaddai (nourisher) Elohim (power) Jehovah-

jirah (God will provide) Jehovah-nissi (God my banner) Jehova-shalom (God our peace) Jehovah-shammah (God is there) Jehovah-tsidkenu (God our righteousness)
The names of God are one way we come to know God, or at least he God would reveal Himself to us.

{It may be the "in thing" for scholars to emphasize just how little we dare say about God– how little we understand the eternal and infinite Other (and there certainly is virtue in humility before that great Mystery.) At the same time Advent and Christmas fairly shout out scriptural truth that ought to fill us Christians with great JOY! James Wall (in the latest Christian Century) talks about "the extravagant language of affirmation" in regards to the Incarnation. Christmas is NOT the time to hang your head, spiritually. The message is "Behold I bring you glad tidings of great joy which shall be to all people." And the reason is that our God is Emmanuel, the God who is WITH us!

WHAT IS THIS NAME, EMMANUEL?

Isaiah was speaking to a particular time and a particular person, King Ahaz, when he predicted the birth of a baby to be symbolically named Emmanuel. But at the same time he was speaking far more truth that he himself could understand. The birth of a baby would be a sign to Ahaz that God was with him whether he wanted Him to be or not; that God could and would work out His divine will.

Ahaz wasn't very strong in his faith; he failed the faith-test. The baby called Emmanuel was Hezekiah, who was king after his father Ahaz died, and before he was weaned the enemies Ahaz had dreaded had been removed through no wisdom or skill of Ahaz.

But the prophecy was bigger than the occasion. One was to be born with the name Emmanuel who would not be symbolically named. Seven centuries later Joseph passed his faith-test. A baby was born that fulfilled all the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. This literally was EMMANUEL.

THE NAME EMMANUEL STANDS AT THE HEART OF OUR FAITH

All the other miracles of the Bible pale in comparison to the miracle of the Incarnation. God has come to dwell with us in the Person of Jesus the Babe of Bethlehem. God has come to share our human condition so that we might be able to share His divine light and life.

Whether we have faith to believe, like Joseph, and are willing to listen and obey; or whether we don't have faith, like Ahaz, and receive his blessings without acknowledging Him, it does not change the fact that God has come to this Earth to give us the Good News of his Love.

If we receive Him with faith and obedience he is with us to comfort and understand and help us and save us. If we reject Him and go our own way, we have to do so over the kind of love that gave God's only begotten Son to die for us. Forever God is involved with humankind. Our eternal happiness or eternal separation from God is wrapped up in our relationship with EMMANUEL.

THE OTHER NAME in this passage is the one we use the most when we think of Messiah. The angel told Joseph to name the baby "JESUS." This name means JEHOVAH OUR SALVATION. It is Joshua in the Old testament, like the Joshua who led the people "IN." When we put the two names together, GOD WITH US, and JEHOVAH OUR SALVATION we are coming to understand the heart of the meaning of Advent and Christmas.

The Gift of Faith is a wonderful thing indeed. If you believe that God has come near in His Son Jesus, then THE NAME EMMANUEL HAS ALREADY COME ALIVE FOR YOU.

Jesus died on the Cross for your sins, and He rose again from the Dead so that you never need to suffer eternal death. Your heart already knows this— and if you believe this it is the gift of Faith.

But your passive, gift faith must be coupled with a responsive faith. God does not force His way into hearts unless they ask Him in. (Revelation 3:21) And that is where the name of Jesus has great power. If you are willing to say, from the faith in your heart that Jesus is Christ, and God has raised Him from the dead,— if you are willing

to say, 'JESUS IS LORD! JESUS IS MY LORD!' You will begin to understand the mighty power in Jesus' name!

[[Over a century ago, a clergyman named Phillips Brooks spent a Christmas in Jerusalem and went to an impressive worship service that lasted several hours. Later, as he was winding down, he spent part of the evening on the hillside outside of Jerusalem and he looked out at the small town of Bethlehem. And he realized that Christ is there too. He captured that insight in a song he wrote, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," with the words "but in the dark streets shineth the everlasting light." (Frm Bass Mitchell)

Our 'streets' are dark these days, with missiles falling in Bagdad while a president is being impeached, but whether or not we will receive Him, Emmanuel is here now.]]

Prayer: Breathe on our hearts, O Breath of God, that EMMANUEL who has come already might be known to us; Give us the living faith to say from our hearts, JESUS IS LORD!, to the glory of God the Father. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

169 Hymn *O Little Town of Bethlehem*

Christmas Eve

Christmas Eve in Wollaston 1998

Christmas has many faces, sparkling and shining everywhere, but also dark corners of disappointment, with myriad traditions. Families gather, and at the same time loneliness is all the more painful. Still, Christmas is the most celebrated event around the world. But Christmas, real Christmas, has but one focal point: THE GIFT.

To me, Christmas is a little like a great cathedral, like Westminster Abbey. So many things to see. A tourist's "must see" in London. Poets corner. Kings, greats and near greats, glorious soaring arches and beautiful windows. David Livingstone in the main aisle. But even though coronations and royal weddings and funerals get great publicity, and though most people would deny it, and it is denied by the way it is thought of and used, Westminster Abbey is first of all a house of worship. Worship. A meeting place with God.

[A few summers ago Helen and I were in the Abbey when the announcement was made for Evensong. Tourists were invited to become worshipers or at least to stop and be quiet or to leave. There was some grumbling, and many did leave. But then the service began and even though the setting was different from our home church God met with us.] The wonder is God meets with people in Westminster Abbey, but also in Rescue Missions, and in Baptist Churches and in high church prayers . . .IF we remember THE GIFT.

WHATEVER ELSE Christmas has brought to you this year, whether pure joy, or even pain; reunion or loneliness, GOD has come to bring YOU a priceless GIFT. With great love, at great cost to Himself, a very real and wonderful GIFT is yours, and mine. It is the Christmas Story, but that story is bigger than all the ideas of Christmas rolled into one. It is an invitation to belong to God's family. It is the assurance that your sins- all your sins- are forgiven. It is a new and wonderful Life that can make us new and beautiful from the inside out.

One tiny Baby! It seems so improbable! So impossible! That if God wanted to bring Light and Life to a world that He would begin with a Carpenter's wife-to-be, a Virgin Mother, and tiny Bethlehem in Judea, of all places. That tiny spark has never gone out. It has grown. It will fill all the universe with glory.

One simple prayer! It seems too simple! Impossible! That receiving God's GIFT can bring light and Life into a human heart.

*"How silently, how silently
The wondrous Gift is giv'n.
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heav'n.
No ear may hear His coming
But in this world of sin
Where meek souls will receive Him still
The dear Christ enters in."*

Have You taken the time this Christmas Season to tell Jesus He is welcome in your life? Have you ever prayed a simple prayer accepting THE GIFT, and thanking God for sharing His life with you? Among all the shining and even sorrow of Christmas nothing is more important than God's GIFT. [I would not impose my will on any of you this evening, but there is a Prayer of Acceptance I would like for you to see, and if you will, for us to pray again together this evening. It is a Prayer of Acceptance of God's greatest GIFT. (It is found on page 327 in the Hymnal.)]

Dear Father, I believe that Jesus Christ is your only begotten Son, and that He became a human being, shed his blood and died on the cross to clean away my sin that was separating me from You. I believe that He rose from the dead, physically, to give me new life. Lord Jesus, I invite You to come into my heart. I accept You as my Savior and Lord. I confess my sins, and ask You to wash them away. I believe that You have come and are living in me right now. Thank You, Jesus. Amen.

I certainly do not mean to trivialize conviction, godly sorrow for sins, repentance, and all that often comes with turning from sin to God. But I want to tell you this Christmas Eve, that if you mean that prayer we have prayed, and if you have asked Jesus into your heart then He is faithful to His Word to enter your life and bring His light. As you walk in that light you will find fellowship and cleansing and assurance.

Words of Invitation and Confession

You who do truly and earnestly repent of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a godly life, following the commandments of God, and walking in His holy ways; draw near with faith and give God praise [# 67 in Hymnal.] Please read responsively: (Pastor, read italics!)

We praise You, O God.
We acclaim You as Lord;
All creation worships You,
Father everlasting.
To You all angels, all the powers of heaven,
cherubim and seraphim, sing in endless praise.
Holy, holy, holy Lord,
God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
The glorious company of the apostles praise You.
The noble fellowship of prophets praise You.
The white-robed army of martyrs praise You.
Throughout the world the holy Church acclaims You:
Father of majesty unbounded,
Your glorious, true, and only Son,
and the Holy Spirit, Advocate and Guide.
You, Christ, are the King of Glory,
the eternal Son of the Father.
When You became incarnate to set us free
You humbly accepted the Virgin's womb.

You overcame the sting of death,
and opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.
You are seated at God's right hand in glory.
We believe that You will come to be our judge.

(All:) Come then, Lord, and help your people,
bought with the price of your own blood,
and bring us with your saints to glory everlasting.

Words of Institution (Let us continue in Prayer)

As Mary and Joseph went from Galilee to Bethlehem
and there found no room,
so Jesus went from Galilee to Jerusalem and was despised and rejected.
As in the poverty of a stable Jesus was born,
so by the baptism of his suffering, death and resurrection
you gave birth to your Church,
delivered us from slavery to sin and death,
and made with us a new covenant by water and the Spirit.
Your Word became flesh, born of woman, on that night long ago.
And, on the night in which he gave himself up for us, he took bread,
gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said:
"Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you.
Do this in remembrance of me."

When the supper was over he took the cup,
gave thanks to you, gave it to his disciples, and said:

"Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant,
poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.
Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."
And so, in remembrance of these your mighty acts in Jesus Christ,
we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving
as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ's offering for us,
as we rejoice in the mystery of our faith:

Christmas Eve

- Christ has died,
- Christ is risen,
- Christ will come again.

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here,
and on these gifts of bread and wine.

Make them for us the body and blood of Christ,
that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood.
By your Spirit make us one with Christ,
one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world,
until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet.
Through your Son Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in your holy Church,
all honor and glory is yours, Almighty God, now and forever.

And now with the confidence of the children of God, we are bold to pray
as Your Son has taught us:

Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy
kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven. Give
us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we
forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver
us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the
glory forever. Amen

The Gifts of God for the People of God

Family Flight to Safety

December 27, 1998

Matthew 1; Hebrews 2

Matthew 1:14 *When (Joseph) arose he took the young Child and his Mother by night and departed for Egypt.*

The abrupt "end" to Christmas in the secular world reminds us that many people have no idea what the Christmas story is all about. [How many times I heard this year "That's what the real meaning of Christmas is all about" and then some word of wisdom about loving our neighbor or being kind all year.]

Christmas is about God invading our planet. Christmas isn't over on the 26th. It is just getting started. But what a story! The Holy Family has to run for its life! The Magi. Herod's jealous paranoia. And then a flight in the middle of the night.

Jesus was a refugee even before he could walk or talk. The Holy family was not exempt from the demands of life every family group has to face.

The love and integrity and sensitivity of Joseph as he sought to care for his family is a lesson for all who would seek God's will for the ones they love.

The fact that even Jesus had to flee for safety could make us AWARE OF THE SUFFERING, HIDDEN AND OTHERWISE, IN OUR WORLD.

We all need God's deliverance from evil (as we are taught in the Lord's Prayer) Our world is full of refugees of one kind or another/ of people who pray the prayer "deliver us from evil."

One step we might take is asking God to make us away of those who are in need. We may be able to do something– we certainly can begin by praying– we can't pray unless we are aware:

- REFUGEES are more numerous than we might believe: a recent U.N. high commission on refugees estimated there were 25,000,000 refugees in our

world that had fled across national borders, beside many displaced within nations.

- THE AGED often suffer dread of change and displacement. They need love and care.
- CHILDREN often are without loving parents; unwanted, un-cared for needing advocates.

We may or may not be able to reach out to these needs. But we need to be ALERT TO THE SPIRIT'S WARNINGS IN OUR OWN FAMILY GROUPS

Joseph was warned that he faced a serious physical threat.

It may be that some of the threats that face our families today are serious spiritual threats that could have eternal consequences!

God's people need to flee the evil spirits of our secular culture. [I know there is an empty sort of external, legalistic piety that mocks true spirituality. But we have swung so far from preaching against what we used to call "externals" – that it is impossible to tell the difference between the church and the world any more.]

We need to develop a sensitivity to the Holy Spirit.

We need to dare to say "Others may– I can not! I will not!" Whatever grieves the Holy Spirit of God not only will bring shallowness into my life– it will serve to make my children, my family insensitive to God's Spirit as well.

Secular culture USES PEOPLE. Sex and violence and worship of money are SYMPTOMS of the worship of SELF gone out of control.

Secular culture EXALTS PERSONAL GRATIFICATION. If it pleases me, then find a way to buy it or rationalize it. If covenants or marriages become inconvenient, they must go!

WE NEED TO BE WILLING TO LISTEN TO THE HOLY SPIRIT. TO TAKE TIME TO HEAR WHAT GOD HAS TO SAY.

Then finally we need to be AVAILABLE TO GOD'S SPIRIT TO HELP OTHERS.

I recall George Anderson and Walter Edsall stopping by the parsonage and saying "Let's go bowling" when I felt absolutely devastated as a young pastor in New Jersey. Maybe not a spectacular flight to Egypt. But a loving gesture of caring that may have saved a ministry??

Maybe something more direct: In our own family, who will, take charge? Deliberate choices of what we shall watch . . . of what games we shall play . . .

I'm not interested in developing lists of this is OK" and "that is WRONG"

I am deeply concerned that we Christians determine we will obey the Holy Spirit, day after day. Step by step he will lead us!

Conclusion

The passage from Hebrews is tremendously encouraging. It says two or three vital things:

1. We are ALL welcome into the Holy Family. Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters.
2. Jesus understands our hard places. He was a refugee Himself, and not only as a Baby. He was despised and rejected. So He is able to help everyone who sincerely asks Him.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus we thank you for our families, with all their tensions and awkwardness. Thank you for days that go well, when we feel proud and hopeful and warmly embraced. Thank you for times when we love them beyond question, and we see them strong and good and caring. And thank you for memories of courage and joy, when we see skills and values and character passing and growing from generation to generation. Heal us of hurts too long remembered, and childhood jealousies never released. Help us to see you in the faces around our table, to hear your voice in those family phone calls and to know your presence in comfortable silence For you are Emmanuel, "God with us", at home with us, making every meal holy, and every family member a child of God... Lord, hear our prayer....

Family Flight to Safety

Lord, help us to see that the power of Christmas isn't exhausted with the music and the lights and the gifts and the food, but grows as slowly as a baby, to become a living treasure, a reservoir of peace and love, to sustain us, not only through December and into the holidays, but each and every day of the days you grant to us. Indeed, O Lord, bless us that we may see your presence with ever greater brightness and that we may ourselves become more and more like unto him whose birth we celebrate this season. Lord hear our prayer...

Lord, hear our prayer too for those particular persons and those particular things that have been shared within this holy place today:

(Prayers of The Community)

Lord hear our Prayer....

Gracious God, we ask all this knowing that you indeed hear us for we pray as your son Jesus, he who is our brother and Lord taught us, saying.... Our Father...

Hymn No.

The 'Say Yes' Kind of Covenant

January 3, 1999

Malachi 3:10 *"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this," says the Lord of Hosts, "if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows."*

INTRODUCTION

- A. Malachi 3:10 is a text that lends itself to manipulation by people who want to raise money for churches. It appeals to a strict cause and effect mentality; it may be used to underscore the mind set the ultra fundamentalist, who sees salvation as a strict contract with the Almighty.

Actually, there ARE elements of contract, of promise, even hints of cause and effect here. God says, "If you will do thus and so, you can prove Me now! I will do thus and so!"

- B. But to be fair we need to see that THE TEXT IS A CLIMAX OF THE [TOTAL] LESSON OF MALACHI; and the whole book reveals God's desire to love and to be loved by His people. God is disappointed when His own people are less than they could be. [The reason God's people do not experience God's full blessing is plain. They have forgotten that real life centers around GOD! One message of Malachi is:]

I. SPIRITUAL IGNORANCE ON ISRAEL'S PART

- A. The entire Book of Malachi reveals that religious people who claimed to know all about God and religion were actually in mortal danger because they were so ignorant. A recurrent theme throughout the short book is (1) a statement of fact by God, through His prophet; immediately followed by (2) incredulous statements like "How can that be?" "Why do you say that?" "Where is that a fact?"

- 1. (1:2) They were ignorant of God's LOVE to them. (1:6) They were even ignorant of insulting the name of God.

The 'Say Yes' Kind of Covenant

2. (2:14) They were ignorant of any reason why God should despise their fancy worship, even though they did not act in honesty and love with one another.
(2:17) They were ignorant of the fact that God was weary of their empty mouth-ing of prayers.
 3. (3:7) They were ignorant both of the need to return to God, and the way in which they might return to God.
- B. There is no sense of the 'personal' in their dealings with God: [God is "an institution, not a Person with feelings!"] How easy to take God for granted! How easy to despise holy things!
1. (3:8) They have never connected GIVING with LOVING GOD! They are ignorant of the fact that when they withhold their tithes from God they are robbing God.
 2. (3:13) They have become CASUAL about SEEKING and DOING God's will! They are ignorant that when they speak for God without being in touch with God they are actually speaking against God.
- C. The call of the prophet is not to condemn, but to re establish true faith. The clear way in which God's people may experience God's grace is practical in nature:

II. THE RE ESTABLISHING OF TRUST IN GOD

- A. God is NOT bound strictly by "contract" to us, or we would all be long gone! We are never dealt with as we deserve, but by God's great grace! GOD IS A COVENANT-MAKING, COVENANT-KEEPING GOD! God is faithful to His covenant with His people! He is reluctant ever to write off one of His own!
- B. TO LOVE GOD, WE MUST MAKE HIM OUR LIFE'S CENTER
- Our love to Him must not be merely a matter of convenience. Malachi says, sarcastically, to his hearers (1:8): "Try giving what is left over to the IRS! Try paying your bills with left overs– with the things you don't want any more! Doesn't that work?? Well, then WHY GIVE YOUR 'CONVENIENCE' TO GOD?

C. TO LOVE GOD, WE ARE TO SEEK TO LEARN TO GIVE!

1. The people to whom Malachi was preaching were consumer minded! THEY WERE TAKERS! They asked "What can God and religion do for me?" Malachi (actually God, speaking through Malachi) was seeking to turn around their thinking, to make them covenant minded!

God always wants His people to be GIVERS! And in God's economy, and in His own currency it is the givers who are rich!

2. Keying on the areas where Malachi accused the people of ignorance, here is an outline on how we should give:
 - a. Our MOTIVE must be love not profit.
 - b. Our ATTITUDE must be reverence for God and His church; and faith. (Not cynical, not self serving. The widow woman COULD have saved her two mites, saying "I need it more than those rich Pharisees...")
 - c. Our ACT OF GIVING should be sacramental. When the plates go by, the amount you place on the plate is one thing; but the very fact of placing something on the plate can be an act of stewardship, a statement of submission to God's will!
 - d. Our METHOD of giving is NOT unimportant! Malachi mentions tithing!

I think that I have heard most of the arguments against storehouse tithing: Tithing is legalistic. Storehouse tithing is invented to support institutions. O.T. Law has been eliminated. Give to get preaching has decimated genuine giving.

The fact is: storehouse tithing is the floor on which to build a disciplined life of stewardship. I do not limit my personal giving to 10% of my income now; but I grew up in the demonstration of what it means to be partners with God, including faithful tithing during the Great Depression. I will testify that it works!

The 'Say Yes' Kind of Covenant

POINTS TO DRIVE HOME: It is possible to give and not be a Christian, but it is impossible to be a Christian and NOT give. Tithing makes us partners with God in the practical world of finances.

CONCLUSION

The end of this short book is like a fork in the road. Ignorance is not excuse when there is light! We can accept what God has to say, and in turn we can SAY YES! To his will and way. Or, we can pursue the way of do-it-yourself religion. One fork in the road is the warning of cursing for those who are arrogant, and choose to remain in ignorance of God's Law and God's LOVE. But the other pathway of renewed covenant and saying YES! To God is full of God's assurance:

(3:16) "Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord gave attention and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and esteem His name. "'And they will be Mine,' says the Lord of hosts, 'on the day that I prepare my own possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him.' "So you will distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him."

(4:2)"But for you who revere my Name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall."

The beginning of a New Year, the opening week of SAY YES! Month are a great time for us to renew Covenant with our God. As we come to the Table of the Lord and receive assurance of His salvation and blessing, will YOU bring the sacrifice of your own submitted will? Bring your burdens and your problems, yes; but also bring the promise that whatever God asks for He can have— that whatever God tells you to do, you will obey! God loves you! He wants to bless you! He wants to bless US!

The windows of heaven are open, and God's blessing is promised to those who truly seek to love Him, and let Him love through them. I pray for you and me and for us the joy of being GIVERS to the glory of God! Amen.

The Holy Communion

Words of Invitation and Confession

You who do truly and earnestly repent of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a godly life, following the commandments of God, and walking in His holy ways; draw near with faith and give God praise [# 67 in Hymnal.] Please read responsively:

We praise You, O God.

We acclaim You as Lord; All creation worships You, Father everlasting.

To You all angels, all the powers of heaven, cherubim and seraphim, sing in endless praise.

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory.

The glorious company of the apostles praise You.

The noble fellowship of prophets praise You.

The white-robed army of martyrs praise You.

Throughout the world the holy Church acclaims You: Father of majesty unbounded, Your glorious, true, and only Son, and the Holy Spirit, Advocate and Guide.

You, Christ, are the King of Glory, the eternal Son of the Father. When You became incarnate to set us free You humbly accepted the Virgin's womb.

You overcame the sting of death, and opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.

You are seated at God's right hand in glory. We believe that You will come to be our judge.

(All:) Come then, Lord, and help your people, bought with the price of your own blood, and bring us with your saints to glory everlasting.

Words of Institution

(Let us continue in Prayer)

The 'Say Yes' Kind of Covenant

On this SAY YES Sunday, in this Season of Christmas, and in the dawning days of a New Year in our reckoning of time, we thank You for the Promise of Life Eternal which you have freely offered to us all in the Gift of Your Son.

Your Eternal Son took our flesh, was born of woman, and lived among us to teach us of Your love; He was tempted as we are, yet without sin; He was despised and rejected, and crucified for our salvation; He rose the third day from the dead in triumph over death, in which we may share; He promised us Power from on high, which You have poured out on us in the coming of the Holy Spirit, birthing the Church and establishing a new Covenant by water and the Spirit.

And, on the night in which he gave himself up for us, he took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said:

"Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

When the supper was over he took the cup, gave thanks to you, gave it to his disciples, and said:

"Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

And so, in remembrance of these your mighty acts in Jesus Christ, we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ's offering for us, as we rejoice in the mystery of our faith:

- Christ has died,
- Christ is risen,
- Christ will come again.

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine. Make them for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory, and

we feast at his heavenly banquet. Through your Son Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in your holy Church, all honor and glory is yours, Almighty God, now and forever.

And now with the confidence of the children of God, we are bold to pray as Your Son has taught us:

Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen

ENC Chapel Notes

The Feast of Epiphany, the Twelfth Day of Christmas

January 6, 1999

FIRST READING: Isaiah 60:1 3,9

ARISE, SHINE; for your light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people; But the Lord shall arise over you, And His glory will be seen upon you. The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

*SURELY THE COASTLANDS shall wait for Me;
and the ships of Tarshish will come first,
To bring your sons from afar,
their silver and gold with them,
To the name of the Lord your God,
and to the Holy One of Israel,
Because He has glorified You.*

This is the last time I'll be speaking in chapel, I'm sure— and I really ought to try to preach a decent sermon, I suppose. I've known for some time this morning was coming, and it would be easiest to hang out three points and a story or two.

But somehow I thought I'd just give my testimony. It is sort of fun getting older— sometimes. Sometimes it isn't. Sometimes I feel invisible when I get around young people: sometimes I feel like a tombstone. Lawson Saunders gave me a fitting epitaph:

*Behold all ye who pass me by
As you are now so once was I
As I am now so you will be
Prepare to die and follow me.*
...To which he added:

*To follow you I'm not content
Until I know which way you went*

Actually— I'm not ready to lie down and die just yet— I don't think. I may be, could be, might be hanging it up this year as a pastor, but I've got a few good things I want to do before the people in the white coats come for me. I'm on a journey, and I haven't arrived yet. And that is why life is so good.

As a teenager I began a serious search for God. My church told me— or at least I understood— that if I would do certain things- and NOT do certain other things— I would be, could be filled with the Spirit and be holy.

I confess I have never FELT very holy in all my life! But I began running to God! Literally, at times! I really wanted to reach out and touch God. And when ever I FELT blessed I would think that my "connection" was now good so I would start asking for what i thought I needed— and poof!

But I kept on running! And from time to time God let a little crack of assurance, or guidance, or growth fall down on my head. I've been a slow learner. And for years I was quite an undisciplined scholar of the Word— undisciplined scholar, period.

But once in a while there would be a little break-through. I learned— or came to believe that I would never be a Christian to amount to anything unless and until I found a way to cultivate a simple but consistent relationship - - covenant relationship - - with God.

I discovered Isaiah 41:10 just for ME! In 1949 on my way here from Ohio.

In Edison, New Jersey, in the pastor's study, after I had been a pastor for more than fifteen years, one day I knew God loved me! I know I was saved and wholly consecrated and sanctified before that— but I don't know how else to tell it. It was just one of those affirming moments that come.

Little by little my understanding of our church's teaching on heart holiness has come to mean to me belonging to God— total willingness to let God have control of my life.

On this day of Epiphany I can't give you words of wisdom on how to follow your star and bring your presents to the King - - but I can share with you my working patter for personal devotions:

1. Some kind of plan for letting the Scriptures address me. I believe the Bible has been given to us to show us who Jesus is. Begin. Haphazard isn't good— but keep at it whatever you do. The Holy Spirit will be your teacher!
2. Find verses to help you focus:
 - Hebrews 11:6 diligently SEEK— expect to be REWARDED with God Himself
 - Ephesians 4:32 seek a spirit like God Himself(KIND, tender-hearted, forgiving)
 - John 15:8 Don't just settle; bear MUCH fruit!!
 - Luke 11:13 If we ask, the father will give us the Holy Spirit! (Jesus said!)
3. Use the Lord's Prayer. Like the Ten Commandments, it has two parts— toward God - - and from God toward US.

After a few years it has a way of addressing the day— where we are just NOW!
4. Keep some sort of written journal. Write out your heart. You can be honest with God— and he will help you see your growth.

I'm not a prophet. But I do know the only thing we can be sure about is we can't know the future. And I do know that if God spares you, and you have forty or sixty or seventy more years to live, they will go by faster than you can ever imagine! Lots of things in this world I don't understand—and lots of things seem to make no sense at all. But I am determined I will not be a sour old pessimistic old man. When I can't make sense of things, I have something that gives me real hope:

There's an old story about a mother who wanted to keep her child informed as well as amused; so she bought a jig saw puzzle picture map of the earth, with lots of pieces. "See how long it takes you to put this map together," she said.

The boy had the map finished in just a very few minutes. It was amazing! "How did you do it so fast?" the mother asked.

"Actually, it was easy!" was the answer. "There is a picture of a man on the back. I just slid it on the checkerboard and turned it over!"

There is the face of a Man at the Back of All History! And that Man is even now at the Throne of the Universe! He ascended into heaven! If we keep His face in view, He will make sense, finally, of your world and mine!

Do YOU need reassurance in your world? I do in mine! There are times when I am absolutely overwhelmed! IT IS THEN I REALIZE I NEED TO LOOK FOR 'THE MAN'S FACE ON THE BACK OF THE PUZZLE!'

Prayer: (For Epiphany)

O God, who by the leading of a star manifested your only Son to the Peoples of the earth: Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may see your glory face to face; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

January 6, 1999

Chapel, E.N.C.

R Metcalfe

When I was about eight my parents rented a small house at 610 S. Magnolia in Lansing, Michigan. It was the first house, the first room of my own. But that's another story.

I learned that it was safer to walk to school with the other kids from S. Magnolia. If we went together we usually weren't bothered. But if we got caught alone it might be a different story. The kids who lived on Hayford Street seemed to love beating up kids who didn't belong to their gang.

[The Hayford Street Gang story.]

. . . has become a metaphor for me— finding out that when I face frightening situations there is Someone who comes along side.

I have found that at times in my life when I needed help the most there was a Big Brother very near to me. I am sure He is near to us at all times. But it is very comforting when He lets us know He is there.

Isaiah 41:10 on the way here, in 1949 !

The walk to the hamburger stand - the "Presence!"

In the Edison study - after facing evil people- when "I knew I was saved"!

The Road to Emmaus . . . Jesus came along side: through scripture, through Presence: the "Presence" is enhanced by developing a walk, a daily time of prayer. I cannot be a vital Christian apart from some kind of regular coming alongside HIM!

Bible

Focus (life verses) Lord's Prayer:

Surrender & Trust

Intercession

(Journaling)

Jesus makes sense of your world! Look for the "Face of the Man" and your world will come together.

To Love Gods Law

January 7, 1999 PM

Psalm 19

This morning we talked about the Master Teacher, and his expectations of us. In his great "lesson," the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said plainly that he did not come to destroy the Ten Commandments, but to fulfil them. Actually, he said, "Think not that I have come to destroy the Law. I came not to destroy, but to fulfill."

In fulfilling, not abolishing, Jesus again and again used the phrase: "You have heard it said . . . but I say unto you." You have heard "don't kill!" But I say, "Don't hate!" You have heard "Don't be immoral." But I say, "Don't think immorally!"

I. THE GOAL: TO LOVE GOD'S LAW

The Old Testament talks a lot about loving God's Law. Modern day Jews could teach us something about appreciating the fact that God communicates with mortals. Chaim Potock in his portrayal of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn paints vivid pictures of the celebrations where the scrolls of the Torah are reverently yet almost hilariously carried around and even danced with on holy days.

How long has it been since you danced with your Bible? How long since you looked at it and thought how wonderful it is that God speaks through its pages?

We are conditioned to think of 'law' as something that restricts. The way we use legislation of human law reinforces that idea. Many laws that are meant to make life better for most people end up being tremendously damaging to individuals. Most of us have heard a horror story of how some environment-protection has brought disaster to some poor farmer. But God's law is not like that.

A modern-day parable by a man named John Killinger, in a book about the Ten Commandments (To My People with Love, Abingdon, 1988) you may recall:

A village was being plagued with disaster after disaster. the reason was the someone had planted land mines all over the countryside. people were constantly being killed or maimed.

Then one night a village elder had a dream. in that dream he saw a map of where every land mine was hidden. He awoke and wrote the map down, and gave it to the people. They were absolutely delighted, and grateful. And they memorized the map.

The Ten Commandments are like that. They would keep us from actions and attitudes which would blow our personal world apart. They would keep us from going into harm's way, spiritually. God's law is precious to people who make it life's business to seek to know God. GOD IS BIG ENOUGH TO FILL THE HEAVENS WITH STARS AND YET POWERFUL ENOUGH TO SPEAK PERSONALLY THROUGH HIS LAW TO YOU AND ME

II. TO BE FULLY CHRISTIAN: GOD'S LAW WRITTEN IN OUR HEARTS

Most of us pass through various attitudes toward God's Holy Laws, especially those of us who grow up within the preaching of the Bible.

1. We have a period when we live in and love authoritarianism. Whether or not we realize it, WE THINK THAT BY KEEPING GOD'S LAWS WE CAN BE SAVED. We may not think we do, and may not say we do but we like the security of being told what is right and wrong. We like to hear that we are on the right side, and we know what is right and wrong because someone we respect tells us so. BUT WE FIND THAT THERE IS NO REAL LIFE IN TRYING TO BE SAVED BY KEEPING THE LAW.
2. But then we begin to think as adults; we reject untested truth. We don't like to be told: "Do so because I say so!" Especially we don't like people telling us things like that our parents, our teachers, human authority figures. But this carries over even to the heavenly Father, too! And in one way or another we demand AUTONOMY! We decide we'll be our own boss! BUT WE FIND THAT THERE IS NO REAL PEACE AND JOY IN BEING 'FREE FROM KEEPING THE LAW' OF GOD.
3. BUT WHEN WE COME TO OURSELVES, AND WHEN WE COME TO KNOW THE LOVE OF JESUS IN SALVATION, WE CHOOSE FREELY TO COME UNDER THE

AUTHORITY OF GOD. Responding to the call of grace (not simply accepting authoritarian dictatorship), but freely accepting the authority of our heavenly father. (He knows where the land mines are!!)when we are born from above we discover the truth:
"BLESSED (HAPPY!) IS THE MAN (WOMAN) THAT WALKETH NOT IN THE COUNSEL OF THE UNGODLY . . . BUT IN (GOD'S) LAW DOTH HE MEDITATE DAY AND NIGHT. Life AND peace AND joy are not detached from the love of God's Laws!

4. To the person struggling in authoritarian blindness it seems that God has simply tried His best to make up some rules to keep us from having a good time.
5. But the wonderful thing we discover when we voluntarily place ourselves under God's LAWS, we see that they are an expression of His lovingkindness to us! The beautiful thing is: God's commandments are not harsh and arbitrary! Rather, they are designed to help to meet every need and longing in our God created being!
6. If YOU are having trouble finding the power to live like a Christian the secret is in TRUSTING ENOUGH TO PUT GOD AT THE CENTER! Matthew 6:33 If we will seek first the kingdom of God, and HIS righteousness, then all these things will be added.

February 7, 1999

Communion

Read in Unison # 752

I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea.

They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink.

For they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ?

Is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?

I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and said,

"This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."

In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying. "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Jesus said, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it find fulfillment in the kingdom of God."

- Communion is Remembering "You show the Lord's death . . ." Jesus died for us, for you, for me. For the world. We were sinners. Jesus saved us. Communion looks back to Calvary. Looks back to our own personal history with God. We remember.
- Communion is Hope "You show the Lord's death UNTIL HE COMES!" Jesus is NOT dead. He died but he is now in Session. He is making intercession. He is guiding us to life. He is preparing a Place. He will come again. That is a promise.
- Communion is Presence In true mystery reverently we bow in awe before it in true mystery Christ is Present when the Church remembers. He comes near when the church comes together around the table of hope.

In communion time and space recede. We sit at the table with Moses and Elijah and James and John. We are part of the Universal church, all peoples around the world who say "Jesus is Lord!" And we draw close to our loved ones wherever they may be as well. At the Lord's table we fellowship with people we have never seen, and whose language we would not understand on a human level. But we are brothers and sisters at the Lord's table.

In communion we draw closer to God Himself, and so we cannot help but draw closer to each other. I invite you to prepare your heart and come to the Lord's table. (We will partake together)

The Coming of the Dawn

Friday, January 22, 1999

Isaiah 8:11-9:2

Romans 13:8 *The night is far spent, the day is at hand; let us therefore put off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light.*

Introduction:

Advent is the time of year just before Christmas when believers think about the coming of the Lord Jesus. We think about the light and the love that His coming has brought into the world. And we wonder, if we had been living before His coming, would we have heard and heeded the promises of Messiah?

Advent is a time when we look to the promises of the Old Testament prophets, especially Isaiah. We see his message as beautiful poetry signifying the coming of Jesus Christ into a benighted world. We try to think of how it must have been to be in the darkness before Christ came. We wonder if we would have had the faith to look to the east for the streaks of dawn.

All this is excellent. But Advent is also a time to do more than speculate about the past. It is even more than a time to recall with joy and wonder that Jesus came. Advent is a time to hear for ourselves living promises that speak about light that overcomes darkness.

And Advent is a time to be looking toward Christ's coming again. Advent is a time to make certain that we are not blocking our hearts from one of God's most priceless gifts the gift of hope!

I. THE WORD FROM ISAIAH REGARDING A LIGHT IN DARKNESS

A. ISAIAH'S MESSAGE SAID, "YES, THERE IS DARKNESS!"

But God's people do not need to live in fear of the darkness!! (Isaiah 8:11-13) God says "DON'T walk in the way of the people...in fear of death and

dying. RATHER, sanctify the Lord God in your hearts. Be more afraid of displeasing Him than you are of what the darkness can do to you! And this faith/fear will be your sanctuary!"

How can we describe "fear" of God? Does it mean terror? Does it negate the fact that God is full of loving-kindness and tender regard for His children?

The fear of God is a healthy respect for Holy POWER tremendous regard for the sheer POWER of God's hatred for sin and injustice. God IS tender. But God is HOLY. The closer men and women are privileged to approach to God, the more they will regard Him with awe and holy fear.

To come closer and closer to God does NOT mean becoming more "casual" and "familiar" with Him, or becoming more careless regarding living to please Him! There is no contradiction between tender, giving, sacrificial love and the demand for high ethical and moral standards of conduct!

B. ISAIAH'S MESSAGE WAS THAT GOD WILL GIVE HIS PEOPLE LIGHT TO WALK IN!

The times may be dark, but God is interested in leading His own people where they ought to go! And God is particularly jealous about NOT having His people looking elsewhere for guidance!

(8:19) DON'T look to secular or un godly sources for directions on how to live!

(8:22) When God's people look to earthly sources for help they find trouble and darkness. It is insulting to Almighty God to profess to love His light, and to profess to be people of light and then (1) to stumble along exactly like un believers; and (2) even to look to God's enemies for guidance in the affairs of life and living.

C. THE MESSAGE OF ISAIAH IS, "IT IS NIGHT NOW BUT DAYLIGHT IS COMING!"

It may be dark, but Isaiah proclaims: (9:2) You cannot keep the sun from rising! The light of God is coming! If you are faithful– Messiah will come!

If you are NOT faithful Messiah will still come! But those that look to God for light will NOT be disappointed.

TRANSITION: WE CAN AND DO SEE THIS AS BEAUTIFUL POETRY SIGNIFYING THE COMING OF JESUS CHRIST INTO A BENIGHTED WORLD.

We think of how it must have been to be in the darkness before Christ came. We wonder if we would have had the faith to look to the east for the streaks of dawn. But this is MORE than beautiful poetry. It is talking about living in a world that is AGAINST God and holiness and light, and yet living victoriously in HOPE in the loving fear and holy fellowship of the God of LIGHT!

Paul sounds this note in our text this first Advent Sunday

II. A WORD FROM PAUL ABOUT DARKNESS AND LIGHT (TEXT)

A. THE STATEMENT OF FACT: THE NIGHT IS FAR SPENT, THE DAY IS AT HAND.

When Paul wrote these words it was still night, but he could see daylight coming. We could be cynical, and say, 'See, 2,000 years have gone by and it is still night. Paul was mistaken.' But for Paul, and the generation of Christians he served, there was already an abundant dawning. They were people of the morning. And every generation of Christians since has had the opportunity to be children of light.

B. THE CALL TO ARMS: TO BELONG TO THE CHILDREN OF THE MORNING!

Paul says "Put off the works of darkness, put on the armor of light." At the very least, this is a call to wake up, to 'get out of bed!' This is no time to be 'sleeping in,' when worlds are being changed, transformed. But for most who hear this message, it is a call for people who would be people of faith to stop living by fears and un faith like people who don't know God!

'Putting on the armor of light' might be amplified in rereading Ephesians 6:13 18: "Put on the whole armor of God..." And in I Thessalonians Paul speaks of "... the helmet of the HOPE OF SALVATION!" We are at war with darkness!

C. [RECURRING THEME]

WE SEE THESE PASSAGES AS BEAUTIFUL POETRY signifying the coming of Jesus Christ into a benighted world. We think of how it must have been to be in the darkness before Christ came. We wonder if we would have had the faith to look to the east for the streaks of dawn.

But this is MORE than beautiful poetry. It is talking about world conditions and personal situations very similar to the world in which we live, and the situation in which you find yourself this very day!

Can we grasp what the "Evangelist Isaiah" is saying about seeing a great light? Can we understand what Paul says in our text: "The night is far spent, the day is at hand!"?

"Yes this means that Jesus Christ is going to return SOME DAY. That is what we have been taught. That is what we believe. That is what we are supposed to say!" But the facts are: We are not really very much creatures of HOPE!

Perhaps MOST Christians are in a "SURVIVAL MIND SET" rather than being filled with HOPE about the DAWNING! We are not too excited about Christ's coming again and we are not even sure WHY we are supposed to be excited about it! But Jesus Christ is Lord! Holiness shall conquer!

If we are faithful, Jesus will come again. If we are NOT faithful, we can be certain, Jesus will come again!

Whether or not we are people of hope, Christ's kingdom will come! We do not control the movements of the sun and the moon and the stars. Those movements will happen inexorably. But even more unstoppable are the movements of the Son of God! We do not CONTROL the movements of light, BUT WE CAN, BY GOD'S GRACE, BE PEOPLE OF HOPE! We can hear what the Holy Spirit would tell us about hope:

[[Is it right to make the Gospel

message "fit" the times? (In the 18th century John Wesley did not spend too much time moaning and crying about how wicked his age was he preached instead that

God LOVED the common and the uncommon, the rich and the poor. He told people they could be saved and they could know it.) Like John Wesley, I don't propose we spend too much time with negatives, crying what's wrong with our times. We are in charge of the Church and we each have a job to do. We have the gifts necessary to carry out our jobs faithfully.

I don't have any special revelation that a new Wesleyan Revival is on the way, and the world may end in chaos before we know it. But I do have revelation that we are called to be faithful where we are.

The results are not for us to determine.]]

(text:) The night is far spent, the day is at hand; let us therefore put off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light."

And a few paragraphs later, Paul prays (15:13) "(May) the God of HOPE fill you with all JOY and PEACE in believing, that you may abound in HOPE by the power of the Holy Spirit!" God wants us to abound in HOPE! And we may! HOW?

(How to be people of hope:)

1. Center your life around the will of God. Personalize the promises. You can be all that God wants you to be!
2. Seek ways to share hope with those who look on the dark side. One way to witness is to think of faith and non faith as light and darkness; people NEED light. Believe that Jesus came that He comes! and believe that He is coming again!
3. LIVE TO THE LEVEL OF JOY! (Rom. 14:17 The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost!) And most of settle for the first, or the first and the second.

But JOY is a by product of living that is GOING SOMEWHERE! Joy is the privilege of every believer! Don't "settle!" Delight in the Lord.

We can make a difference in this dark age in which we live! We can, by God's grace, be people of HOPE! LET'S BE AWAKE FOR THE SUNRISE!

#192 Lo! He Comes, with Clouds Descending

The Venture

January 24, 1999

1 Corinthians 1: 10-18

Psalm 27

"Follow Me, and I will make you . . ." Matthew 4:19

It was a time of change and crisis in Andrew's life, and probably in Peter's and James' and John's as well. Andrew, we know, had been a follower, a disciple, of John the Baptist. Now John was in prison, and the One John had said was the Anointed One was an Unknown Quantity.

Crisis times are opportunity times. But change is threatening. Change can be exciting, it is almost always challenging. But for certain, perhaps in our time as never before, changes are swift, and change is inevitable.

Sometimes I think I'm tempted to sympathize with the Mugwump, the legendary bird that always flew backward so it could see where it had been. But even when we bravely try to face the future, and peer ever so hard into the fog, we really can not tell what even tomorrow may bring. Except that there will be change.

We can wring our hands and wish for the good old days. (Which, by the way, weren't all that much fun then. I know. I was there.) We can hold on for dear life to what we think we know, and rail against anything we don't understand. We would have lots of company across the years:

A university professor, who was evidently in synch with the latest wave of academic sophistication just about at the dawn of the 17th century is said to have said to Galileo, who was proposing a different place in the cosmos for the earth than plunk in the center: "You have made me see this business so plainly and sensibly that, did not the text of Aristotle assert the contrary I should be constrained to confess your opinion to be true."

In 1825 the March issue of The Quarterly Review, in England, had this calculated statement: "What can be more palpably absurd than the prospect held out of locomotives traveling twice as fast as stagecoaches?"

An American explorer, Lt. Joseph Christmas Ives, in the middle of the last century, 1857, sailed up the Colorado River to a place near what is now Las Vegas, and wrote in his diary: "Ours was the first and will doubtless be the last party of whites to visit this profitless locale."

At the turn of this century a United Brethren Bishop (who, by the way, was just about my age now!), named Milton Wright, had this to say at the suggestion that one day humans would be able to fly: "Blasphemy! Utter blasphemy! God intends only his angels to fly."

Just a few years later airplanes were flying, but one of the great military men of the western world, Marshall Ferdinand Foch of France, said, "Airplanes are interesting toys, but they have no military value."

(It is probably overkill, but interesting, a couple more of these bold predictions of the future:)

In December 1941, four days before Pearl Harbor on December 7, Frank Knox, the Secretary of the Navy said, on December 4 of that year: "Whatever happens the U. S. Navy is not going to be caught napping."

In 1958 the publication Business Week said: "With over 50 foreign cars already on sale here, the Japanese auto industry isn't likely to carve out a big slice of the U. S. market."

Crisis and change are inevitable. We can face the future with fear, or with human wisdom and optimism– OR we can seek to find a center we can trust. Like Andrew and Peter and James and John, we can bet our lives that following Jesus will be the wisest thing we can do. It has been a long time since Jesus called these men. We think they were really fortunate to hear Jesus in the flesh. And we wonder if sometimes when preachers talk about God coming by and calling us, and use these

scriptures, they are just using "call" as a figure of speech. I have a couple questions, actually three:

1. Does God still call people like He did Peter, Andrew, James and John? Is it just as personal, just as real?
2. How would God get your attention if He wanted to speak to you?
3. How can we respond to a call from God in 1999?

To answer #1: (Does God still call individual people?]

- a. My answer, in fact my 'message' is "YES!" God calling people personally, by name, in love, is a basic theme that runs through the whole of scripture. This story is true, it happened; but this story is also an example, a paradigm of how Jesus calls you and me. From Adam in the Garden, to Noah, and Abraham, and Jeremiah and Samuel, to the stories of the New Testament God's word is: DARE TO LEAVE WHATEVER WOULD HINDER YOU, AND COME WITH ME: I WILL GIVE YOU REAL LIFE!" In one way or another the Holy Spirit repeats the Savior's call and makes it personal: "Leave the prison of your self-made gods— come away from a Scripture that YOU edit and cut and pick and choose and stand in judgment over— leave the bondage of "what so-called sophisticates might think," AND STEP OUT ON A JOURNEY OF FAITH WITH ME! My official "answer" is YES!
- b. My personal testimony is YES!: I know you would expect an evangelical Christian minister to answer in the affirmative. I am certain, convinced, sure, that God spoke to me when I was living selfishly and out of fellowship with Him. He spoke to me by both love and fear; by what I might call "Behold the goodness and the severity of God"(Romans 11:22)

To answer #2 [How would God get your attention if He wanted to speak to you?]

- a. To hear God speak we might just have to be listening! God can't teach us anything if we already know it all!

Wes Tracy wrote these words in the Herald a few years ago:

"Some who take the name of Christ seem owned by their ambitions, chained to a success formula, enslaved by the hunger for prestige— diseases they have caught from our sinful culture... Aren't you tired of trying to be a classy

sophisticate who knows all about things timely— progressive education, career enhancement, political correctness, next season's fashions, and the done thing? . . . "

- b. To hear God speak there must be faith; some measure of trust. The One who is speaking is all-important. We aren't simply buying into a plan or a theology. We aren't waiting until we know all the answers before we follow. When we are convinced: this is God! then we must make a decision.

In every purely human decision we consider very carefully all the factors and then we decide which way to go. And that is only common sense. But when it comes to the deep satisfaction of the heart, and we hear God begin speaking, we have to choose— make a decision— on whether or not Jesus will be at the very center of our lives.

These fisher men did not know, certainly, where that decision to leave their boats and follow Jesus would take them. Something inside them convinced them Jesus was no ordinary preacher. They trusted HIM!

The "common sense" thing would seem to be to say, "God— let me see what You have in mind, then I'll say yes or no—" And that certainly works for everything and everyone except God. But Romans 12: 1,2 says "Present yourselves to God for His service and then He will let you know what is his good and acceptable and perfect will!" So to really hear God speak is a matter of trust!

- 3. To hear God speak we may well have to go against the current of what is accepted as Christian by many evangelicals. We have to choose to take SELF off the throne, and seek God's face for Himself alone!

Spirituality is MORE than self-fulfillment. God's way is what we are made for— but it is a way of spiritual discipline that does not have happiness or deliverance or becoming fully human as its final goal— though these may well be by-products. Spiritual fulfillment begins when we realize GOD ALMIGHTY WANTS US TO COME AND WALK WITH HIM ON A JOURNEY WHERE ONLY HE KNOWS THE WAY!

Responding to #3 [How can we respond to a call from God in 1999?]

WE HAVE TO CHOOSE WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT IN OUR LIVES. I BELIEVE GOD CAN AND WILL LEAD 'STEP-BY-STEP' THOSE WHO WANT TO BE LED.

A few years ago one morning I opened my Bible to read and get ready to pray. The passage was I Kings 3, and I got as far as verse five (5) where God is speaking to the newly crowned Solomon. He, God, tells Solomon "Ask for whatever you want me to give you."

I stopped. I thought. Honestly, now, what one thing would I ask of God if I knew for certain that He would grant me that one thing, and I did not know if He would grant me anything else. What one thing is most important to me?

First I thought "You, Lord, You tell me! You decide for me!" That sounds very pious, but somehow it did not let me off the hook. I felt prodded. No— what really is the most important thing?

I was pleased that I didn't think about big bucks, or a palatial retirement home or material things— at least not "up front," but only after a long reflection— reflection that these were "way down the list."

I confess I did think of things like not ever wanting to come down to old age and be a burden to myself and others. I thought of what a pleasure it would be to be able to write and speak and teach for years to come.

Do you know what I finally decided was most important? What would YOU say?

Conclusion

WHAT DID FOLLOWING JESUS "DO" FOR ANDREW, PETER, JAMES AND JOHN?

It certainly didn't make them rich. I suppose they are famous now, but they never knew it. But they have made thousands and even millions rich as a result of their decision to go where Jesus led them.

They didn't get to by-pass hard places and pain and even death. But the fact is whether or not you follow Jesus, whether or not you are a Christian, life has hard

places and pain and death. And Christians are never alone in their hard places, although at times they forget and feel alone.

But they did find great joy. Peter could write years later, "Even when tribulations come, children, count it all joy!" They did find the love and fellowship of Christ and his church. John as an old man wrote, "My little children, love one another!" And they did meet the massive changes of their generations without being swept away. Their lives were resilient. Change does not need to intimidate and destroy us.

Bishop Milton Wright (,the man I spoke about at the turn of the last century who said flying would be "blasphemy" for humans,) had two sons. Their names were Wilbur and Orville. (Last spring Helen and I drove around Kitty Hawk and saw the big dunes where these two men on December 17, 1903, became the first humans to fly with a powered plane.) Some years later, in 1910, Orville took his dad, Bishop Wright for his first ride in an airplane, back in Ohio. The old man, at 81 years of age, could be heard shouting above the roar of the engines: " Higher Orville, higher!"

Change is exciting. Change can be threatening. Change is one thing we cannot avoid. All too often we can't easily tell which way to go. But it is possible to hear Jesus, and respond to Him. In our personal lives, in our families, in our church life, we can listen and pray and obey and follow Jesus step-by-step. We can help heal hurts we know about. We can be gentle in spirit and try to reflect the love of Jesus. On this Sunday when many churches are emphasizing the epistle lesson that speaks about unity we can pray to God for a love for all who call Jesus Lord in a depth we haven't known before, perhaps.

That epistle lesson says that if we follow Jesus and proclaim His gospel it will be foolishness to a lot of people, but the promise is that the Gospel will be the very power of God at work through us if we can dare to say no to our fears, and SAY YES! To the One who is calling us. To be very honest with you, some of the changes that loom out in front of me seem staggering in their proportions. I am tempted to be as negative as that "old" (68-year-old) bishop who said "Man will never fly!!" Somehow I believe as we follow God our spirits will soar with something like the old bishop's words: "Higher, Orville, higher!"

Prayer: Thank you, Father, that You still call us by your Spirit, to follow your Son.
Father, make us what Jesus calls us to be; make us reflectors of Your love in Christ.
Help us to find the blessing of a closer walk with you.

Hymn: #541 *JESUS CALLS US*

The Simple Walk

January 31, 1999

Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:1-12, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Introduction: This statement by the Prophet Micah, in the Old Testament, is one of the most concise summaries of what it means to be a genuine person of faith in all the scriptures: (Micah 6:8) He has shown you, O mortal, what is right; and what does God require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

The background of this summary statement is almost like a courtroom trial scene. God is making accusations against his people, Israel, who through selfishness and cruelty are in danger of his judgment. Most have forgotten him altogether. And even though there is the promise of Messiah, God's people are called to repent and turn to him.

In the verses just preceding the text (vv 6 - 7) Israel asks: With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before the High God? Shall I make spectacular sacrifices? Shall I pour out libations of rivers of oil? Shall I sacrifice my first born son for the sins of my body? And the answer, a resounding "No!" comes in the text: (reprieve)

I. A SIMPLE OFFER OF GRACE

Invitation to walk with God

- A. God alone can show us what is good. It is easy to overlook the premise of the statement of grace: God is the only one who can (ultimately) determine good and evil. Basic to a right relationship with God is accepting that GOD IS GOD!
- B. Here is a 'trinity of righteousness.' DO justice: doing flows out of who and what we are. LOVE mercy: LOVE speaks of "WHY" we do what we do. Ultimately, we do what we LOVE to do! Most important, in God's eyes, are our MOTIVES! Love mercy! WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD! This is both the GOAL, and the MEANS OF ATTAINTING

THE GOAL! As we "agree with God" is is honor-bound to show us "what is good!" (Amos 3:3 "Can two walk together unless they are agreed?")

- C. Being a Christian is not for the casual or foolish. It is a simple thing, in theory, to 'walk with God.' In practice, it takes every bit of loyalty and faith we have!

[R. C. Sproul likes to tell of a conversation between a minister-theologian and a scientist-astronomer. The star-gazer said, "When it comes to religion we don't need all this study- these big words, Faith and salvation are simply "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." And the pastor came right back: "I think I see what you mean about technical terms and study: I don't understand "expanding universe" and "novae" and "black holes" and the like. Such terms are unnecessary; astronomy is simply, "Twinkle, twinkle, little star . . ."]

It is a challenge to walk with God. Is it realistic to say we can?

II. JESUS SPELLS OUT WHAT WALKING HUMBLY WITH GOD MEANS.

Here in the Sermon on the Mount, particularly in the Beatitudes, Jesus is KEY-NOTING what amounts to A COUNTER-CULTURE. Blessed are the poor in spirit! What? Blessed are they that mourn! Are you serious? Blessed are the meek! All this on Super Bowl Sunday!

1. CHRIST'S KINGDOM DOESN'T MAKE "NATURAL" SENSE! THE PERCEPTION OF FALLEN MANKIND IS: I AM THE CENTER. It makes sense to put others down, to compete, to climb over, to say: "We're Number ONE!" We are BORN into the CENTER of our own little universe. Little children, as wonderful as they are, have a very small world that slowly expands but always has "EGO" at the center!
2. THE CENTRAL THEME OF CHRIST'S KINGDOM IS: GOD IS GOD THE TRUTH THAT DAWNS IN A BELIEVER'S HEART IS: I AM NOT GOD! I am NOT at the center! I'm not SUPPOSED to be at the center! Apart from grace I have NOTHING! In the LOSSES I have experienced I both know my need of God, and realize HE IS WITH ME!

These "be-attitudes DON'T make sense in our world; but to be BORN AGAIN is to enter into the REAL WORLD, where God is at the CENTER. We come to believe spiritual reality by the ministry of the Holy Spirit but we still see things, humanly,

from our own eyes, from within our own frame of reference. The secret to walking humbly with our God is to keep looking to Jesus.

III. JESUS TAUGHT ON ONE MOUNT WHAT HE PROVED ON ANOTHER

A. IN THE CROSS OF CHRIST, GOD HAS REVEALED HIS LOVE TO US

Yes, it is mystery, in that we can not know 'why' or 'how' God should love us so much.

The cross unlocks the treasure chest of grace. Paul writes: I Corinthians 1: 18 - 31 18 For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . . 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. 26 For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; 27 but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

[Roman/cross = weakness] Pilate thought he could use the cross to prove how Roman power was greater than anything else; might makes right.

[Jewish/cross = non-sense] The enemies of Jesus thought that the cross would prove the claims of the Galilean Messiah were silly: that God loved the world and that love is stronger than legalism and hatred.

B. IN TAKING UP THE CROSS TO FOLLOW JESUS WE DISCOVER THE 'SIMPLE' MEANING OF MICAH'S SUCCINCT STATEMENT: (DO justice, LOVE mercy, WALK

HUMBLY WITH GOD!

The DYNAMIC of THE CROSS-WALK! Unless we are willing to walk with God the best human intentions are actually ARROGANCE! Saying/thinking that WE know already what the Bible means we reflect that we have eaten from the Tree of knowledge of Good and Evil, but NOT from the Tree of Life!

CONCLUSION:

The transcript from a "60 Minutes" TV show a two weeks ago this evening began with words something like this:

"Except for her passionate love of South Africa, AMY BIEHL was a typical Southern California kid, a straight A student and a college diving champion who would end her diatribes against apartheid with the words 'Free Mandela!' So it was not surprising that when she won a Fulbright scholarship, she opted to go to South Africa and immerse herself in the country's culture and politics.

But her young life ended abruptly in 1994 when she was stoned and stabbed to death by a mob of angry, young, black militants. She was killed by the very people whose cause she was fighting for. But instead of being angry with her murderers, her parents did something so atypical that it boggles the mind. The Biehls dealt with their grief by doing what they believe their daughter would have wanted: understand the fury that drove the mob, forgive the killers, and become, in effect, the patron saints of the village that her very killers came from.

Amy's parents, Linda and Peter Biehl, decided they had to try and understand their daughter's commitment to the people for whom she had given her. They read her diaries, in which she wrote about her admiration for those who were suffering under apartheid. The Biehls and their three other children decided that they had to go to South Africa. Linda attended the trial of Amy's killers. They visited the squatter camps of Guguletu, the black township where Amy's killers had grown up. They came to understand how those squalid conditions could have led them to violence. Linda went into the home of one of the murderers and met with his mother. She says that after hugging her, "I walked out of that home. There was a rainbow in the sky. My

heart was very light. I felt I had come to terms. And if that is forgiveness, I felt it. And I felt you know, I felt I feel at peace with myself. So to me, that's forgiveness."

When asked about the Biehl's forgiveness, Rhoda Khadalie, one of Amy's professors in South Africa and a close friend said "It is a gift from God that they can forgive the killers of their daughter, meet with the mother, go into the homes of the killers and understand who they are and where they come from." Not only do they understand, they spend much of their time in Guguletu, passing the very spot where their daughter was killed. What they've done to carry on for her is to establish the non profit Amy Biehl Foundation. With \$1/2 million in grants, donations and their own money, they sponsor 15 programs, including welding classes and after school programs which involve thousands of young people, all in the very community where their daughter was killed. What the Biehls are doing is widely known in South Africa, and like Archbishop Desmond Tutu, everyone marvels at it. "The [Biehl's have] turned it all upside down,"

Tutu said. "It is the victims, in the depth of their own agony and pain, who are saying, 'The community which produced these murderers, we want to help that community be transfigured.'"

The twelve year old sister of one of the murderers is enrolled in the after school program. And when her brother and the other two murderers applied for amnesty after serving four years in jail, Peter and Linda did not object, even though they could have blocked the release. There are more incredible details from their efforts in South Africa, but I think you get the point.

This is where walking with God took one family. This is the message of the beatitudes. Do the beatitudes tell us there is a BLESSEDNESS that seeks us out when we are empty? Do they say that JOY FROM GOD can be ours when we are at the end of our own hoarded resources?

The world will be watching a football game today. Millions will be spent for seconds of commercial time. But next year I, for one, will have a hard time remembering who won, and who played whom. The world's triumphs come and they go.

The Simple Walk

But God's people know a JOY and BLESSEDNESS that comes from being in the company of Jesus. The "blessedness" is not just for the vague and distant future. That humble walk with God can begin here in the reality of life as it really is. It is a companionship that will never, ever end.

But remember: Not great deeds of heroism: Just THE CHOICE TO WALK WITH GOD! To AGREE with Him! To let HIM show us what is GOOD! (Amos 3:3) "Can two walk together except they be agreed?"

An unbroken relationship that goes beyond DEATH into ETERNITY (Enoch like) for us ALL!

#552 O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee

The Least and the Greatest

February 3, 1999

Matthew 5 ... "salt and light"

Comparing "greatness" or "pettiness" in people somehow doesn't seem a very polite thing to do. Often we politely avoid comparisons, of who is great and who is least, at least among people we know personally. Jesus invites such comparisons, or at least advertises the fact that there will be greater and lesser in His kingdom.

When we do think of the greats, we measure with a different yardstick from Jesus. How about Larry Bird? Do I like Larry Bird? Does Helen like Larry? But that isn't fair.

I. SALT AND LIGHT RE DEFINES, RE CLASSIFIES ORDERS OF IMPORTANCE

- A. We tend to classify by (1) notoriety and fame; (2) intelligence; it is better to live by one's brain than by one's hands, no matter how skillful those hands may be; (3) material success— money made from almost any source; and (4) the unfocused, the people who live from paycheck to paycheck which takes in most of the population.

ILLUSTRATION: Cornelius Vanderbilt built a house on the east bank of the Hudson. In the village of Hyde Park are actually two mansions. One is the Roosevelt mansion, and it was a summer home and white house for FDR. The other is the Vanderbilt mansion, of truly palatial proportions, of marble and granite one of several such homes Cornelius Vanderbilt had scattered around the country and world. (One is in Newport)

Vanderbilt is hailed (by plaques there in the Hyde Park mansion) as something of a great hero because he helped fund the Hyde Park fire fighters association. I may be cynical, but it seemed like so called "conscience money" to me because his BED was probably as expensive as the entire Fire Department his bedroom RUG weighed in at 2,000 pounds.

- B. God has entirely different criteria for gaging individual worth. His scale is rated entirely on RELATIONSHIPS.

1. First, there is a Master Relationship, which divides the entire population of the world. Either we are seeking after God, or we are not. Unless you are BORN AGAIN you cannot (even) SEE the kingdom of heaven!
2. Then, there is an Integration of that Master Relationship through society. You are the SALT of the earth! You are the LIGHT of the world! The people who grasp this will be GREAT; the people who don't will be LEAST!
3. But here is the "zinger!" for Christians for us "society" can never simply be that nameless, faceless "population" "out there, somewhere." We can never discharge our duties by joining some ideology or "ism" and contributing our money. The relationship by which God judges us is intensely personal. We must LOVE GOD, and then we must SEEK TO PROVIDE A CLIMATE IN WHICH OTHERS CAN KNOW HIM, TOO.

II. A KINGDOM WHERE POOR BECOME KINGS, AND WHERE KINGS ARE SERVANTS

- A. Paul doesn't sound flattering when he describes the fact (in I Corinthians 2) that not many of them were wise, or mighty, or noble after the flesh but Paul goes on to say (2:27) God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise and the weak things to shame the things that are mighty.

Later in that same letter (6:9 11) Paul gives an unsavory list of the unrighteous that do not inherit the kingdom fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, perverts, homosexuals, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, and swindlers; but then these amazing words: AND SUCH WERE SOME OF YOU! But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God.

- B. Saved, made kings but kings like our Master, who served.

We never get "too important" to do the "one on one" thing.

ILLUSTRATION: Cliff Barrows You have all seen Cliff Barrows at one time or another across the years; directing a choir numbering in the thousands, leading a song at a Billy Graham rally, or doing a "commercial" on a Billy Graham TV program. In that

parlor right across the hall I had a conversation with Cliff Barrows and George Beverly Shea. You might never guess what the conversation was about. Cliff Barrows talked about his wife, and about their mutual concern for new neighbors and how they were trying to introduce them to Jesus. Not to impress me but as naturally as conversation could be. C. Barrows was living out on the personal, one to one level the kind of life that he was advocating to the millions.

Conclusion

We are kings and priests! We can change society! But IF we do— or should I confidently say "WHEN" we do it will not be because of values and powers the world understands.

We never dare to think that because we are saved, and because Christ loves and lives in us that WE, now are the SOURCE of truth and light and love and power. We DRAW from Christ; and it is as we obey Him and carry out our SALT and LIGHT MISSION that the power is manifest:

ILLUSTRATION: paraphrased Wangerin: "You actors must remember that you do not possess the truth, but that you are communicators of the truth. We tend to worship the "stars" when real actors make people think about the character, the truth they portray."

SALT AND LIGHT RE-DEFINES CLASSES OF IMPORTANCE

THE NEW ORDER OF IMPORTANCE ACCORDING TO CHRIST

NOW ARE GRAINS OF SALT AND RAYS OF LIGHT

A meeting of the plant services people last Monday left me contemplating a practical meaning of what it means to be "salt" and "light." They are true partners in the enterprise of whatever Eastern Nazarene College is doing, and have a part in shaping the lives of young people in significant ways.

Prayer: [Into Invitation to, and Sacrament of, Communion]

The Life-Changing Teacher

February 7, 1999

Matthew 5 *You are the salt of the earth . . . I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

BEGINNING

Do you remember an outstanding teacher you once had, maybe a long time ago; maybe for you current students just recently? One that stands out in your memory. If you're like me, you've had so many teachers that you've forgotten many of them. Their faces are sort of a blur. But then along the way a few faces stand out. Some good memories. Some not so good. But maybe one or two teachers that really had an influence on your life. Maybe one even helped with a decision in choosing a major or even a career.

As you think back, was that outstanding teacher one that made no demands on you? It seems strange, maybe, but often we remember a teacher who was anything but a pushover. But at the same time they were demanding, they also made us think what they were teaching was for us. They demanded because they thought we could do what they were teaching. There is a powerful motivation in a good teacher's expectations.

[[[I read a story some time ago about a tutor hired by a school system to take lessons to students who had been out with health problems for a period of time. One day the tutor's assignment took him to a hospital, and before he understood what was happening he had been ushered into a sterile room where a very badly burned boy was fighting for his life day by day.

The tutor didn't know how to back our gracefully, so he told the boy he was there to help him with his adjectives and adverbs in English. He went

over some material as briefly as he could and excused himself. The boy asked if he was coming back and the tutor mumbled something about being back in a couple of days.

When the tutor came back in two days he was met by a nurse that said, "What did you do in your lesson the other day?" The teacher was aghast. He hadn't meant to be any kind of burden. But the nurse said, "No, it isn't what you think. The boy has taken a turn for the better. He is fighting back. It looks like he will make it."

When the facts were known they found out the boy had reasoned to himself, "It isn't likely they'd send a teacher to drill me on verbs and adverbs and adjectives if I was going to die!" So he started fighting to get better.]]]

Jesus wouldn't teach such a lesson to poor sinful mortals unless He thought there was reason to believe grace could help them receive the lesson and respond. The very lesson brings hope!

Jesus was certainly an outstanding teacher! Here in the greatest lesson ever recorded by the greatest Teacher who ever lived, Jesus is combining a challenge with confidence: You will have to do better– but I know you can do it!

I. "YOU MUST DO BETTER!"

JESUS CAME RAISING EXPECTATIONS WHILE AT THE SAME TIME HE WAS OPENING WIDE HIS KINGDOM

He said, "Come to me ALL who labor!" He said, "WHOSOEVER believes on God's only begotten Son will be saved!" He said, "I have come to seek and to save that which is lost!"

But then he called his disciples around him and told them, "Unless your righteousness goes beyond the righteousness of the so-called 'professionally righteous people,' you can't really enter the righteous kingdom!"

Jesus isn't into teaching lessons which are non-sense. He is not wasting his time demanding that which can never be understood or obeyed. But how in the world could his disciples beat the Pharisees at their own game? They were "pros" at keeping the letter of the law. Does this lesson— do Jesus demands even apply to us today? "Unless you do better in righteousness than the professional law-keepers you can't even get into the kingdom!" What does this mean?

II. "BETTER THAN WHAT?"

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE SCRIBE AND PHARISEES

The people Jesus was talking about, could be blameless at keeping the letter of the law. They were strict tithers. They kept a rigid Sabbath. They prayed long and loud and often. Outwardly it was hard to see where they broke any of the Ten Commandments

We do not dare to simply say the Ten Commandments have been superseded. Jesus made it plain that is not what he was doing. We do not dare to take the Law lightly. Jesus says plainly here: "Whoever breaks one of these commandments and teaches others to break them is to be called least in the kingdom of heaven." What Jesus was concerned about was MOTIVATION. He was concerned about what goes on INSIDE a person's heart. In Matthew 23, if you want to take time to read it later, Jesus shows why our righteousness has to go beyond outward righteousness. These people were SELF-righteous. They were concerned with APPEARANCE. They were like WHITE-WASHED TOMBS . . . beautiful little houses full of corruption and death on the inside.

III. "YOU CAN TRUST ME!"

'BUT I SAY UNTO YOU . . .' THE 'BETTER WAY' OUR TEACHER HAS SHOWN TO US

If the world might want to build a righteous man or woman it would begin with what can be seen. It would say I had better have this righteous person join a church. It probably would say I had better have my righteous person begin doing good works,

The Life-Changing Teacher

and the more public the better. It would carefully build an image built on things to do, and even more on things NOT to do.

But Jesus begins building a righteous man or woman starting with the inside. Not that the outside is not important. But when the inside is right the outside soon begins to take care of itself.

Jesus said he did not come to do away with the law, but to complete it, or fulfill it. So he had the authority to say, "The law says thus and so . . . but I say THIS!" And every time it was going "inside." Jesus is installing a new center, a new CORE for living, based on God's law written within.

The old law rightly says, "Don't kill." Jesus says, "Don't HATE!" But Teacher, that's a high standard! "Don't BE immoral!" "Don't even THINK immorally!" Teacher, that's too high!!

But then this demanding, loving Teacher somehow says, "You can do it!"

YOU CAN TRUST ME!

It took a while for this lesson to unfold.

There were a few, more than a few glitches along the way.

YOU CAN TRUST ME!

Jesus not only TOLD them. Jesus SHOWED them.

When he died their faith wavered! But he rose again, and came and expounded the scriptures. He told them to pray for the promised Holy Spirit.

Jesus promised them that the same empowering Holy Spirit that had descended on Him like a dove when he was baptized and began his ministry would be available to every one of them personally, just for the asking.

YOU CAN TRUST ME!

And Jesus told them: I'm counting on you to get this lesson! YOU are the salt of the earth! You're the only way I have to preserve and flavor and bring healing to this

world! YOU are the LIGHT of the world! I AM the light of the world! But you are going to bring ME, your lives are going to reach wherever there is darkness!

CLOSING

[If you have heard on TV the famous Christmas Eve choir from Kings College, Cambridge, then you know that the first notes are sung by a soloist. What you may not know is that the sopranos do not know whom it is until the conductor points at one. Whichever singer is directed to begin singing does not think, "I should be the soloist this evening!" but rather she knows, "I AM the soloist! If I don't start there is not Christmas program!" Instantly— the call comes—"You're IT!"]

That is what the Master Teacher is saying to you and me right now. He is saying, "I've forgiven your sins. I have opened the doors of the kingdom, You're IN! But unless you take my Gift of the Holy Spirit, and do better than just pretend or put on a show you're not going to make it in the kingdom!" He is demanding! But he is also loving! He believes in you and me!

That is what the Master Teacher is saying to us, here, now! Jesus is demanding, challenging— he won't let us just 'get by.' Jesus did not say, "You WILL BE the salt of the earth, WHEN . . . When we have a new center, a new heart, a genuine walk with God, the future is NOW!

Prayer

Hymn

With Jesus on the Mountain

February 14, 1999

(cf. February 18, 1996 am)

Matthew 17:1-9 - The Transfiguration

"This is my Son ...listen to him!"

Mountains As Points Of Reference

One Sunday afternoon, a long time ago, instead of taking the usual Nazarene nap, I took my four sons on a hike up Mount Beacon above the majestic Hudson River in Beacon, New York. We lived in Poughkeepsie where I was pastor at Vassar Road Church. It was sultry and hot, and the thought of climbing in shady, cooler woods sounded like fun.

It was a twenty minute drive to a place where we could leave the wagon as far up the mountain as it could go. Then it was just over an hour's walk to the top where you could look up and down the river for miles.

On the way up the trail we heard the sound of a brook off to one side, and followed the sound and found a beautiful place where the water was falling through a U shaped place in a big rock into a shallow pool like a basin underneath it. It was hot, and the water was very cool.

The four boys stripped down to their shorts and into the water they went. One of them would sit in the cleft in the rock and dam up the water it was that narrow until it spilled over his shoulders– then he'd jump into the basin below with the wave gushing after him.

We stayed at that pool half an hour or less that hot Sunday afternoon and that was more than thirty years ago. I drove back to Vassar Road and preached and led the evening service. I haven't a clue as to what I preached it has been long forgotten. But every one of those four boys, now grown men with families of their own,

remembers that day we climbed Mount Beacon. And somehow it has a good place in our family history. It was one of those defining moments that help give life direction.

We've all had those times, those defining moments, that we remember as we look back across the landscape of our lives. (R.C. Sproul had a teacher who put his paper on the board and told him, "You can write!") We look back to those mountains, literal or figurative, that show us where we've been, and to some extent, who we are and where we're going.

The Transfiguration As A Point Of Reference

Perhaps the day the story in our Gospel lesson began started out like just any other day for the disciples. But it was going to turn out to be a day they would never, ever forget.

Jesus called to Peter, James, and John. He often went apart to pray, and a prayer time was all they really were expecting. Up and up the mountain trail they went, until they reached the top. And there they stopped. Luke's Gospel says that Jesus began to pray, and he also tells us that the three disciples became sleepy.

Peter, James and John were not expecting what came next. While they watched in awe something wonderful beyond description began to happen. The kindly face of the Galilean carpenter began to change in ways the evangelist has found difficult to describe. Later the three men tried to find words to express what they had seen: "Light streamed from his face, as bright as the sun. His clothes became whiter than white they shone with light."

These men knew Jesus well. They had been with him three years and had heard him speak, and heal, and raise the dead. They had even confessed their faith that He is the Son of God, the Messiah. But they were NOT prepared for this display of dazzling glory. They knew Jesus. But they also realized they hardly knew him at all!

(To be very honest, coming to know God is always like that! We CAN know Him! But no matter how well we think we know Him, God IS WHO HE IS! We do not define or comprehend except as He chooses to reveal. Our doctrines are good/necessary;

they try to explain the mysteries of faith: Jesus is very God and very man, the Son of God and the Son of Mary. The Father in heaven helps us to confess our faith with Peter, and say with conviction: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God!" But NOTHING is as convincing and satisfying and thoroughly frightening as a mountaintop glimpse of Christ's glory!)

As they watched, the three disciples next became aware that two other people were present, talking with Jesus in the cloud of light. In some mysterious and wonderful way, they knew that these two glorious figures were Moses and Elijah, the Lawgiver, and the greatest of Old Testament prophets.

Moses on a mountain many years before this Day of Transfiguration, Moses, this great giant of faith, this the meekest man who ever lived, had talked with God face to face, and had received the Ten Commandments, the holy Law of God by which all mankind is supposed to live, but especially the people of God.

Elijah on another mountain in the days of wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, this rugged prophet had prayed fire down from heaven, and had defeated the prophets of Baal, and had brought God's people back to Him.

Here incarnate as it were, were the Law and the Prophets in conversation with the Living Gospel, the Good News of Salvation. Here was a vision of the Law fulfilled, and of Truth triumphant, the whole Plan of Salvation, the whole Word of God represented in one glorious conversation.

Luke tells us something of what Moses and Elijah were discussing with their glorious Lord that mountaintop day. They were not talking about Mount Sinai, or Mount Carmel. They were talking about another mountain that had yet to be climbed. They were talking about the hill we call Calvary.

Peter, James and John may not have understood the full implication in the dazzling light of the moment, but they were dramatically seeing portrayed before their eyes

1. Jesus as fulfilling the Law (Moses), completing the truth of Torah; and
2. Jesus as Champion over evil (Elijah), making sinners right with God, completing the Plan of Salvation.

The disciples were uncomfortable. Don't ever think that when God is manifested in power it is a comfortable, easy time. This was gut wrenching, frightening to the limit! Peter began to 'prattle' a bit. "Lord, let's build succoth booths right here on top of the mountain! We'll build three one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for You!"

At that moment a majestic, thundering, authoritative voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to HIM!" The Father put things into perspective. The heart of faith is not Jesus AND Law, or Jesus AND Proclamation, or Jesus AND anything else. The heart of faith is Jesus. That is the message this mountain top experience carried home to Peter James and John. Then it was over. Just like that.

As soon as they came down the mountain actually before they got to the bottom they were back at nitty gritty work. As far as we know they never had another Transfiguration type opportunity. (Oh, yes, John saw the glorified Savior during his exile on Patmos you can read about it in the first chapter of the Revelation.) But these men never forgot what they saw on that mountain that day.

They needed it in just a few weeks when their Master was taken from them and mocked and beaten and killed on a Cross. It looked like defeat. It looked like weakness. (But) They had been to the mountain. They had seen the glory. They could believe when the Resurrection came.

They needed it after Jesus ascended to heaven, and their own crosses became heavy, and they were tempted to wonder if it was worth it. But they had seen a glimpse of the glory. They knew that their Master was Lord of Moses and Elijah who are very much alive. They had been on the mountain. They could trust that God would not waste their sacrifice.

James was killed by the sword early in the first wave of persecution. Had the vision been wasted on him? I don't think so. Peter led the church in Jerusalem, and then Antioch and Ephesus and Rome. The vision sustained him, and he passed it on to Luke. John the Beloved outlived all the other apostles. As long as he lived the

memory of that day of Transfiguration on a mountain in the north of Israel was a blessing and a hope.

We cannot live on mountain tops, or even live FOR that kind of experience. Don't forget, eight perfectly good apostles got word of this day second hand, just like you and I have. Ninety-five, maybe ninety-nine per cent of life is lived in the lower places of life between the mountain peaks. We will probably not be on the mountain top this very week. In fact you may be in a pretty deep, dark valley right now.

What we can do is live in confession of faith in our Master. If truly the faith has been granted us to believe that Jesus is the Christ we can say with Peter, six days BEFORE this glory time, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!"

What we can do if we have that faith is affirm from our hearts, "Jesus is LORD!" We can ask Him if we can follow Him around day after day. We can listen to Him pray. We can ask Him if we can come along when he cares for people who hurt. That is what we can do.

And sometime when we least expect it there will be those loving times those tender times when Jesus lets us know He's pleased with us. Not Transfigurations, maybe. But mountain experiences. Defining moments. Moments we never forget.

I can tell you on the authority of God's Word that God KNOWS when you're in the valleys. And I can tell you with confidence that God CARES right now! But I pray also that you will know He IS WITH YOU RIGHT NOW.

Let's pray:

O God, Father, Savior, Brother, Our very LIFE!

How we want to KNOW You!

Today is Valentine's Day, when the official subject of the day is "love." God, we want to tell You that we love YOU!

Maybe it is not answers to our questions that we need. Maybe we do not even know what questions are important. Maybe we really need to be silent before You.

With Jesus on the Mountain

We confess Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. We ask that we can walk with You—that you will walk with us. Somehow, help us to glimpse Your glory!

Fill us with your Spirit. Cleanse our hearts.

Hymn No. 66 *Thou Art Worthy*

No Short Cuts to Glory

February 21, 1999

Matthew 4

He had finally got his chance to make the Really Big Sale. He was going into the final interview on the biggest contract he had ever written. He was ushered into the office of the executive buyer. An assistant brought coffee and left. The atmosphere was cordial.

Then the assistant tapped on the door and re-entered the office and spoke briefly with the executive. She stood and said, "I apologize, but I have to tend to a matter. I'll just be a minute or two." She followed her assistant out of the room.

The sales representative looked around the beautifully appointed office. He saw her family pictures on her desk. Then he noticed she had evidently been studying what looked like a contract, a bid from a competitor. Leaning forward, he saw a column of figures, but it was obscured by a diet soda can.

What harm possibly could there be in reading her private information? After all, she had left it out in plain sight. But when he lifted the can it wasn't diet soda; it was 1,000 BBs that gushed out the bottomless can, and ran all over the desk and cascaded onto the carpet. His attempt to short cut the competition was exposed. Not every temptation is so obvious. Not every failure is so embarrassing. But every temptation is a challenge. Not even Jesus was spared the choosing.

I. Temptation Is An Enticement To Use A Short Cut To Reach A Desirable Goal.

You want a good grade. Good grades are desirable. They open doors. They bring scholarships. The easiest way to good grades is to let someone else do your work for you. But there is no real short cut to real education.

You want intimacy and the good feelings of love and security. No one has to tell you those are good things. The easiest way to those feelings is the pathway of least

resistance. But there are no short cuts to real friendship. There is never an excuse to USE people like things, no matter what the goal may be.

You want success and influence. Within the boundaries of genuine caring those could be very worthy goals. But in our world all too often personal goals are reached at whatever the cost. But there is no short cut to real integrity.

And cheating is always wrong. Adultery and fornication are always sin. Betrayal of confidence is always heartbreaking.

Whatever the reason, remember: there are no short cuts in finding and doing God's will. It is a wonderful thing to come to believe that in God's will we don't need short cuts!

II. Adam And Eve And Short Cuts

Adam and Eve, even in their innocence thought they might be able to take a short cut to God-likeness. They were tempted to believe that maybe God was holding out on them. Whatever good was coming, they wanted it NOW! A short cut. The Tempter said, "Did God really say that?" Then he pursued that seed of doubt with philosophical denial. "You won't really die! God has it wrong! You can't really trust Him. He wants a monopoly on Truth!"

But they did die! Their innocence was gone. They were dead in trespasses and sin. And they were expelled from a garden into a wilderness. Their short cut was a tragedy.

In the classic Pilgrim's Progress, Christian and his new companion Hopeful fell in with a smooth talking man named By-end, from the town of Fair-speech. To hear By-end talk the Christian journey required no effort at all. As his name suggests, he took the position that the end always justifies any short cut necessary, just so long as the rugged way of obedience could be avoided.

Just then Christian and Hopeful came alongside a beautiful meadow. There was a fence marking the pathway, but there was a stile over the fence, and they could see a path running parallel to the Way on the other side of the fence. After some

discussion they crossed over to take advantage of easier going on the other side of the fence.

But soon it became less simple. Darkness fell, and it became hard to see. They tried to make their way back to the crossing, but soon they had to stay the night under a tree in the open. Then they were captured by a wicked Giant Despair, and taken to a dungeon in the Doubting castle. A pleasant short cut turned out to be a near disaster.

We can never leave the clear known will of God for our lives without bringing on big trouble. The most innocent disobedience brings broken fellowship with God. And there is no such thing as a short cut to where God wants you to be. You can trust His timing.

III. Jesus In His Innocence, Was Exposed To Temptation.

Fresh from his public baptism, and with the blessing of the Father's endorsement ringing in his ears, and in the joy of the Spirit's anointing, Jesus was led into the wilderness to face the challenge to take a short cut. Haggard and drawn from fasting, he was confronted with evil, demonic, powerful, hostile suggestion. The evil enemy attacked every angle. Henri Nouwen summed up the three temptations: be relevant, be popular, be powerful.

Be relevant: you have to survive! 'Make these stones into bread. You're famished. This is the real world. A dead Messiah isn't going to do anyone any good.'

But Jesus' response in fact said, "No, I don't have to survive! I have to be true!"

It wasn't that Jesus wasn't hungry. It wasn't that he couldn't work a miracle later. He fed 5,000 people with a little boy's lunch. But Jesus was taking orders from no one but the Father, and especially was not about to take advice from the Evil One.

"Man does not live by bread alone," he said, "but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

Be popular: you need to communicate! 'Spiff up your act! What is this "repent stuff!?? Put on a show! Do miracles! Walk a high wire!'

But Jesus was never a performer. He never did things for the effect. It wasn't that he couldn't master the forces of nature. He walked on the sea. He calmed the storms. He raised the dead. And he died and rose again the third day.

"Don't try to put God on the spot!" was his reply.

Be powerful: you need to take charge! 'No one will see you out here in the desert as you compromise and kneel down to me. But then I'll lay off, and you can be the dictator of the world! No competition! A cross is a terrible way to go. You have to take charge of your life! Assert yourself!'

This was not a friendly debate. It was not a gentleman's duel of honor. Weak, exhausted, physically drained, Jesus was facing pure evil at its demonic worst.

Jesus, at his weakest, used the defense that is available to us all if we will just use it. (It is the 'key' that finally unlocked the dungeon of Doubting Castle, and let Christian and Hopeful out.) He did not reason with the Enemy. He reached into the Father's promises. He fled to the first Commandment. He claimed the protection that comes from utterly belonging.

He was God's Son! He affirmed his determination to worship Him only, and to live by the father's Word and way. Satan had to leave. And the angels came, there in the wilderness, and Jesus was refreshed. Then he resumed the step-by-step following of the Father's will that would take him to Calvary, to Olivet, and to Glory and Salvation for you and me. There would be no short cut.

Conclusion

Temptation Is an Enticement to Use a Short Cut to Reach a Desirable Goal

Temptation is NOT sin. But yielding to temptation IS sin. And sin never, never, never makes good on its promises. There are no short cuts to truly desirable goals.

A workman went to his big boss one day and said, "I'm tired. I think I'll take my retirement benefits and hang it up. It's been great working for you."

The big boss looked disappointed, and said, "I really hate to see you go. I was hoping you could do at least one more big job for me. Will you, just one more?"

Reluctantly the builder agreed to build a house for some important client of the big boss. It was a big house, a lot of work on a golf course, with a lot of detail. But the man's heart really wasn't in it. He threw the house together in record time, and cut corners on material and labor wherever he could. He saved the boss a lot of money, but it wasn't really his best work and he knew it.

Imagine how he felt when he turned the keys over to the big boss, and the boss gave them right back, and fished around in his briefcase and gave him the title and deed to the property on the golf course. "This is my gift for you!" he said. "Thanks for all your good work across the years!"

Then the builder wished he hadn't been in such a hurry. He wished he hadn't cut corners and taken short cuts just to get the job done.

Life is like that. Exactly like that. We become the product of our own integrity in following after God. Or lack of integrity. We become exiles from innocence when we try to take short cuts to being like God. Or, following our Savior, we use the promises and the commandments of God to resist the tempter's power, and we begin to share in Christ's righteousness.

This is the first Sunday in Lent. It is a good time to ask God for His help in deliberately drawing closer to Him. I don't know about you, but I don't want to try to get away with building a shoddy house. I know I'm going to have to live in what I build.

Prayer

#512 Take Time to be Holy

20-20 Blindness

With Jesus into the Light

February 28, 1999

March 17, 1996

John 9:1-41

Did you ever hear the old saying about college students:

Freshmen know not, and know that they know not;
Sophomores know not, and know not that they know not;
Juniors know, and know not that they know;
Seniors know, and know that they know?

I don't quite know what to say about that, except I'm not sure I ever met a "pure" freshman who knew that he/she didn't know and I'm not sure which I am more ashamed of that I still catch myself being like a sophomore, who doesn't know how much I don't know or even like a senior who is wise beyond all understanding.

The story today is about knowing; about knowing the most important things in the world. It is a story about the healing of physical blindness. Before the story is over we see there are worse things than not having physical sight. At the end of the story one big question is asked: "ARE WE BLIND?" That is a question we all might want to dare to ask Jesus. Because NO ONE IS QUITE AS BLIND AS THOSE WHO ARE SURE THEY CAN SEE CLEARLY.

[To the story: John 9:1 14]

You might not think it would be hard to imagine what it would be like never to have seen to be blind from birth. You could just shut your eyes, you might think. But of course you know that is not the same.

The man in this story got on in the world as best he could, using his other senses. Blindness was a severe handicap, but he made a living, such as it was. Then one day

the blind man met Jesus. He didn't know, really, who Jesus was. We are not told how much he had heard about Jesus. By what he told the authorities after he received his sight, the blind man didn't know very much about Him at all.

We have to wonder what in the world inspired such hope and faith in him that he would even listen to Jesus. Then when Jesus did what he did, and told the blind man to do what he was supposed to do this man simply went and did as he was told. [What Jesus did: made mud, sent the blind man off in his darkness to wash in the Pool of Siloam}]

I like to think that something warm happened inside the man when Jesus spoke to him. I like to think that grace began to work in him to begin the miracle of faith. That beginning faith might have been as small as simply saying "What do I have to lose!?" Or it may have been inspired by what he had heard of other miracles.

Whatever it was, this man did not deserve to be blind because he had sinned and he did not deserve to be made well because he was good. We know he was made to see because Jesus took compassion on him; not because he believed in Jesus as Messiah or savior or because he was especially religious or deserving. He simply obeyed, and a miracle took place: He could see!

We have to speculate a bit on what it must have been to experience sight for the first time. To live in a dark world of sounds and smells and jostling, and suddenly to see a donkey for the first time, or a pigeon, or the crowded streets of Jerusalem, or the Temple mount looming above the pool?

Did the blind man have to have help getting home? Did he have to shut his eyes so he could remember where he was?

Finally he got home and found that he was now quite a celebrity. If he lived now he would certainly make at least the local talk shows on the radio he might even make Good Morning Israel! on nationwide TV. People began to take notice. It isn't every day a person born blind can see with 20/20 vision by a miracle of God.

So now the people who know everything about everything who have a faith of rules and regulations that exist to maintain their traditions, rather than traditions that

nurture and maintain their faith these people said, "This is outside OUR control! This is too dangerous!" They moved in.

"Number one nobody does anything or goes anywhere on the Sabbath unless WE say so." [The healing had taken place on the Sabbath.] Of course there were ways to get around Sabbath rules but they were sure Jesus hadn't bothered to worry his head about that.

Number two this Jesus was the object of grave concern because he had been teaching SPIRITUAL worship that God must be worshiped by placing HIM at the center of life instead of by just keeping rigid rules and regulations.

Number three they had to show this man who was really in control of spiritual matters so they found him and began their interrogation.

This is one of the funniest stories in the Bible, in one way. The interchange between the big shots and the blind man becomes actually almost hilarious.

"Tell us about what happened," they say.

He does.

"Well, this man couldn't be good and do what he did not the Sabbath."

"I think it's pretty good, what he did," says the blind man. "I'm learning to read at 35 years of age!"

"Don't get smart with us," they say. "Maybe you are twin brothers or something." Then, "Let's go and ask his mom and dad."

Mom and Dad don't need trouble with the authorities. They don't want to make any waves.

"No," they say, "we only have the one blind son he was blind all his life that's him he's 35 years old he can speak for himself."

The big shots look the poor man up again.

"Tell us what happened," they say.

"I have already told you about six times," he says. " Are you considering joining the Church of the Nazarene?" Oooh, that one burned!

"Don't be smart with us! We know this man is bad news."

"Bad news, good news ," our friend is getting testy. "All I know is this: I was blind. I can now see 20/20! That is the sum and total of it!"

For his veracity and tenacity the blind man succeeded in getting the high up people very angry. On the spot they officially excommunicated him. His last hope of heaven, supposedly, was out the window. Their rage must have been a bit sobering even for the ex blind man, and I'm sure his parents, who didn't want to make trouble, were devastated.

But then comes the best part of the story: Remember, this man had never ever even once seen Jesus. I'm sure Jesus planned it that way. He could have healed him on the spot and when he opened his eyes to see for the first time the first thing he would have seen would have been Jesus instead of that donkey by the pool of Siloam. But Jesus had sent him away to wash.

The blind man didn't know what Jesus looked like but Jesus looked him up. The disciples said, "Jesus, Master, you know that man you healed last Sabbath day? The authorities have cast him out! His whole neighborhood is buzzing about three visits in one day by the long black robes and all the commotion." So Jesus went looking for him.

And Jesus found him. "Do you believe in Messiah?" Jesus asked.

"Who is Messiah?" answered the man. " I'd like to be able to believe." And then here it came again! Last week to a Samaritan woman, this week to an excommunicated ex beggar blind man. Jesus reveals to one person the fact that He is the Messiah.

"You're looking at him!" said Jesus.

"Lord, I believe!" said the blind man who now could see in more ways than one. Down on his knees before the Son of God he went.

Then Jesus said one of those enigmatic statements that aren't too difficult to understand if you really want to understand them: "I've come, he said, to help blind people see, and to make those who see become as blind as bats."

Some Pharisees heard him and they got really upset because they thought they knew what Jesus meant. It was then they asked the question I began this sermon with: "YOU'RE NOT TELLING US THAT WE'RE BLIND, ARE YOU? ARE WE BLIND?"

And Jesus said: "THERE ISN'T ANYONE QUITE AS BLIND AS THE ONE WHO THINKS HE KNOWS EVERYTHING!"

AM I BLIND, JESUS?

If I am a know it all, yes!

But if I am in a living connection with Jesus I can say No! I am not blind! The LORD is my Shepherd!

With Jesus as prophet, priest, and king I can see: If my life is centered in Him ('looking unto Jesus' Hebrews 12:3) As Prophet he helps me see clearly what is his will, As Priest he shows me that the cross and the empty tomb are my salvation, and As King he is the shepherd who leads me even through the (Glen Coe) dark valleys of shadow.

In Chapter 8:12 Jesus said these words: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Prayer & Hymn 424 *The Song of the Soul Set Free*

The One Imperative Life

February 28, 1999

Last week we began Lent with Matthew's story of Jesus facing temptation in the wilderness. The lesson from that story: THERE IS NO SHORT CUT TO INTEGRITY.

Today we begin a four-week visit in John's Gospel, for four Lenten lessons. John was very selective in writing his story of Jesus. He chose seven discourses, seven miracles, and seven "I AM" statements Jesus made about himself. He had a SINGLE purpose in his selectivity (20:30-31): 'Jesus did many other things beside what is written here, but these were selected and written down "that you might believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.'"

John is interested in one question: DO YOU HAVE ETERNAL LIFE?

THE ONE IMPERATIVE: LIFE!

John 3:3, 5, 7 "... You must be born again"

I. NICODEMUS VERY EVIDENTLY WAS INTERESTED IN THIS QUESTION.

The conversation between Jesus and this scholarly Pharisee is the first of the seven discourses recorded in the Gospel.

Nicodemus addressed Jesus as a teacher. He was looking for learned discourse, looking for a lesson. Jesus is a teacher. [We can learn the language of salvation; the so-called 'life-style.'] But salvation is not LEARNED.

(Later another intelligent, respectful (Rich Young Ruler) came to Jesus, and asked, "What must I DO to be saved?" Jesus said, "Empty your hands. There isn't anything you can DO! Come follow Me!" Salvation is not EARNED.)

Jesus told Nicodemus: "This is mysterious stuff! The wind blows where it will, and you see its effects. The Holy Spirit is like that! He is blowing right now if you will stop and look and listen! YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN!" Nicodemus was mystified! This seemed like non-sense! What is this Rabbi talking about?

II. SALVATION IS A RESPONSE TO GRACE

- A. A response TO GRACE : Jesus gave the Pharisee a quick challenge to faith: "Do you remember that story about how our ancestors in the wilderness were bitten by snakes?" Jesus said.

"Of course," answered the scholar. "Every schoolboy knows that story."

"You remember how they sinned, and as punishment they were being killed by poisonous snakes? Do you remember how they were kept from dying when they were bitten?"

"Yes."

"Well, just as Moses put a brass serpent on a pole and lifted it high so it could be seen by those who were dying, God the Father is lifting up his Son in love high above the earth, on a Cross, and whoever LOOKS in faith will live forever!"

SALVATION IS NOT ABOUT 'DOING'; IT IS HAVING SOMETHING DONE.

Jesus has paid the penalty for sin, your sins, and my sins, and the sins of the whole world on the cross. But we are still dead and dying in our sins unless and until we look to the cross.

We can't simply hear a lesson and learn how to live. We are not called by God to be "better" men and women. We are cursed by sin, and God is calling us to be "different" with a different center; TO BE 'BORN AGAIN.'

- B. SALVATION IS A RESPONSE TO GRACE. A RESPONSE :THE INITIATIVE IS GOD'S

When we talk of eternal life the story of Abraham always comes up. Abraham responded to God's clear call. "Where You lead is where I am going." Until God called, Abraham wasn't going anywhere. When he responded, God made covenant with him, and he was justified by faith. Until God calls you and me, we are without hope and without life. Until we respond we are still lost.

C. GOD IS CALLING!

But the wonder is GOD DOES CALL! God's Spirit still does come where we are and say: "Will you quit this way of living and come, follow Me?" Abraham said, "You lead, and I'll follow!" Do you dare pray a prayer like that? Have you been challenged in your inner spirit that God wants YOU?

God wants to lead you into a covenant relationship with HIM! He wants to forgive your sins. He wants to give you a new kind of life, real LIFE, that you can share with HIM. He wants to adopt you into His family, for ever and ever. He wants to make you like Himself! All this simply because he loves you. The price is already paid. All you need to do is LOOK and LIVE!!

III. WHY IS SOMETHING SO SIMPLE SO VERY DIFFICULT TO SEE??

- A. One reason is OUR HANDS ARE ALREADY FULL. We are talking when we need to be listening. We are too busy being "good" and working our own salvation: A story both Henri Nouwen and Barbara Brown Taylor have used goes like this:

Once upon a time, there was a woman who set out to discover the meaning of life. She read everything she could get her hands on history, philosophy, psychology, religion. She became a very smart person, but nothing she read gave her the answer she was looking for. She sought out other smart people and asked them about the meaning of life. They had long and lively discussions, but she was never satisfied.

At last she took a leave of absence, closed her house, and set off in search of the meaning of life. She went around the world. She went to India. She went to South America. She heard about a man who knew the meaning of life, and asked about him everywhere she went. Finally, someone told her where he lived on a mountain, in a tiny little hut just below the eternal snows.

She climbed and climbed to reach his front door. When she finally got there, with knuckles so cold they hardly worked, she knocked.

"Yes?" said the kind looking old man who opened it. She thought she would die of happiness.

"I have come halfway around the world to ask you one question," she said, gasping for breath.

"What is the meaning of life?"

"Please come in and have some tea," the old man said.

"No," she said. "I mean, no thank you. I didn't come all this way for tea. I came for an answer. Won't you tell me, please, what is the meaning of life?"

"We shall have tea," the old man insisted, so she gave up and came inside. While he was brewing the tea she caught her breath and began telling him about all the books she had read, all the people she had met, all the places she had been. The old man listened (which was just as well, since he couldn't get a word in edgewise), and as she talked he placed a fragile tea cup in her hand. Then he began to pour the tea.

She was so busy talking that she didn't notice when the tea cup was full. So the old man just kept pouring until the tea ran over the sides of the cup and spilled to the floor in a steaming waterfall.

"What are you doing? !" she yelled when the tea burned her hand.

"It's full, can't you see that? Stop! There's no more room!"

"Just exactly so," the old man said to her. "You come here wanting something from me, but what am I to do? There is no more room in your cup. Come back when it is empty and then we will talk." (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Stay for Tea, Nicodemus" Christian Century, Feb 21, 1996)

(WHY IS SOMETHING SO SIMPLE SO VERY DIFFICULT TO SEE??)

- B. Another reason WE TAKE HOLY THINGS FOR GRANTED. It may be that we have heard so much about God's unconditional love that we have confused it with UNIVERSAL SALVATION. If there is nothing we can DO to be saved, then we take it that

we will be saved without even genuinely responding to God's grace. UNCONDITIONAL LOVE IS NOT THE SAME AS UNIVERSAL SALVATION. Unconditional love is NOT the same as universal salvation!

God loves you. He loves me. He loves us just as we are, warts and all. He loves the worst sinner. But the most effective lie from the pit of hell that is loose in the churches today is the old Antinomian heresy of a false confidence in a kind of love that is not holy, and does not come from a holy God.

IV. THE QUESTION: DO YOU HAVE ETERNAL LIFE?

DO YOU KNOW YOU ARE RIGHT WITH GOD?

NO QUESTION WE CAN ASK IS MORE PROFOUNDLY IMPORTANT

Do you know that you have passed from spiritual death into this life in Christ Jesus told Nicodemus about? Are you SAVED? This is not a question about which we can afford to be casual.

People who spend great pains preparing for their children's future, and who invest time and fortune getting ready for retirement can be very careless about what it means to be ready for an eternity with a holy God. As surely as there is a heaven of joy and reunions and eternal feasting awaiting those who simply look in faith to the Cross of Christ, there is a hell of eternal emptiness and isolation in the darkness away from God's face for those who refuse the free gift of God's grace.

[[Jude, the Lord's brother, wrote about pretenders at the church's love feasts, big as life, sitting there eating without the slightest qualm, but he says (in vs 12,13) "they are twice dead- wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame- wandering star, for whom blackest darkness is reserved forever." In Peter's epistle Peter echoes this reality, saying "blackest darkness is reserved for them."]]

THAT NIGHT LONG AGO NICODEMUS HEARD THE GOOD NEWS OF THE GOSPEL
When he had heard, the response was up to him. Would he look to the Son of God and be saved? Or would he go on in darkness?

The One Imperative Life

Sooner or later that same question comes to every one of us.

HOW DO WE KNOW? When we are saved, there is new LIFE! (Regeneration) and our SINS are all FORGIVEN (Justification) and we are welcomed into God's FAMILY (Adoption) and begin to be made LIKE JESUS (Sanctification.)

But how do we know?

HAVE YOU SAID "YES!" TO GOD'S CALL? ARE YOU EVEN NOW SAYING "YES, LORD!" THAT'S how we know!

Prayer

461 Open My Eyes, That I May See

Light for the Way

A Story of a Gift of Light

Lent IV

March 14, 1999

John 9:1-41

What a week it was for the man who had been born blind! Highs higher than high. And then lows lower than low.

He had been living by begging until Jesus came along and found him in his blindness. Jesus spat in the dust and made a clay and anointed the blind man's eyes. He sent him off to the pool of Siloam, still blind— never having seen Jesus at all. "Go wash!" was all he said. He obeyed, and came away seeing.

When you think of it, sight had to be a traumatic change. I wonder if he had to close his eyes to get his bearings to even get home. He must have been fascinated by the simplest of sights. He had never seen a pigeon, or a donkey, or his mother's face. It had to be total good news. Not spiritual news. No spiritual application now. Just good news.

What happened? His neighbors asked. He told them. "A man named Jesus anointed my eyes with cool mud and told me to go wash. I did and now as you can see, I can see!" Everyone was happy. He was a celebrity. If he lived in our time he would have been on *Larry King Live*.

But then the religious people had to rain on his parade.

They brought in their idea of the spiritual dimension. Maybe the blind man had never seen Jesus but they had. And they didn't like Jesus. So now the people who know everything about everything— who have a faith of rules and regulations that exist to maintain their traditions, rather than traditions that nurture and maintain their faith— these people said, "This is outside OUR control! This is too dangerous!" They moved in.

1. Nobody does anything or goes anywhere on the Sabbath unless WE say so." [The healing had taken place on the Sabbath.] Of course there were ways to get around Sabbath rules— but they were sure Jesus hadn't bothered to worry his head about that.
2. This Jesus was the object of grave concern because he had been teaching SPIRITUAL worship— that God must be worshiped by placing HIM at the center of life— instead of by just keeping rigid rules and regulations.
3. They had to show this man who was really in control of spiritual matters— so they found him and began their interrogation.

This is one of the funniest stories in the Bible, in one way. The interchange between the big shots and the blind man becomes actually almost hilarious.

"Tell us about what happened," they say.

He does.

"Well, this man couldn't be good and do what he did not the Sabbath."

"I think it's pretty good, what he did," says the blind man. "I'm learning to read at 35 years of age!"

"Don't get smart with us," they say. "Maybe you are twin brothers or something." Then, "Let's go and ask his mom and dad."

Mom and Dad don't need trouble with the authorities. They don't want to make any waves.

"No," they say, "we only have the one blind son— he was blind all his life— that's him— he's 35 years old— he can speak for himself."

The big shots look the poor man up again.

"Tell us what happened," they say.

"I have already told you about six times," he says. "Are you considering following the Nazarene?" Oooh, that one burned!

"Don't be smart with us! We know this man is bad news."

"Bad news, good news—," our friend is getting testy. "All I know is this: I was blind. I can now see 20/20! That is the sum and total of it!"

For his veracity and tenacity the blind man succeeded in getting the high-up people very angry. On the spot they officially excommunicated him. His last hope of heaven, supposedly, was out the window. Their rage must have been a bit sobering even for the ex-blind man, and I'm sure his parents, who didn't want to make trouble, were devastated.

But then comes the best part of the story: Remember, this man had never ever even once seen Jesus. I'm sure Jesus planned it that way. He could have healed him on the spot and when he opened his eyes to see for the first time the first thing he would have seen would have been Jesus instead of that donkey by the pool of Siloam. But Jesus had sent him away to wash.

The blind man didn't know what Jesus looked like— but Jesus looked him up. The disciples said, "Jesus, Master, you know that man you healed last Sabbath day? The authorities have cast him out! His whole neighborhood is buzzing about three visits in one day by the long black robes and all the commotion." So Jesus went looking for him.

And Jesus found him. "Do you believe in Messiah?" Jesus asked.

"Who is Messiah?" answered the man. "I'd like to be able to believe." And then here it came again! Last week to a Samaritan woman, this week to an excommunicated ex-beggar blind man. Jesus reveals to one person the fact that He is the Messiah.

"You're looking at him!" said Jesus.

"Lord, I believe!" said the blind man who now could see in more ways than one. Down on his knees before the Son of God he went.

Then Jesus said one of those enigmatic statements that aren't too difficult to understand if you really want to understand them: "I've come, he said, to help blind people see, and to make those who see become as blind as bats."

This is an arresting story of darkness and light, light and darkness. But it is more than a story. It is a lesson: Jesus said some very profound things about blindness and sight, and darkness and light:

Light Both Heals And Blinds

Jesus made some profound statements about 'spiritual light'. He said (39) that Light divides. He said he came into the world so that people who were in darkness could see, but also so that people who see might be made blind. Light divides. The most dangerous thing in the world, spiritually, is to play with what you know to be God's truth. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus Himself said, (Matt 6:23) If therefore the light that is in you becomes darkness, how great is that darkness!!!!!!

- Jesus said: **Light is precious.** He said, "I must work the works of Him that sent me while it is day." ONLY as God gives us light we are able to discern right and wrong. The spiritual light that shines into the life of every follower of Jesus gives opportunity to do the father's will.
- Jesus said: **Light is limited.** Jesus also said "The night comes when no one can work!" There is a night coming that will end the day we know. It seems a pity that it takes scare tactics and selfish motivation to get people excited about getting ready for the inevitable appointment we have with eternity. So-called Christian entrepreneurs are making money scaring people with Y2K speculation when a real crisis looms out there for every one of us. The night coming is not to be feared if we know the Shepherd who has promised to be with us even in the valley of the shadow of death. But neither is the coming of night to be ignored.

The Question

The religious experts were stung by the fact that Jesus was not impressed with their self-righteousness. They threw out a bitter rhetorical question:

Are we blind too?

Jesus threw the question back at the questioners. If you really were blind, and honest, even like the blind man, then there would be great hope for you. But since you say, "We can figure out the answers for ourselves!" the fact is you are without Light and without Hope!

But this is a haunting question! Do we dare ask it of Jesus??

Are we blind too? Are WE blind? I'm sure we ALL have our blind spots! But there is a key to understanding in the very way we ask the question! The Pharisees "KNEW" they were NOT blind, and they asked in anger!! But if we come in humility the fact is we will find grace that covers our sins. (Psalm 139 "Search me!") We admit the possibility that we ARE blind!!

But remember what Jesus told us:

Light IS precious! The tiniest candle can push back an ocean of darkness! When God shines in your soul, walk in that light! You need light! I need light! We can't live without it! (Pilgrim's Progress . . "Conversion" Do you see that light?" "I think I do!")

We may have Light for the asking. But it is a humbling thing to be died for! To come the way of grace. And we need to walk in the light we have before we get more.

We may have light. And as we walk humbly in the light we are saved! (I John 1:7,9)

Light is limited! We must work while it is day. We spoke a moment ago about the Y2K scare. People are more concerned about Y2K than they are about the night that is coming when no one can work.

Will you ask the God of Light to let YOU shine in the lives of those you love?

How long has it been since you thought seriously about what Jesus said about the Day of his Coming? We have become so sophisticated, and we have let the extremists and know-it-all self-proclaimed prophets rave about the end of the world that we forget that light IS limited!

What would happen if instead of Y2K and failure of computer chips around the world in some way known only to God He would decide that time will be no more and ring the curtain down on this day and say "That's it! What's done is done!"

Jesus said "As long as I am in the world I am the light of the world." But guess who the light of the world is NOW? God is depending on you!

A Closing **Prayer** (from a UMH #456)

O Lord,

open my eyes that I may see the needs of others;

open my ears that I may hear their cries;

open my heart so that they need not be without succor;

let me not be afraid to defend the weak because of the anger of the strong,

nor afraid to defend the poor because of the anger of the rich.

Show me where love and hope and faith are needed,

and use me to bring them to those place.

And so open my eyes and my ears

that I may this coming day be able to do some work of peace for thee.

Amen.

459 *Open Our Eyes, Lord*

Summons to Life

March 21, 1999

Lent V

Ezekiel 37; John 11

THE FUNERAL WAS OVER.

Soon the official time of mourning would be over as well. Where there's life there's hope. That's good human optimism. But death is another matter. Death has a ring of finality. Where there's death it's all over, isn't it?

The words of Jesus in the face of death don't seem to make sense. How can a dead person hear and believe? Jesus said, "The one that believes in me, even if they are dead, yet shall live; and whoever is alive and believes in me will never die!"

Have you ever been really down? I have. Have you ever prayed in desperation, and felt like nothing happened? I have. Have you ever felt as though the last train had left and you weren't on it? I think that is what these scriptures are talking about. These are not "self-help" scriptures. They are words about grace that comes when everything else has gone.

I believe that Jesus came to show us that nothing can frustrate God's love for us. Jesus came to let us know that while we can't avoid life's reality- there will be times of loss and pain- yet in the dark we can trust; God is there and if we listen He is calling our name.

I. THE JEWS IN BABYLON WERE REALLY DOWN.

They prayed in desperation and nothing happened. Their pathway to hope was closed down permanently. And then God sent along a visionary prophet with fantastic word-pictures. Wheels in wheels, mysterious flying creatures, and a God who knows and cares.

Ezekiel's vision really is a tremendous message of hope if it is received from faith to faith. You have heard the details read again today: the prophet finds himself in a valley, grim and foreboding. It is exceedingly dry. Even worse, it is populated with human skeletons, and they, too are dried and scattered.

God speaks to the prophet. He asks him a question: "Son of man, can these dry bones live?" The prophet is wise. He does not know the answer, even though he knows, humanly, there is no hope. "O Lord God, " he says, "you know the answer to that question."

God speaks again. This time it is a command. "Preach over these dead bones," God says. "Tell them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.'"

"Tell them 'Thus saith the Lord God YHWH: Behold I will cause breath to enter you that you may come back to life. And I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin, and put breath in you that you may come alive, and you will know that I AM the LORD.'"

So Ezekiel, in his vision, stood there in the valley of dry bones and preached the word God had given him. Then in the virtual reality of his vision Ezekiel reported, "Even as I preached there was a rattling and a shaking and the bones came together, bone by bone, until there was an army of bodies" But they were just that– bodies, for, Ezekiel said, "There was no breath in them."

Just then God broke in again and spoke to his prophet: "Prophecy to the wind, now, Son of man, and say to the Wind, 'Come Holy Spirit, and blow over these dead bodies!' What a vision! In his vision Ezekiel saw this great army of corpses come alive and stand to their feet, ready to take orders from God, ready to live! And Ezekiel understood.

The exiles in Babylon heard and understood as well. WHEN THEY WERE WILLING TO RECOGNIZE THEIR OWN HELPLESSNESS– GOD'S WORD SPARKED THE LIGHT OF HOPE. The word of God was not dependent on their resources. It was a call to life that rekindled new life and new hope. Even in the dark we can trust; God is there. If we listen He is calling our name.

II. THE FUNERAL WAS OVER.

Martha's and Mary's faith had slipped into the past tense. They both said the very same thing when Jesus finally arrived four days after their brother Lazarus had died and was buried: "Lord, IF you HAD been here, my brother would not have died!"

Several interesting things stand out in this story of the final miracle in John's Gospel: Jesus' timing. (Why did he stay where He was so long?) Thomas's devotion: "Let's go an die with him!" Jesus' powerful, wonderful words: "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. Do you believe this?" These are words we have learned to use with power at our funerals. They give us hope for we know the Authority behind them.

Jesus asked them to take him to the grave. They said, "Come, we'll take you there."

Jesus wept. (Lots of speculation here. But real men cry; they feel; they CARE!)

Then Jesus said, "Take away the stone that seals the grave." Mary said, "It won't be good." Lazarus had been dead four days. Jesus said, "Hold steady. Trust me."

Jesus called: Lazarus, come forth! The final miracle of John's Gospel was a preview of the time when by the power of his own Resurrection Jesus could say for all the world to hear: "Do not be afraid: I AM the First and the Last. I am He who lives and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hell and of Death." (Rev. 1: 17,18) It was an astounding miracle. It ended hopelessness for the household in Bethany. And it set off the final countdown to the Cross.

CONCLUSION

[[Have you ever been really down? I have. Have you ever prayed in desperation, and felt like nothing happened? I have. Have you ever felt as though the last train had left and you weren't on it? I think that is what these scriptures are talking about. These are not "self-help" scriptures. They are words about grace that comes when everything else has gone.]]

Summons to Life

God sent Ezekiel to exiles in Babylon who thought their situation was hopeless, Ezekiel with his fantastic vision of dry bones coming to life. That vision seemed unconnected to life as it really is lived. It flew in the face of common sense and logic. But it connected.

"We may be as good as dead," they said. "But God is not! We hear him calling us to hear his Word of creation!" And they listened and lived!

The situation in Bethany, humanly, was past hope. The human word of optimism is "Where there's life there's hope." But Lazarus was DEAD! God's Word is "Where there is GRACE there is HOPE!" Jesus is God's Word of GRACE!

Where you are just now– where I am– if we will just stop and listen
we just may hear Jesus calling our name!

In a work called "**May I Have this Dance?**" Joyce Rupp said in poetry what I think I've been trying to say:

*There I am
in Ezekiel's valley
one heap among many,
just another stack
of old, dry bones.*

*Some Mondays
feel this way,
and Tuesdays, too,
to say nothing of
Wednesday, Thursday,
Friday.*

*Lost dreams
and forgotten pleasures,
sold like a soul
to a gluttonous world*

*feeding on my frenzy
and anxious activity.*

*But just when
the old heap of bones
seems most dry
and deserted,
a strong Breath of Life
stirs among my dead.*

*Someone names God
comes to my fragments
and asks, with twinkling eye,
"May I have this dance?"
The voice stretches into me,
a stirring leaps in my heart,
lifting up the bones of death.*

*Then I offer my waiting self
to the One who's never
stopped
believing in me,
and the dance begins.*

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, If we hear what we think we hear today, You are calling our name! We want to come to Life! O God, without YOU life is not really Life at all. We hear you say, "Come to Me!" Please, Jesus, help us take that next step Into your Presence, because knowing You is What Life is all about. Amen.

HYMN #305 (STL) *O Breath of Life* Verses 1 & 3 only

King Jesus on a Donkey

Palm Sunday

March 28, 1999

Matthew 21:1-13; Philippians 2:5-11

The face-to-face showdown was inevitable. Jesus had become unbearable to the religious powers that controlled Jerusalem. They were on a collision course. But no one could predict how that final confrontation would take place.

Some who thought they knew Jesus saw in him a possible leader for a revolt against hated foreign government. Maybe the people would rally and they could take back Jerusalem from the hated Romans.

Others thought they knew Jesus, and told him to stay away from Jerusalem altogether. They were sure his kind spirit and his powerful words were no match for swords and spears. They just wanted to keep things the way they were as long as they could.

But both ways of facing the conflict were mistaken. The battle would be joined. Jesus would meet his challenge head on. But no one could predict how the inevitable conflict would unfold.

It Began With A Parade.

The joyful, tumultuous procession down the hill called Olivet may have looked as though it just spontaneously happened. But this Triumphal Procession was orchestrated and deliberate. The gospels make it clear that Jesus sent for the donkey he would ride. It wasn't the disciples' idea; it was Jesus'.

A parade may seem at first to be a total contradiction to both the humility of the lowly Man from Galilee and the terrible events of the Friday to follow. And it might even seem silly or ludicrous for the lowly Nazarene to ride a donkey down Olivet's hill, and be hailed as a king. But the funny thing is, no one was laughing!

The enemies of Jesus certainly were not laughing. They said, "The whole world is going after him!" And maybe not the whole world just then, but Matthew tells us that this excitement got the attention of the entire city. The battle was joined. The opposition could not ignore further.

The crowd certainly was not laughing! They were shouting and jubilant! They were caught in the excitement of praise! It was entirely fitting!

Jesus was not laughing, either! He was accepting of the praise that should only be given to God; in fact he told his critics, "If these don't praise me, the stone in the road will cry out praise to their creator!"

King Jesus on a donkey! What a statement of contrasts! Jesus is Emmanuel. He is God and he is fully human. In him combine the majesty and strength as well as the humility and faith of very God and very man.

That parade down the slope of Olivet made a powerful statement about Jesus. It gave a glimpse into his majesty and authority. It refuted the idea that he was a local, temporal revolutionary, for he was sent for the salvation of the whole world. It made it clear that he was not to be a martyr or victim, no matter how it looked that next Friday. Jesus was moving without swerving to do the father's will, conquering sin, and death, and hell.

A Statement Of Authority: Lion And Lamb Combine In Jesus

Everything about Jesus that day spoke of his majesty and authority. In the way Jesus orchestrated the parade Jesus showed it was not by accident this parade took place. The very act of sitting calmly on an unbroken colt which had never before been ridden is remarkable. Somehow I have the feeling the colt was delighted to have the opportunity to carry its Creator.

As the parade reached the temple area, Jesus exercised authority in a remarkable way. He moved through the holy ground overturning the money changers tables and driving out the people making business out of religion. "My house," he shouted in

majestic anger,"is to be a place of prayer for all nations. You have made it a den of robbers!"

A Higher Vision Than Freeing Israel From Romans

The parade did not make its way to the houses of government: it stopped at the temple. Jesus knew he was the Paschal Lamb, and that this Passover would be the fulfillment of the Baptist's prophecy: "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world!" Jesus told Pilate late that next week: "My kingdom is not of this world or my people would fight!"

The parade that day was to make the statement that Jesus was not a Martyr, but a Champion.

The King was taking the fight to the enemy; he came to bear witness to the Truth; he IS the Truth. He was not running away or hiding from fear. Yes, he would be arrested. Yes, he would be mocked and crucified. But he could forgive even those who crucified him. And hardened soldiers saw something awesome in the One they nailed to the cross.

Here, today, we make a break in the story of Christ's passion that we know so very well. We know in our minds how it unfolds; we have heard it over and over. But it is not a myth. It was all very real: Jesus had to live through that Holy Week.

There was a crisis in the drama on that same mountainside that next Thursday night, in a garden called Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed "Not my will but thine be done." He was arrested, and the final confrontation continued to the Cross, and then to the Open Tomb, and on to the Emmaus Road, and beyond.

Exactly 47 days after this strange and wonderful parade, on this very hillside where the people shouted hosanna and the authorities complained, Jesus, now risen from the dead, led his disciples to the very place where the parade began. There he told them to go back to Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit. And then Jesus ascended into the very Presence of the glory of the Father. There he sat down in unspeakable majesty to begin his Session.

King Jesus on a Donkey

He had not hesitated to humble himself to do the Father's will. He did not once violate the integrity of his love for God and for you and me. And as a result he has opened a pathway between a holy God and sinful me and sinful you. He has made it possible for us to walk that wonderful pathway. And the story continues to this very moment . . .

Hear the challenge of the scripture:

"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it something to be held onto to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a slave, and being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

"Therefore God also highly exalted him gave him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."
(Philippians 2: 5 - 11)

Prayer

Almighty God our father, We pay homage to Christ in his majestic triumph, With songs and palms we follow his parade into the holy city. Grant that we may dare to follow him in his humility as well, With surrender and trust and obedience to the father's will for our lives, So that with joy we may come to the Heavenly Jerusalem To be with Him who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit To all eternity. Amen

Hymn 215 *All Glory Laud and Honor*

or 217 *Hosanna, Loud Hosanna*

or 124 *All Hail the Pow'r*

Praising God in "Handed Over" Life

April 1, 1999

"...the Lord Jesus, the same night he was betrayed took bread ..."

I've been reading devotions by Henri J. M. Nouwen this Lenten season, a little book Esther Sanger gave to me almost five years ago. This week I got new insight into a word we associate with Good Friday and salvation. The word is "passion."

The word "Passion" correctly refers to the agony of Jesus. The Oxford English Dictionary has as its first definition of Passion: "The suffering of Jesus on the cross (also often including the Agony in Gethsemane.)"

But there are shades of meaning to the word passion that shed light on Christ's mission and on our own calling to follow Him.

The way I commonly think of passion is the OED's third general definition, i.e.: "An affection of the mind; any kind of feeling by which the mind is powerfully affected or moved." I can have an (almost) passionate love for Scotland. Some people have a passion for certain ball teams. We can be passionate about faith, or love, or various pursuits.

But I am intrigued by the second general definition of the OED in relation to Jesus: "The fact of being acted upon, the being passive. Being acted upon or affected by an external agency."

The night Jesus ate the last Passover with his disciples, and gave them the Great Commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you—" that night Jesus was betrayed. The word in Greek (pa-ad-dou-) means "handed over, give into the hands of." It is what Judas did in the Garden that night, but it is also the same word in Romans, spoken of God the Father, "He that spared not his own Son, but "handed him over" (pa-ad-dou-) for the sake of us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?"

Henri Nouwen points out that in the passion, in the sacrifice, Jesus finished his mission not by what he actively does, but by what is done to him! The passion, proper, began when he was handed over to those who bound him, and took him from place to place, and mock inquiry to mock trial to the Cross itself. His ministry had gone from action to passion.

Most of our lives, yours and mine, comes to us without asking, and without anything we can do about it. We have the illusion that we can control our own destiny. Self-help books are best sellers, and always will be. But passion is a great part of our lives than action. It is how we respond in the parts of life that are "handed over" to things beyond our control that shape our character, and ultimately fulfill our purpose as Christians.

Certainly what we do for God is important. It is wonderful to follow a vocation, and attempt great things for God, and even accomplish great things for God. That is sometimes the only way we can see things: in terms of what we can measure, or see, or count. But as hard as it may be to believe, it is not a cop-out to say that what we are is far more important in God's eyes, even, than what we do. The kind of person we are, the trust we put in God, and the integrity with which we seek to obey Him are somehow more precious to him than all our accomplishments. If we can, like Jesus, say "Yes!" to the Father's will even in the darkness of being betrayed, "handed over", we will be letting his passion speak to us where it counts.

Somehow the Book of Job is relevant here; it gives insight into how God knows and cares and even highly values genuine integrity above active accomplishment. You remember the setting of that poem: God brags on Job, and says, "Have you considered my servant who loves me and hates evil?" Then comes the contest or wager: the Adversary asks "Does Job love YOU, or does he just love your blessings?" And so Job is tested. But in it all, Job does not have a righteous clue as to what is going on. He is being "handed over" and in his integrity in that time of helplessness he is making God very proud of him.

In surrendering to the Father's will, and trusting Him through the darkest days in all history, Jesus has shown us, by his passion, that we can dare to trust where we

cannot see. It is very meet and right, and our bounden duty to praise God when the sun is shining, and when we are happily occupied in some good work. But maybe it is even more precious in the times, the many, many times, when we are "handed over"— maybe even betrayed— to say with Job, in the dark, "Even if God slays me, I will still believe He is good! I know He knows where I am! I will trust Him!"

That next dark day, the day we call Good Friday Jesus knew darkness like we never will. In his passion, his agony, his utter helplessness he cried out, "My God, My God WHY have you forsaken me?" for that is how he truly felt.

But his very next words, wonderful words, as he gave up his spirit and died, were words of trust: "Father, into Your hands I commend my spirit!" His passion was over! He would rise as Conqueror of sin and death and hell.

Invitation to Communion

April 1, 1999 - Continuation from meditation:

Scripture (I Corinthians 11:23 - 30)

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Whoever, therefore, eat the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. [NRSV]

Apostles' Creed (#8)

Invitation to the Table of the Lord

Jesus Himself is the Host.

Examine your heart. If He bids you come, you are welcome.

Prayer of Confession/Forgiveness

The "holiest" among us needs every moment the grace of God; we are not holy in and of ourselves. We come short of the perfect will of God in performance, and all too often, we lag in spirit, are insensitive in our relationships, and act more to our own self interest than for the kingdom of God and the salvation of others.

For this we ask your forgiveness— purchase of your blood on Calvary.

We claim your promise: (I John 1:7,9) If we confess our sin, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Prayer of Dedication

We ask that we may have your ASSURANCE that we have been CHOSEN of you to be your sons and daughters.

We ask that you will give us our ASSIGNMENT, not just our "big" assignment for life's career, but our day-by-day assignment of introducing You to those we know.

We ask that You will help us ACCEPT Your revealed will, and put you at the center of our lives, in all we do.

We ask that as we partake of these emblems of bread and the cup they may be for us true means of grace, by faith may we partake of your body and blood to our soul's life and health.

Lord's Prayer - (Instructions. Come, receive, and hold the bread and the cup and we will partake together.)

At the moment of partaking: The BODY of the Lord Jesus Christ: (may it) Preserve you blameless to life everlasting.

Again, with the cup: The BLOOD of the Lord Jesus Christ: Preserve you blameless to life everlasting.

#220 *Lamb of Glory*

- Into Tennebrae - (pa-ad-dou-)

With Jesus into Resurrection Life

Easter Sunday

April 4, 1999

Revelation 1:17 *Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and of Hades.*

My earliest recollections of Easter are in the Great depression of the '30s, when, although I never recall being "poor," I do recall how many times we were literally "penniless." And yet Easter was always special. Easter we boiled eggs and colored them. Easter my mother would somehow always get us to church looking fresh and scrubbed, and in spring colors. Usually we had something brand new to wear, even in the Great Depression.

I got the idea that Easter was important— and of course that the Resurrection was the central thing about Easter.

EASTER REALLY MEANS RESURRECTION

ALL MY YEARS as a Christian pastor I have seen Easter as important, and have seen the Resurrection as the center of what Easter stands for.

But I think there has been a subtle change as I have been growing older. I no longer see the Resurrection as the most important part of Easter. I see the Resurrection of Jesus Christ as the heart and soul of all our faith, and Easter is an important part of the Resurrection, and not the other way around. As Paul wrote some twenty years or so after the Crucifixion, in 1 Corinthians 15:14 *"If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith."* It is as simple as that.

We praise God for the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary. We sing of the old rugged Cross. And that is very vital and true. But the resurrection is the engine that drives all our faith. The resurrection means that all we have to do with that connects with Jesus is vibrant and alive.

I. WE WORSHIP A LIVING SAVIOR

A. Because Jesus is alive, we have **A LIVING WORD**

Jesus is our living PROPHET. Jesus IS the Word of God. Our faith is a living faith, and our Scriptures are living Scriptures. If we read the Bible to find Jesus we find that He is there by His Spirit to help us find Him. (We read soteriologically instead of epistemologically.)

B. Because Jesus is alive, we have **A LIVING WORSHIP**

Jesus is our living High Priest. He is present in our worship of Him. When we gather in His name, he comes! I feel sorry for those who worship week by week and never make contact with a living God. He is present in the sacraments, yes. But also where two or three have gathered together.

When we worship we do not meet simply to enhance the life we once lived in the flesh. But we meet in the reality of the everlasting covenant. We meet in a union with God that has been sealed by the blood of the Cross.

C. Because Jesus is alive, we have **A LIVING HOPE**

Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, the King of Kings. We do not yet see all things the way they shall be in the full expression of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is at work on this planet in our time!

II. RESURRECTION LIFE BEGINS NOW, WITH GRACE

A. This resurrection life is a free gift.

"If you believe in me," said Jesus, "you will never die."

The news seems too good to be true. We can 'connect' with eternal life here and now, today. [Usually such claims are false advertising: if it seems too good to be true, it no doubt is too good to be true. But Jesus stands behind his promises.] How do we 'connect' with eternal life?

1. Do you want to know Jesus? Do you have desire to know God?

The desire comes from God. It is a measure of his grace. No one can come to me except the Father draw him. The faintest desire is precious; RESPOND TO THAT DESIRE.

2. Do you believe that Jesus is alive? That God has raised him from the dead?

The faith to believe comes from God. It may come with some struggle. Thank God for "doubting" Thomas! But by God's grace deep down within you can know this is true. This faith is not yet saving faith: it is grace reaching to you: RESPOND TO THAT FAITH

3. Confess with your mouth JESUS IS LORD! Romans 10: 9,10 says: "If we confess with our mouth the Lord Jesus, and if we believe in our hearts that God has raised him from the dead, we shall be saved!"

B. This life is too good to keep to ourselves!

A study friend of mine, Fr. Jerry Fuller, sent along a story about a boy named Joey. Joey was one of those scary little kids you come across every once in a while, the type who seems to know much more than you might expect in a child, the beginnings of wisdom in a five or six year old.

(I have a grandson Joey just like that— eight years old, and knows every Red Sox player and his number— can play an entire baseball game in the back yard, playing all positions, all nine innings, all by himself.)

Fr. Jerry's Joey's mother and father had always tried to live up to their responsibility as his first and most important teachers about faith. For a long time, their son had known about Jesus as though he were a member of the family. Joey knew how good Jesus was, how kind he was, how God was at work in Jesus and did wonderful things for all the people through his Son.

That year, during Holy Week, they also told Joey about what had happened to Jesus at the hands of bad people. They told him about Jesus suffering and

his death. And on Easter morning, they told him that Jesus rose from the dead.

Joey always enjoyed learning about Jesus, and all during this special week, he was right there with Mom and Dad, seeming to take very seriously the sad story as it unfolded. But he did have a little trouble with the Resurrection. As a matter of fact, what he said was, "Nope. When you're dead, you're dead." Mom and Dad were perplexed, and they tried again, retelling the story. They explained that God acted on behalf of his Son, Jesus, that because Jesus was so true to God and so faithful to all God's people, God gave him new life.

Joey tried really hard to listen, but he was still shaking his head. Very patiently, Mom and Dad assured their son that they believed, and that it was really true.

Suddenly Joey jumped up and headed toward the telephone.

Where are you going? they asked. Who are you going to call?

Joey's face was bright, and eager, and intense. Does Grandpa know about this? I gotta tell him!

Joey had the right idea. The fact of Jesus rising from the dead is so mind-boggling that we immediately feel the need to tell someone. Mary Magdalene felt that need after seeing Jesus on resurrection, and she raced back to Jerusalem to tell the apostles: He is risen! That is something worth sharing!

WILL YOU AFFIRM YOUR FAITH IN THE RISEN LORD AGAIN WITH ME THIS MORNING?

Will you say with me, "Jesus is LORD!"? (Jesus is LORD!)

Prayer

He is LORD! He is Risen from the dead and He is Lord!

Whom Having Not Seen You Love

Easter 2A

April 9, 1999

John 20:19-31; Psalm 16

I Peter 1:8 *Though you have not seen him, you love him.*

John 20:29 *Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed.*

THEY WERE MEETING BEHIND CLOSED DOORS on the very day of Christ's resurrection. The great victory over death had been fought and won, but they were still afraid, and I don't blame them. All power in heaven and on earth was now in the hand of their Lord. They had heard he was alive. Mary had seen him, or so she said. John believed. They wanted to believe. But they were afraid. I would have been, too. Oh, how they wanted to believe!

('Closed doors' sounds like A DEFENSIVE FAITH. A remnant mentality. 'Our dogma is the right dogma; our logic is the pure logic' There are Christians who worship like that to this day! There is a difference between defending the faith and a defensive faith.)

THEN JESUS WAS THERE! It was really Jesus! Somehow he was different. There was a glory that shone in his face; his clothing almost glowed– but somehow, too, he was the same! It was their Lord! An indescribable joy welled up in their hearts.

(PERHAPS OLD DREAMS WERE RESURRECTED THEN.) Perhaps all sorts of possibilities raced through the minds of the disciples there in that Upper Room. If Jesus had come back now maybe his revolution would begin? Maybe all the world would see him now, and fall in behind him? Maybe even the authorities who crucified him would simply give up? What would Jesus do now?

(By itself, human faith tends to be AN AMBITIOUS FAITH. If Jesus is really alive, then we had better get going! Somehow the planners always have the important role in the plan!)

THEN JESUS BREATHED ON THEM. He said, "Receive the Holy Spirit!"

They were still behind locked doors. They would go on meeting behind closed doors for some time to come. But with that breath of God a new kind of divine life had been planted. The church had been conceived. God's plan was under way.

"Receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus had said. Then he told them what the Holy Spirit would do through them. He was describing the core mission of the church that was yet to be born. "Whose sins you forgive will be forgiven. If you do not forgive them they won't be forgiven," is what Jesus said. The work of salvation is the central, solemn charge of Christ to his church.

THEN JESUS WAS GONE. The doors were still locked. The disciples were still afraid of the authorities. But a flame had been kindled. It was never extinguished again. The joy was still there. They were determined to obey Jesus and find out what in the world it was that he had said.

(The DEFENSIVE faith had faded along with the AMBITIOUS faith— at least for the time being. In its place Jesus had kindled AN OBEDIENT FAITH! The disciples had no idea of how Jesus would lead. They could not anticipate the next step. But they were willing to listen and learn.)

FOR FORTY DAYS Jesus came and went in what seems a mysterious fashion. When he was with the disciples they had no doubt at all that God was in his heaven and all would be right with his world. Where Jesus went in between times, where he slept, what dimensions he visited, all this is mystery.

During the forty days the core group of the embryonic church-to-be-born became totally convinced that Jesus was really who and what he said he was. We read of "many infallible proofs," and of "over 500 brethren at one time" that saw and believed. The life stirred within them.

They continued to meet in the same retreat. But when the Promise was fully come, then the breath of life that Jesus had breathed into them when he said, "Receive the Holy Spirit!"— when that breath one day became the outpouring of Pentecost with

the sound of the mighty rushing wind, THEY UNLOCKED THE DOORS! Not to let the authorities in where they were, but to let the life and joy spill out.

THEY COULD NOT HOLD BACK THE LIFE THEY HAD RECEIVED. The church had been born! It began then to carry out the Plan. Jesus had told them, "I will build my church." Now he would begin to do it. Conceived on Resurrection Sunday, the church was born on Pentecost, and on its birthday 3,000 people were baptized. They died to sin and self, and came alive to Christ as they, too, received the Breath of the Holy Spirit.

(Defensive faith [became ambitious faith that] gave way to obedient faith. Obedient faith always leads to more and more of God. Pentecost fulfilled the Promise.)

But it all began behind locked doors. It began when fear turned to joy when the living Savior came. It began with a holy breath. It was the Second Creation of Man. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

THOMAS WAS NOT PRESENT THE DAY THE CHURCH WAS CONCEIVED. I'm glad that he wasn't. His story is like yours and mine. We weren't there either. So we say with Thomas, "I really want to know for myself! I need to be convinced!"

Thomas's confession is the climax of John's apology. It is the exact place where he intends for you and me to finally arrive. It is the place where life is conceived, where Jesus breathes life.

"Blessed are you!" Jesus said to Thomas, after he had shown him his hands and his side. But then Jesus said, "And blessed are YOU!" You here this morning behind closed doors. You have not seen me, but you love me! I love you, too! "Receive YE the Holy Spirit!" Believe in me! Trust me! Obey me! Let that life grow up within you!

THAT FIRST DAY OF THE NEW CREATION THE CHURCH WAS CONCEIVED.

For Thomas it was the second Sunday of Easter. Life, hope, joy— all were there with the dawning of the great truth: Jesus is alive!

There was worship! The Lord himself was with them! They knew they were alive in Him, and with Him. And although they did not understand it then, they were on course for Pentecost.

IT REMAINS FOR US TO RENEW THE GREAT CONFESSION. Jesus said we are blessed if by the Spirit we can truly believe he is risen from the dead. Peter said in the epistle lesson that even though we have never seen Jesus we have a genuine love for him. We have come to know Him.

Has Jesus breathed on us? Are we alive in Him? Those doors cannot contain such wonderful news for very long!

I'm sure they did not grasp it fully then— nor even fifty days later at Pentecost— but the disciples— and you and I— are where God lives on this earth.

It was the Presence that kindled this trust. Jesus is faithful: he is with us here and now! If we will let Him he will live within us, and walk with us. We may not know all about Him, but we may know Him. He loves us, and his perfect love cast out fear. David said, "If I can just BE WITH YOU I will be all right! In your Presence is joy! "

Prayer - Hymn (Chorus)

#301 *O Breath of Life*, OR

716 *So Send I You- By Grace Made Strong*

Moments of Recognition

April 18, 1999 (cf April 21, 1996)

Luke 24:13-35

The Walk to Emmaus is one of my very favorite stories in all the world. It brings the story of the earthly life of Jesus to a close in a way that is really a launching pad for a sequel that is still unfolding. Whatever it was that happened on that road the first Easter evening is still taking place.

There are a number of other stories of encounters with God in the Bible. Moses turned aside from his flock of sheep to see why a bush would burn and not be consumed. Jacob laid his head on a stone while he was running away from his troubles, and saw a stairway to heaven, and then, years later, he wrestled all night with a manifestation of God in the flesh. Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up in the Temple. But still I love the story of the Road to Emmaus perhaps best of all.

The Emmaus Road story contrasts with another famous encounter with the risen Savior. Saul of Tarsus first met Jesus on another road, going in another direction. On the Road to Damascus Jesus got Saul's attention by knocking him to the ground. In this story Jesus walked along with the disciples, warming their hearts with scripture, and would have walked on if they had not asked him to come in.

Perhaps those two encounters are examples of the ways some of us here today came to meet the risen Lord. Saul was not at all acquainted with Jesus before he met him on the Damascus Road. Paul was very much NOT a part of the followers of Jesus. But Jesus found Saul, and stunned him with conviction. His conversion story has all the subtlety of a whack on the head with a stick! Saul was blinded for three days, and his life turned around 180 degrees.

No one here has had a conversion exactly like Saul/Paul. But all the same, that confrontation, that shock, is the way some people need to find God if they ever find him at all. My own father never heard of being born again until he was 21 years old. His conversion was night and day, black and white, dramatic change, a break with

everything old in his life. Maybe you were not brought up in the fellowship of Jesus, or with the followers of Christ. But God spoke to you, the Holy Spirit showed you where you were wrong and you repented and surrendered and Jesus became your Lord and Savior. There was a dramatic meeting with Christ you couldn't miss.

The two disciples on the Road to Emmaus had an altogether different problem. If Jesus was the last person Saul would have wanted to meet these two disciples were mourning because they loved Jesus so much, but believed they could never know him again. These were people who had spent time with Jesus, and with the friends of Jesus. Maybe they had heard the Sermon on the Mount maybe they even knew the Lord's Prayer by heart, and had been taught to pray by Jesus Himself.

When they met Jesus on their road, there was no light from heaven at least not the kind that knocked them to the ground. There was no persuasion from being against Christ to calling Him 'Lord.'

THE STORY ITSELF is deceptively simple:

The disciples were:

- **SAD**- which is understandable; they thought Jesus was dead, permanently.
- **DISCOURAGED** Their faith was in the past tense (If only it could be like it used to be) Jesus described them as sinful, or at least "slow of heart to believe"
- **UNBELIEVING**: even sinful in their inability to believe

The Savior was

- **A COMPANION** even as they walked the road. (Illustration: The walk to the hamburger stand??? [where God comes up along side] A FEW times since- YOU have had them, too ??)
- **AN INTERPRETER OF SCRIPTURE** Jesus demonstrated how we should read the Bible
Jesus is the reason for the Scriptures!
- **REVEALED IN THE BREAKING OF BREAD**

Their faith brought:

- **THAWING HEART** (like John Wesley's testimony!) as they walked. (Can it be that when WE talk about Jesus to others their hearts will also feel that warmth of His Presence, be "thawed"??)
- **CERTAINTY!** Their faith immediately came back into the PRESENT TENSE!! The fact that Jesus immediately disappeared was not the least discomfiting; the fact that he was very much alive, very real, totally satisfied their hearts. They would have to walk by faith for years they may never have such vivid assurance again but they knew what they had experienced.

Then . . .

- **AN IRRESISTIBLE URGE TO SHARE THE GOOD NEWS!**

They got up from the table and started back the seven miles to Jerusalem to tell the other friends of Jesus!! The Emmaus Road is the way some of us found the Lord. But the reason I love the story is that the Emmaus Road happens again and again.

This is not just a story about conversion it is a story of the re kindling of faith, of assurance. Even Saul needed this kind of reassurance: he had one Damascus Road experience, but then he went on to have many more encounters much more like the Emmaus Road.

The day his ship was wrecked, and strong men were failing with fear it was Paul who said, "Don't be afraid! God stood by me last night and said we are all going to be all right!"

Where ever you may be on your spiritual journey, Jesus is not very far away! He wants to make sense of the Bible for you. He wants to get to know you in the breaking of bread. He wants to bring your faith into the present tense.

Where do you suppose Jesus is right now?

Prayer

Moments of Recognition

Hymn #606 (one or two vs) *In the Garden* "And He Walks with me, and He Talks with Me."

A Return to the Shepherd Psalm

Communion Meditation

April 20, 1999

October 11, 1992 (pm)

Psalm 23

Jesus said, "I AM the Good Shepherd." John 10:10

The phrase in the 23rd Psalm, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies," is somehow comforting and at the same time mysterious. I often think of it as I approach the sacrament we call the Eucharist, or Communion. And then the phrase takes on an almost immeasurable depth of meaning. This is the table of the Lord!

A TABLE GOD HIMSELF PREPARES

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. A good shepherd knows his sheep; knows what they need, and provides for them. If we are His sheep, then we need to believe that He knows what we need and will provide for us.

What we need is not always what we are most concerned about. I am pretty sure that if a flock of sheep caught wind of a wolf in the vicinity they would be very apprehensive. They would have reason to be worried if their shepherd either did not know about the wolf, or was unable to deal with the wolf. But the shepherd might not be quite as concerned, knowing exactly what he was going to do to protect his sheep.

Jesus knows we need food and fellowship and refreshment. He knows that we are human and frail.

God Himself has provided strength for our journey. Our meat and drink come from the very life of our Shepherd, who lays down His life for the sheep.

A TABLE IN DEFIANCE OF MANY UNCHALLENGED SO CALLED FACTS OF LIFE

Life is filled with "enemies."

The Psalmist speaks of the "valley of the shadow of death." Life at times is harsh, and dark, and foreboding. We shrink back from that which would destroy us. The only thing that kept the Psalmist from a death of shattering fear was the Presence of the Shepherd. For the presence of the enemies was evident!

Personal enemies! David had real enemies, people who wanted to do him in, to kill him. We have real enemies, too. Life is NOT a game, it is for real.

We have personal enemies; that which would keep us from believing that God really will guide us into abundant life. The Table of the Lord is a corrective that says, What I need more than anything else is You, O God!

Enemies of the CHURCH! The very spirit of our age is corrosive to the spirit of the church, and vice versa. And some of our worst enemies are attitudes from within, attitudes that can be corrected at the table of the Lord. [Perhaps you may think I'm "reaching" to include this, but it needs to be said:]

In the book *Resident Aliens* William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas list some rather unconventional "enemies of the church" which may be present as we partake at the Lord's Table:

1. One such enemy is SENTIMENTALITY. Commenting that "exciting services" and "good feeling" have become ends in themselves in the ministry they write; "When that happens the church and ministry cannot avoid sentimentality, which we believe is the most detrimental corruption of the church today."

Sentimentality, after all, is but the way our UNBELIEF is lived out.

SENTIMENTALITY, THAT ATTITUDE OF BEING ALWAYS READY TO UNDERSTAND BUT NOT TO JUDGE, CORRUPTS US AND THE MINISTRY. This is as true of the conservative churches as it is of the liberal. Sentimentality is the subjecting of the church year to "Mother's Day" and "Thanksgiving."

Sentimentality is the necessity of the church to side with the Sandanistas against the Contras. Sentimentality is "the family that prays together stays together."

Without God, without the One whose death on the cross challenges all our "good feelings," who stands beyond and over against our human anxieties, all we have left is sentiment, the saccharine residue of theism is demise. [1]

2. A second enemy is LETTING THE WORLD DEFINE THE CHURCH; or accepting conventional definitions of the church. If the church accepts the values of our rotten culture, then (and I quote again:)

(The) church will be a source of conventional, socially acceptable answers, a place to reiterate what everybody already knows, even without the church. We shall die, not from crucifixion, but from boredom.

(We especially pastors are conditioned) "to think in terms of what the church can do to help people but within parameters set by a society that does not know God. In that myopic world view, solutions to what ails us will be petty. WHAT SORT OF COMMUNITY WOULD WE HAVE TO BE TO BE THE SORT OF PEOPLE WHO LIVE BY OUR CONVICTIONS? [2]

3. A third enemy of the church named by Hauerwas and Willimon is UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS: We try to make the church whatever WE think it ought to be, or what we think the WORLD wants it to be to meet their perceived needs. Hauerwas and Willimon are speaking especially of pastors, but this truth applies to us all. We must focus in on what GOD wants us to do, and then we find we have peace with Him, and with ourselves! Listen to what they say about pastors, and see if there is an application for you in this enemy of "Unrealistic Expectations":

Pastors come to despise what they are and hate the community that made them that way. Because the church is not a place to worship God, but rather a therapeutic center for the meeting of one another's unchecked, unexamined needs, the pastor is exhausted. Only a few months into his or her first pastorate the new pastor realizes that people's needs are virtually

limitless, particularly in an affluent society in which there is an ever rising threshold of desire (which we define as "need." There is no job description, no clear sense of purpose other than the meeting of people's needs, so there is no possible way for the pastor to limit what people ask of the pastor. Not knowing what they should do pastors try to do everything and be everything for everybody. The most conscientious among them become exhausted and empty. The laziest of them merely withdraw into disinterested detachment. Not knowing why their pastor is there, the congregation expects the pastor to be and do everything. They become unrealistic critics of the clergy rather than co workers, fellow truth tellers."

Self hatred is inevitable in someone who feels abused, prostituted, unfairly criticized. The burden of being a generally good person, open and available to people of unbounded need is too great for anybody to bear. Self hate and loneliness result. [3]

IN THE PRESENCE OF THESE ENEMIES, as well as all others, we have THE TABLE OF THE LORD, which is prepared for us by the Shepherd Himself! And, how does this truth apply?

A TABLE OF BOTH PROTECTION AND WITNESS PROTECTION

By coming humbly to partake of the Blood and Body of the Lord, in obedience and in faith, we find the strength to obey, to take daily direction, to keep in the Path of Righteousness for His Name's sake.

We find that our enemies are powerless to keep us from the Pathway, so long as we are careful to stay in His Presence. Have you read or re read Pilgrim's Progress lately? Remember the lions that stood by the pathway just ahead? Remember how they were chained, and could not reach to the center of the path?

WITNESS

On November 16, 1989, members of the church family met in the gathering room after the funeral of Donna Bowers. (She had been cared for for weeks in Esther Sanger's living room in a hospital bed.)

The church family sat around tables, and then one after another Donna Bowers' friends stood and told stories of her kindnesses.

Later four of us made the trip to Attleboro for the interment. John, Janice Nielson, Esther Sanger and I. We sang, four part harmony, *"My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness... On Christ the solid Rock I stand all other ground is sinking sand."*

The cemetery workers were amazed. "Do you always do that?" they asked.

WE COME TO THE TABLE, TO THIS SACRAMENT, FOR STRENGTH IN THE MIDST OF OUR ENEMIES. BUT AS WE DO, THE CHURCH ITSELF IN A SENSE BECOMES THE SACRAMENT

If a definition of "sacrament" is an outward and visible sign of a spiritual reality then is not the church to be a living sacrament making visible the love of THE GOOD SHEPHERD WHO CARES FOR HIS OWN?

Our first concern is not what other people may see, but what in fact we ARE, and what we are TO BE and TO BECOME. But what other people may see is not unimportant; as we pay attention to the reality, then what three worlds observe will be the gratitude and worship and appreciation and love of a people who have a God they call "Father" and whose love makes them truly "family." Is there any reality in this vision? This table may well be a key to true evangelism!

Finally,

A TABLE OF PERPETUITY

God will provide for us, as family, in HIS house where we shall dwell with Him, for ever!

[1] Resident Aliens, Hauerwas & Willimon, 121

A Return to the Shepherd Psalm

[2] Resident Aliens, 122

[3] Resident Aliens, 124

Faith Comes By Hearing

Romans 10:17 – *and hearing by the Word of God*

April 25, 1999 - Annual Meeting Sunday

Acts 2; John 10:1-10; Psalm 23

On the front page of yesterday's Globe there was a ringing Christian testimony. Out of the tragedy of this week in Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, again and again we heard and saw Christian faith in action. This was just one story, the story of a true martyr:

Last Sunday morning Cassie Bernall went to church. Whatever else went on while she was there, evidently Cassie was listening to the Shepherd. For sometime after she got home she sat down at her desk, this beautiful seventeen-year-old high school senior, and wrote these words of faith on a little note pad that had advertisements on it for caps and gowns and other graduation things– these words:

Now I have given up on everything else - I have found it to be the only way to really know Christ and experience the mighty power that brought him back to life again, and to find out what it means to suffer and to die with him. So, whatever it takes, I will be one who lives in the fresh newness of life of those who are alive from the dead.

Cassie Bernall had no way of knowing what was going to happen two days later. Tuesday she was in the library at Columbine High School when the tragedy that has shocked our nation began to unfold. She opened her Bible and began to read. One of the killers stopped in front of her and asked, "Do you believe in God?"

Loud enough for her classmates to hear, Cassie answered, "Yes, I believe in God!"

The gunman mockingly asked her, "Why?" and then before she could answer, he shot her dead. Cassie died for her faith.

There is no way to 'make sense' of killing like this. I will not believe that God wills evil in order to get greater good. But the fact is that after the killing was over, and the

disbelief and mourning began to set in, Cassie's younger brother found what she had written after church last Sunday. Cassie had died in the faith, and perhaps specifically FOR her faith. Cassie was a martyr. Listen again:

Now I have given up on everything else - I have found it to be the only way to really know Christ and experience the mighty power that brought him back to life again, and to find out what it means to suffer and to die with him. So, whatever it takes, I will be one who lives in the fresh newness of life of those who are alive from the dead.

These words clearly echo Philippians 3:10: *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings being made like him in his death and so somehow to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

These words echo the mission statement of our church: To know God! And what ought to be the mission statement of every Christian!

ABUNDANT LIFE BEGINS WITH LISTENING

It is obvious that Cassie had been listening to the Shepherd: ((FAITH COMES BY HEARING. MY SHEEP HEAR MY VOICE.))

We are influenced by what we hear. Making a distinction between hearing, and listening, we become what we listen to. How important that we not only hear, but listen to the Good Shepherd.

It is also sadly obvious that the two young men who did the killing were listening to voices that were not the Good Shepherd's.

ABUNDANT LIFE BEGINS WITH LISTENING

Jesus says that he leads his sheep– they follow him– go in and out and find pasture. The end result is abundance. "I have come," Jesus said, "that they might have life, and have it abundantly– to the full." (John 10:10)

HOW DO WE HEAR? HOW DO WE LISTEN? HOW DO WE FOLLOW?

. . . THREE MILE AN HOUR GOD

((It is always important to keep the Shepherd in view– at the center. It is always important to listen for his voice. But it is particularly important in the crisis times, and in the times of choosing, decision times. We never know when a crisis will come.))

THE POST RESURRECTION APPEARANCES HAVE A PATTERN:

1. THE WORD,
2. THE FELLOWSHIP
3. THE BREAKING OF BREAD

At the end of Peter's sermon in Acts 2 is this pattern repeated and embellished a bit. Luke tells us:

- They (the disciples) devoted themselves to the apostles teaching (that's the WORD)
- and fellowship (that's FELLOWSHIP)
- and to the breaking of bread (that's COMMUNION)— and Luke adds
- "and the prayers." (That is private and public conversation, on-going, in Jesus' name.)

((How do we come to know and trust the Shepherd? How do we find the Gate to the sheep? How do I find my way in a new phase in my life? How does the church chart a course to life more and more abundant?)) There's the formula:

1. The Word
2. The Fellowship
3. The Breaking of Bread
4. The Prayers

God will lead you. God will lead me. God will lead us– in and out to green pastures and still waters, and even through the valleys as we listen for his voice, the voice we know.

This is true in individual lives. People do not make a statement of consecration such as Cassie Bernall made lightly. And even though it seems such a waste– a tragedy

beyond understanding- I know in the depths of my being that Cassie's consecration was not wasted. It is something precious beyond words. And given the horror of that day, can you imagine the comfort such words bring to Cassie's parents? Bertha Munro stated as her deepest conviction: GOD WILL NOT WASTE A CONSECRATED LIFE!

This is also true for the Body of Christ, and for individual congregations. Abundant life begins when we listen for the Shepherd's guidance.

If I could be explicit on the Annual Meeting Sunday, and speak particularly to the Wollaston situation- it is important that the church listen for the voice of the Shepherd during this time of transition. It would be great if God would write instructions in the sky, or speak with an audible voice from heaven. We know that isn't usually the way He works. But God does speak.

I DON'T HAVE ANY PROFOUND WORD ABOUT THIS WEEK'S TRAGEDY

BUT I DO KNOW GOD IS WAITING TO USE PEOPLE WHO WILL LET HIS LOVE SHINE THROUGH THEM.

Probably you have thought about how it took tragedy for faith and love to come out into plain view. Tragedy seems to bring out the best as well as the worst in people. But, too, the thought that comes to us all is- why can't we at least try to show some love here in Quincy where THANK GOD there has not been a tragedy? Why can't we pray for our neighbors, and support one another in love and deeds of kindness? Thoughts like that come from tragedies like this week's. CAN WE FIND A 'BREAK-THROUGH' INTO SHOWING OUR LOVE??

IT HAPPENED TO ESTHER . . . she found a way to "break through" into active caring for others, as she heard the Shepherd's voice.

IT WILL HAPPEN WHENEVER THE SHEEP LISTEN FOR THE SHEPHERD'S VOICE

Three years ago there was a terrible tragedy somewhat like this week's in a little village in Scotland. In Dunblane a violent man shot sixteen little children and a teacher, and like Columbine High's sorrow, shocked the world.

In a book called *Everyday Passions* Rev Dorothy McRae-McMahon lifted out an incident that followed that shooting. She told of how soon after the massacre the minister of the local Church of Scotland was trying to think about God and life as he walked home one night. Her book quotes him as saying:

'As I was reflecting on all this, I made my way to the school gates which had become a center of devotion, transformed by the floral and other offerings placed there by residents and strangers alike. As I approached, the street outside the school was deserted apart from a handful of police officers, and a gang of youths aged, I suppose, about seventeen to twenty. As I watched, they took from their pockets sixteen night lights one for each dead child and, kneeling on the damp pavement, arranged them in a circle and then lit them, using glowing cigarettes to do so.

'They stood around the candles for a moment, then one of them said, 'I suppose somebody should say something.'¹ As they wondered how to do it, one of them spotted me, identified me as a minister and called me over with the words, 'You'll know what to say.'¹ Of course, the reality was quite different. As I stood there, tears streaming down my face, I had no idea what to say, or how to say it. Words had not been especially useful to me, or anyone else, in this crisis.

'So we stood, holding on to each other for a moment, and then I said a brief prayer. That was the catalyst to enable them to start praying. A question came first: 'What kind of world is this?'¹ Another asked, 'Is there any hope?'¹ Someone said, 'I wish I could trust God.'¹ 'I'll need to change,'¹ said a fourth one. As he did so, he looked first at me and then glanced over his shoulder to the police who were on duty. He reached in his pocket and I could see he had a knife. He knelt again by the ring of candles and quietly said, 'I'll not be needing this now,'¹ as he tucked it away under some of the flowers lying nearby. One of the others produced what looked like a piece of chain and did the same. We stood silently for a moment and then went our separate ways.'¹

ABUNDANT LIFE BEGINS WITH LISTENING

We hear what we listen for . . .

PRAYER (contemporary language)

O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people;
Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us
each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the
Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever.

#100 - *The Lord's My Shepherd* (Scottish Psalter, Crimond)

A Place For You

Easter 5

May 2, 1999

John 14:2

A place of belonging is at least a part of what Jesus was telling his disciples; there would be a place for them in his personal future. Where he was, they would be, and they would belong. [The importance of a sense of "place" in belonging. 'This is yours!'] A place where you "fit." A place where you are welcome.

"I'm going to prepare a place for you. , " Jesus said. "You know where I'm going, and furthermore, you know the way to where I am going."

"Oh, no, we don't!" was Thomas' response.

"I am the way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me," Jesus said.

And then Philip chimed in, "Show us the Father and it will satisfy us."

Jesus said, "If you have seen me you have seen the Father."

If you think the place Jesus is preparing is like a mansion or a hotel suite that is fine. It won't be anything less, I'm sure. But the place Jesus has prepared is more than spatial. That place in Jesus' heart for you is available right NOW!

Some years later the apostle Peter in one phrase summed up a big part of what that "place" is that Jesus is carving out for his own people– including you and me. He said, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, God's own people!" It is a phrase so rich we can rush right by and not realize how wealthy we really are if we have trusted in Jesus.

We have a place in A NEW RACE . . A new kind of HUMAN RACE! "We are A CHOSEN RACE"

This has nothing to do with our color, or economics, or nationality here. It has to do with the genetics of Calvary. The Adam of our race is Jesus, who died to sin for us all, and who was "buried to carry our sins far away. But rising he justified freely forever" and so we belong to a life that is eternal, that never "runs down" or "wears out."

We have a place in A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD. "We are A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD"

Priests stand between a holy God and sinful human beings and make sacrifices that bring God and people together. Some things we do when we worship are sacramental in nature, and priestly in function. But beyond times of worship, Christians are privileged to stand on that mysterious border between the world we can see and the very real world of fellowship with God. Christians are called to stand between God and people, and somehow make sacrifices that bring God and people together. There is a place in that royal priesthood for every Christian. For YOU!

We have a place in GOD'S KINGDOM "We are A HOLY NATION"

It may sound unpatriotic to say that God's kingdom is NOT identical to our own beloved nation. But it is true! The kingdom of God is not "of this world.," even as Jesus told Pilate. Jesus has the authority to command our first allegiance. Any person or group claiming what we claim without authority would be a dangerous sect. And whenever we waver from belonging to the kingdom we become just that: dangerous to ourselves and to all we meet. But if we say "Jesus is LORD!" we have the authority and the responsibility to be his ambassadors. After all, the Lord's prayer begins "Hallowed be thy name, THY KINGDOM COME! Thy will be done!" We live as citizens of two world.

We have a place IN GOD'S OWN FAMILY!

"We are GOD'S OWN PEOPLE" WE EXIST TO BRING PRAISE TO THE ONE WHO HAS CALLED US FROM DARKNESS INTO HIS MARVELOUS LIGHT God wants to use us to tell the world he is to be trusted - that he is GOOD that John 3:16 is true!

We have a place of our own in God's love while we look for the time when we shall take OUR PLACE in heaven that he has prepared for us.

FINDING OUR 'PLACE' HAS TO DO WITH ROCK-SOLID FOUNDATION

WHAT DO WE DO WITH 'THE ROCK'???

Either Jesus is a stumbling stone - OR the foundation for everything GOOD!

In our difficult times the knee-jerk reaction is "What shall we DO?" "Pass a new law!" Instead of focusing entirely on what is wrong (which is normal and needful) - maybe we should focus on WHAT WAS AMAZINGLY RIGHT WHEN THE STORM CAME!!

Instead of JUST looking at "Harris" and "Klebold" we need to look at the Christian response to anger and evil: an unashamed turning to God in Christ!

[Last week was no time to analyze the horror; it was time to pray for the hurting, and to marvel at the faith of those who showed us Jesus. Cassie Burnell must have been used of God, for many, many pulpits of many points of the spectrum of faith were catching her clear martyrdom faith.

[But if last week as NOT a time to look at possible reasons for our violent society, maybe this week, and this week's scriptures could be at least a starting place.

Maybe instead of just asking "What is wrong?" we ought to ask "What is RIGHT about the Christian response to evil? !!" [Closing of Sermon on Mount]

Cassie Bernall and Isaiah Shoels and the other Christian teens- the Christian response to the tragedy by parents and community - reveal the solid rock foundation that we can have in Jesus Christ!

I don't know what I would do if a loaded gun were pointed at me and I was asked "Do you believe!" But I would certainly hope that my foundation would be as solid as that 17-year-old young woman who had absolutely sold out to God!

IN THE SACRAMENTS WE COME BACK TO OUR SOLID FOUNDATION

- We affirm that we are a chosen race HIS race
- A royal priesthood HIS priests, to offer spiritual sacrifice
- A holy kingdom and HE is LORD and KING!

Two Ways to Look at Grace

Grace over and above to be reached for in our need to keep us alive in a hostile world sort of punching holes in a dark sky to let pinpoints of light shine on us. Grace permeating all of creation and life. Sacraments help us to be aware that Jesus IS Lord to be aware that wherever we are, Jesus is already HERE.

The sacraments, all our worship, remind us that Jesus goes before us. Grace is here for you and me today.

#473 The Sold Rock

THE HOLY COMMUNION

The Law Read and Confession Made

The Lord Jesus Christ has said to us: "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Shall we pray:

Search us, O God, and know our most private thoughts. Try us, and show unto us the deepest motives, the real state of our hearts. Forgive us where we have been selfish, or insensitive, or sinful in any way. We cannot keep the Great Commandment, and truly love You, O God, with all our heart, soul, and mind unless You in mercy grant to us the grace of Your indwelling Spirit. We cannot love each other as we should unless Your love is shed abroad in our hearts.

Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to draw us near to Himself so that we can come to his table with confidence.

We do not presume to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

Let us confess our faith:

The Apostles' Creed

The Informal Invitation ("This is not my table . . . ")

Holy and gracious Father; in your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin, and were worthy of death and hell, you, in your mercy sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to You, the God and Father of all.

He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

The Words of Institution

On the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had give thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat: THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

After supper he took the cup and when he had give thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me: Amen

We praise you for the mystery of our salvation! We truly believe Christ has died!
Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

Bless these emblems, O God, and make them to us the Body and Blood of your Son, spiritual food, and spiritual drink of new and unending life in Jesus Christ.

And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us:

Our Father which art in heaven . . .

Now, humbly we receive the Gifts of God for the People of God

(Today we will (please) hold the elements and partake together)

Marvelous Light of Gods Grace

May 2, 1999 - cf. May 5, 1996

Last week was no time to analyze the horror; it was time to pray for the hurting, and to marvel at the faith of those who showed us Jesus. Cassie Burnell must have been used of God, for many, many pulpits of many points of the spectrum of faith were catching her clear martyrdom faith.

But if last week as NOT a time to look at possible reasons for our violent society, maybe this week, and this week's scriptures could be at least a starting place.

- Foundations/ Cornerstones
- Habitat Housing in Hurricanes
- Owner-built, and extra nails
- Closing of Sermon on Mount
- WHERE WE ARE IN SOCIETY CONTRASTED WITH WHERE WE ARE IN JESUS CHRIST

(The following is NOT a manuscript, nor a complete set of notes for the May 5 sermon; more of a diary of what I was thinking about before during and after I stepped into the pulpit last Sunday. RFM)

Communion Meditation

Acts 7; 1 Peter 2:9; John 14: 1 14

Introduction

Today we need to learn again something which we already know, but which come to us in the words of Peter:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Who We Are

If we are Christians, and can say from our hearts with the help of the Spirit, "Jesus is Lord!" then these statements apply to us now, in the present.

- **We ARE . . .A CHOSEN RACE.**

This has nothing to do with our color, or economics, or nationality here. It has to do with the genetics of Calvary. The Adam of our race is Jesus, who died to sin for us all, and who was "buried to carry our sins far away. But rising he justified freely forever" and so we belong to a life that is eternal, that never "runs down" or "wears out."

- **We ARE . . .A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD.**

Priests stand between a holy God and sinful human beings and make sacrifices that bring God and people together. Some things we do when we worship are sacramental in nature, and priestly in function. But beyond times of worship, Christians are called to stand between God and people, and somehow make sacrifices that bring God and people together.

- **We ARE . . .A HOLY NATION, GOD'S OWN PEOPLE.**

Any person or group claiming what we claim without authority would be a dangerous sect. And whenever we waver from belonging to the kingdom we become just that: dangerous to ourselves and to all we meet. But if we say "Jesus is LORD!" we have the authority and the responsibility to be his ambassadors. After all, the Lord's prayer begins "Hallowed be thy name, THY KINGDOM COME! Thy will be done!" We live as citizens of two world. WE EXIST TO BRING PRAISE TO THE ONE WHO HAS CALLED US FROM DARKNESS INTO HIS MARVELOUS LIGHT God wants to use us to tell the world he is to be trusted that he is GOOD that John 3:16 is true!

AN EXAMPLE OF LIVING OUT THIS SPIRITUAL REALITY

The early church reached the end of the earth in a generation. There were great miracles along the way. There were stories of deliverance from illness and death and

danger. But those stories actually are incidental to the march of the kingdom.

One of the very first stories is that of Stephen the deacon who became the first martyr. He proved he belonged to a chosen race by his spirit. He was unafraid to confront unbelievers when they questioned him about the faith. All the disciples did that. But in Stephen's case his confrontation brought persecution to the extreme. And his spirit did not waver there was a gentleness, a forgiving spirit, and a vision of the eternal that proved he belonged to a higher plane of life. As a royal priesthood we have never forgotten the sacrifice Stephen made.

What kind of sacrifices do we of the royal priesthood make? (Laura Kottis raised this question in our study last Wednesday evening.) Whenever a Christian, living in this world, in this limited flesh, obeys the Spirit, and says "No" to the so called "wisdom of this world" he or she is making a sacrifice that is acceptable to God (Romans 12:1,2) and is bringing heaven and earth together. Not too many we know have been called upon to make the kind of sacrifice Stephen made, although thousands still make it in other parts of this world. Stephen saw the throne of the royal kingdom that day. He saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God the Father.

But of course that was not the end of the story. In God's kingdom there never is a final end of good things. Stephen's sacrifice brought God and a young man named Saul closer together. Stephen had his part in everything God did through the ministry of the Apostle Paul.

JESUS IS THE KEY TO WHO AND WHAT WE ARE (JOHN 14:)

Before Pentecost, before the Resurrection, before Calvary Jesus told the disciples about this life we Christians know. He told them that there was plenty of room in the kingdom for all of them, and that he, Jesus himself, would prepare a place in the kingdom and makes sure they found their place.

He said, "Where I am going you know, and the way to get there you know." Thomas was like us, all too often. he was thinking strictly in this world's thought mode, of what he could see and handle. "Lord, we DON'T know about heaven! We've never

been there! How can we ever know the way?" Jesus answered: "If you know ME, Thomas, then you know the way to God!"

Philip said then, "Show us God the Father and we will be satisfied!" (The Jews had the highest imaginable concepts of God, and have passed that reverence on down to us if we will but receive it: no pictures of God no portrayals for that would be to construct an idol. So what Jesus then said would either be the highest blasphemy possible OR the declaration of a wonderful revelation:) Jesus said, "If you know ME, you know God! If I am with you, God is with you!

I am with you, and I will be IN YOU!" (He was speaking of the Spirit who would inhabit the church beginning at Pentecost!)

PRAYER (contemporary language) Almighty god, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

IN THE SACRAMENTS WE SEEK TO DO JUST THAT: TO KNOW JESUS BETTER We affirm that we are a chosen race HIS race A royal priesthood HIS priests, to offer spiritual sacrifice A holy kingdom and HE is LORD and KING!

Two Ways To Look At Grace

Grace over and above to be reached for in our need to keep us alive in a hostile world sort of punching holes in a dark sky to let pinpoints of light shine on us

Grace permeating all of creation and life. Sacraments help us to be aware that Jesus IS Lord to be aware that wherever we are Jesus is already HERE.

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The Lord Jesus Christ has said to us: "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

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Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to draw us near to Himself so that we can come to his table with confidence. We do not presume to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

Let us confess our faith: **The Nicene Creed** (STL # 14)

The Informal Invitation ("This is not my table . . . ")

Holy and gracious Father; in your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin, and were worthy of death and hell, you, in your mercy sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to You, the God and Father of all.

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The Words of Institution

Marvelous Light of Gods Grace

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After supper he took the cup and when he had give thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me: Amen

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A Reason for Sharing the Jesus Film

May 9, 1999, from May 11, 1996

1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-22

One of the most significant, and by all accounts, the most effective project for sharing the Good News of salvation, at least in recent years, is the simple showing of a motion picture, The Jesus Film. I don't know exactly how it got started, but I do know that Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ asked our denomination if we would team up with him in distributing the Gospel of Luke, the words and story of Jesus. As you may have heard Ned Yankovich say last Sunday, more people have seen this movie than any other moving picture on the face of the earth.

World-wide, nearly half of the people who see this film have made some profession of faith in Jesus. Literally millions have been introduced to Jesus by this film.

SO- what does that have to do with us here in good old Massachusetts, in the beautiful little city of Quincy? Well, the Jesus Film has reached even to us! We can have a part in this sharing of the Good News. And I could not imagine a more gentle, neighborly, way of getting the Good News out to our community.

(Recall last week's text, 1 Peter 2:9. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, God's own people— that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.") Today's text picks up on last week's concept of proclamation: Peter says "Be always ready to give a reason for the hope that is in you."

We will use a tool: handing people a free video. But WHY we do it is just as important as HOW we do it; the SPIRIT of what we do is always more important than the actual words: the things we do for God always ought to come from the heart. That is true, even if it is as simple a thing as handing people a free video and a package of microwave popcorn. Why should we participate in The Jesus Film?

I. TELLING PEOPLE GOD IS GOOD

There is no question that God's people are supposed to tell the world that God is good. The code-word in the church is "witnessing." All my life I've been told I need to "witness." And usually I feel vaguely guilty about it because I know I don't do it very well. Right here I want to tell you I am not going to put guilt on you if you are not high pressuring people about spiritual things. But how do we tell others that God is good? Peter gives some clear directives for telling people about our hope. He says:

- Sanctify the Lord God in your heart. Make certain that Jesus is Lord.
- Be ready where people are. Be prepared. (The best preparation is simply staying on good terms with Jesus all the time.) If someone asked you who Jesus is to you, are you prepared to tell him or her?
- Do it with extreme gentleness and courtesy, respect for the person to whom you are speaking. We will not win people to Jesus without the spirit of Jesus. Our spirit must be congruent with the love of God. (Yes, Jesus got angry at times— but those people he drove OUT of the temple, not IN!)

Illustration: Verne Ward, missionary to Papua New Guinea, who was here with his wife Natalie a few years ago for "Say Yes!" worked for several years in some of the most primitive culture on earth. Every bush, rock, tree has "spirits" and the people were ruled by what we would call "witch doctors."

One day Verne saw a witch doctor talking with one of his Christian people and it made him angry. He came up and "shooed" the man away in no uncertain tones. He was protecting his little flock.

But then as he walked away along the trail it seemed that God spoke to him about the way he had spoken to the witch doctor. Verne made his way back along the trail until he located the man. According to the custom of that culture, which Verne had learned, Verne sat down on the ground silently and waited for the man to recognize his presence. When finally the man spoke, Verne asked him, asked the witch doctor to forgive him

for being rude. He made it clear that the God he served was not unkind, and that he loves everyone. Then he went on his way.

The story of that witch doctor's conversion is too long to tell here. God spoke clearly to him, almost like he did to Saul of Tarsus on the Road to Damascus. But it began with simple gentleness and courtesy, and the humanness of an American missionary who was big enough to apologize, and to ask a New Guinea Witch doctor for pardon.

Our spirit must be in harmony with the words we speak. We cannot tell people about a God who loves them when we don't love them. We can't simply throw money at the world's problems. We can't simply buy the latest games and clothes for our children, and leave them for the television to educate and call that giving a reason for the hope that lies in us.

We cannot really LOVE by 'remote control.' We say our love with words— and that is important But we really say our love with our spirit— with our time and with our presence.

Illustration: There is an old country tear-jerker ballad called *Roses for Mama* that tells the story of a going into the florist to order flowers sent to his mother for Mother's Day— he is going elsewhere. A little boy comes in with just a little money to buy for his mother. I think the first man helps the little boy buy a few more flowers, but anyway the next verse takes our flower order-er past the cemetery where he see the boy laying flowers on his mother's grave— Whereupon he turns around and goes back to the florist— asks if the flowers have been delivered yet— and then delivers them himself.

Our spirits must say the same things that our words say. We may not even be able to say the absolutely correct thing— but if we care, and if we are there— God will help us get the word of HOPE where it belongs.

Peter's word is not the final one on this matter. Jesus himself says, "If you love me you will love each other, as I have commanded you." He tells us that if we will love him and love each other we will never be alone.

II. TELLING PEOPLE GOD IS GOOD ACTUALLY BRINGS GOD NEAR

It may have been my fault, the way I heard it. But I thought that witnessing was trying to persuade hostile people to become something they didn't really want to become. All Jesus asks us to do is to love Him, and love people, and then let them know we care and God cares. This is saying, "GOD IS GOOD!"

Illustration: The Russian Count Leo Tolstoy wrote a short story called "Where Love Is, There is God," that actually is a beautiful picture of what Jesus was telling us when he said "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." It told of a humble cobbler, a shoemaker, named Martin Avdeich, a widower who worked in a basement shop that had but one window at street level. From that lowly position Martin could only see the boots of people passing by in the street outside his shop. After the loss of his wife and the tragic death of his only son, he became despondent and hopeless. He wished to die.

"How shall we live for God?" he asked a visiting countryman who had just returned from a eight years of pilgrimage. The old holy man reminded him "Christ has shown us how to live for God. Do you know how to read? If so, buy yourself a Gospel and read it, and you will learn from it how to live for God. It tells all about it."

So after the man departed, Martin did what he had been instructed to do: he began to study scripture. His heart was lifted. His life began to change. He was happy simply in the seeking. But one night as he was reading late into the night he put his head down on the table and not knowing if he was asleep or awake he heard a voice which he believed to be that of Christ: "Tomorrow I will come to the street!" And so, expecting a miraculous appearance, he began the next day to look for a visit from Jesus.

As he waited, expecting a knock at his door, he attended to the needs of those passing by his window an old man who had come to shovel the snow from his sidewalk whom he invited in for hot tea; a poor woman with her infant child, whom he fed and offered his cloak; and, finally, a young boy caught in the act of theft, whom he spared from a beating reconciled with his intended victim.

Finally, the cobbler realized that the day had drawn to a close, and he searched his mind to interpret the voice he had heard and make sense of the absence of his promised visitor. In the growing darkness, he heard a voice calling to him: "Martin, oh Martin, have you not recognized me?" One by one, those whom he had helped during the day appeared to him in a dream. After the last of them departed, he opened his Bible and his eyes fell upon the text from Matthew twenty five: "Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of these, the least of mine, my brothers, you have done it unto me."

Tolstoy concludes: "And Martin Avdeich understood that his dream come true, that the Savior had really come to him on that day, and that he had received Him."

We think "To know Christ is to love Him." We think "If Jesus makes himself known to me then I will surely give him all my love." But the fact is we will see Jesus when we love Him; we will come to know Christ when we learn to serve one another in love. To love him is to know him.

III. TELLING PEOPLE 'GOD IS GOOD' IS REDEMPTIVE

(Finally) When we incarnate love to others— when we express to them the fact that God cares and we do, too— we may do more than save a soul— we may redeem a life. Every one of us has had a teacher or a Sunday School teacher or a camp counselor along the way that has made a lasting impression on us. Sometimes that impression may be negative. Sometimes that word of hope goes far beyond what that person dreams of.

Illustration: Bertha Munro prayed for me. (Hector Hawkins was mean to me!)

Charlie and Gladys Caldwell sponsored junior high kids years and years ago. Many of them are old enough to have their own kids in junior high now and more. But they still remember the love they got at church from their junior high sponsors!

R. C. Sproul is one of the leading evangelical Presbyterian theologian-writers. I have heard him tell in person about what it was that first gave him courage to become a scholar. A second grade teacher pinned one of his papers on the bulletin board at school and said, "R. C, you can write!"

Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts— and then gently, and with great respect— this week be ready to tell people that God is good. If we get ready to tell them, we'll certainly have a chance to say it: "GOD IS GOOD!" And if we have a chance, and if we tell them— who knows !!!

Prayer

Hymn - (Prayer Chorus, actually) *Open Our Eyes* #459

The Third Great Day of the Church

May 22, 1999 - Pentecost Sunday

John 7:37-39 On the last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty let them come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

Today is one of three great celebration days in the church year. Yet when the day has come and gone many Protestant churches won't even know it was Pentecost. The other two great days, Christmas and Easter, are adopted into the culture, and celebrated by many non-Christians. Christmas becomes a family time at the winter solstice; Easter a celebration of the return of spring. But so far the secular world has not discovered Pentecost, and so many Christians don't even know it exists, or why it is such a great day.

CHRISTMAS AND EASTER

We all understand the how and why of Christmas and Easter— don't we? Christmas is when God stooped low, and took on our humanity and walked and talked among us—the greatest of all miracles to believe. Easter is when God in that only begotten Son took our sins and nailed them to the cross and provided eternal life for us. But Pentecost— just what did God do then? The fact is without Pentecost we would have no way of personally connecting with either Christmas or Easter.

PENTECOST Is A Little More Mysterious.

In the wisdom of God it is a Jewish Feast that has been assimilated into the framework of God's Master Plan of Salvation through his Son, Jesus Christ.

The Jewish Feast of Pentecost was (1) a feast of First Fruit; the first harvests of summer were coming in, with the promise of more to come. Also (2) Pentecost came to be celebrated as thanks for the giving of the Law on Sinai.

The Third Great Day of the Church

That first Christian Pentecost a number of wonderful things took place. The sound of a mighty wind brought people running– there was a manifestation of God's Presence that seemed like tongues of fire. And wonder of wonders, every foreigner in the gathering crowd- Luke mentions sixteen different nationalities- heard the Good News about JESUS in a language they could easily understand. It was Babel reversed! THEN- at Babel- humans thought they could answer all questions and reach heaven on their own intelligence and the result was total confusion. HERE- at Pentecost- men and women humbly sought to let heaven reach to where they were, and the result was a universal language of God's great love reaching in and through them to everyone there.

WE have picked up on the symbols of wind and fire and languages. We speak of Pentecost as bringing purity and power. We have codified the coming of the Spirit, and often have limited it in our circles of preaching to a second crisis of consecration and cleansing. But the fact remains that Pentecost is mysterious. We can't "explain" it, or make it "fit" our grids and frameworks.

But we can understand that somehow Pentecost is at the very life and soul of the church. Pentecost is when the Church was born. And since that time every Christian who has ever been born again has experienced a measure of Pentecost– for Pentecost is nothing less than the life of God in Christ brought right into our very beings. (Romans 8:9) "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ he is none of his!"

What is Pentecost supposed to mean today? How do we properly celebrate this Third Great Day which is just as important as Christmas and Easter?

1. Recognize: YOU ARE (ALREADY) A PENTECOST CHRISTIAN! There is life within you if you have received Jesus!
2. Respond: THE SPIRIT IS ALWAYS WILLING TO TAKE US DEEPER
3. Receive: ASK FOR A FRESH IN-FILLING!

Jesus said that whenever two or three are gathered in his name, there

he will be in their midst. In the life of any congregation there are times of challenge, crisis, even peril. There are times when we may be tempted to forget that God is in

charge even in the hard times. But Pentecost is a reminder that God is not distant, not uninterested in what we're doing or where we are. The Holy Spirit is at work in us creating a new sense of unity of purpose and mission. The Holy Spirit is present as we begin to act together in the Spirit.

PENTECOST is re- discovering that God is in you, and in us, as we live in the light of the resurrection. It is not simply a memory of the living Christ of Christmas, or even just praise that our sins are forgiven and we will live in heaven forever, but it is grasping God's call to embody Christ for one another. Amen.

In Pentecost the LIFE of God has reached even where we are. But it calls us to where we have never dared go before!

(Have you ever been swimming in a river? It can be a moving experience! :-))

One wonderful image likens the life of God in the Holy Spirit to a mighty flowing river proceeding from the Throne of God. The water is life-giving, refreshing. As we stand in the river the water flows against us and around us. It seeks to move us with it, but if we resists, perhaps fearful, perhaps unwilling to let go and surrender fully, it moves around us, pushing on toward its destination. Yet the current is there, ready to move us when we are ready to let go and let God.

Prayer:

Almighty God, who on this day opened the way of eternal life to every race and nation by the promised gift of your Holy Spirit: Shed abroad this gift throughout the world by the preaching of the Gospel, that it may reach to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Alternative closing exhortation: "Warning" that to let go into the flow of the River may sweep you away where life can never be the same . . .

[One time Bob Hope spoke at a college commencement. "The world is out there, waiting for you," he told the graduates. Then Hope added a fervent, "Don't go!"

The Third Great Day of the Church

Once Moses was living the comfortable life of a shepherd. One day, however, he sees burning bush that was not consumed by the flame. He goes closer to investigate, and he hears the voice of God.

So, when you see divine fire, beware! God is calling you. The world needs you. And your first impulse will be, "don't go!" Just believe a few dogmas, just sing a few hymns, just pray a few prayers.

However, if you do hear the Lord's voice, if you do take Jesus' teachings to heart, if you do vow to be faithful to the gospel then the world will never be the same again!]

Majesty Mystery Mercy

Trinity Sunday

May 30, 1999

Isaiah 6:1-9a

THE STORY

Isaiah was in the temple when it happened. That was not unusual: Isaiah was a prophet in good standing. He had stood before King Uzziah many times and proclaimed his vision for God's people. He was in the mainstream of the best in Israel's faithful.

Isaiah had come for the usual reasons: he needed renewal and refreshing. He always felt better when he had worshiped. (That's why we're here, isn't it?) But somehow this day the focus swung away from Isaiah's hopes and Isaiah's expectations. And all of a sudden Isaiah got a glimpse into the majesty and the mystery that is Almighty God! The most important thing in your life and mine is the nature of our God, and our relationship to Him.

GOD BEGAN TO REVEAL HIMSELF TO ISAIAH

THERE WAS MAJESTY - When God Almighty reveals Himself in any measure there is also a corresponding sense of awe or reverence. The temple in which the prophet was worshiping was beautiful. But God's Presence is a beauty and majesty of a different quality altogether. I love to worship- thank God for the many ways in which we express praise to God- but when God chooses to reveal Himself- whenever there is that unmistakable Presence- there is majesty.

THERE WAS MYSTERY - When God comes near it is more than a "good time." In Isaiah's vision there is an awesome, almost eerie sense of God the "other." There is a disturbing, almost frightening quality to awareness of the holiness of God coming near.

You could say that God has a problem in communicating with us: if He wants to come near he has "to be careful" on two important counts: (1) we are finite, and can't really grasp the dimensions of eternity; and (2) we are sinful, and don't begin to understand the utter power and sheer white-hot energy of pure holiness.

GOD ALSO BEGAN TO REVEAL ISAIAH TO HIMSELF

The most important thing in your life and mine is the nature of our God, and our relationship to Him.

When God comes near- when we begin to recognize how He loves us- we begin to get a glimpse of ourselves as we really are. God is majesty, and he is mystery, but that LIGHT shines where we are and we begin to see things about ourselves we had not seen before. (Like shafts of sunlight in a darkened room, we see tiny little swirling particles of dust . . .) Isaiah cried out with the self-revelation: WOE is me!

The painful thing to Isaiah was fact that he was a GOOD man, and yet as he had the opportunity to draw nearer to God instead of being affirmed and having his needs met, Isaiah began to see himself as sinful and needy.

Every time God draws near the focus is not on how good I feel, or how great "I" am, but on HOW GREAT THOU ART! Peter: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man!" John: "I fell at his feet as dead!"

But that self-revelation as not the end of the vision:

THERE WAS MERCY!

GOD HAD EXACTLY WHAT ISAIAH NEEDED

With the revelation of his own need, and with his cry of "Woe is me!" Isaiah moved up to a new level in his walk with God. It came (in what always seemed to me a s boy hearing this message) in a strange way: with a live coal from off the altar of God.

This was NOT to torment Isaiah, however- it was not to sear his lips so he could not speak; quite the contrary it was cleansing, illuminating, purifying FIRE! Isaiah began to experience the greatest luxury, perhaps, that mortals can know: Isaiah was clean,

in God's Presence (7)!! ISAIAH ENTERED INTO GOD'S FELLOWSHIP IN A WAY HE HAD NOT KNOW BEFORE.

CONCLUSION - UNIQUE and UNIVERSAL dimensions of Isaiah's vision:

WHO was Isaiah? He was NOT a casual worshiper. (Why "the year that King Uzziah died"? Removal of royal 'prop'?)

TO WHOM does God reveal Himself? Hebrews 11:6 TO SEEKERS! The most important thing in your life and mine is the nature of our God, and our relationship to Him.

Chances are no one will ever have another vision exactly like Isaiah's. But the promise is there: IF WE ARE SEEKERS AFTER GOD, GOD WILL REWARD US WITH HIMSELF!

There is a big difference in TALKING about seeking, and actually putting God at the center of our lives and SEEKING HIM. We are experts on doctrine; we can tick off the steps to discipleship– but not many of us are very well acquainted with this great GOD who is so GREAT he shakes temples, and so HOLY he makes us see our SIN and yet so TENDER AND KIND that he comes where we are with holy FIRE to touch our lips and our hearts.

TALKING about God is pretty "boring" and "tame" compared to, say, a trip to Disney World, or even a gospel concert . . . UNTIL ONE DAY AS WE EARNESTLY SEEK GOD COMES!

I was 18 years old before I ever saw the ocean. I had read about it. Intellectually I understood that it was vast. But since I first got a glimpse of it– here at the end of this street– and then out at Nantasket Beach– then flying over it a number of times - - then watching it in hurricane-force waves– I began to realize that I could never know the ocean just by reading about it. As a matter of fact, I know there is a sense in which I don't know the ocean very much at all!

We could say the same for all the great wonders of God's creation– and they are just handiwork that point to the great God beyond, a God we can KNOW, and whom we can never FATHOM. David said: "When I consider the heavens, the work of thy

fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast ordained, what are WE that you are mindful of US, or our children that you visit us?"

Today we think of the TRINITY– the God who is OVER us, and who is WITH us, and who is IN us. The doctrine of the Trinity is not a fascinating puzzle for our holy amusement, but in some wonderful way it is God's own revelation to us of His love. Our God is so great as to be unspeakable in his glory, and yet so condescending that he has taken our nature, and speaks in our language to show us how we may live– and a God so very near that he is with us HERE as we worship.

Prayer

Hymn

The God Who Comes Alongside

DRAW NEAR TO GOD

Trinity Sunday

May 30, 1999

The Hayford Street gang story.

When I was about 7 or 8 years old we moved into our very first house of our own; I had a room of my own— on Magnolia Street in Lansing Michigan.

The Hayford Street gang story. Has become a metaphor for my life . . .

I DON'T KNOW what Isaiah faced. He was in the temple. Maybe for the usual reasons . . maybe he was feeling loss (Uzziah died . .) I don't know, but the focus went from Isaiah's needs to a sense of God's Presence. God came alongside.

There was MAJESTY and there was MYSTERY — but there was also MERCY: Isaiah saw himself in new light; but he also got help.

FIFTY YEARS AGO this very year I discovered Isaiah 41:10 on the way to Eastern Nazarene College in early September, 1949, in the Durkee's new Plymouth. The occasion was evening bible reading. I didn't know where I was, but God not only knew, He let me know that He knew.

And many times since. This is TRINITY SUNDAY. The Sunday when we are challenged to ponder the MAJESTY and the MYSTERY of our great God. But best of all, we have a God who comes alongside when we need Him.

I don't know where YOU are on your spiritual journey this morning. I don't know what has motivated you to be here in worship. I don't know what storms you've come through, or what you may be facing just now. But I do know that we have a God who is there for us! I do know that true worship is a two-way conversation!

The God Who Comes Alongside

We have a great and wonderful God, who fills the heavens. But this great God comes alongside and lets us walk with Him. He is nearer than we think— every day of our lives. From time to time He lets us know.

Prayer

O God, thank you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for your majesty, and for the wonder of your glory. But thank You most of all that you CARE, and that you COME to where we are. Help us to learn to walk with You. We ask in our Savior's name, Amen - Hymn

The Call of and to Faith

June 6, 1999

Genesis 12:1-9; Matthew 9: (call of Matthew)

Our lessons today, the stories of Abraham and Matthew being called, pick where last week's message left off. The (last week) we told again of a God who comes alongside us as we go through the living of our lives. Today, another facet of that Presence: a God who calls to us wherever we happen to be to come alongside HIM, and get in step with Him where He is going.

Abraham and Matthew were centuries and cultures apart, and in very different circumstances. But both were quite well situated, well off, when the divine challenge came.

I don't know how God spoke to Abraham. Somehow we think it must have been easier in Bible times to discern the voice of God. But I'm not so sure that it was all that simple. I DO know that Abraham did not know where he was going when he left Ur of the Chaldeas. He was convinced of one thing: it was God calling. So Abraham followed the call and BEGAN his walk to a new level of life.

Abraham didn't arrive in a day, or a month, or a year. That walk with God never really ended. It is still going on. But God led Abraham from strength to strength, from trial to testing, and he became a blessing to the entire world.

I KNOW how God spoke to Matthew: it was the human voice of the Savior. But you and I don't know how Matthew knew Jesus was for real, and not just another prophet-for-profit sort of preacher. I do know that when Matthew heard Jesus say, "Come, follow Me" Matthew simply stood up and left his tax business and followed.

Matthew didn't know where he was going either. But Matthew had caught a glimpse of the holy and true and good. He wanted to be where Jesus was. So he took the opportunity to get in step with Him.

IN EVERY CALL OF GOD IS THE CALL TO REPENT

WE NEED TO REPENT OF SIN AND SINFULNESS

To "repent" means to turn from our own wicked way, and seek the path of righteousness. Isaiah tells us "we have turned every one to his own way." God's call makes it possible to turn out of the pathway of sinfulness and be forgiven. "The Lord has laid on (Jesus) the iniquity of us all."

THE CALL TO REPENT IS AN ON-GOING CALL

The Lord's Prayer has a built in adjustment for course-correction. It doesn't say "Forgive THEM– those mean and rotten sinners OUTSIDE the church . . ." It says "Forgive US our debts! ...our trespasses." It doesn't mean we're rebellious and have deliberately walked away. Quite the contrary, it means we accept correction.

IN EVERY CASE THE CALL OF GOD IS A CALL TO LEARN AND GROW

God does not stand still. HIS life carries us forward. The life of Abraham is a great example of how God calls . . . and calls . . . and calls.

First Abraham left Ur . . . then he decided not to argue and fight but let God choose his way . . . then (15:6) he came to a firm COVENANT with God . . . then (17) he was challenged to be marked for life (CIRCUMCISION) . . . and when he was more than 115 years old came maybe the hardest test of his following the CAL– Issac!

IN EVERY CASE THE CALL OF GOD IS TO GROW AND GROW FOR LIFE!

That last challenge to Abraham resulted in what unbelievers see as BIZARRE . . . some sort of pagan cult story; but faith sees as a portrait of God's great Father-Love– giving, saving, redeeming!

CONCLUSION

God does come alongside us in every challenge of our lives. He is here for us today. But, too, God challenges us to come alongside Him and walk with Him, and let Him take us where He is going.

THE HOLY COMMUNION

Wherever you are on your Spiritual Journey - If you believe God is seeking fellowship with you— and if you want to turn to Him, I invite you to come in faith to the Table of the Lord. Draw near with faith and take this Sacrament to your comfort, and make your humble confession to Almighty God in humility before Him.

The Apostles Creed

The Law Read and Confession Made - The Lord Jesus Christ has said to us: "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to draw us near to Himself so that we can come to his table with confidence.

(Reading No. 750) A prayer in unison, from scripture:

Unison: Search me, O God, and know my heart; Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me. Lead me in the way everlasting. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Pastor: Jesus our Savior Himself said: Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. And he has also said, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Prayer: Thank you, O God, for your forgiving us when we come humbly to you. We do not presume to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

The Call of and to Faith

(In Place of Gloria Patri) sing "Father, I Adore You, Lay my life before You How I love you! "Jesus, I adore you . . ." and :Spirit, I adore you . . ."

The Informal Invitation ("This is not my table . . . " Do not come irreverently. Do not come because someone else expects it. But if the Host invites you, and you want to walk with Him, then you are welcome at His table...)

The Words of Institution

On the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat: THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me. After supper he took the cup and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me: Amen

We praise you for the mystery of our salvation! We truly believe Christ has died!
Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

Bless these emblems, O God, and make them to us the Body and Blood of your Son, spiritual food, and spiritual drink of new and unending life in Jesus Christ.

And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us: Our Father which art in heaven . . .

Now, humbly come and receive the Gifts of God for the People of God

#754 God of the Ages

Making God Welcome

Hospitality of the Heart

June 13, 1999

Genesis 18; Romans 5:1-11

One bright, warm spring morning Abraham was sitting outside his tent set up on a small hilltop, overlooking miles and miles of his flocks and herds and the tents of his servants and their families when something unexpected took place. God dropped by for a visit.

God's appearance was not like anything Abraham could invent or imagine, and yet Abraham did not seem surprised that God chose to reveal Himself as He did. Then, as wonderful or amazing that God should come for a visit, even more amazing— even unbelievable was what God told Abraham that afternoon.

"You're going to have a son! A year from right now you'll be parents of your own child!"

Sarah was listening just a few short feet away behind the tent flap. The flap shook just a little bit, and the Visitor said, "Why is Sarah laughing?"

Sarah stuck her head out the tent flap and said, "I'm not laughing!"

"Oh, yes you are," smiled the Visitor. "But it is true all the same! You're going to have a baby!"

The Promise seemed both remote and impossible. But Abraham took pains to make God at home with him. Not simply in this incident which reveals the mind-set formed across years of faith and obedience, but as a way of life Abraham cultivated a walk with God. And the result was great and far-reaching blessing.

Abraham entertained God. It couldn't have been "the expected." Three men, addressed as "My LORD." Abraham knew it was a visitation from God, and he did his best to make God welcome. The result was God's agenda for Abraham and Sarah.

THAT was unexpected as well. But certainly welcome. The result was also a role in God's agenda for Lot. Abraham became an intercessor. It began when Abraham made room for God. HOSPITALITY: Making room. Making space. An act of the will. Deliberate. For God, room. Then for God's thoughts, room. Which means – for people, room.

HOW IMPORTANT IS HOSPITALITY??

Hospitality is not necessarily a certain way of welcoming people; it is rather an opening of the heart to them. I have been entertained in luxurious circumstances, and made to feel absolutely welcome and at home. But it was not the luxury that made me comfortable. I have been entertained in very humble surroundings, and once again, have been made to feel welcome. Hospitality, as Henri Nouwen might define it, is making space where it counts in the heart.

This passage of scripture sent me back to an old favorite book that may be your favorite, too: *Reaching Out*, by Nouwen. In that book hospitality is an important word, and he speaks of three movements toward making space: in ourselves, toward others, and toward God. They seem to fit this message today:

We need space within our hearts for ourselves. We need time alone, with ourselves. We need quiet. Tomorrow. Next week. After I get this project done. But if, like Abraham, we were visited today by a theophany, and manifestation of God, would we, could we possibly recognize and welcome God to our homes and our tables?

We need to make space in our hearts for each other, for people. Nouwen calls it "moving from hostility to hospitality." We might call it being aware of our basic attitude toward others: defensive, fearing, suspicious after all this is the real world and then asking God to help us make space for genuine compassion: compassion feeling what others are feeling!

How we really feel about others becomes an aura that welcomes or shuts out. Do you think churches can have auras?

Finally, or maybe first of all, we need to make space in our lives for listening to God. Moving from faith to faith. Moving from sporadic experience to trusting relationship. Moving from 'what has God done for me lately' to 'What is God saying to me NOW!'

CLOSING STORY

A story of hospitality...

Holy Spirit, Thou art Welcome 306

A Valedictory for Wollaston

Pastor Metcalfe's final annual report to the Wollaston Church of the Nazarene congregation.

June 27, 1999

1 Corinthians 3:21-23

Our message this morning is one of praise and thanks to God, and of thanks to you, the Wollaston church family. Our words may be more testimony than sermon, but these are valedictory words.

A lot of good things have happened around here these past 22 years. Yes, there have been some failures and tough times as well. In our personal valleys the church family has been there for us, and we are grateful.

We've been through two major building projects: the erection of this sanctuary, and the transformation of the lower 800-seat sanctuary into a multi-use facility. E.N.C. alumnus Jim Couchenour was God's instrument in challenging us to believe we could go ahead and build, and you went ahead and did just that.

In 1983 Merritt and Linda and Jeremy and Jennifer Nielson came, to be joined later by Brandon and Andrew. Merritt and I have been colleagues now for sixteen years, and he has been at the very heart of many good things that are now part of Wollaston's ministry heritage. "Say Yes!", Second Church in Dorchester- a Church of the Nazarene, Quincy Chinese Church- and much more would not have happened without Merritt's vision and key input. And as a matter of fact, Merritt has served in a pastoral relationship here in Wollaston longer than anyone else- except for the one speaking to you now.

I have asked Merritt to share in this valedictory this morning, our last worship service as pastors here. Merritt: [seven minutes]

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A Valedictory for Wollaston

I can not hope to summarize two decades of worship together in the time we have. But I want to express my gratitude to God and my thanks to you for the privilege of being called "Pastor" and the honor of having your confidence.

You have been kind and generous: you sent Helen and me on a cruise in the Caribbean when we had been here ten years. In our twentieth year you sent us on vacation in Switzerland (and even gave us round-trip tickets!) On two occasions, beginning in 1982, we had pulpit exchanges with Paisley, Scotland, and Brian and Joyce Farmer were your summer pastors here while we enjoyed the hospitality of the folk there. Many great friendships on both sides came out of that exchange. They preceded us in retirement by just one month, but I have a feeling you'll see them again a time or two in the future.

Many honors have come our way more than we ever expected or deserved: I've come to know the leaders of our church, local, district and general. We were "minister-in-residence" at N.T.S. for a week; we've had writing assignments from different departments in Kansas City; we've been a camp meeting speaker, and held prayer and ministry seminars and revivals on several districts other than New England. But no honor has been more precious to us being your pastor.

We have had the privilege to be with many of you in significant and insignificant times in your lives. I've held newborn babies. I've sat with the dying. I've had part in memorial services for great and humble people whom I revered more than I could tell you. I've married and dedicated and baptized and all with a sense of wonder and awe that God would ever use me as pastor.

I have seen families blossom as covenants have been honored. I've seen character develop into Christ-likeness even through great adversity and opposition. I've had great disappointments, as has just about every family represented here; but God has been with us, and is with us now, and He will be with us.

We have developed and grown together in the way we have worshiped, emphasizing scripture and celebrating our full heritage in the Church of Jesus Christ.

My first sermon here was on July 3, 1977. I preached it in nine minutes flat, and the church board and pulpit committee: Ruth Bullock, Chuck Gailey, Lowell Hall, and Cecil Paul must have felt like maybe they had made a big mistake. [I have said that the ghost of Dr. J. Glenn Gould followed me out on the platform that morning, and I confess I think he did intimidate me a bit!] I never did preach that sermon again, although the message is still with me, and it is this:

"Let no one glory in the merely human. For all things are yours: Paul, Apollos, Peter, the world, life, death, things present, things to come, all are yours, and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's." (I Co 3:21-23, par.)

That rich promise is just as true this morning as it was twenty-two years ago. That message is bright with hope: if we depend on our own wisdom and strength we will certainly fail, but because we are in Jesus Christ we are standing on tip-toe with possibility. This is a valedictory– a farewell. But if all things are ours, and we are Christ's and Christ is God's, then even in this farewell and change we can celebrate. Paul Cunningham prayed a prayer that Merritt remembered and wrote down for us this spring. He said,

- The future is your friend.
- You have nothing to fear.
- God is already there!

Prayer: Father God we have everything to thank you for, and now we commit our ways to You. You know us, You know the way we take– and we thank you that nothing can ever separate us from your love, or ultimately frustrate your will as we follow You. Help us to walk with you confidently into your best will for us, In Jesus' Name we pray.

Amen

93 - *Children of the Heavenly father*

Making Room For Jesus

The Meaning of Hospitality

September 18, 1999

Lowell First Church of the Nazarene, Lowell Massachusetts

Luke 10:38-42

(Story One:)

One bright summer morning Abraham was sitting outside his tent which was set on a small hilltop. He was looking out over literally miles of his own flocks and herds and the tents of his servants. Then something unexpected happened. God dropped in for a visit.

The appearance of God was not like anything Abraham could have imagined or even dreamed. Yet Abraham did not seem surprised that God might choose to reveal himself as he did. And as wonderful and awe inspiring as it was that God should drop in for a visit, it was what God SAID after lunch that day that was even more unbelievable.

"You're going to have a son! A year from right now you and Sarah will be the proud parents of your own child of promise!"

Sarah was listening just inside the flap of the tent that served as a door. The flap shook just a little bit and the Visitor said, "Why is Sarah laughing?"

At that Sarah stuck her head out the door and said, "I didn't laugh!"

"Oh yes you did," smiled the Visitor, "but it is true all the same. You are going to have a baby!"

God always stretched Abraham's faith, it seemed, to the breaking point and then just a little bit more. But Abraham loved God. He took pains to make God welcome in his life wherever he was on his journey. Not just here in this part of Abraham's life, but

Making Room For Jesus

across years of trust and obedience and faith Abraham kept God at the center of his life's focus.

ABRAHAM WELCOMED GOD! HE MADE ROOM FOR GOD IN HIS LIFE. AS A RESULT ABRAHAM FOUND GOD'S AGENDA FOR HIS OWN LIFE. Then Abraham became part of God's agenda for his nephew's life. Lot was saved from disaster. And finally Abraham became a blessing across the years to millions of people. It began with a heart of hospitality: making room for God.

MAKING ROOM. FOR GOD. IN OUR OWN HEARTS. FOR PEOPLE. GENEROSITY, AS GOD IS GENEROUS.

(Story Two:)

One morning a small boy woke up early and dressed as fast as he could and walked down a well trod path to a beautiful blue lake, where he was soon engaged in one of the finest past times known to humankind. He had just caught two small fish when his attention was caught by what seemed to be a parade or crowd coming around the end of the lake from the direction of the village. He was curious as all small boys are, and so he went to investigate. What he found out sent him flying home to ask his mother if he could go along, too. And amazingly she said he could.

She cooked his two fish and wrapped them in a clean napkin and put in half a dozen small biscuits she was baking on top of them in his basket. Then he was off to find out what was so exciting. By this time it was afternoon, and he had worked his way through a lot of people right to the very front where Jesus was teaching. He liked the stories, but didn't really understand too much, but he did hear a private conversation in between lessons. He got the idea that the disciples were hungry and there was no food.

So the boy spoke to one of the people with Jesus he was a big fisherman. We know he was Andrew, Peter's brother. "Jesus can have my lunch," he said. "At least HE won't have to go hungry!"

All four Gospels tell the story. Only one tells where the disciples got the five loaves and two fish to feed the multitude. But WE know it was a small boy. His hospitality for

Jesus turned into a blessing that went far beyond what he could have dreamed. It all began when someone forgot his own ego, and put Jesus at the center.

SOMEONE MADE ROOM FOR GOD.

THAT IS WHY WE ARE HERE TODAY! (to make room for God in our lives) THAT IS WHAT CHRISTIANS ARE SUPPOSED TO DO EVERY DAY (make room for God!) THAT IS WHAT IS FIRST, PRIMARY, CENTRAL about our faith.

(Stories 3,4) It can be comical sometimes when secondary things are remembered and primary things are forgotten

(Story 3)

Victor Borge told about a couple at the airline check in line waiting to go on vacation. They had piles of luggage; suitcases of all shapes and sizes.

The husband said to the wife: "I wish we had brought the piano."

Wife: "We've got sixteen bags too many already!"

H: "Yes, I know but the tickets are on the piano!"

(Story 4) This actually happened, in Sacred Heart Parish, Can Street, New Orleans: In the late 1960s they were beginning to do baptisms in the Sunday mass times, and a couple was having their baby baptized.

The parents were instructed. They were told the importance of not being late. The paperwork was all done. Everything was set.

Well, the parents were on time, and they hurried forward, and yes you guessed it they forgot to bring the baby. The baby was still at home with Grandma. EVERY ACTION, RELATIONSHIP, INSTITUTION, LIFE has a basic focus a

most important thing, or it should have if there will be success in its existence. A CHURCH EXISTS TO KNOW GOD, AND LIFT HIM UP, AND LOVE AND WORSHIP HIM . . . if all there is to church is counting noses or raising money or singing songs or anything else then the potluck suppers and walks for hunger and all are missing the heart of the target.

Making Room For Jesus

(Story 5)

Jesus said, "Martha, Martha! You are all worked up out there in the kitchen! You have forgotten that the most important part of having company is making that company feel 'at home.' "

(Conclusion, into Story 6)

THE PASSAGE IN LUKE 10 tells us that the focus of our lives is to be LOVE. We are to MAKE ROOM FOR JESUS at the center. The very heart of the meaning of "love" here is "HOSPITALITY." How?

1. Put Jesus ahead of your own self. The Lord's Prayer: GOD, then petitions, etc.

The McLandress Syndrome, named after Prof Herschel McLandress of Harvard: he developed a way to measure a person's self absorption: In spoken and written material he measured the use of "I, me, mine" – and the "coefficient" was supposed to be the longest a person could remain diverted from himself. Eleanor Roosevelt was supposed to have a coefficient of two hours. JFK could go 29 minutes. Elizabeth Taylor's was THREE MINUTES. Maybe the reason Jesus isn't at home with me is because I want to talk about ME while HE wants to talk about something else???

2. Make Jesus "literally" at home in all our work and play: be aware that HE wants to share in your TV watching, your work problems, your attitude as you drive, check out at the grocery, etc.
3. Continually "come back to basics" with Jesus in the many things we need to do around a home or around a church don't forget that Jesus just might be cooling his heels in the living room waiting for a chance to tell us he loves us!

Thank God for Martha. Those who do the pots and pans. Thank God for Mary– who reminds us what faith is all about.

(IF TIME:)

Her name was Esther. She was a Martha if there ever was one. Esther had ways of getting Esther's way. She was always a mover and a shaker. But then about 1979 or

so something changed. Esther started making room in her heart for God. More room than she had ever given Him before.

She never dreamed what would happen. She put her phone number on sheets of paper that said, "Having a crisis? Call xxx xxxx" and she nailed them to telephone poles around her neighborhood. The phone started ringing. It has never stopped.

The Quincy Crisis Center went to a budget of \$800,000 a year before Esther died. It is still functioning.

ONE THING IS NEEDFUL! I wonder what might happen in our homes and in our churches– to say nothing of our personal relationship with God if we really made room for God - - FIRST!??

Prayer:

God help me listen! Help me love You! YOU are what we need. Amen

626 Gentle Shepherd

Tale of Two Rivers

September 28, 1999

Psalm 65 "*The river of God is full of water . . .*"

Introduction

It is certainly not my purpose to have a string of sermons based on 'what I did on my summer vacation,' and yet here I go again! Last week I talked about heat and desert dryness and God's Presence that satisfies like a drink to a thirsty man. This week I have been thinking about rivers. And my mind went to the Red River in Texas.

All my life I've been singing "When I come to the Red River valley..." But when one sees the Red River it is likely to be quite different from what one expects. The bridges that cross the Red River seem to be few and far between. When there is a bridge it is a BIG bridge. A strong bridge, too; we were told a number of times about last year when the floods came, and how the water all but swept away the bridge that carries I 44 across the Red River (I 44 is the Interstate from Oklahoma City to Dallas.)

The Red River basin itself is quite wide, too. It is made to carry a lot of water or perhaps more correctly, has been shaped across the centuries by carrying a lot of water. But the thing that has impressed me the several times that I have seen the Red River has been: HOW LITTLE WATER! Where's the river?!

Now comparisons are odious. And no one can blame the Red River for it depends on its sources.

Every river is the product of its tributaries. And evidently in the normal course of events the Red River has a very limited supply of steady, dependable, unfailing water. When the cloudbursts come up in the hills, the Red River, and many Texas rivers can become extremely dangerous. They fill up their wide banks and more.

If one came to cross the Red River bridges at flood time one would say: "Here is one of the strong suppliers of water, a major stream in this part of the world." But when

the run off of the distant storm is over the Red River becomes a shallow, meandering stream amidst a great long pile of sand.

Comparisons are odious. No one can blame the Red River. But for years I lived near another river. As a matter of fact I was born on its banks, at Nyack, New York. I have crossed the Hudson many more than a hundred times. I have put my little boat on its broad expanse and felt it moving powerfully under me.

The Hudson is actually a tidal estuary as well as a mighty river, and the tides move many miles to the north from its mouth in New York Harbor. It is navigable by ocean vessel more than 100 miles, all the way to Albany. It is connected with the Great Lakes system through the Erie Canal. And while the Hudson has its moods, it is always there, and it is always FULL! It can't help it. It is a product of its sources.

For coming down from Lake Champlain, and through two (or three) ranges of mountains (if you want to name the Berkshires as separate from both the Adirondacks and the Catskills) the Hudson does not change character for thunderstorms. The mighty Hudson is fed by hundreds of spring fed lakes and streams that flow into scores of brooks and rivers.

It is amazing when one thinks of the sheer volume of water that passes, say, the Tappan Zee, where the river is two or three miles wide, flowing two or three miles an hour past a given point. Where does all that water come from? But there it is!

What is the difference between the Red River and the Hudson? Or, perhaps more importantly: How may we keep the rivers of our souls filled with God's water of life and blessing?

ON KEEPING THE STREAM FULL

1. WE CAN DETERMINE: Not just to live on the run off.

We can begin to keep our soul's life streams filled when we determine that we will not be satisfied with a spasmodic flow of grace.

Perhaps "determination" is the key in starting. To say: "Inasmuch as in me lies, I will tap into the great and permanent sources of God's grace." Rivers

cannot help what they are, nor can they determine their 'character.' But people may choose how they shall be filled. People can simply move to higher ground, or to where the water is flowing. People have the privilege of tapping into God's resources.

2. So how do we go about 'tapping into the deep springs?'

I want to talk about keeping our souls filled with God in these minutes we have together.

(Perhaps there is one sense in which this is a process that cannot be taught. Our relationship to God is intensely private, and each of us must learn the deep lessons for ourselves. But in another sense we can guide and help each other. That is what pastors are for, and churches, and fellowship in the Holy Spirit. There are two sides to that truth!)

Illustrations are helpful. When we talk about rivers that are full and rivers that are half full or less we get a picture in our minds. But illustrations cannot sustain the total truth. They aren't the whole picture. And we need to see that while we may talk 'tributaries,' of many 'sources' and many 'means of grace,' there is really but one Source of Life! And that Source, of course, is God Himself! God is the Source of spiritual fullness.

All that we do, all that we are come to this one point: we are made to know GOD!

3. GOD IS THE ONLY SOURCE. But He has provided what we call "means of grace."

Our goal is God Himself. Not what God can give, or what He can do for us: God Himself! But in finding God Himself, we still see that God has provided (what we call) means of grace that bring us into contact with Himself.

Some of these means of grace are public worship, and scripture, and daily communion, and fellowship with God's people. And the goal of all these and many other channels (or tributaries) to our stream of life is an increasing awareness that God is with us, and wants to share all our life with us.

- a. So we look to meet GOD when we come to worship! It may seem so elementary but often people come to church because they know they should; or they come because vaguely they want to 'receive help.' But deliberately come to meet God and be filled anew with His Presence.
- b. And read the scriptures to meet GOD. Once again, it is so simple I hardly dare say it but many of us learned to read the Bible because we know we SHOULD (and so we should! . . . but there's the rub!
- c. And so on down the list of "means of grace!" PRAY in order to be filled with God's Presence . It is one of the things that will make a river of you instead of a dry stream bed. SEEK JESUS IN FELLOWSHIP with God's people!

One of the rich sources of finding God is looking for Him in the face of the Church! We find God in an INCREASING AWARENESS of the "Presence."

The Quaker teacher Thomas Kelly (A Testament of Devotion) holds forth the ideal that common, ordinary, work a day mortals like himself and you and me can practice the Presence of God until He becomes to most real Person in our lives!

Conclusion

I don't know about that but I'm bound to find out! Where will such a determination to find God leave us?

1. It won't make 'little gods' out of us as we said in the message this morning: when we pray "OUR Father..." With Jesus we still have our faults and need His grace . . .
2. But it will become our greatest joy to know that in some measure GOD DOES FILL THE CHANNEL OF OUR LIVES and once in a while we have that exquisite joy of realizing: God has used me! God has blessed me by letting me serve Him!

Oh, humanly it is possible to be exhausted in doing well (don't we have to 'rest up from our vacations' now and then?) and even Jesus became weary. But Jesus also said, at the well at Sychar when He had been so very tired: "I have meat to eat that ye know not of!"

In ministering to the woman at the well, Jesus had been physically refreshed, as it were.

None of us are great "Hudson Rivers," perhaps. But God's Source channel is full of water! We do not need to be gushing full and then empty and dry. We can tap into the deep wells of God and stay filled with Him!

The Constant

October 22, 1999

(August 30, 1998)

Hebrews 13:8 *Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, and today, and forever.*

CHANGING SCENES, CHANGELESS CHRIST

Last year (1998) I visited the house I left to come to E.N.C. as a freshman student back in September, 1949. I found the house, even though the neighborhood has changed dramatically. It was painted a bright, shocking blue!

I met, too, with a number of friends I hadn't seen too often in the last 40 years. There were several who were members of the youth group; we had grown up as teens together. We laughed and remembered the good times and the dumb things we had done. But somehow THEY had all changed, too. They looked different, even though we recognized each other.

I know that I have changed a lot, too. But there was a constant. Our old friends had come to be with us to remember my father, who died earlier in the month. As we prayed the Lord's Prayer together Jesus Himself was there. Things had changed, we had changed, but Jesus had never left us, not one!

The fact that we were burying my father, who was born in 1901, really underscored the idea of "change." We had to laugh a little bit because Dad died in Texas, and we flew him back to Ohio to the family plot to be buried. And that was the first time Dad ever flew. He was born November 15, 1901, two years before the Wright Brothers made the first powered airplane flight. Dad was one of those who knew that if God had intended us to fly...

It is almost impossible to imagine the changes in the way we live and move and have our being that took place in this one century. But through those changing years, there was one constant: Jesus never left us!

It is a simple, powerful statement we are asked to believe: "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, and today, and forever." The same Jesus we know that the writer of Hebrews knew as he wrote those words. The same Jesus no matter where we come from, or what race we represent, or what our I.Q. might be, or how important our place in life is supposed to be. The same Jesus regardless of what our doctrines SAY about Him; because Jesus is not the product of our understanding: Jesus IS.

Jesus is YHWH, the "I AM THAT I AM" who spoke to Moses from the burning bush. The "Alpha and Omega" who frightened John half to death on the Island of Exile. He is the same Jesus you learned to pray to when you said, "Now I lay me down to sleep" and he will be the same Jesus if you ever live to be 96 and close your eyes and die like my father did. In changing times, you can count on it: the one unchanging CONSTANT in this universe is Jesus Christ.

CONTRASTING GOALS, CHOICES FOR ETERNITY

I am probably pretty naive, but I'll say it anyway: There are just two kinds of people in this world . . . only two kinds of life-goals:

1. Those who believe that Jesus IS — is there for them to build their lives on . . . AND
2. Those who think they can "fit Jesus in", that Jesus changes with the times.

It may come as a shock to you, but YOU CAN'T FIT JESUS INTO YOUR LIFE PLANS! He always gets in the way. Jesus is the "odd-shaped cornerstone" that only works ONE WAY: You can trust Him, and build on Him, and He will never let you down as long as you live!

The first kind of people are people who really believe that Jesus doesn't change, and so they dare to follow him through the changing scenes of life. They believe that Jesus is NOT simply who we make Him out to be. He is not the private, personal "God of our choice", but the God that IS! He is YHWH!

The second kind of people are people who act as if Jesus Christ is in the same category as Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. They may never admit it out loud, but instead of staying in personal touch with Jesus they begin to accept what the experts

say about Him, or they stop talking to Him because that is what little kids and old, old people do. And so they change their god to fit their world instead of the other way around.

THAT is what Jeremiah was talking about when he put God's words like this: "My people have done two big sins! They have left ME! They have constructed pitiful substitutes that will never work!"

COMPREHENSIVE PROMISE: A LIFE-TIME GUARANTEE

The Hebrews passage is a conversation. It is a dialogue we can play back when we need help in changing times.

The conversation starts with God. God says, "I will never leave you or forsake you!" Then the response we are challenged to make is: "I will not be afraid!"

This doesn't mean I will not FEEL afraid. We can't always help how we feel. It doesn't mean we will never fall down and cry in fear at times. But it does mean: "I will not be afraid to build my life on my relationship with You, Father God!" I will not be afraid to look the values and non-values of this world straight in the face and say "If they don't fit with Jesus, they don't come into my life!"

I have a final challenge, to us all, but particularly to any who have had great times of blessing; real experiences of God's blessing, perhaps at camps or on spiritual retreats. That challenge in a phrase is this: Begin with your experience and turn it into relationship.

Being saved is wonderful; but it is not the end of the line. Having your sins forgiven is great; but that is not all there is. Experience can be essentially "me-centered." Have you been saved? Do you have the Holy Spirit? Are your sins forgiven? All these are necessary and wonderful... But the secret of joy in the Christian Way is this: Everything God does for you, he does so that you can be his child and his friend.

Being a child and a friend are not always one and the same thing. I hear that a lot in my journeys around our church. We LOVE our families; but we aren't always really FRIENDS! It is great when families actually CARE! Do you LOVE God??

Prayer: Lord we come to You, the Eternal God! We thank You we can dare to build our lives on You. Give us grace to make and keep covenant with You and live to please You. In Jesus' name, AMEN

Closing Hymn 145 (STL) *Glorious Is Thy Name* (IF the brass can be ready!) After last verse go into #146 (STL) *There is Strength in the Name of the Lord*

No Short Cuts to Glory

October 31, 1999 (am)

Falmouth Church of the Nazarene, Falmouth, Massachusetts

(September 25, 1999 and February 21, 1999)

Matthew 4

He had finally got his chance to make the Really Big Sale. He was going into the final interview on the biggest contract he had ever written. He was ushered into the office of the executive buyer. An assistant brought coffee and left. The atmosphere was cordial.

Then the assistant tapped on the door and re entered the office and spoke briefly with the executive. She stood and said, "I apologize, but I have to tend to a matter. I'll just be a minute or two." She followed her assistant out of the room.

The sales representative looked around the beautifully appointed office. He saw her family pictures on her desk. Then he noticed she had evidently been studying what looked like a contract, a bid from a competitor. Leaning forward, he saw a column of figures, but it was obscured by a diet soda can.

What harm possibly could there be in reading her private information? After all, she had left it out in plain sight. But when he lifted the can it wasn't diet soda; it was 1,000 Bbs that gushed out the bottomless can, and ran all over the desk and cascaded onto the carpet. His attempt to short cut the competition was exposed.

Not every temptation is so obvious. Not every failure is so embarrassing. But every temptation is a challenge. Not even Jesus was spared the choosing.

I. Temptation Is An Enticement To Use A Short Cut To Reach A Desirable Goal.

You want a good grade. Good grades are desirable. They open doors. They bring scholarships. The easiest way to good grades is to let someone else do your work for you. But there is no real short cut to real education.

You want intimacy and the good feelings of love and security. No one has to tell you those are good things. The easiest way to those feelings is the pathway of least resistance. But there are no short cuts to real friendship. There is never an excuse to USE people like things, no matter what the goal may be.

You want success and influence. Within the boundaries of genuine caring those could be very worthy goals. But in our world all too often personal goals are reached at whatever the cost. But there is no short cut to real integrity.

- And cheating is always wrong.
- Adultery and fornication are always sin.
- Betrayal of confidence is always heartbreaking.

Whatever the reason, remember: there are no short cuts in finding and doing God's will. It is a wonderful thing to come to believe that in God's will we don't need short cuts!

II. Adam And Eve And Short Cuts

Adam and Eve, even in their innocence thought they might be able to take a short cut to God likeness. They were tempted to believe that maybe God was holding out on them. Whatever good was coming, they wanted it NOW! A short cut. The Tempter said, "Did God really say that?" Then he pursued that seed of doubt with philosophical denial. "You won't really die! God has it wrong! You can't really trust Him. He wants a monopoly on Truth!"

But they did die! Their innocence was gone. They were dead in trespasses and sin. And they were expelled from a garden into a wilderness. Their short cut was a tragedy.

In the classic Pilgrim's Progress, Christian and his new companion Hopeful fell in with a smooth talking man named By end, from the town of Fair speech. To hear By end talk the Christian journey required no effort at all. As his name suggests, he took the position that the end always justifies any short cut necessary, just so long as the rugged way of obedience could be avoided.

Just then Christian and Hopeful came alongside a beautiful meadow. There was a fence marking the pathway, but there was a stile over the fence, and they could see a path running parallel to the Way on the other side of the fence. After some discussion they crossed over to take advantage of easier going on the other side of the fence.

But soon it became less simple. Darkness fell, and it became hard to see. They tried to make their way back to the crossing, but soon they had to stay the night under a tree in the open. Then they were captured by a wicked Giant Despair, and taken to a dungeon in the Doubting castle. A pleasant short cut turned out to be a near disaster.

We can never leave the clear known will of God for our lives without bringing on big trouble. The most innocent disobedience brings broken fellowship with God. And there is no such thing as a short cut to where God wants you to be. You can trust His timing.

III. Jesus In His Innocence, Was Exposed To Temptation.

Fresh from his public baptism, and with the blessing of the Father's endorsement ringing in his ears, and in the joy of the Spirit's anointing, Jesus was led into the wilderness to face the challenge to take a short cut. Haggard and drawn from fasting, he was confronted with evil, demonic, powerful, hostile suggestion. The evil enemy attacked every angle. Henri Nouwen summed up the three temptations: be relevant, be popular, be powerful.

Be relevant: you have to survive! 'Make these stones into bread. You're famished. This is the real world. A dead Messiah isn't going to do anyone any good.'

But Jesus' response in fact said, "No, I don't have to survive! I have to be true!"

It wasn't that Jesus wasn't hungry. It wasn't that he couldn't work a miracle later. He fed 5,000 people with a little boy's lunch. But Jesus was taking orders from no one but the Father, and especially was not about to take advice from the Evil One.

"Man does not live by bread alone," he said, "but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

No Short Cuts to Glory

Be popular: you need to communicate! 'Spiff up your act! What is this "repent stuff!?? Put on a show! Do miracles! Walk a high wire!'

But Jesus was never a performer. He never did things for the effect. It wasn't that he couldn't master the forces of nature. He walked on the sea. He calmed the storms. He raised the dead. And he died and rose again the third day.

"Don't try to put God on the spot!" was his reply.

Be powerful: you need to take charge! 'No one will see you out here in the desert as you compromise and kneel down to me. But then I'll lay off, and you can be the dictator of the world! No competition! A cross is a terrible way to go. You have to take charge of your life! Assert yourself!'

This was not a friendly debate. It was not a gentleman's duel of honor. Weak, exhausted, physically drained, Jesus was facing pure evil at its demonic worst.

Jesus, at his weakest, used the defense that is available to us all if we will just use it. (It is the 'key' that finally unlocked the dungeon of Doubting Castle, and let Christian and Hopeful out.) He did not reason with the Enemy. He reached into the Father's promises. He fled to the first Commandment. He claimed the protection that comes from utterly belonging.

He was God's Son! He affirmed his determination to worship Him only, and to live by the father's Word and way. Satan had to leave. And the angels came, there in the wilderness, and Jesus was refreshed. Then he resumed the step by step following of the Father's will that would take him to Calvary, to Olivet, and to Glory and Salvation for you and me.

There would be no short cut.

Conclusion

Temptation Is an Enticement to Use a Short Cut to Reach a Desirable Goal

Temptation is NOT sin. But yielding to temptation IS sin. And sin never, never, never makes good on its promises. There are no short cuts to truly desirable goals.

A workman went to his big boss one day and said, "I'm tired. I think I'll take my retirement benefits and hang it up. It's been great working for you."

The big boss looked disappointed, and said, "I really hate to see you go. I was hoping you could do at least one more big job for me. Will you, just one more?"

Reluctantly the builder agreed to build a house for some important client of the big boss. It was a big house, a lot of work on a golf course, with a lot of detail. But the man's heart really wasn't in it. He threw the house together in record time, and cut corners on material and labor wherever he could. He saved the boss a lot of money, but it wasn't really his best work and he knew it.

Imagine how he felt when he turned the keys over to the big boss, and the boss gave them right back, and fished around in his briefcase and gave him the title and deed to the property on the golf course.

"This is my gift for you!" he said. "Thanks for all your good work across the years!"

Then the builder wished he hadn't been in such a hurry. He wished he hadn't cut corners and taken short cuts just to get the job done.

Life is like that. Exactly like that. We become the product of our own integrity in following after God. Or lack of integrity. We become exiles from innocence when we try to take short cuts to being like God. Or, following our Savior, we use the promises and the commandments of God to resist the tempter's power, and we begin to share in Christ's righteousness.

This is just another Sunday evening service. There isn't anyone here but us. But God is here. And right now is a good time to ask God for His help in deliberately drawing closer to Him. I don't know about you, but I don't want to try to get away with building a shoddy house. I know I'm going to have to live in what I build.

Prayer

#512 Take Time to be Holy

The Power of Gods Word

-A Story of Martin Luther-

-For Reformation Sunday Evening-

For: October 31, 1999

Falmouth Church of the Nazarene, Falmouth, Massachusetts

Preached first October 31, 1993

Let me tell you a story this evening about a man who became a legend in his own time. This man, I sincerely believe, spent his life earnestly seeking after God, but he made at least as many enemies as he made friends. Five hundred and sixteen years after his birth (Nov 10, 1483) he is still a controversial figure in history.

The man's name, of course, is Martin, Martin Luther. He was the son of a peasant, Hans Luder, a working copper miner who was himself shrewd and ambitious and became an owner of mines. In a way it was a miracle that Martin should have gotten higher education, for few in his social level were recognized as worthy. But Martin was gifted, both scholastically and musically. He was permitted to attend the University of Erfurt, in Saxony, where he received his Bachelors of Arts in September 1502, and Master of Arts in January 1505. He began studies for law in May of that same year, 1505.

Like many young people Martin thought seriously about life and God and salvation. He was a seeker after truth and after God. In July of 1505, the year in which he began his law studies, Martin was caught in a thunderstorm, and a bolt of lightning struck so close to where he was that he was frightened half to death. He was certain that God Himself had spoken. In that moment Martin Luther said to God, "I will become a monk!" [cf. Acts 9/St. Paul] He was "shocked" into the most extreme action he knew how to take.

The Luders were devout Catholics, but they did not want their child to be too religious. A monk takes vows of poverty, and there would be no way Martin could

support them in their old age. And so it came as a shock to Hans Luder as well when Martin announced that he was entering religious orders. But enter he did, and he was ordained in 1507 and celebrated his first Mass just two years later.

So Martin Luther not only became a monk, but a priest, and an outstanding scholar. Highly respected, Martin was promoted to Doctor of Theology in October of 1512, and was appointed the cathedral lecturer there at Wittenberg.

About this time two things happened that sparked a great change in Martin Luther, and ultimately in the way many of us have come to understand God's plan for our salvation.

FIRST, in these early years as a scholar and lecturer Martin Luther was wrestling with the word of God as revealed in Holy Scripture— wrestling with it directly.

Often as he studied Martin actually lived in torment because his faith only brought him into conflict with a God that demanded righteousness but never satisfied those who sought after it. So along with his studies came a growing sense of his own inability to measure up to what he could see of God's demands that God's people be holy and righteous.

In 1513, the year after receiving his Doctorate and becoming lecturer, Martin began lecturing on the Psalms. When he arrived at Psalm 72, even as he was lecturing to the students he got a new grasp about "the righteousness of God." He began to see it as a quality which God was willing to give to believers, and which would make them acceptable in his Presence.

He was struggling to HEAR WHAT GOD'S WORD REALLY WAS SAYING to him. In 1515 he began lecturing on Romans, and soon his "LISTENING" centered Paul's statement that the righteous live by faith. Martin had always thought this said, "If you are RIGHTEOUS, then you will have the true faith." He knew that God was righteous, and that he, Martin Luther, was not.

But as Martin listened to the word of God with the ears of his soul he heard, he understood, finally, what we now take so much for granted, and what we need to hear again and again:

It is by God's gift of grace to us, by FAITH, that we are enabled to take hold of Christ's righteousness— and the righteous LIVE BY THIS FAITH.

Luther declared that we could not even understand that we are sinners apart from the gospel. He wrote:

"We must know that we are sinners by faith alone, for it is not manifest to us; rather we are more often not conscious of the fact.. Thus we must stand under the judgment of God and believe His words with which he has declared us unjust, for he himself cannot lie."

Luther discovered that he had had it all backwards: WE DO NOT ACHIEVE FAITH BY BEING RIGHTEOUS, BUT WE RECEIVE CHRIST'S RIGHTEOUSNESS BY FAITH! This kernel of truth— this powerful portion of God's Word— was HEARD by Luther. He processed it— what could it mean? He RECEIVED IT AS GOD'S WORD. And Martin BELIEVED it! THE WORD OF GOD WENT TO WORK IN MARTIN LUTHER!

The SECOND THING that sparked change was: The mother church at Rome needed money, and was sending out special missions to collect it by the selling of indulgences. In Saxony, where Luther was, this conflict centered around an itinerant money collector named Johann Tetzel, who had the franchise on indulgences for that part of Germany.

Historian Walther Köhler has quoted Tetzel's sermon: "Do you not hear the voices of your dead relatives and others, crying out to you and saying, 'Pit us, pty us, for we are in dire punishment and torment from which you can release us for a pittance'?" And then the last exhortation in the form of a couplet:

"When the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory heavenward springs!"

Luther may not have been opposed at that time on the idea of purgatory, or even perhaps on praying for the dead; but he knew and understood that the motivation behind Tetzel's money-raising was not the salvation of souls at all. So he vehemently opposed the selling of indulgences, and he pretty well ruined Tetzel's business in his territory.

For it was on October 31, 1517, exactly 482 years ago this very day, Martin Luther nailed 95 Theses— 95 statements for debate on why the sale of indulgences were evil— on the Cathedral door in Wittenberg, Germany. He wrote these propositions for debate in Latin— the language of the church, and they began great debate, you may be certain. But the 95 theses were also translated into the common German, and printed, and spread far and wide. THAT is how Tetzel's business was ruined in that part of Saxony.

A whirlwind of things happened in the months and years following this revolt. The presenting problem had been sale of indulgence, but the underlying problem was where final authority for the church would rest. There were many communications and interviews, including a citation from Pope Leo X for Luther to come to Rome, which Elector Frederick of Saxony refused. Finally a Papal Bull in June of 1520 gave Luther 60 days to submit, and early in 1521 Luther was invited, under safe conduct, to the high court, or Diet of the Church at Worms, where he finally appeared in April, 1521.

Luther had hoped to engage in debate, but when he was admitted to the Diet on April 17, at about 4:00 p.m., before the Emperor Charles V and all the representatives of Rome the chancellor of the archbishop of Trier gave him no opportunity. Instead he gestured to a table in the middle of the impressive assembly, which was piled high with books. He told Martin Luther he had been called to the Diet of Worms to answer two questions: Had he written those books? Was there a part of them he would now choose to recant?

The monk and professor from little Wittenberg was given a chance to recant— not to debate. The judges had already made their decision. He spoke in a voice that could scarcely be heard: "The books are all mine— I have written more." But then, as he considered the second question: "This touches God and his Word. This affects the salvation of souls. I beg you, give me time." And so he was given one day. Back in his quarters Luther wrote, "So long as Christ is merciful, I will not recant a single jot or tittle."

Luther was not admitted to the Diet the next day until nightfall, and he stood in the candle-lighted episcopal hall next to the great cathedral. After realizing again that there was no room for debate, Luther made this statement:

"Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures or with open, clear, and distinct grounds and reasoning— and my conscience is captive to the Word of God— then I cannot and will not recant, because it is neither safe nor wise to act against conscience."

And then he added the famous words: "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen" And with those words Luther became an outlaw.

Even though he had been guaranteed safe passage his life was immediately in danger. [He made his way to the Castle Wartburg, where he allowed his hair to grow out, and he became "a knight" for the next few years. But much of Germany was responding to this concept of salvation by faith.]

Let it be said that it is clear from all records that Martin Luther loved his church, and never intended that he start a different movement of the church. He appealed to the Pope himself to stop the excess. But there were many factors that entered the picture, too many to put in one sermon. The political scene in Northern Europe, the threat and even invasion of the Turks up the Danube against Christendom— soon the lines were drawn, and the division became beyond repair.

But the entire Christian world was changed by this man who listened— who believed— who let the word work in him. We who call ourselves Wesleyan owe a great deal to Luther, for in May, 1738, while he was at a prayer meeting, John Wesley heard one reading Luther's Preface to the Book of Romans— and Wesley knew in a new way that he was saved— by faith— that his sins were forgiven through grace!

THIS ENTIRE REFORMATION MOVEMENT WAS SPARKED BY ONE THEME, ONE PHRASE, AS IT WERE, FROM THE WORD OF GOD.

LOOK AGAIN AT THE LESSON (in your worship folder) THAT IS OUR TEXT FOR THE MORNING: Paul says

The Power of Gods Word

1. I labored to give you the gospel of God; and
2. I am thankful when you heard it you received it and believed it, and
3. it is at work in YOU now!

Two thoughts:

1. HOW IMPORTANT IT IS THAT WE SHARE THE WORD OF GOD; (SHARE THE WORD AND NOT OUR IDEAS!) The ancient prophet Micah complained that false prophets were saying whatever got them the highest salary.
2. HOW POWERFUL GOD'S WORD IS WHEN IT IS HEARD AND TRUSTED.

Just what IS the "word of God?" It is revelation; it is given to us in the Bible, by the Spirit, by the foolishness of preaching, by God's great grace.

The word of God is that which we know to be God's will communicated to us with convicting power; the word of God is the transforming message of God's love in Christ. The Bible is all that. It is the word of God.

THE WORD OF GOD IS DYNAMIC:

1. The word of God needs to be communicated. Spoken. Proclaimed faithfully. Preaching is God's appointed means, method.
2. The word of needs to be received, heard, believed. The word of God is "not" the word of God for you, for me unless and until it is received!!

The word of God is powerful. The same word that called worlds into being is the power that calls LIFE into being within the person/church that hears, receives, and believes. The listening ear of the soul is the receiving organ of God's mighty holy power.

What happens when we hear the word of God? When we really listen to what God is saying?

We can never stay the same. We either walk forward in the power of the word that transforms us— that is "at work in you who believe"— OR we fall forever behind what God wills for us to be.

To listen, to hear, is to be a part of God's Plan of salvation. Every true messenger of God has been energized, empowered, compelled by the WORD OF GOD. When evil attacks us, our families, our world— our first reaction is to march out with all our might against it. And if we do we are doomed to failure. But if, instead, we listen to what God is saying about the evil, the word of God at work in us will involve us effectively. The whole thing will be wrought of the Spirit.

461 *Open My Eyes That I May See*

Lesson:

Surely you remember, brothers(and sisters), our toil and hardship; we worked hard day and night in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.

You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of (mere humans), but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

1 Thessalonians 2: 9-12 (NIV with my own (x)s)

Jesus is Lord

Christ the King Sunday

November 21, 1999

Lesson: Matthew 25:31-46

Introduction

This is the last Sunday of the church yearly cycle. Next week we begin the wonderful season of Advent. The last Sunday of the year is called "Christ the King Sunday;" when the final chapters have been written, and the books are balanced and closed, the Bible tells us all Creation will acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord of All.

God's Word for today is found in this 25th Chapter of Matthew; Jesus is speaking what shall come to pass. These words are sobering:

I. WE HAVE HERE A VISION OF CHRIST'S GLORY (not A Parable!)

- A. The people knew Jesus as the lowly Nazarene. Now Jesus tells them He is coming again as King and Judge. All the angels of heaven will be with Him— the angels that sang when He was born, and that fill heaven even now with praise— that run to and fro at the bidding of God— now will attend around a throne of great glory and splendor.
- B. Jesus here tells us that human history will be brought to account. What we celebrate on Christ the King Sunday is vividly illustrated in the last enigmatic book of the Bible. The Revelation is a mysterious book which no one fully understands. But the message of Revelation is loud and clear, and that message is that we know who wins the war between Good and Evil!
- C. Certainly not everyone believes this. Darkness and chaos abound; city streets are stalked by fear, and lawlessness has reached into every corner of our land. There are two kingdoms existing side-by-side; there are two ways of looking at life. Jesus tells us we can count on it: He will be here to take charge. The light that shined in the darkness has not been snuffed out; and the darkness cannot comprehend it. Jesus tells us that all Creation

must join in the chorus: Worthy is the Lamb that was slain!

But this is not simply majestic and dramatic. Jesus has promised us

II. HERE ALSO, THE PROMISE OF ACCOUNTABILITY FOR US ALL

A. All nations shall be gathered before this glorious Throne where the Son of Man shall sit. The Apostle's Creed says that Jesus Christ is seated at the right hand of God the Father, "from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead."

B. This raises questions of "narrowness" and "sectarianism" and "triumphalism." But Jesus Christ is God Almighty, and if God Almighty is Faithful and True, then there must be, there shall be a final accounting. The concern at the Judgment is: HAS THERE BEEN LOVE IN YOUR HEART? HOW HAVE YOU EXPRESSED THAT LOVE?

The moral and spiritual world that is without form and void, and that has darkness upon the face of the deep will hear again the word of Power: "LET THERE BE LIGHT!" And then IN THAT JUDGMENT LIGHT every sin will be exposed, every evil thought and intention of the heart will be brought into full view, and every motivation will be fully understood and rewarded in kind. That is what Jesus is telling us here.

Explain away or edit this passage if you can. Many people will, and do. Tell us what it really meant to those who heard it, or those who thought they heard it and wrote it down in this form. I choose to believe that by the Holy Spirit this is the solemn word of God writing history before it happens. I cannot understand how or where or in what way this Great Azzize will take place. But YOU will be there. And I will be there. I will answer then for this message, and for the life I am living. And so will you.

[This is not a triumph of "us" over them. God is NOT on OUR side. God loves all people, everywhere. But how important it will be then to really be on HIS side!}]

III. AN AMAZING PART OF CHRIST'S PROPHECY: BOTH GROUPS ARE SURPRISED BY HIS JUDGMENT!

They have an identical response! Their love, or lack of love expressed, has been for the most part totally unconscious! "When did we ever see You? When didn't we do what we were supposed to do?"

IV. WHAT WAS/IS THE DIFFERENCE IN THIS DIVISION OF THE NATIONS?

(After all, these are NOT real sheep and goats; they are people!) THERE WILL BE A DIVISION OF HUMANKIND!

NICODEMUS ASKED THE QUESTION: "What do I need to DO in order to enter the righteous kingdom? And what Jesus told Nicodemus is what we need to remember when we think of Christ the King, and the Day of reckoning:

YOU MUST BE... AND THEN YOU WILL DO!

[How may we "prepare" for the time when we shall stand before this throne of splendor? How do I make sure that I will be on the right hand in the Day of Judgment? Do I set out to be more sensitive? do I make sure I do the good things I should? Do I begin to love more and better?

DOESN'T THIS REFLECT A WAY OF THINKING THAT IN OUR BETTER MORE LUCID MOMENTS WE REJECT— THAT SALVATION REALLY AND FINALLY IS A MATTER OF WORKS AFTER ALL? IF I AM GOOD, THEN I WILL BE SAVED ... AND IF I AM BAD I WILL BE DAMNED?

If I want to be a sheep I don't start out simply trying to act like a sheep. I don't give Jesus "an important part of my schedule;" or start doing good things, and associating with Christians and joining the church; but rather, like Nicodemus I need to hear Jesus say

UNLESS YOU ARE BORN AGAIN YOU CANNOT EVEN SEE THE KINGDOM!

If Jesus and the things of God are a more-or-less important part of my life, the chances are that I am not a Christian. If I am trying to become a citizen of the

heavenly kingdom without swearing allegiance to the King I will never be anything but an illegal alien. To see the church as kingdom is much different from being a part of a "church" that exists as an auxiliary to life and living. If we are the sheep of God's pasture, if we are kingdom people, then the church must be a way of life for us. If we are NOT kingdom people, then we by default become part of the rest of the world, the kingdom of chaos, and hopelessness.

When, by the Spirit of God, I see that God so loved ME that He sent His only-begotten Son to die for me— when by the Spirit of God I see that Jesus has raised from the dead for MY life, for MY victory over sin and death— then I am coming close to birth into this great kingdom.

And when by the Spirit of God I pledge allegiance to the great Kingdom by saying from my heart:

JESUS IS LORD!

then I leave the rank of the "goats" and have been born again as a child of God— I may be counted among His sheep!

We are not saved by ACTING LIKE SHEEP== we are saved by BEING GOD'S PEOPLE OF GRACE, THE SHEEP OF HIS PASTURE— AND THEN LETTING HIS GOD-LOVE FLOW OUT THROUGH US!

AND THAT GOD-LOVE COMES WHEN WE SAY FROM OUR HEARTS: JESUS IS LORD!
DO You indeed say it from your heart this morning?

1. It is a gift of faith to look to the past and see Jesus hanging between heaven and earth, dying on the Cross for you and me, and to truly believe that the Cross was not the end for a great martyr—BUT THE OPENING OF THE DOOR TO ETERNITY BY THE LORD OF LORDS AND KING OF KINGS! It is good, and it is right to say,
Jesus WAS Lord!"

It is a gift of faith to look to the past and see the open entrance to an empty tomb, and know that THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS DEFEATED SIN AND DEATH AND HELL! In the Resurrection,

Jesus WAS Lord!

2. It is also a gift of faith, and even more thrilling to look to the future when our Lord shall return, and the promise is that EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL CONFESS THAT JESUS CHRIST IS LORD TO THE GLORY OF GOD THE FATHER! I say with all my heart, and I believe it is true that, JESUS WILL BE LORD!

3. But what does SAVING FAITH say? It says, Jesus IS Lord!

Right here and now, in the midst of problems! Right now, when the church is imperfect- right now, I affirm that JESUS IS LORD!

Prayer

Read together 125 Yours Is the Kingdom Sing

123 All Hail King Jesus

Scriptures for Christ the King Sunday - November 21 (1999?)

Ezekiel 34:11-17 For thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out. As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day. And I will bring them out from the people, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land, and feed them upon the mountains of Israel by the rivers, and all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be: there shall they lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel. I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord God. I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick: but I will destroy the fat and the strong; I will feed them with judgment. And as for you, O my flock, thus saith the Lord God;

behold, I judge between cattle and cattle, between the rams and the he goats.

Psalms 95:1-7 Come let us sing unto the Lord; let us shout for joy to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving and raise a loud shout to Him with praise. For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the caverns of the earth, and the heights of the hills are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands have molded the dry land. Come let us bow down, and bend the knee, and kneel before the Lord our Maker. For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. Oh that today you would hearken to his voice!

Matthew 25:31-46 When the Son of Man comes as King, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his royal throne, and all the earth's people will be gathered before him. Then he will divide them into two groups, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats: he will put the sheep at his right and the goats at his left. Then the King will say to the people on His right: 'You who are blessed by my Father: Come! Come and receive the kingdom which has been prepared for you ever since the creation of the world. I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.' The righteous will then answer him: 'When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we ever see you a stranger and welcome you into our homes, or naked and clothe you? When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you?' The King will answer back, 'I tell you, indeed, whenever you did this for one of these poorest brothers of mine, you did it for me!' Then he will say to those on his left: 'Away from me, you who are under God's curse! Away to the eternal fire which has been prepared for the Devil and his angels! I was hungry but you would not feed me, thirsty but you would not give me

drink; I was a stranger but you would not welcome me into your homes, naked but you would not clothe me; I was sick and in prison but you would not take care of me.' Then they will answer him: 'When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and we would not help you?' The King will answer them back, 'I tell you, indeed, whenever you refused to help one of these poor ones, you refused to help me.' These, then, will be sent off to eternal punishment; the righteous will go to eternal life. I Corinthians 15:20-28 But the truth is that Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised. For just as death came by means of a man, in the same way the rising from death comes by means of a man. For just as all men die because of their union to Adam, in the same way all will be raised to life because of their union to Christ. But each one in his proper order: Christ, the first of all; then those who belong to Christ, at the time of his coming. Then the end will come; Christ will overcome all spiritual rulers, authorities, and powers, and hand over the kingdom to God the Father. For Christ must rule until God defeats all enemies and puts them under his feet. The last enemy to be defeated will be death. For the scripture says, "God put all things under his feet." It is clear, of course, that the words "all things" do not include God Himself, who puts all things under Christ. But when all things have been placed under Christ's rule, then he himself, the Son, will place himself under God, who placed all under him; and God will rule completely over all.

The Baptism of Our Lord

January 9, 2000

"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" Acts 19:2

Last Thursday, January 6th, was the Twelfth Day of Christmas, the Epiphany of Our Lord. ("Epiphany" means "showing" or "revealing.") Epiphany is the day we remember the Wise Men and their Gifts. In some respects it closes the Christmas Season.

But we Christians know that Christmas is never over. Christmas is not an ending, it is a beginning. Jesus needs to be shown not just to the wise men but to the whole world.

Mark's Gospel does not tell the Christmas story. We first meet Jesus as a young adult. With Mark, Jesus' showing, or his epiphany to the world, began with his baptism.

I. THE BAPTISM OF JESUS BY JOHN

Mark in his story of Jesus plunges right in . . . He starts with John, preaching repentance from sin in the wilderness of the Jordan. His message is rugged, like his appearance. Somehow this rugged message of repentance from sin, getting right with God strikes a chord with the hearts of seeking men and women. Mark tells us that the whole countryside, even as far as Jerusalem, came out to listen, to hear, and to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins.

Onto this scene of revival and repentance from sin comes the One— the only One— who was absolutely without the need for repentance or renewal. The only One who was intrinsically holy. The only One who could say "Who can convict Me of sin?" And what does this sinless One do? He gets in line with the sinners waiting to be baptized. And when his turn comes, even though John the Baptizer protests, Jesus is baptized.

WHY?

The Baptism of Our Lord

1. Jesus was identifying with us. The pivotal event in all history was when God became a Baby and in Jesus took our flesh, our humanity as His own. (That is why we turned the calendar over last week to 2,000. Not when Jesus died, or even when he rose—vital as those are. But when he CAME!))But as if that were not enough, now Jesus accepts our sins. 2 Corinthians 5:21 "For (God) hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."
2. Jesus was being obedient to the Father's Plan. In being the Sin-Bearer he also was pleasing to the Father.
3. Jesus was gloriously affirmed by (1) the descent of the Holy Spirit, and (2) the Voice from Heaven "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

That is the historical beginning of Jesus' ministry. Identifying with sinners. Obedient to the father's Plan. Affirmed by the Father in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

But that is not all "The Baptism of Jesus" means: Not just that Jesus himself was baptized, but that Jesus also had a baptism to give to others. Jesus Himself was a baptizer even more than John the Baptist. In our lesson John urges us not to forget that fact.

Here is the heart of our message today: Jesus was baptized by John so he could be one with us, and he came all the way to where we are. But Jesus baptizes us with his greater baptism so that we might be one with HIM, and take us into the very LIFE of God!

II. THE BAPTISM JESUS HIMSELF GIVES

The lesson in Acts 19 asks the question: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" Remember in our Gospel lesson John the Baptist said, "I baptize you with water, but One is coming after me who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!"

- What is this Spirit baptism?
- Who gets to have God's Spirit?
- When do you suppose that prophecy or promise of John the Baptist was fulfilled?

The answer may surprise you! It is simpler and yet more profound and richer than we can fully grasp. It is one of the wonderful mysteries of our faith!

The first real baptism of the Holy Spirit came when the church was born after Jesus ascended to the Father. We call that Day "Pentecost" and it is recorded in the second chapter of Acts.

There was a lot of excitement that day. There were tongues of fire, and strange sounds and speaking in at least sixteen different languages so that everyone could hear the Good News. All the church that day was filled with the Holy Spirit.

But what about you and me? Do WE get to have the Holy Spirit in our lives as well? Can we share in this baptism of Jesus?

Absolutely! When we are baptized into Christ– when we are converted from selfishness and sin– when we confess that Jesus is Lord– at that moment we receive the Holy Spirit! (Cf Romans 10: 9,10) Paul also says (in Romans 8:9) "If we do not have the Spirit we are not Christ's!"

When we realize that Jesus is alive! He is risen from the dead! And when by the help of the Holy Spirit Himself we can say "Jesus is LORD!" it is a kairos moment! It is a change time! The baptism of LIFE by Jesus Himself is begun in our lives! THAT IS THE BAPTISM OF JESUS!

[Have YOU been born of the Spirit? Have you confess Jesus as your personal Lord? Do you know Jesus lives in your heart just now?]

Conclusion

BUT there is a difference in being alive, and in being abundantly alive! (John 10:10) Do you want to know how you can be sure you have both been baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit?

[Unfortunately there are many complex answers to that question! Everyone is an expert in the Holy Spirit! Some say you have to "feel" something– or "speak a certain way" – or claim somebody's doctrine. But forgive me if I tell you I believe there is a very simple way: we ASK!]

The Baptism of Our Lord

A "life verse" of mine is Luke 11:13. Jesus is teaching his disciples to pray. It is another version of what we call "The Lord's Prayer." But then Jesus tells us: "If you being evil know how to give good things to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?!!"

We can have this baptism of Jesus. We can be filled, and keep on being filled. But we must ask. And we must be willing to empty our hands of stuff that might hinder us from coming really alive in Christ. Shall we pray?

Prayer

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting.

O Father! Your Son who baptizes people with the Holy Spirit has told us that if we ask You, you will fill us with the Holy Spirit. We come for that filling again today. In Jesus' name. Amen

Will you share communion with me this morning?

Listen! God wants to tell us something about His purpose for us here! If we will listen, God will do a wonderful thing! I don't know about the future of this church. I don't know about my own future, or yours. But I know Someone who holds the future. We do not have to be afraid, for He is already there! So for these first few weeks as we get acquainted I ask you to join with me in listening! Step by Step He will lead us! I really believe that!

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he

ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven torn open and the Spirit descend on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well-pleased." - Mark 1:4-13

O God, You are my God
And I will ever praise You
O God You are my God
And I will ever praise You
And I will seek you in the morning
And I will learn to walk in your way
And step by step you'll lead me
And I will follow You all of my day.

The Call of God

January 16, 2000

East Wareham United Methodist Church, Wareham, Massachusetts

1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51

LISTENING!

This room, right this moment, is full of pictures and words and music! We can hear and see them if we just have the proper equipment and know how to use it.

Here I hope to produce a transistor boom box radio. I turn it on. It does NOT work. THEN I see it doesn't have any batteries. I find the batteries in my bag, put them in and turn it on again. I begin to get random stations. Some (bad) music. Some talking. There are many stations all competing for our attention.

This world is full of spiritual messages. Not all of them are from God. But do you know what? You already HAVE the equipment. You don't HAVE a spirit; you ARE a spirit.

Maybe you need power. FAITH is God's gift; the batteries to give you power to listen. Then you have to TURN ON, and TUNE IN.

To TURN ON, means to deliberately seek to listen for the Word of God. To realize we are spiritual creatures, and must not seek to live by bread alone.

To TUNE IN means to tune OUT so-called spiritual messages that are not God's best will for our lives. We can't follow many leaders. As a matter of fact we can't even really follow TWO leaders. We have to decide: what is God saying to ME? To US?

There are MANY spiritual messages available— and we have the ability to "tune in" to God. But to do that we need to "tune out" a lot of other broadcasters.

(I had a memorial service this week for a semi-homeless person, and met a lot of wonderful people you might call "street people." One of them told me he belongs to fifteen Christian ministries. "Oral Roberts sends me mail," he told me. He has too many messages coming in to be able to "tune in.")

HEARING!

How do you suppose God speaks to people who really want to listen?

1. We have to be willing to take advice, and not begin by knowing it all before we even start!

According to one 19th century expert, after the battle of Little Big Horn some Cheyenne women found Custer's body, the one they called 'Yellow Hair'. He and all his men had died because he had failed to listen to good advice. Evan Cornell, a historian, said these Cheyenne women pierced Yellow Hair's eardrums with sewing awls. This was so that in the next world he would be able to hear better, because he sure hadn't listened in this one.

As Jerry Fuller, who told this story said, "Ouch! Lucky Custer was dead!"

2. We need some quiet time, even silence in our lives.
3. We need a regular time and place to talk with God, and even more important, to listen.
4. We need the Bible. The Spirit uses the Bible as He talks with us. In the Word preached, yes. In the Word studies together, yes. And in the Word we read and think about.

If we will listen, and use our equipment, God is already speaking!!

Obeying!

How can we be sure it is GOD speaking??? We have to be willing to OBEY! We may not understand; we may not know what is the right choice; BUT IF WE ARE WILLING TO OBEY GOD WILL LEAD US!

God's will will always be bringing us closer to Jesus! To His Lordship! To His glory!!

THE GOSPEL STORY HERE - John 1:43-51

Jesus told Philip the Apostle, Follow me. He did. Philip had to talk about it. He told his friend, Nathaniel. The result was the conversion of Nathaniel.

So, in fact, Jesus called Nathaniel through Philip! He might call someone through you or me!

Philip: We have found the Messiah!

Nathaniel: Can anything good come from Nazareth? (Can anything good happen HERE?)

P: Come and see!

Jesus: (Backs Philip up) I know you! Nathaniel, your faith is on the right track!!

N: How do you know me?

Jesus: You haven't seen ANYTHING yet!!

Nathaniel begins to follow Jesus— his faith begins to unfold as he listens, hears, obeys!!

We might reflect on others who have answered God's call.

(Henri Nouwen's responses to God's calls led him first to the ordained ministry in his native Netherlands, then to university classrooms in Europe and the U.S.A. Later, seeking, Nouwen became a member of one of Jean Vanier's L'Arche Communities; there he answered God's call as spoken through the needs of the intellectually and physically handicapped with whom he shared his love and care. Nouwen found at L'Arche the home and family harmony for which he had longed so many years of his life.)

Esther Sanger was past 50 years of age when she heard God speak in a special way.

God is a God of surprises. We need to be listening and willing to hear and to heed the call of God from wherever, in whomever and whenever it may come.

When we feel unequal to the challenge of God's call, remember that no call ever comes without accompanying grace. When there seems to be inner conflict or we think we need to quit or take a detour it is time to renew surrender, and tell God we are WILLING to obey if we KNOW IT IS HIS WILL!

Remember we cannot be filled with the Spirit if we are not willing to let go of the stuff that clutters up our lives. We cannot be blessed and a blessing if we are hanging on

The Call of God

to known sins. When it is clearly God's will we had better ask for grace to obey immediately:

Illustration: The renowned preacher Donald Grey Barnhouse told of a missionary in Africa whose little son was playing in the yard. Suddenly he heard his father's voice. "Philip! Obey me instantly! Drop to the ground!" The boy did what he was told without any question. "Now crawl toward me as fast as you can." Again the boy obeyed. "Now stand up and run to me!" The lad followed instructions and ended in his father's arms. Only then did he look back at the tree where he had been playing. Hanging from a limb was a 15-foot snake! Suppose the boy had paused to ask why, or in a whining tone had inquired, "Do I have to do that right now?" He would have been killed by that deadly reptile.

LET US PRAY: Lord God, You showed Your glory and led many to faith by the works of Your Son. As He brought gladness and healing to His people, grant us these same gifts and lead us also to perfect faith in Him, Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

Affirm your faith with me:

The Apostles' Creed - on Page 7 UMH

Invitation

Prayer of Confession - on Page 8 UMH

Let us offer ourselves and our gifts to God!

The Lord's Prayer

Communion

O God you are My God

Benediction

Postlude

Answering Gods Call: Jonah, Peter, and You

January 23, 2000

Jonah 3, Mark 1:14-20

Did you ever have a neighbor that could make life miserable for you? Thank God we haven't had very many, but even one is one too many!

{In one church the houses were close together and our next-door neighbor was a sour old man who seemed to hate my four sons. He called the police if their friends parked across the street from his house. He kept their ball if it went over his fence. One day he had a heart attack and as he was being carried on a stretcher out to the ambulance he raised his head and yelled "Keep off the grass!"

{I wish I could say I changed him with charm and prayer, but I'm afraid he was just as unhappy when we moved as when we came.}

I. JONAH'S CALL

Multiply your worst neighbor by 1,000,000 and add blood-letting and hatred and horrible violence and you get the idea of what Assyria was as a neighbor to the little kingdoms in the Middle east. So– one day God said to his prophet Jonah, "Go down there to Ninevah and tell them they are in big trouble!"

GOD CALLED HIS MAN, TO DO A JOB FOR HIM

And you know what? Jonah ran the other way! Why? Was he afraid? Maybe. But I think he was afraid that God might forgive those wicked neighbors and Jonah didn't want to share his God with them. They didn't deserve it! So Jonah ran!

{Do you know the story of Jonah? Ran to Joppa, got a ship to Tarshish - BIG storm– draw straws- over he goes– BIG FISH - deep-sea prayer meeting- SICK FISH . . . THEN}

GOD GIVES JONAH ANOTHER SHOT AT IT and a miracle of miracles– Ninevah repents. God does NOT destroy them. And Jonah is sorry!

BUT JONAH'S MESSAGE IS: GOD LOVES US, BUT HE LOVES THAT DIFFICULT NEIGHBOR, TOO

(Just pray He doesn't ask you to be nice to him!! If he does what will you do??)

II. JESUS CALLS PETER ANDREW JAMES AND JOHN

This is about God's love, too. But it seems a lot more personal. Jesus comes along and says FOLLOW ME!

What would you have done?

I really want to know Jesus! I would follow Him if He came along, wouldn't you?

Peter and Andrew and James and John first of all got to be with Jesus. They didn't have to tell their nasty neighbors anything until Jesus showed them how. Later He did just that.

Peter had to learn to follow Jesus even after Jesus had gone to heaven. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to help Peter get over his prejudices. Peter never was "perfect" but he left everything he needed to leave and he followed. And we're here because he did!

III. JESUS CALLING!

- Does Jesus still come by where people are working and playing and ask them to follow Him?
- Do you remember when Jesus called to you?

I can't remember the first time I believe I knew Jesus was calling me. But I certainly DO remember ONE time! JANUARY 17, 1948 was a Saturday night. That night Jesus spoke to me and I felt very sick of my sins. I knew I was not where I ought to be with God. I promised God that night that I would give my heart to him the next chance I got. I was thinking in terms of an invitation to an altar of prayer,

The very next night JANUARY 18, 1948, Sunday night, I went to church. I don't know what the pastor said. I didn't FEEL anything emotional. But I

heard Jesus say in my spirit 'DO YOU REMEMBER YOUR PROMISE?' I heard my call 'FOLLOW ME!'

- Do you believe Jesus still calls us?
- Do you think he is calling us, like Jonah, to love those neighbors?
- Do you believe he calls us to follow Him?
- Do you say "Yes!" to Him?
- Do you know you are saved?

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, preached that we could be saved and we could KNOW we are saved! That ASSURANCE is a wonderful thing!

HOW do we know we are right with God?

1. By the Word of God: If we confess God is faithful!
2. By our spirit's witness that we have answered in good faith.
3. By the assurance that the Holy Spirit gives us that we are forgiven.

Prayer

O Father God, through your Son the Lord Jesus, we hear you calling, "Come, follow ME!" We don't know where you want to take us. We don't know what you want to do with us. But we want to be with You! We want to belong to You! So we come! Forgive our sins! By your Holy Spirit live in our hearts! Make us Your people this very day, we pray

We ask this in Jesus' Name. Amen

The Authority of Jesus Word

January 30, 2000

Mark 1:22 *And they were astonished at his teaching, for He taught as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*

Do you know the difference between power and authority?

You're sitting at a traffic light, in the middle lane, waiting for the light to change. On your left is a Dodge Viper, with about a zillion horsepower, just waiting to streak away like a shot. That is power! On your right is the biggest, shiniest eighteen-wheeler you ever saw, with chromium exhaust pipes and a cab that looks two stories tall, and it is rumbling like a thousand snarling lions, waiting for the light to change. That's power!

But just before the light begins to change, you see a State Policeman, in shiny boots and spit-and-polish uniform. His car is parked across the way. He is evidently filling in for the school crossing guard. He walks to the center of the street and holds up his hand. All the traffic comes to a stop. You wait. The Viper waits. The eighteen-wheeler waits. And a tiny little girl with a backpack walks kitty-corner across the busy intersection. The rumbling engines have power. He has authority!

I. JESUS SPOKE WITH AUTHORITY

What was the difference in the preaching of Jesus and the preaching of the scribes? I'm sure it was not that the scribes preached untruth. They were versed in the Old Covenant. That was God's powerful Word. That was the scripture that Jesus came to fulfill. The difference was that the scribes were teaching lessons, and Jesus was teaching LIFE! The bean-counters were quoting this or that rabbi and explaining all the meanings of the words. Nothing wrong with that. But Jesus was never a bean-counter. He was not a legalist. He was inviting those who heard him to believe that God cared about how they responded to His Word. Jesus spoke and HOPE began to spring up in his hearers' hearts.

Jesus always spoke with authority. In the storm when the disciples were terrified Jesus said, "Peace! Be still!" and the storm was over! He said, "Lazarus, come forth!" and the dead man was alive again. When the authorities sent police to arrest Jesus they came back without him. "No one ever spoke like this Man, ever before!" was their reason for coming back empty-handed.

Jesus forgave sins. Jesus said the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Jesus said, "You have heard it said, but I say unto you!" Yes, Jesus spoke with authority! He still does!

II. THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS IS WHOLESOME AND GOOD

A man with an unclean spirit had come to church that day. The words of Jesus troubled him greatly— or at least troubled the unclean spirits within him. They cried out at the pressure of God's AUTHORITY. A selfish, sinful heart does not like the idea of God telling it what to do. Preaching from the Bible gets hate and ridicule because the WORDS separated from the AUTHOR can easily be used to restrict their happiness and freedom. When there is true AUTHOR-ity there is always happiness and freedom. The authority of Jesus sets us free. God is the author of true freedom. But true freedom is never finally freedom FROM unless it is also freedom TO!

Don't get hung up on the unclean spirit part of the story. You don't have to be demon possessed to have problems inside. There is such a thing as a spirit world that oppresses. But all of us are filled with something or another. There are no true spiritual vacuums. That is why it is so important that we know God, and are being filled with His Presence, His Love, His Spirit.

III. THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS CAN BRING REAL LOVE TO YOUR LIFE

Jesus could have made us all perfect robots, with no problems, and no doubts and fears. He chose instead to give us freedom to choose which way we shall go: toward the light, or away from it. Faith tells us that in the end God will sort things out. His Word is powerful. His will is good, and will finally be done on earth as it is in heaven.

But in the meanwhile, God does not operate without the consent of persons. We are what theologians call "free moral agents." God has given us the power to say yes or no to the great choices in life.

We are heavily weighted on the side of error and sin. Sin has great power. In fact the Bible says that every one of us has fallen, and not once but many times. It seems that the power of the Truth escapes us. Still, we are not left without help.

We are free to choose to call upon the authority of Jesus. We can ask him to meet us where we are and take us to where he wants us to be.

[The love of Jesus meets us where we are. Billy Graham went to Korea during the conflict there and preached and held services and met with the troops. One thing he did was visit the hospitals, and in one visit he saw a man who was burned badly, and was recovering by being strapped into a bed-frame that was turned periodically. He was lying face down when Billy Graham came through. Billy Graham lay down on the floor and scooted under the bed so he could talk face to face with this wounded soldier. That is an icon to me of how God in Christ meets us where we are when we really want to come under his authority.]

[The authority of Jesus leads us where we have never been before - - -The true story of J____ T]

Conclusion

The POWER and the AUTHORITY of God reside in His Son, Jesus Christ. I want Him to walk into the intersections of my life and hold up His hand and let the traffic move according to His Plan. By His Spirit Jesus wants to give us freedom to do God's will. Where His Spirit is in control, there is true liberty.

You have to make the decision. Can you trust the authority of Jesus? Will you deliberately ask Him to take direction of your life? The decision takes an instant. The choices continue for a lifetime. But so does the Presence!

Prayer

Times of Refreshing from the Lord

February 6, 2000

Isaiah 40:21-31, Holy Communion

Have you ever been "down"? Who hasn't? Have you ever had someone come along and give you just the lift you needed? What do you know about finding strength to go on when the going gets tough?

The simple story in today's lesson from Mark's Gospel, chapter one. Coming from the synagogue (where he spoke with authority) Jesus find's Peter's mother-in-law down in bed sick. Jesus heals her. Then the whole community heard about it. The one with authority also had power. They all had needs, so they turned up to get whatever Jesus could give.

But early in the morning Jesus disappeared. He went to find a quiet place where he could be alone with his father. Even Jesus needed renewal and refreshing. And Jesus knew where to find it.

Some thoughts that come from our lessons today:

GOD IS GREAT AND MIGHTY BEYOND ALL UNDERSTANDING

"To whom will you liken God?"

- JESUS CAME WITH ALL AUTHORITY AND POWER, AND YET
- JESUS CAME TO BRING LOVE, TO LIFT UP, TO CARE...
- JESUS BROUGHT GOD TO WHERE WE ARE

He showed us the compassion of PRESENCE!

ISAIAH GAVE US THIS WONDERFUL PROMISE OF RENEWAL: THOSE WHO 'WAIT ON THE LORD' SHALL RENEW THEIR STRENGTH

What is 'waiting'? Time ? (no) Serving tea and biscuits to God? (No!)

It is listening! It is LOVE! It is obedience! (Even when we do not see the way . . . even when the way gets hard!)

A minister named JOHN CLAYPOOL had a child who died from leukemia. He found this very passage in Isaiah very helpful to him. In a sermon he described three situations Christ's followers live under as they seek renewal.

1. FIRST there is a spiritual HIGH. The Lord feels very close. Things are great. We mount up to the sky. Maybe you've been there. Maybe you're there now. Maybe not.
2. SECOND, there is the spiritual NORMAL. We're inspired to do our work and worship. We're hanging in there. This is where we most often live. Nothing TOO exciting, but God is with us. Maybe that is where you are now. Maybe not.
3. But the THIRD state is when all we can do is drag one foot in front of the other. We feel like the end of the world. And if you are like me, you have been there. Maybe you're there right now.

In that THIRD state we're tempted to go our own way. God has failed us– or so we think. Or we're tempted just to give up altogether. But here is where the promise is most precious of all. If we cry out to God, God hears. In the darkness we can dare to trust. And we will not faint!

THE GREATEST VICTORY WE ALL SHARE CAME FROM THE EARTH'S DARKEST MOMENT

On the cross our Lord was faithful to the will of the father He was faithful to you and me. We will live forever as we keep faith with Him.

So where does that leave us this morning? Flying high? Maybe. But usually not.

Running on "normal"? Probably– most of the time.

Under the very heaviest of loads? This will come to us all!

BUT THE PROMISE STANDS!

THEY THAT WAIT ON THE LORD SHALL RENEW THEIR STRENGTH

Let me tell you about a remarkable man named Millard Porter . . . In many ways Millard Porter was pretty ordinary. You wouldn't look at him twice if you saw him in Wal-Mart. He was getting old when I first met him. I came to know and love him because he loved the Lord and he loved his little church.

Millard Porter died in an eight-bed ward in a hospital in New Brunswick, New Jersey. He had a stroke that left him helpless. But twenty years ago this coming October when we dedicated a great new college church I was thinking of Millard Porter. In his darkest hour he said a word I never forgot. It has been a challenge to me to seek and find the renewal Isaiah is talking about in this passage (40:29-31). Do you know what the word was that Millard Porter told me? He said, "Thirty-four." I had to lean over and listen to be sure. Yes, he said it again. "Thirty-four."

Now I knew Millard Porter. He had lived for God and the church. Janitor. Usher. Counter. Taxi. Whatever. Ready. Steady. And I knew Millard Porter's favorite Bible verses– or at least some of them.

So when Millard said, "Thirty-four," I knew he was saying "I will bless the Lord at all times. His praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul shall make its boast in the Lord! The righteous shall hear thereof and be glad!"

Even when a stroke had taken away his ability to speak or communicate Millard Porter was receiving strength from his God. In utter weakness this man of God spoke to a young pastor of the fact that it pays to serve Jesus. It pays to stay true. I want to have a "34" witness. I want to be like Millard Porter! I want to be like Jesus!

(Eagle's Wings 143)

Prayer - then into HOLY COMMUNION

The Joy of Being Clean

February 11, 2000

East Wareham United Methodist Church, Wareham, Massachusetts

Mark 1:41 *I will: be thou clean.*

We Americans are obsessed with physical cleanness. Not all of us, maybe. But it is hard to imagine how a great part of the world lives– and in fact, how we used to live before we had the kind of plumbing we have today. I know I'm really old, but can you remember when we took baths once a week? When we might wear the same shirt and pants to school over and over again?

Some cultures even today seem to enjoy various kinds of odors we would just as soon not talk about. Some even think some odors are attractive. In our own country perfume used to do more than just be an accessory: it was a cover-up. But we all know there isn't really any substitute for being clean!

I used to wash my face to come to the supper table. Sometimes I just got the front sort of wiped off. My mother had a way of looking behind my ears. (And she also had a disgusting way of looking me over before we went into church and if she saw a spot she'd take her handkerchief and touch it to her tongue- spit on it- and then wipe my face– hard! Ouch! Yuck)! As I said, there is no substitute for being really clean.

TO BE IN GOD'S PRESENCE IS TO SEE HOW MUCH WE REALLY NEED TO BE MADE CLEAN

(Whenever in the Bible people meet God there is usually a sense of shame or fear.) The prophet Isaiah was a very good man. A priest. But as he started to really draw near to God he said, "Woe is me! I am in big trouble! I have a dirty mouth! I live with people who have dirty mouths! I have seen God– now what am I ever going to do?"

THERE ARE TIMES WHEN ONLY BEING REALLY CLEAN WILL CUT IT

The Old testament lesson today is a fascinating story about a truly important, even great man– but one day he looked at his arm while he was bathing and saw a strange sore. He asked his doctor about it. The doctor called another doctor. Then they just shook their heads. "You're unclean!" they said. "You have leprosy!" Naaman was going to die!

Naaman's boss was upset. Everyone in Damascus where he lived was upset– at least the one's who knew it. They kept it a secret as long as they could because leprosy was like AIDS today– incurable, and bad, bad news.

Then though a strange coincidence– the Lord seems to use a lot of these– a slave girl from Israel gave her mistress, who was Naaman's wife– a tiny ray of hope. "There's a man of God in Samaria, Israel, who could help the General," she said.

That began a chain of events that finally led to a really impressive caravan pulling up in front of the man of God's house in Samaria. How they finally got there is a fun part of the story. (Maybe I'll tell you.)

Naaman was willing to pay any price. He came prepared. "Would you like to be a millionaire?" he was waiting to say to Elisha. But Elisha didn't even show. He sent Gehazi his servant to the door with instructions. "You're unclean. OK– go wash seven times in the River Jordan on your way home. That will do the trick. Goodbye." Very strange treatment for a VIP by the prophet. And believe me, Naaman did NOT like it!

"Let's get out of here!" he said.

No price could pay for it! It couldn't be bought. But at the same time nothing but submission and obedience could receive it. Naaman's servants talked some sense into him. They pulled up by the river and off came the jacket with the five stars. Off came the sandals and all the rest. Down into the shallow Jordan walked the general. He dipped, and dipped, and dipped again and again. Seven times. Six times– nothing. Seventh time– miracle! No more unclean! Grateful, Naaman headed back to the prophet's house to give him his zillion dollars reward.

NOW the prophet came down, smiling. "Nope, I don't want any money. This is God's miracle. Just be grateful."

"I am! I am!" It is wonderful when you have been unclean to realize– I am clean! I am clean! What a luxury to have a clean heart! Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart!"

The Old Testament seems to discriminate against anything unclean. There were unclean foods. There were unclean animals. There were a thousand ways to get unclean. One reason, and in my mind, the reason for this is the fact that God is HOLY. We need to see that fact as well as the true fact that God is love.

Only God is holy in a pure, underived, absolute sense. So everything that belongs to God, or approaches God, or wants to have to do with God has to be clean.

And there is our Catch 22. We have to be clean to come to God, and we can't come to God unless we are clean and yet we can't make ourselves clean. When Isaiah saw God he immediately felt he was unclean.

That is where the message of grace comes in. Our unclean-ness does NOT keep us from asking God for help. For forgiveness. For inner cleansing. Isaiah was made clean as soon as he cried "Woe is me!" God cares when we want to come to Him. And God makes a way where we could never make the way ourselves.

Naaman was willing to pay, but he could never have enough to buy clean-ness. The leper that came to Jesus cried for help, and said, "If you wanted to you could-" In both cases their cry for cleanness was heard.

What a luxury it is to have God not only save us and grant us his forgiveness for sin, but to fill us with his Spirit, and make us clean on the inside! The Holy Spirit will do that for us. And we can be filled with God's Spirit just for the asking.

But maybe first we need to see how much we need the cleansing. Maybe Naaman can teach us a lesson. He did not look for the cheap way. And when he found out it took humbling, and obedience, and washing he repented and relented and the miracle took place.

The Joy of Being Clean

Our hearts can be made pure. Not just a cover-up. But a cleansing- an on-going cleansing. Not some sort of absolute perfection, but a freedom from the power and filth of sin.

"Lord, if you will, you can make me clean!"

"I will! Be clean!"

Prayer

The God Who Comes Alongside

February 20, 2000

East Wareham United Methodist Church (#7 in this church)

Isaiah 41:10

Two lessons for the price of one this morning: Mark 2:1 - 12 tells of a paraplegic man who was carried by four healthy men to meet Jesus, who forgave his sins, and healed him on the spot. Isaiah 43: 18 - 25 tells of a God who says God loves us and wants to do a new thing for us, and it comes out of a portion of Isaiah that is very precious indeed, especially to me.

FIRST, THE MAN CARRIED BY FOUR.

In his book, *The Return of the Prodigal*, Henri Nouwen takes that story apart, looks at it from the perspective of every person in the story. You remember, there was a loving Father, an elderly brother, and the younger brother who wasted a great portion of his wealth and life, but was welcomed when he came home. Then Henri Nouwen seems to imply, at least he did to me, that at one time or another Christians take each of the roles in that great story. We all are the Prodigal in some ways until we come to ourselves and come home to Father. Perhaps whether we like it or not sometimes we are the selfish elder brother who stands back and wonders if the Father has lost his mind to welcome such a sinner back home. And Nouwen even says sometimes we have the privilege of speaking for the Father, bringing love and welcome to wanderers.

Well, I wonder if we could take that same technique and apply it (very briefly) to this story of the paraplegic carried by four others to Jesus. I don't know about you, but there are times when I have felt weak and helpless. I have been that helpless man. And then I have felt someone or something carrying me, lifting me. Maybe it was a phone call. Maybe it was a word from someone at church that was more than just the perfunctory "How are you?" There have been times when our family has gone

through the deep waters. Then it has been a humbling thing, but a marvelous thing to realize the church was there for us. I wasn't Mr Strong Man, the Pastor– I was just a father hurting, who appreciated being carried.

Then, too, there have been times when I have been privileged to be a part of a team that brought someone to Jesus. In fact I don't think I ever brought someone to Jesus all on my own. It is always a cooperative effort, a function of the true church, when people are brought to Jesus. So do you want to be a part of that kind of team? So do I!

Maybe sometimes we are like the scribes that looked on. "What is going on!?!?," they asked. It is always a challenge to see any kind of new thing, any kind of change. I don't like change, usually. Change for the sake of change is usually wrong. But life is full of changes. God is always doing something new and fresh.

Maybe we are the home owner who looked up to see his ceiling coming apart and people lowering a pallet or stretcher right into his living room. His hospitality was certainly stretched that day! But people are more important than things!

Sometimes, believe it or not, we are even called on to be Jesus, as in the story! This is never something we take on ourselves, or something we earn or deserve. But is we let Jesus live in us, and seek to walk with him, He will shine out through our lives.

Many years ago there was a social work student at the college where I was pastor named Cindy Knox. When she graduated she began working in Boston. Often Cindy saw things that shocked her; things she never knew existed. One day Cindy was involved a particularly case. People had been mistreated. I remember her telling about it later in a prayer meeting. She said that she got almost angry with God that He let such a thing happen. She cried out in her heart, "Where are You, God! Where are You in this house!?!?"

And then she said she was shocked as she could almost HEAR the immediate answer to her prayer: "I'm in YOU, Cindy! I'm in YOU!"

The story speaks about cooperation, and even compromise; it speaks of confidence in bringing our loved ones to Jesus– and it tells us Jesus won't disappoint.

Which brings me to the other lesson, the Isaiah passage:

A GOD WHO COMES ALONGSIDE

Isaiah 43 reminds us that God want to love us, to bring us to new planes of trust. God comes alongside those who go through difficult places.

I remember when I was a young, teenager Christian. I used to try to "run to" God. I wanted to feel blessed. I thought the feeling was the thing. Then, when I felt, I asked. And frankly it was pretty "thin soup."

Well, I still am trying to run to God– but then I stop and realize God is HERE. I need to open up to Him, not try to get Him to come around to my ideas. I still ask, but now it is "Please let me know YOUR will!"

I have NOT "arrived." I know Jesus. But as a dear and godly friend of mine once said (Reuben Welch) "I know Jesus– but sometimes I think I hardly know Him at all!" I get scared again. I look at life's problems and I FEEL overwhelmed. Then I see this passage in Isaiah saying, "I was waiting for you to call Me! I am waiting! I am willing! I will be with you! I am with you!"

And I remember times past when I have been overwhelmed, defeated– and have cried out. Nothing! But NOT nothing! I have been heard in those cries!

And often I remember a story, a thing that really happened to me a long time ago that has sort of become a Parable for me to remember. It is the story of the Hayford Street Gang.

(How many times have I told this one?!!!) . When I was about ready to go into the fourth grade my parents moved into a little house on Magnolia St in Lansing, Michigan. I loved that little house. I had great friends on the street there. I did just fine in the Allen St school a half mile or so away. But one thing could make life miserable. The **Hayford Street Gang**. So— we Magnolia kids made it a point to walk to school and back again together every day. Safety in numbers, you know. But one day I had to stay after school . . . and they parted just like the Red Sea did for Moses and I walked right through with my big friend.

The God Who Comes Alongside

We have a big Friend like that. We can call on him ourselves. We can team up in prayer with each other to bring our needy friends to Him. We can invite Him to live in us.

PRAYER: WE WANT TO WALK WITH YOU

LET Your Word be our food and drink this morning, O Lord. More than just stories, and more than wishful thinking, we want to know you, and walk with you, and stay so close to you that you can go with us through the good times and the tough times. We want you to live in us so that we can bring others to you, and they will see you and know that you love them, too. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen

A Call to Put God at the Center

February 27, 2000

Mark 2:13-22

The story of the call of Levi (or Matthew, as we better know him,) is simple and straightforward. Jesus stopped by Levi's place of business and said, "Follow Me." Immediately Matthew cleaned out his desk. They went to Matthew's house where they had something very much like a party. Matthew's old friends came. They were not typical church-type people. The church-type people of Capernaum were offended. Jesus said to them "These are the very kind of people I have come to invite into my kingdom." From that very day Matthew had a new reason for living. Jesus became the center of his life.

Jesus is still calling people to follow him. He doesn't (usually) come by in a visible form and ask us to get up and go with him. We think it would be simpler if he could and did. But believe me, Jesus still says "You! I want you! Come, follow me!"

Sometimes we church-type people get the call of Jesus all mixed up with our idea of the call of the church, or the call we heard way back then. It is always a wonderful thing when Jesus comes by and says "Follow me!" The best thing we can do is help people listen— to sort out all the voices that are shouting, help them seek to follow the voice of Jesus.

The so-called important people seemed to think Levi and his friends were not eligible to walk with God because of what they had been in the past. They knew tax collectors and publicans and sinners were not usually found in the synagogue when worship time came around. Actually they weren't welcome there.

But Jesus said, "If true religion is about getting right with God, then- well, maybe they should be welcome!"

THE CALL TO LIVE WITH GOD AT LIFE'S CENTER IS A CALL TO BE LOVED

The religion of the scribes and Pharisees saw living life with God at the center as a matter of rule and regulation. It was a joyless, sterile, juiceless way of living. By contrast, the relationship with God Jesus was introducing was made for real life— life the way it ought to be lived.

[Illustration: There is an old story of a woman who was married to an extreme hard-nosed legalist. A real nit-picker, he made a list of things his wife was to do and not to do and put it on the refrigerator. Scrub the floor. Wash the clothes. Pack the lunches. Bring my slippers— it was all there and believe me he made life miserable if she missed a beat. The list made her life very difficult. Thankfully, the legalist caught a bad cold because he had his mouth open so much, and he died.

In due time the lady married again, and this time her husband was quite different. He brought her flowers. He told her every day he loved her, and he seemed to mean it. He was thoughtful, and kind, and loving. Their home was happy.

But one day as she was cleaning she found an old list left by the first husband in a drawer somewhere. As she sat down to look at it she realized she was doing every single thing on the list and even more. Her life was not unhappy because she was doing for love what the old law had demanded that she do or else!]

THE CALL TO LIVE WITH GOD AT THE CENTER IS A CALL TO SHARE LIFE WITH JESUS

Jesus said, "I did not come to people who are whole. I came to bring genuine soul health to those who are sick or broken!" If there is no sin, we don't need a Savior. But the Bible says we all have sinned and come short of God's glory. The LAW tells us we have a list on the refrigerator and we had better get with it or else. Jesus comes along and says. "The old Way is dead. Come along with Me, and I'll show you the way of LOVE!"

The theological way of describing this New Life in Jesus is not dull and dry: three things take place, which coalesce into a fourth. When we decide we will follow the

call and follow Jesus— not just mental and tentative, but when from our hearts we say "Come into me heart! Be Lord of my life!" these things begin to take place:

1. we are given a genuine NEW LIFE inside (crying for food! regeneration)
2. we are given A CLEAN SLATE (ALL our sins are forgiven justification)
3. we are ADOPTED INTO GOD'S FAMILY (adoption)
 - and together this effects our
4. sanctification (we are made, we are being made, we will be made like Jesus)

THE CALL TO LIVE WITH GOD AT THE CENTER IS A CHALLENGE TO LOVE LIKE JESUS LOVED

Jesus loved those old scribes and Pharisees, I'm sure, even though they were miserable and made others miserable. He even loves us when we get set in our ways. But the message is: Jesus loves everyone. The hospitality of Jesus reached out. He was not ashamed to love "sinners." He even loved ME! He loves YOU!

Our live can reflect that hospitality. Our worship will reflect that hospitality.

[Illustration: I heard a great story recently about a brilliant young hippy-type college student whose regular outfit was tee shirt and jeans and long hair and all. He found the Lord in a college fellowship, but never really had been to a "church' church.

So one day he wandered into a really big neat downtown church right during morning worship. The service was pretty far along; actually the pastor was preaching. The place was full. All the aisle seats were taken. Our hippy friend listened for a moment and liked what he was hearing and he just sort of wandered down the center aisle and squatted down on the carpet. That is what they did in the informal college fellowship. But no one had ever done it in First Church before!

Just then the head deacon got up from his aisle seat and started toward the front where the young man sat in the aisle. The deacon was dressed impeccably: three piece suit, gold rimmed glasses, the whole nine yards. The congregation watched out

A Call to Put God at the Center

of the corners of their eyes, and even though the pastor kept talking no one was hearing what he was saying except maybe the college student on the carpet.

When the deacon got to where the hippy was sitting he bent down and— he lowered himself to the carpet and sat down beside the young man so he wouldn't have to feel strange. The pastor said later that he was sure the people would forget his sermon that day, but they would never forget what the deacon did.

REAL religion, heart-felt religion is Jesus at the center of our lives, and that makes room then for real hospitality.]

Life with Jesus at the center will help us love people who don't "know enough" to worship "the right way" (like WE do it!)

Jesus is calling every one of us this morning, calling us to follow Him and put him at the center of our lives. He is asking us to put away selfishness and sin, and asking us if He can give us LIFE, and FORGIVE OUR SINS, and ADOPT US into his Family.

INVITATION TO COMMUNION

As we come to Holy Communion time, let this be a way we can respond to the call of Jesus to "Come, follow Me!" Affirm your faith with me:

The Apostles' Creed - on Page 7 UMH

Invitation

Prayer of Confession - on Page 8 UMH

Let us offer ourselves and our gifts to God!

The Lord's Prayer

Communion

Here I Am, Lord (chorus only)

Benediction

Up the Mountain and Down Again

March 1, 2000

Mark 2:2-10 - *And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves; and he was transfigured before them, and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Eli'jah with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Eli'jah." For he did not know what to say, for they were exceedingly afraid. And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." And suddenly looking around they no longer saw any one with them but Jesus only. And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of man should have risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what the rising from the dead meant.*

11 - 13 - *And they asked him, "Why do the scribes say that first Eli'jah must come?" And he said to them, "Eli'jah does come first to restore all things; and how is it written of the Son of man, that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Eli'jah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him."*

14 - 29 - *And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd about them, and scribes arguing with them. And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed, and ran up to him and greeted him. And he asked them, "What are you discussing with them?" And one of the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a dumb spirit; and wherever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able."*

And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me." And they brought the boy to him; and

when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus asked his father, "How long has he had this?" And he said, "From childhood. And it has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us."

And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible to him who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You dumb and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again."

And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse; so that most of them said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."

1. A glimpse of the spiritual reality beyond what we now understand. The revealed glory of Jesus. Moses and Elijah alive and able to carry on conversation. The disciples were very much afraid.
2. Why do you suppose this glimpse was given to Peter, James, and John? And what does it mean for us 2,000 years later? Why did Jesus tell Peter, James, and John not to tell until after the resurrection?
3. Coming down from the mountain top- disappointment? Certainly more work to do!
4. Significant- the father's prayer: *Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief*. God will work with less-than-perfect faith, understanding, proper formula. All he asks is that we ask His help!

With Jesus on the Mountain

The Transfiguration "This is my Son ...listen to him!"

March 5, 2000 (cf: February 22, 1996 AM)

Mark 9:2-9 cf Luke 9:28-36

Mountains As Points Of Reference

One Sunday afternoon, a long time ago, instead of taking the usual Sunday afternoon nap, I took my four sons on a hike up Mount Beacon above the majestic Hudson River in Beacon, New York. We lived in Poughkeepsie where I was pastor at Vassar Road Church. It was sultry and hot, and the thought of climbing in shady, cooler woods sounded like fun.

It was a twenty minute drive to a place where we could leave the wagon as far up the mountain as it could go. Then it was just over an hour's walk to the top where an old restaurant had stood; you could look up and down the river for miles.

On the way up the trail we heard the sound of a brook off to one side, and followed the sound and found a beautiful place where the water was falling through a U shaped place in a big rock into a shallow pool like a basin underneath it. It was hot, and the water was very cool.

The four boys stripped down to their shorts and into the water they went.

One of them would sit in the cleft in the rock and dam up the water it was that narrow until it spilled over his shoulders then he'd jump into the basin below with the wave gushing after him.

We stayed at that pool half an hour or less that hot Sunday afternoon and that was more than thirty-five years ago. We walked back to the station wagon and I drove back to Vassar Road and preached and led the evening worship. I haven't a clue as to who was there, or what I preached it has been long forgotten. But every one of those four boys, now grown men with families of their own, remembers that day we

climbed Mount Beacon. And somehow it has a good place in our family history. It was one of those defining moments that help give life direction.

We've all had those times, those defining moments, that we remember as we look back across the landscape of our lives to those mountains, literal or figurative, that show us where we've been, and to some extent, who we are and where we're going.

Perhaps the day the story in our Gospel lesson began started out like just any other day for the disciples. But it was going to turn out to be a day they would never, ever forget. Jesus called to Peter, John, and James. He often went apart to pray, and a prayer time was all they really were expecting.

Up and up the mountain trail they went, until they reached the top. And there they stopped. The Gospels tell us that Jesus began to pray. Luke tells us that the three disciples became very sleepy.

Peter, James and John were not expecting what came next. While they watched in awe something wonderful beyond description began to happen. The kindly face of the Galilean carpenter began to change in ways the evangelist has found difficult to describe. Later the three men tried to find words to express what they had seen: "Light streamed from his face, as bright as the sun. His clothes became whiter than white they shone with light."

These men knew Jesus well. They had been with him three years and had heard him speak, and heal, and raise the dead. They had even confessed their faith that He is the Son of God, the Messiah. They had seen the authority of Jesus, and watched Him do miracles. But they were totally unprepared for this display of dazzling glory. They knew Jesus. But that day they also realized they hardly knew him at all!

As they watched, the three disciples became aware that two other people were present, talking with Jesus in the cloud of light. In some mysterious and wonderful way, they knew that these two glorious figures were Moses and Elijah, the Lawgiver, and the greatest of Old Testament prophets.

Moses. A long time before this wonderful day Moses, the meekest man who ever lived, had been on a mountain, had talked face to face with God, and had received the Ten Commandments. What a great giant of the faith!

Elijah. On another mountain top, also many years before this day, this rugged prophet had prayed fire down from heaven, and had defeated the false prophets of Baal, and brought God's people back to Him. Here were the Law and the Prophets personified, in conversation with the Living Gospel, the Good News of Salvation. Here was a vision of the Law fulfilled, and of Truth triumphant, the whole Plan of Salvation, the whole Word of God represented in one glorious conversation.

It was Luke who actually wrote what Moses and Elijah were discussing with their glorious Lord that mountaintop day. They were talking about another mountain yet to be climbed. They were talking about the hill we call Calvary. Moses and Elijah were there to worship their Master, and urge Him to hurry home!

Peter, James and John may not have understood the full implication in the dazzling light of the moment, but they were dramatically seeing portrayed before their eyes 1) Jesus as fulfilling the Law (Moses), completing the truth of Torah; and 2) Jesus as Champion-over-evil (Elijah), making sinners right with God, completing the Plan of Salvation.

The disciples were uncomfortable. Don't ever think that when God is manifested in power it is a comfortable, easy time. This was gut wrenching, frightening to the limit! Peter began to 'prattle' a bit. "Lord, let's build succoth booths right here on top of the mountain! We'll build three one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for You!"

Then came a majestic, thundering, authoritative voice from heaven. The Father put things into perspective. He said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to HIM!" The heart of faith is not Jesus AND Law, or Jesus AND Proclamation, or Jesus AND anything else. The heart of faith is Jesus. That is the message this mountain top experience carried home to Peter James and John. Then it was over. Just like that.

As soon as they came down the mountain, the very next day actually before they got back to Capernaum they were back at nitty gritty work. As far as we know they never had another Transfiguration type opportunity. (Oh, yes, John saw the glorified Savior during his exile on Patmos you can read about it in the first chapter of the Revelation.) But these men never forgot what they saw on that mountain that day.

They needed it in just a few weeks when their Master was taken from them and mocked and beaten and killed on a Cross. It looked like defeat. It looked like weakness. (But) They had been to the mountain. They had seen the glory. They could believe when the Resurrection came.

They needed it after Jesus ascended to heaven, and their own crosses became heavy, and they were tempted to wonder if it was worth it. But they had seen a glimpse of the glory. They knew that their Master was Lord of Moses and Elijah who are very much alive. They had been on the mountain. They could trust that God would not waste their sacrifice.

James was killed by the sword early in the first wave of persecution. Had the vision been wasted on him? I don't think so. Peter led the church in Jerusalem, and then Antioch and Ephesus and Rome. The vision sustained him, and he passed it on to Mark and others. John the Beloved outlived all the other apostles. As long as he lived the memory of that day of Transfiguration on a mountain in the north of Israel was a blessing and a hope.

We cannot live on mountain tops, or even live FOR that kind of experience. Don't forget, eight perfectly good apostles got word of this day second hand, just like you and I have. What we can do is live in confession of faith in our Master. If truly the faith has been granted us to believe that Jesus is the Christ we can say with Peter, six days BEFORE this glory time, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!"

What we can do if we have that faith is affirm from our hearts, "Jesus is LORD!" We can ask Him if we can follow Him around day after day.

In a way that comes right to where we are today, we can ask Jesus to help us walk with him. In our private lives, and together as a church fellowship, we can tell Jesus

we will walk with him even in the valley. the next seven weeks before Easter, in our worship services, in our private devotions, we can be true to what we know about Jesus!

Like the disciples, we can ask Him if we can come along as he cares for people who hurt. That is what we can do.

And maybe sometime when we least expect it there will be those loving times those tender times when Jesus lets us know He's pleased with us. Not Transfigurations, maybe. But mountain experiences. Defining moments. Moments we never forget.

And who's to say? Oh well.

Let's pray

Blessed are you, God of light eternal. Hear our prayers and let your glory shine upon us. Let our lives reflect your goodness, let our labors bring you honor. You have shined in our hearts to show your glory in the face of your only Son, Jesus Christ, who with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, world without end, be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

May the Communion this morning be a time of drawing close to our Lord for each one of us. Amen

The Great "I AM" is Where You Are

March 12, 2000

August 30, 1992 - 6 p.m.

Exodus 3: *I AM THAT I AM*; John 10: *I AM the Door...*

Everybody knows what God is like! That is— until they try to describe Him. Sometimes I think we are like the little kindergarten boy painting at his easel, with his frock made out of his father's shirt.

"What is that you are painting, Andrew?"

"I'm painting God!"

"But Andrew, no one knows what God looks like!"

"They will when I get done with this picture!"

I. THE INEFFABLE GOD

(transcendent/wholly other)

A. The fact is God is NOT 'LIKE.' He is INEFFABLE! God is NOT "like" anything! God IS!

Not is LIKE, but IS! Do you see the difference?

B. We may not have pictures of God, but God is a God who reveals Himself to faith:

1. In ancient times God spoke through prophets and holy men of God:
2. He revealed Himself to Moses as: I AM THAT I AM
3. The great "Call to Worship" of the Old Testament is still valid: (Deuteronomy 6:4,5) "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Jesus re-emphasized this call to worship, and added, "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself."
4. There is ONE God of heaven and of earth. One "God for all purposes": this was a revolutionary concept to ancient peoples. They had gods for everything. But

then, you see, they constructed their gods; but the God of revelation was different— IS different, I should say. In a practical way, it is still revolutionary to say "There is ONE God of heaven and earth!"— for we have "one God" to take care of life's "ritual times" when we are "born" and "married" and when we "die." But all too often in between we serve the non-gods of the culture, the day, the age— and Christians are not distinguished from the rest of the non-believers! But remember, it is still true: GOD is ONE— God of heaven and earth. He is "not LIKE."

II. THE IMMINENT GOD

(condescending/present to us)

- A. This great, transcendent God has a face. [The INEFFABLE is also the IMMINENT.]
While it is true that we will never "know" God in the sense of comprehending all that He is, it is possible to KNOW Him right here and now in the sense that He IS our Friend, and that He desires to BE our Friend. And so it is that this great God of heaven and earth has made Himself available to us. As the writer of Hebrews opens his epistle: "GOD, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through Whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power." (Hebrews 1:1-3) God has a face. That "face" is Jesus. As we come to know Jesus, we come to see God, and to know HIM, the I AM.
- B. This great God meets us at our point of need. WE are NOT the center of the Universe. GOD does NOT exist for us; WE exist for HIM. But at the very same time, God stoops to our weakness; God loves us; God reveals Himself to us as Father and Friend and Loved One. And so sometimes we say "God is 'like'" when we try to describe ways that God relates to us:
 1. Consider just ONE writer's attempt to show us the nearness of God in Jesus Christ: John (in His Gospel) records Jesus as saying:
 - I am the Bread of Life
 - I am the Door

- I am the Good Shepherd
 - I am the Light of the World
 - I am the Way the Truth and the Life
 - I am the Resurrection and the Life
 - I am the True Vine (and Ye are the Branches)
2. Let me lift out just ONE of these "I AM" statements: "I am the DOOR!"
- A door way is (1) an entry and an exit; a door is (2) a source of security, a haven; a door is (3) access to the "beyond" ("By ME you shall (not only come IN and find LIFE, but you shall) go in and out, and find pasture.") Jesus Christ is the ACCESS to everything GOOD and everything WORTHWHILE in all of life! He is God-making-life-available!

III. WHERE CAN I FIND THIS GOD?

A. You CAN'T find Him— He has to find YOU! But good news! He is always LOOKING for you! He is speaking if we will listen!

1. The face of Jesus is reflected in the love of His people. I need to see it, and sometimes I see it in you. You need to see it, and sometimes you see it in me.
2. It is important that if we know God, we need to give Him access to us so others who are seeking Him will not be disappointed!

B. Our greatest privilege is to press into the knowledge of Jesus

Conclusion: What is God like? God is a great Mystery! But God is also the gentle Jesus you have known since you were a Baby! God is Your dearest, closest Friend! God is NEAR— just NOW! His promise is: "Draw near(er) to Me— I will draw near(er) to you! (James 4:8.)"

Prayer: Wherever we are in our spiritual journey, O God; show Yourself to us in newer, fresher, stronger ways. Whatever our needs may be just now, O God; help us to see that You are what we need most of all. And so, help us to come near to You so that You can come near to us. In Jesus' name. Amen

Invitation - (Essence of the prayer) - Hymn Only Trust Him -UMH 337

Abraham's Challenge

March 19, 2000

cf Feb 23, 1997

Genesis 17:1

I love the story of Abraham. Even across thousands of years, somehow I feel connected to the great Father of Faith.

Three great world religions look to Abraham as the one who showed them what it means to walk with God by faith. Jews call him their father; Muslims believe his son Ishmael was their ancestor; Christians own him as their own. It is easy for us to try to fit the life of Abraham into our particular understanding of theological truth. I don't have a problem with that at all. I see MY story in miniature in Abraham's story. God calls. God says move. Move up! Trust me!

Abraham had left his native land to follow God. He had started out not knowing where he was going. Furthermore, Abraham had made covenant with God simply on the basis of trust (see Genesis 15:6.) But now in old age, when Abraham's best years seem to be behind him, God asks Abraham to move up.

This call to move higher reached Abraham at the very point of his weakness and inability. (When we think it is all over, maybe God is thinking about beginnings!) "When Abraham was ninety years old and nine YHWH appeared . . ."

God's challenge was to walk before Him and be perfect, or blameless. We could easily get sidetracked by the use of the word "perfect." Abraham didn't PERFORM perfectly. Abraham made some dumb mistakes. But Abraham responded perfectly to God's challenge. It wasn't a perfect performance God was looking for. Abraham fell on his face before God. He prostrated himself in worship and submission. He agreed with God, he continued to believe God's word; Abraham's perfect response was simply total willingness to belong to God and God alone.

Abraham's Challenge

This faith of Abraham and Sarah was not to do great things with God's help. RATHER, THEY BELIEVED GOD WOULD DO WHATEVER GOD WANTED TO DO WITH THEM. God would do great things if God said so. Abraham himself became a living sacrifice, and God could have him, weakness and all.

Two things took place when God challenged Abraham to a closer walk with Himself. God changed Abraham's and Sarah's names. Scholars cannot say for sure what the new names mean; the best explanation for me is that God took a part of his own name and put it into Abraham's and Sarah's names. One thing is for sure— when God changes a name it is significant, and it means a life, a character is being changed for the better. To really be a CHRISTIAN means more than believing a certain way. WE TAKE THE NAME OF JESUS AS A PART OF OUR OWN!

God also established the old testament covenant of circumcision that day. Abraham accepted a permanent sign of the covenant, to forever belong to God. Being circumcised did not save Abraham. Being baptized will not save you. Abraham's faith resulted in obedience. Whatever God said, Abraham listened, and believed, and obeyed. BAPTISM IS MORE THAN AN EMPTY REMEMBRANCE. Do you affirm what YOUR baptism means this morning?

THE GOSPEL LESSON FROM MARK 8 IS ABRAHAM'S CHALLENGE ALL OVER AGAIN. It is a call to a deeper walk, a higher way. That challenge is open to us all:

Jesus was speaking to the twelve disciples, and yet at this point he also included all who would listen, "the multitude," and he said, IF ANY ONE will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. It is clear that God's call is to the whosoever: John 3:16 "God so loved the world . . .that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Peter tells us (2 Peter 3:9) " The Lord is . . . long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."

(We are all called, but not everyone— in fact not many— respond to that call. In fact, it seems as though there are at least two levels of Christians— many are called— few

are (finally) chosen. But those who do choose to follow, to walk with Jesus, he has promised His Presence.)

Dr. (Edward S.) Mann used to begin one of his great sermons with a bit of poetry. I probably don't have it exactly right, but this is how I remember it: (I don't know who wrote it . . .)

*Behold, I set before you a way, and ways, and a way.
And the high soul goes the high way, And the low soul gropes the low.
And in between, on the misty flats, The rest drift to and fro.
But to each is opened a high road and a low,
And each one must determine The way his soul would go.*

THE CHALLENGE TO ABRAHAM, AND THE CALL FROM JESUS TO EACH ONE OF US, IS TO DELIBERATELY CHOOSE THE HIGH ROAD OF WALKING BEFORE GOD, or, as Jesus put it, of following after Him.

Jesus makes it clear and simple what the steps are if we want to take the high road. They are just three:

- We are to deny self.
- We are to embrace the cross.
- We are to follow Jesus.

To deny one's self is not to deny one's self of something. It is to ask God to do what we cannot do— to seal us with His Spirit— to circumcise the heart— It is a willingness to be His love-slaves for time and eternity. It is to take self out of the center and to seek with all one's heart to know and do God's will.

Some of the disciples loved Jesus that much. They wanted to be where He was. They were willing to give up their own selfish wills. And when the Holy Spirit was given to them they found that their hearts were made pure, and it was possible to deny self and delight in God's will at any cost.

To take up the cross is more than being willing to die for Jesus. It is being willing to LIVE for Him— it is making an offering of our lives to Him. The world lives for

happiness. If a relationship is painful, throw it away. If promises or responsibilities get in the way of happiness, throw them aside. "We deserve it!" But to take up the cross is to say with Jesus, "Thy will, not mine be done, even when it costs!"

To follow Jesus means simply that this higher road, this deeper walk has the great privilege of always being where Jesus is. God's challenges are always in the context of covenant— and we can count on it, God keeps his word. If we will take the time to listen these days and weeks of Lent, we will hear God calling us to come and walk with Him.

WHEREVER YOU ARE ON YOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY, GOD WANTS TO MAKE COVENANT WITH YOU. He wants to unfold His best will for you, in you. God's best and highest comes only as we, like Abraham, go down on our faces before God— as we, obeying Jesus, are willing to deny self, take up our cross, and follow Him.

Shall we pray: **Prayer** (of A. W. Tozer) I am your servant, Lord. How I want to be a good disciple. Lead me; awaken me— not that I might be great through you, but that you might be glorified through me. Amen

UMH #408 *The Gift of Love or Just as I Am* #357 (Nazarene #462 *Sweet Will of God*)

Coming to the Light

April 2, 2000

Numbers 21; Ephesians 2; John 3:14-21; Psalm 107

Nicodemus came to Jesus in the darkness, out of the shadows. He asked Jesus how he could find eternal life. Why he came at night we do not know. Why he told Jesus he believed he came from God we do not know. But we do know that Jesus interrupted Nicodemus to tell him that he had to be "born again" in order to be able to see the kingdom of God.

Then Jesus told him that heaven's light has come into the world.

Jesus also said that as Moses had lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so He would be lifted up so that anyone who would believe could have eternal life. Do you remember that story of the serpents in the wilderness? (It was the lesson from the OT, from Numbers 21 today.)

That story was about death and life, and about God's wrath against sin, but his grace and mercy for the sinner. I don't pretend to know all there is to know about that story, but it says to me that the Israelites were evil. Do you know what their sin was? They were whining and complaining against the God who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt. God, in the story, sent fiery snakes among them with painful and fatal bites.

But even as they were crying out in pain, God gave Moses a remedy. He said quick, take some bronze and make a copy of the snakes that are biting and put it on a pole. Lift it up where everyone can see it. Then tell the people that all they have to do is LOOK at the bronze serpent and they will not die. All they have to do is LOOK and they will LIVE.

Can you imagine that some people were so mad at God they wouldn't even look? Can you imagine how simple an easy it was to just say 'what do I have to lose?' and look—and be instantly healed?

Coming to the Light

How can this possibly be a comparison to Jesus? What did he mean that as Moses lifted up the snake, even so must the Son of man be lifted up so people can believe?

The bronze serpent represented the penalty for the people's sins. Jesus on the cross of Calvary became "sin" for us– he who never sinned, who was pure and holy, took your sins and my sins and carried them to the cross. He represented there the sting of sin which is death for all of us.

And in his own words, Jesus did not come into the world to bring judgment and damnation, but he came to bear our sins away and to save the world.

THERE IS LIFE FOR A LOOK.

WHOSOEVER BELIEVES IN THE SIN-BEARER WILL BE SAVED. Can you imagine NOT looking to Jesus? Can it be real?

God HATES sin, make no mistake about that. But he loves the sinner. I'm glad for that because I was a sinner and a rebel, going my own way. I was bitten and sure to die. But I heard there was life for a look.

HOW DO WE 'LOOK TO JESUS'?

To believe means more than just believe a thing is true. To believe means to ACT AS IF a thing is true. To believe means to turn around from our own ideas and agree with God.

[Psalm 107 is a wonderful example of people coming to believe: they are away from God and safety– then they cry out for God! He hears them– and he saves them. To "look to Jesus" is to cry out to God for help. God hears. God saves.]

Nicodemus came to Jesus in the darkness, and Jesus told him about light. Nicodemus heard about the serpents in the wilderness, and Jesus told him that he had been bitten, too, and that He, Jesus would be a remedy for sin's curse. Nicodemus came, probably seeking how to live, and Jesus told him he hadn't even been born yet. He was not yet alive!

I WOULD BE NICE IF WE COULD LIVE– BE ALIVE– SOMETIME BEFORE WE DIE!

What is death, anyway?

"By and large, most of us pretend that death is something which happens to other people. Somehow, it's like the husband who said to this wife, 'If one of us dies, I think I'll move to Paris'."

Was Nicodemus "dead"? What IS dead? Dead means to be totally unresponsive to the world around you. Dead means there is air but you can't breathe. There is food but you are not hungry. There are loved ones, but you can't hear them.

Paul (in the Ephesians passage) defines death as FOLLOWING THE COURSE OF THIS WORLD– in other words– LIVING AS IF GOD IS NOT THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN YOUR LIFE!!

IN EPHESIANS PAUL SAYS WE WERE ALL DEAD, BUT GOD HAS MADE US ALIVE TOGETHER WITH JESUS.

Listen to how Peterson puts that passage in his translation called The Message: (Ephesians 2: 1- 6)

'You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us.

But then comes that contrast of death with life:

"Instead God, immense in mercy and with incredible love, he embraced us. he took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. he did this all on his own, with no help from us! Then he picked us up and set us down in highest heaven in company with Jesus, our Messiah.

Coming to the Light

Contrasts in death and life, in light and darkness, tell the story of every one of us. We have all been bitten by the fiery serpents of sin and guilt. But we can be saved by a look at the cross.

Of course, the cross itself does not save. It is the One on the Cross who knows we have looked. Even the look does not save. But somehow God Himself comes down that look and meets us with mercy and forgiveness! Have you looked to Jesus? Are you looking just now? Communion can be a time when we look again to God for his grace and mercy!

Jesus said, "As often as you do this, do it in remembrance of Me! I came to save you!"

Life Beyond Pain

April 9, 2000 - Lent 5 Year B

Psalm 51:1-12; John 12:20-33

One thing we hear in the lessons this morning we may not particularly want to hear. That thing, that word is pain. Two weeks from today is Easter. Easter is the happiest, brightest day on the Christian calendar. Resurrection. Light. Life. But before Easter is Good Friday. Before the resurrection there is a cross. The hard lesson for today is: sooner or later every one of us faces real pain. But along with that lesson comes a mirror, and a challenge.

I. DAVID'S PAIN IS A MIRROR

David was in an agony of guilt. He had done some terrible things. No mistake about that. He had betrayed another man who trusted him. He had seduced his neighbor's wife. He had compounded his sin by scheming to have the man (Uriah) killed to cover his guilt. And he had gotten away with it. Or so he thought. David had swept his guilt under the carpet of activity and forgetting. Out of sight out of mind. But no one ever gets away with sin. No one. Ever.

God sent a prophet, Nathan, to confront the king. King David. David had the power of life and death, so Nathan was brave to face him. But Nathan was also wise. He told an intriguing story. David became enraged about someone else's selfishness and sin and injustice. Then Nathan said: "Thou art the man!"

When David came face to face with his own sin—it HURT! Psalm 51 is a record of what happened next.

David's pain was deserved. In his case, the pain was the pain of GUILT. Do you think pain is bad? Evil? Is guilt a bad thing?

Actually guilt and pain are not themselves always evil; guilt and pain are the RESULT of something wrong. Pain is necessary, even healthy! (Lepers cannot feel pain.) Like

pain, guilt is not something to be ignored or covered up or stuffed back in the recesses of the mind.

But God does not want his people to live with guilt, either! I'm certainly not saying your sins or mine were as gross as David's, although that is possible. I am saying that every one of us has sinned. Every one of us knows what it feels like to be caught in the wrong. And that is the mirror! Psalm 51 holds up a mirror of confession: we do not have to live with the pain of guilt and sin.

The good news is: GOD FORGIVES SIN! I John 1:9 says: "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." We don't have to live with guilt. The only sin that cannot be forgiven is the sin we try to hide away from the light.

David prayed that the JOY would be restored. He prayed that God's PRESENCE would not be taken away– he wanted to be near to God. And that prayer was answered. Your prayer and mine, like that of David, will be answered as well WHEN WE CRY FROM OUR HEARTS GOD HEARS US. The power and penalty of sin has been broken forever.

But there is another sort of pain in our scripture lessons for this morning: it is the pain of the Lord Jesus Himself.

II. THE PAIN OF JESUS - A CHALLENGE

John 12:27 "Now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' But for this cause came I to this hour. Father, glorify thy name!"

This was a very different sort of pain from what David knew. This was NOT guilt. This was NOT deserved. This pain was the price of an unselfish love for you and for me. I do not pretend to understand such love. But I think I know this much: Jesus would not take the easy way out for himself because he loved the Father, and because he loved me, and loved you. He was willing to take our place, to bear our sins.

I heard a story last week about an incident that happened during WW II, when some people were about to be shot in a concentration camp. I wish I had names and

details, but the heart of the story stays with me: a prisoner who was also a pastor offered to take the place of a man about to be shot because the man had family and the pastor did not. The officer roughly ordered the switch to be made. But then one of the soldiers on the firing squad spoke up and said "I can't shoot a pastor!" And the officer in command ordered the soldier to stand with the condemned and he, too, was shot and killed with the prisoners for disobeying orders in wartime. Seemingly a useless waste of life. He died rather than be silent.

Love costs. Love will demand sacrifices. Love cost Jesus. And yet Jesus something in you and me that he believed was worth dying for! The writer of Hebrews even says that Jesus saw A JOY set before him as he endured the cross: and that JOY was when you and I confess our sins and find eternal LIFE because of what Jesus did for us.

This pain of Jesus is NOT a mirror for me. I don't see myself in His part of the story. I am not pure and holy as He was. I am not a hero or martyr. I am not able to save anyone. I CAN identify with David and HIS pain. I CAN ask forgiveness for my sins. But I cannot identify with Jesus. No one is so good and so holy as He.

THE PAIN OF JESUS IS A CHALLENGE TO ME!

I cannot see that he suffered for me and not want to receive the gift that cost Him so much. Somehow Jesus asks me to follow Him. Jesus asks YOU to give him your guilt and your sins and let HIM bear them. Leave your own selfish way and come to the sin bearer.

To accept this challenge to follow Jesus is worth whatever it costs! HOW? This is something we each must answer for ourselves, but I think I know this much:

1. we can be with the One we love. ("Where I am there also will my servant be." If we can be with Jesus it is worth whatever it costs.)
2. we can share the JOY of Jesus. There is no joy like hearing the Father say, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased!"

Conclusion:

Life will NOT be pain-free. But life can have its full share of joy.

God's GRACE enables us to deal with the pain of guilt. We can come and confess as sinners, and be born again into the kingdom of God. We can confess our need for grace as Christians, and maintain the necessary course-corrections that keep us in fellowship with God and with one another. The Lord's Prayer reminds us of our need for the grace of forgiveness.

God's LOVE calls us to embrace the cross. We certainly do not seek any way of pain. We pray "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." But also we hear our Lord say, "Follow me!"

PRAYER

Almighty God, You alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of those who come by faith to you. Grant your us your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the dizzying changes of this world, our hearts may surely stand firm where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

#UMH 382 - Have Thine Own Way, Lord

The King is on Parade

Palm Sunday

April 13, 2000

(cf April 12, 1992)

Luke 19:28-38

Introduction

It may have seemed to the casual observer that this was a very impromptu procession, this parade we call the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. It had all the obvious organization of a pick up game of softball.

But in fact this was a very well planned and deliberate happening, this one Man parade! It had been announced in detail hundreds of years before by a prophet born in Babylon:

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. Zechariah 9:9-10

As unlikely as it seems, even to the casual reader today this was:

I. A PARADE OF INFINITE POWER

- A. Usually when we think of power in a parade we think of booted soldiers marching past Hitler, or massed tanks and missiles filling Red Square. But those powers have come and gone, and the "parade" down Olivet's hill manifested a power that still remains as vital as ever.

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In fact, the people that day were thinking of the Triumphal Procession in terms of power as they understood it! And they were all mistaken about the nature of the power they saw, but real power was there:

- B. The enemies of Jesus saw Him as a threat. They hadn't really worried until they heard He had said that everyday common believers should have righteousness that exceeded the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees themselves! And then there were the miracles! And finally, Lazarus! This Jesus had to be stopped!
- C. Many if not all the friends of Jesus saw Him then as a fulfillment of their dreams. "Will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" "Hosanna to David's son! Surely HE is going to throw out the Romans and their stooges!"
- D. This power, real power, was not what the friends or enemies thought! Jesus was demonstrating the power of LOVE. He was carrying out His mission, which was John 1:12 type power. To as many as were going to receive Him, Jesus was giving the power to become the children of God, to share in God's eternal life, to still be happy and growing and useful when the stars grow old!

II. IT IS A PARADE OF INFINITE DURATION

- A. How long was this procession? About one donkey long or two, if the mother donkey came, too. About an hour's time, or less, if we just count the time when people sang, "Hosanna!" For just a few moments, in order to declare to three worlds that Calvary was not an accident out of His control, Jesus accepted the praise of the multitude. Jesus was King! He knew where He was going that week! He knew Thursday and Friday were out there ahead! But He also knew that He would know the JOY of completing the Father's will, and releasing the mighty power that makes us all God's children. The parade was short just a brief flash of power.
- B. But this movement of Christ toward Jerusalem and the hosannas and the cross and the empty tomb beyond began a long time before even Zechariah prophesied about it! John tells us (in Revelation 13:8) that Jesus was "the Lamb slain from the creation of the world."

Out of the fullness of His LOVE God sent His Son.

C. The movement of Jesus toward Jerusalem and the cross was settled in the heart of Jesus long before this brief parade. On the Mount of Transfiguration He had spoken with Moses and Elijah about where He was going. Again and again He had told His disciples that He was going to Jerusalem to die and to take back His life again.

1. Yet what a strange display of power! Knowing He was going to His death Jesus deliberately kept on doing the things we love Him for; he attended to the details he heard the blind man shouting from the edge of the crowd he saw Zaccheus up in the sycamore tree all this was in Jericho as he was on His final journey to Jerusalem. Even later in this last week of ministry, on the very night He was arrested this King of All Power in Heaven and Earth took a towel and washed His disciples' feet!
2. And even though at the end of this procession He entered the Temple and, as He had done before, cleansed it with anger, and demonstrated His authority in a way we cannot understand it is true that before He got all the way down the hill— when He was in view of the beautiful Temple, this great King of power stopped his little mount and wept over the city that had rejected Him.

III. A PARADE OF CONTRASTS, OF CHOICES

A. That first Palm Sunday certainly was a day of contrasts! A Carpenter being called a King! Little children and happy disciples praising and shouting for joy while worried power brokers frowned and plotted evil! Bright sunshine on a happy parade while black storm clouds piled high on the western sky!

B. There was LOVE and there was HATRED contrasted that day! There was PEACE and there was TURMOIL and STRIFE in stark contrast that day! Suspicion, questioning every motivation, giving no one the benefit of the doubt; while Jesus, who knew what was in the heart of every human being still loved them and believed in them.

There was WORSHIP taking place that day in stark contrast to BLASPHEMY AND DENIAL OF GOD.

C. The government, and the power brokers, and the policy makers probably weren't too impressed by the POWER of that parade that first Palm Sunday! The same kinds of

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people in our own world today are exactly the same! Jesus doesn't really matter! God is a "Private Matter!" Faith is the Great Irrelevancy!

But if we listen and look with the gift of faith, we can see those same contrasts clearly even today: love IS stronger than hatred! Trust IS greater than suspicion and pettiness.

And what is more, if we look and listen with our eyes and ears of faith we can hear this King of Kings say, If you really want to, you can come after Me! Get in line! Join the parade!

The only thing is, to join in the parade we must "Deny our own self sovereignty and say, 'Jesus is LORD!'" and we must take up our own cross, day by day, and then we may follow Him!

Conclusion

And the wonderful thing is that we CAN get in the parade! We CAN, because He DID!

Parades are supposed to inspire. I confess that I enjoy hearing stirring marches, and feel a flutter when the flag goes past. But those kinds of parades pale in comparison to what happens within when the King Himself looks our way and says, "Come, Get in line! Follow on!"

This is the way the writer of Hebrews has put it and how it has worked again and again for me!

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus who, for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him that endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart! Hebrews 12:2,3

Shall we get in His parade? The line forms here!

Prayer: Help us to see with the eyes of faith, and hear with the ears of faith as You bid us to follow You, for we know that You have the power to make us God's own children. Amen

Hymn : *Jesus Comes with All His Grace*

Black Holes and Anchor Lines

April 30, 2000

John 20:19-31

One afternoon about twenty years ago I was fishing along the edge of nantasket Roads, the shipping channel that goes just past the Boston Light. It was well into the fall and past the summer heat. I had a VIP guest in my little fifteen-foot boat. I really wanted to catch some flounder. (My VIP was Sam Hunt, the biggest linebacker in the NFL, and a starting player for the New England Patriots.)

I was all set for a couple of hours of good bottom fishing as I swung my boat around to face the incoming tide and threw out my anchor. It was fifty to sixty feet deep and the tide was beginning to run, and I let the anchor line run out through my hands. As a matter of fact it ran so fast that I came to the end sooner than I thought and I watched with a sick feeling as the end went overboard.

I grabbed for it, and then quickly started the engine and tried to swing back and get a boat hook on it but it was out of reach and the line was slowly sinking out of sight. We were drifting with no way to hold steady.

How we finally got another anchor and had a great day of fishing is another story. [Should I tell you?] But I never will forget the sinking feeling when my anchor was lost. It was a mini-picture of what it is like when things we really count on aren't there any more.

WHEN THINGS WE REALLY COUNT ON AREN'T THERE ANY MORE!

THOMAS LOST AN ANCHOR WHEN JESUS DIED

When Jesus died something in Thomas did, too. Jesus simply had not performed according to Thomas's idea of what Messiah was supposed to do. Messiah was supposed to end suffering and bring peace and probably beat up on the Romans and bad guys and make His friends the new government. Thomas found out he didn't know Jesus as well as he thought he did.

Thomas LOVED Jesus, Don't make any mistake about that. Before the Passover, when Jesus was on his way to Bethany he was warned people were waiting there to kill Him. Thomas was one who said, "Well, let's go and die with Him!" But when the actual death came it shattered Thomas. Thomas had seen Jesus' power. Calmed the sea. Healed the sick. Raised the dead. But then Thomas had seen Jesus crucified in weakness and now Jesus was DEAD!

Thomas really wanted to believe that Jesus was alive. The rest of the disciples said they had seen him/. Two men on the road to Emmaus claimed he had talked with them and broken bread at their house. They were so very sure. But Thomas was not. "I have to see for myself! I have to know!"

Did YOU ever get the idea that others had a better, tighter faith than you? Did you ever wonder how people could be so sure they knew God? Did you ever wonder if anyone could really KNOW Jesus?

CAN ANYONE REALLY KNOW GOD?

CHRISTIANS DON'T ALWAYS TALK ABOUT THEIR DOUBTS

We like to talk about our victories. We like to have people think we're really together, spiritually. But people do fight battles with darkness. There are some questions we don't know the answers to.

Maybe sometimes we get to thinking "I'm probably the only one who fights battles like this!" Or, "If other people knew the thoughts that come to my mind they wouldn't have any faith in me." But the reality is that every Christian has to fight the good fight of faith.

Am I saying that we cannot know we are saved? Absolutely NOT! Our spiritual model John Wesley specialized in preaching about the assurance of salvation. We can be saved and we can KNOW we are saved. But there will always be questions we can not answer.

THE ONLY PEOPLE WHO NEVER FIGHT BATTLES WITH DOUBT ARE PEOPLE WHO NEVER ADDRESS THE PROBLEMS THAT FAITH ENCOUNTERS IN A REAL WORLD.

THERE IS A NAME FOR 'OSTRICH PEOPLE' WHO LIVE WITH THEIR HEADS IN THE SAND. IT IS 'OBSCURANTIST.' ONLY THE OBSCURANTIST NEVER FIGHT BATTLES OF FAITH, AND THEY GIVE UP THE INNER CORE OF THEIR INTEGRITY. THEY FIGHT WITH ANYONE AND EVERYONE WHO DARES TO DISAGREE WITH THEM ON ANY MINOR POINT. THEY BECOME TRUE FANATICS.

Fanaticism is only insecurity turned inside out. But genuine faith is forged on the anvil of honest doubt. It says "I wish I could believe, but here is a reality I can't understand. Please, God, I want to know!"

THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HONEST DOUBT AND UNBELIEF

Doubt and unbelief may superficially look alike. Maybe even sometimes they are hard to tell apart, Unbelief comes from a heart that is centered in itself and says "Show me and I'll think about it and maybe I will and maybe I won't!" Doubt, on the other hand, seeks to find God. It says, "Show me Yourself, and i will believe!"

I have based my entire life and my life's calling on the trust that God answers that cry. Like Thomas who cried "Show me!" I believe that God answers the seeker. A life verse is Hebrews 11:6, which says that God honors a seeking faith.

What do we do when we are seeking a Jesus that seems out of reach?

What do we do when we face the dark moments when it almost seems our God has failed us? Black holes of agony when we send our desperate prayers winging their way toward heaven, and NOTHING seems to be happening?

THE ANSWER OF FAITH IS JESUS, A PERSON, NOT AN EXPLANATION

We think we need the answers to the questions of life. And we need to keep facing them, and wrestling with them. But answers are not what makes faith. Thomas thought he needed one kind of proof. When Jesus CAME, that was all Thomas needed then.

THAT PERSON IS STILL VERY MUCH AVAILABLE

Text: These words were written so that YOU might believe, and that believing you might have LIFE through Jesus' name!

His name is Joel. He is a leader in his field of science, radiology; a practicing physician, but more, a professor at a university, and a Sunday School teacher. But once Joel was far, far away from where he ought to be with God. He and I had a confrontation about something he was doing I believed was wrong. I recall desperate prayer and tears, and I had little reason to believe there was hope. After that confrontation there were years of what seemed to be little spiritual progress. Imagine my joy when a few years ago I had a phone call: "My wife and I have found the Lord!"

I lost the anchor line out of that little fifteen foot boat because I failed to take hold of the end of the anchor line. But our eternal life doesn't depend on how well WE hang on, but rather it depends on our being able to say to Jesus MY LORD AND MY GOD!

God does not reveal himself to unbelief. But God ALWAYS answers honest, seeking, willing-to-follow-Him doubt, the doubt that wants to become faith. THE RESURRECTION IS AN INVITATION TO CHOOSE LIFE!

INVITATION TO COMMUNION

Jesus is calling every one of us this morning, calling us to follow Him and put him at the center of our lives. He is asking us to put away selfishness and sin, and asking us if He can give us LIFE, and FORGIVE OUR SINS, and ADOPT US into his Family.

Holy Communion

As we come to Holy Communion time, let this be a way we can respond to the call of Jesus to "Come, follow Me!"

Affirm your faith with me:

The Apostles' Creed on Page 7 UMH

Invitation

Prayer of Confession on Page 8 UMH

Let us offer ourselves and our gifts to God!

The Lord's Prayer

Communion

Benediction

Two Kinds of Rich

May 3, 2000

(cf September 27, 1998 AM *Letters to Live By*)

1 Timothy 6:6 ...godliness, with contentment

Luke 16:19-31

I. JESUS TELLS A STORY, A STORY OF CONTRASTS

Here in Luke 16 is a story full of contrasts. Jesus has painted a word- picture— a sketch, really— of two men who could hardly have been more different from each other in every way. One had more money than he knew what to do with. The other was poverty- stricken. One evidently had the best in health care. The other had disgusting open sores.

One had great parties with the V.I.P.-types over for dinner. The other ate out of the garbage. While they were alive not many people would have wanted to be Lazarus. After they both died NO one would trade places with the rich man. They were contrasts in their eternal destinies as well.

Why do you suppose Jesus ever told this story? What was He telling us? (Well, actually a story is a story. And you might get a different lesson from the one I get.) I can tell you what I hear Him saying. And I can tell you what Paul told Timothy in *Letters to Live By*.

Jesus is NOT saying that it is a sin to be rich. Jesus is NOT saying that it is good to be poverty stricken. Jesus IS saying that there are spiritual dimensions in life that go far beyond even extremes like these in the story. Jesus is also saying— at least I am hearing— that it is not what we have or do not have that ultimately makes us "rich." It sounds impossible, but the truly "rich" are those who have discovered, or are discovering the "contentment factor."

This spiritual "contentment" is not a loss of the challenge to grow in every way. It is not a slovenly laziness that believes that "the world owes me a living." It is the sense that even though we are on a journey, and we haven't arrived, yet we are walking with our Father, and we are in the center of His will for NOW! Jesus is saying that money can't buy LIFE.

"You can gain the whole world and still lose your soul !!" Jesus IS saying that hardship and extreme circumstances can't keep a person from eternal life. The angels knew where to find Lazarus. The name "Lazarus" is a clue, I really believe. Lazarus is the Latinized form of the Hebrew Eleazar which means "God is my help", and he is the only character mentioned by name in any of our Lord's parables.

We are pilgrims on a journey. This world is not our final home. Still we can be "at home" while we are on our way home. God is our contentment. "Godliness with contentment is GREAT gain!" It isn't a sin to have a lot of money. It isn't any fun to be in poverty. But money is NOT the "bottom line" for Christians. There are spiritual dimensions in life that will make us or break us eternally. This is where our "Letters to Live By" lesson from Paul comes in:

II. LOVING ADVICE ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

- A. Paul is very practical. He says: Your attitude toward money will make you or break you! He deals directly with the matter of "riches." But before we look at his advice let me return to a theme from last week. I believe it is important enough to stress one more time. Hear what he says to Timothy, a young man— his "son in the faith": (1 Timothy 6:11) "But you, O man of God!!"

Paul (the seasoned veteran) addresses Timothy (the "next generation") as "MAN OF GOD!" Paul challenges Timothy to step up and be a full partner in the Body of Christ! Yes, it takes time to develop the gifts and graces God gives each of us. BUT we do not need to be "second-class Christians" even one day! We, you and I, are called to be men and women of God! You are not the church of yesterday if you happen to be retired! You are a vital part of the church right now! You are vital, you are needed!

You are a man of God! A woman of God! You are not the church of tomorrow if you happen to be in school! Your task, your job right now IS SCHOOL! You are to prepare and sharpen your skills. But right now! YOU ARE A MAN OF GOD! YOU ARE A WOMAN OF GOD!

- B. Paul warns: Your attitude toward money will make you or break you! It is very easy to be driven by a financial "bottom line." Here is an often misquoted verse; how many times have you heard MONEY is the root of all evil?? Of course Paul does not say that at all. He says, "The LOVE of money is a root of all kinds of evil." The ambition solely to make money is a trap that feeds selfishness. Money is a wonderful servant, but it is a deadly master. Jesus said, "You cannot serve both God and money."
- C. Then Paul repeats the "call to arms" that we heard last week. Remember then he said "That you might wage a good warfare." Your attitude toward money will make you or break you! Do you recall the weapons he mentioned then? Faith and a good conscience. Here Paul gives two battle commands: [Flee, run away, shun,] AND [pursue, follow, cling to]. Flee the selfish ambitions of this world: (see 4 - 10) Follow, pursue: righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness.

III. CALLED TO TRUE RICHES

Quality of life is always a spiritual dimension. But we still do not believe it! Proverbs 30:8 says "Give me neither poverty nor riches . . ." A very wise young pastor and academician named John Piper wrote a book several years ago called "Desiring God: Confessions of a Christian Hedonist." The idea of connecting the words "Christian" and "hedonist" caused some raising of eyebrows.

But Piper got his point across: the best and highest satisfactions come from God's blessing of making Himself known to us, his children. The name-it-and-claim-it people set their sights far too low. They are despicable, like the government lottery industries are despicable; they play on the hopes of poor people to suddenly find all their problems solved by winning a sweepstakes. God does not exist to be our servant, to give us every whim we think we need or want. We are not the center of the spiritual universe.

God is at the Center of all Existence. The heavens declare his glory. The angels sing his praises. The Eternal Son of God came to earth saying, "I delight to do Your Will, O God!" When we begin to get this relationship straight and understand the Covenant, we find that as God is our helper (Lazarus, Eleazar) and as we seek to live to His glory we are rich beyond all understanding! Selfish ambition - to wealth, or to power, or to fame - can never find satisfaction. Stay the course! You will find tribulation and challenges and pain whatever course you choose. But if you make it your purpose to walk with God you will find that you have a Companion with you in joy and sorrow.

Conclusion

One day Peter said to Jesus: "Lord, we have left everything to follow You!" Do you remember what Jesus said in reply?" Jesus had said that it was harder for a worldly-type rich man to enter the kingdom than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. (See Mark 10) But when Peter said what he said, that he was "poor,"

Jesus answered: "Truly, no one leaves anything for me but he receives a hundred-fold back in this life! Yes, there is persecution! There is pain! But you will have family! You will have shelter! You will have what you need! And in the world to come you will live with Me forever!"

Prayer

O God, who declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

#707 Freely, Freely

Doing Lost, Being Found

May 7, 2000

(cf September 17, 1995)

Luke 15:1-10; 1 Timothy 1:12-17

This chapter is about what it means to be LOST. When I think of "lost" sometimes I remember the story of "Lady Be Good."

In the early years of World War II after the United States forces invaded northern Africa, crude airstrips were established on the desert, and bombing runs across the Mediterranean were begun on Axis targets in Italy.

"Lady Be Good" was a Flying Fortress, B 17 bomber, that was making these long and dangerous flights. The night this plane was tragically lost the crew had made it to Italy and was returning on a radio beam from the desert air strip. When the beam would come on the Lady be Good made certain it was on a straight line toward home.

The crew never knew until it was too late that they had a strong tail wind that brought them back much sooner than expected. With no visual point of reference they simply overflowed the directional signal and kept straight on until they ran out of gas and came down in the Libyan desert more than a hundred miles south of the coast and water. They were LOST. They simply disappeared off the face of the earth no one knew they had overflowed their base into the heart of the desert.

Their plane has been almost perfectly preserved in the dryness the men themselves survived the emergency landing only to die of thirst in the desert with no one knowing where they might be.

This story has always been a classic object lesson to me, personally, that doing MY best and following rules, even good rules, is not enough. These men were literally "on the beam." And perhaps the chilling part of this story is that people can be lost and not even know they are lost until it has ruined their lives or worse.

In order to find our way in this world there has to be a dependable point of reference, a point of personal contact with God. The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes and the guidance of scripture are all good, but they cannot save us, and we can keep them all so far as human effort is concerned and still be lost.

"Lost" is being where you're not supposed to be. "Lost" is not really knowing where you belong, or how to get there. [I had a son to get lost in a great museum in Manhattan one day; it still frightens me more than thirty years later!] "Lost" is having no valid point of reference outside of "self." A great proportion of society today is unaware that there is any reference point beyond what looks good, or feels good, or seems good at the moment. The worst kind of being lost is not having a clue that you are lost at all.

These people Jesus was talking to when he told these stories about "lost" and "found" did not think at all that they were lost themselves! They were sure and certain they knew all about God and what God expects; they "knew" they didn't need Jesus or anything he could tell them. And one thing for sure, the Pharisees are not the only people who ever thought they knew more than anyone else about right and wrong.

These people thought they were all right because they went to church and kept rules. Whenever religion becomes a matter strictly of "doing" with no reference point for "being" we have people who are lost and don't even know they are lost. The three stories about being "Lost and Found" in Luke 15 are a warning to people not to just DO RELIGION apart from really knowing GOD.

How do we find ourselves? What do we DO to be FOUND? The answer is WE don't!

The message is: GOD IS THE SEEKER ! He is looking for us! We're the sheep! We're the coin! The stories of our Gospel lesson speak of one who seeks the lost one who turns the house upside down looking for the lost.

So– what do we do to be saved? How can we be sure we're not LOST?

If you care at all about your relationship with God I can tell you that grace is at work in your life! If you even THINK that maybe you need to find God and move closer

Him, then you can be sure that grace is already at work in your life. If you WANT a God centered faith, you are a lot closer that you might think. Being FOUND is there for the asking.

I remember a story of the sea from days gone by.

A sailing vessel had become becalmed off the coast of South America and had drifted for days with not enough wind to go anywhere. Their supplies had been low when the wind had died, and now they were becoming desperate for drinking water. They prayed for rain, prayed for a wind, but just scorching sunshine. Then over the horizon came a coal burning steamship. They shouted and hoisted flags, and soon the ship turned and came toward the becalmed vessel.

They shouted as soon as they could make themselves heard "Do you have any water for us? We're dying of thirst?"

They thought they heard the reply "Let down your casks into the sea?" They asked again and got the same strange answer. Anyone knows that to drink sea water doesn't quench thirst and is inviting death. "Let down your casks where you are right now!"

Someone threw over a bucket on a line and hoisted it on deck, and, amazingly, it was sweet and fresh. The reason they has drifted into the mouth of the Amazon River, which is 100 miles wide when it flows into the ocean. They had been dying of thirst with water to drink all around them.

There are people not far from where we are right now who are drying up in spirit, and dying of spiritual thirst with the provisions of God all around them. We don't have to DO anything to bring God where we are. But maybe we DO need to let down our buckets into the water of life!

GOD IS HERE!

He is here, waiting for us to recognize Him and ask His help in putting him at the center of our lives.

Doing Lost, Being Found

- WE CAN CONFESS OUR NEED
- WE CAN ASK CHRIST INTO OUR LIVES
- WE CAN RESPOND IN OBEDIENCE AS HE LEADS US
- WHEN WE ARE WITH HIM, WE ARE NOT LOST!

We can respond to a God that seeks us in our lost condition.

Pray with me:

INTO COMMUNION - Make the confession count: make the prayer your own.

Abundant Life in Jesus

May 14, 2000 - Mother's Day

John 10:11-18

John 13:34-35 *A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also may love one another. By this shall all know that ye are my disciples; if ye have love one to another.*

There are many ways to look at Mother's Day. I see it as an opportunity to celebrate unselfish love. It doesn't have to just be birth mothers that we honor. At least we can think again about how important our loved ones are to us.

Children often see things a little differently from what we might think. David Heller wrote a book called DEAR GOD: CHILDREN'S LETTERS TO GOD. He eavesdrops on some children's prayer-letters in which they talk about family. For example:

Dear God, Thank you for my parents, my sister Anita, and for my grandma and grandpa. They are real warm and special. I forgive you for my brother Phil. I guess you didn't finish working on him. Sean (age 12)

Dear God, My mom is acting weird because she is getting old. Can you take back a few gray hairs? That would help bring back the house to normal. Thanks for what you can do. Mike (age 9)

Dear God, You light up my life. So do mom and dad. I hope you like this. I am not sure what it means. Luv, Toni (age 7)

Dear God, My mom tells me a story about you every night. Last night she told me how you always remember your mother on her birthday. And you give her divine gifts. I think she was kidding me and herself. Love, Holden (age 7)

In my early years we always had carnations on Mother's Day. We may not have had any money, but my mother saw to it that my sister Ruth and I had red carnations to show OUR mother was alive— and she and Dad wore white carnations in honor of

their mothers who had died. It seemed somehow sacred and "official"— that was the way to observe Mother's day.

Mother's Day still is a good way to honor all that is best about mother love and family love. But it has to be much more than carnations and cards.

Anna Jarvis, the West Virginia woman whose crusading got her state to adopt Mother's Day in 1910, and the whole nation to adopt by 1914 later became very bitter over the heavy commercialization of Mother's day. She told a reporter she was sorry she ever started Mother's day. In fact she was arrested for disturbing the peace at a War Mother's Rally when she protested the sale of carnations. "This is not what I intended," she was quoted as saying. "I wanted it to be a day of sentiment, not profit."

Mother's Day is an opportunity to honor far more than just birth mothers. Anna Jarvis herself, the founder of Mother's Day, never was a birth mother.

One of the most beautiful real-life stories in our nation's history was about a boy who was born in Kentucky, moved early to southern Indiana where his mother died. When his father brought home a new bride the little boy was very upset, almost frantic. He didn't want to accept a step-mother. he was afraid he would forget his birth mother.

But the boy's step-mother was a kind Christian woman. She read to him every night. She nursed him when he was sick, and held him on her lap a lot. As time went by he came to realize he could love this new mother without losing his love for the mother who had died. He came to call his step mother his "Angel Mother." Later on Abraham Lincoln would say, as 16th President of the United States, "All that I am or ever hope to be I owe to my angel mother."

This day of celebration of family love comes on a Sunday when we read about how Jesus came to bring 'abundant life.' It fits with what Jesus said just a few pages later in the same Gospel of John: "A new commandment I give you," Jesus said, "That you love one another."

First Jesus said it: This is my command! Love one another!

Then Jesus told them HOW they should go about it: As I have loved you, so you are to love one another! Like Jesus! As He loved!

Finally Jesus told them that this was to be their identification badge: By THIS, He said— by THIS shall all know that you are MY disciples— if you have love one for another!

When we talk about unselfish love we are at the heart of the whole scheme of salvation: WE ARE TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS JESUS HAS LOVED US!

This is on a different plane now even from The Golden Rule. Jesus is not now saying, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!" This is more than that! He is saying, "Love one another as I have loved you!" He had just finished washing his disciples' feet. He was about to die on the cross of Calvary for their sins, and for yours and mine as well. And he said to them and to us: LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE LOVED YOU.

This kind of self-giving love is what soul-health is all about! It lifts us out of self-pity and self-absorption, and brings us into a working partnership with Jesus Himself. I close with a little story by Eddie Ogan:

I'll never forget Easter 1946. I was 14, my little sister Ocy was 12, and my older sister Darlene 16. We lived at home with our mother, and the four of us knew what it was to do without many things. My dad had died five years before, leaving Mom with seven school kids to raise and no money. By 1946 my older sisters were married and my brothers had left home.

A month before Easter the pastor of our church announced that a special Easter offering would be taken to help a poor family. He asked everyone to save and give sacrificially. When we got home, we talked about what we could do. We decided to buy 50 pounds of potatoes and live on them for a month. This would allow us to save \$20 of our grocery money for the offering. When we thought that if we kept our electric lights turned out as much as possible and didn't listen to the radio, we'd save money on that month's electric bill. Darlene got as many house and yard cleaning jobs as possible, and both of us babysat for everyone we could. For 15 cents we

could buy enough cotton loops to make three pot holders to sell for \$1. We made \$20 on pot holders.

That month was one of the best of our lives. Every day we counted the money to see how much we had saved. At night we'd sit in the dark and talk about how the poor family was going to enjoy having the money the church would give them. We had about 80 people in church, so figured that whatever amount of money we had to give, the offering would surely be 20 times that much. After all, every Sunday the pastor had reminded everyone to save for the sacrificial offering. The day before Easter, Ocy and I walked to the grocery store and got the manager to give us three crisp \$20 bills and one \$10 bill for all our change. We ran all the way home to show Mom and Darlene. We had never had so much money before. That night we were so excited we could hardly sleep. We didn't care that we wouldn't have new clothes for Easter; we had \$70 for the sacrificial offering. We could hardly wait to get to church!

On Sunday morning, rain was pouring. We didn't own an umbrella, and the church was over a mile from our home, but it didn't seem to matter how wet we got. Darlene had cardboard in her shoes to fill the holes. The cardboard came apart, and her feet got wet. But we sat in church proudly. I heard some teenagers talking about the Smith girls having on their old dresses. I looked at them in their new clothes, and I felt rich. When the sacrificial offering was taken, we were sitting on the second row from the front. Mom put in the \$10 bill, and each of us kids put in a \$20. As we walked home after church, we sang all the way. At lunch Mom had a surprise for us. She had bought a dozen eggs, and we had boiled Easter eggs with our fried potatoes!

Late that afternoon the minister drove up in his car. Mom went to the door, talked with him for a moment, and then came back with an envelope in her hand. We asked what it was, but she didn't say a word. She opened the envelope and out fell a bunch of money. There were three crisp \$20 bills, one \$10 and seventeen \$1 bills. Mom put the money back in the envelope. We didn't talk, just sat and stared at the floor. We had gone from feeling like millionaires to feeling like poor white trash.

We kids had such a happy life that we felt sorry for anyone who didn't have our Mom and Dad for parents and a house full of brothers and sisters and other kids visiting

constantly. We thought it was fun to share silverware and see whether we got the spoon or the fork that night. We had two knives that we passed around to whoever needed them. I knew we didn't have a lot of things that other people had, but I'd never thought we were poor. That Easter day I found out we were. The minister had brought us the money for the poor family, so we must be poor.

I didn't like being poor. I looked at my dress and worn out shoes and felt so ashamed I didn't even want to go back to church. Everyone there probably already knew we were poor! I thought about school. I was in the ninth grade and at the top of my class of over 100 students. I wondered if the kids at school knew that we were poor. I decided that I could quit school since I had finished the eighth grade. That was all the law required at that time.

We sat in silence for a long time. Then it got dark, and we went to bed. All that week, we girls went to school and came home, and no one talked much. Finally on Saturday, Mom asked us what we wanted to do with the money. What did poor people do with money? We didn't know. We'd never known we were poor.

We didn't want to go to church on Sunday, but Mom said we had to. Although it was a sunny day, we didn't talk on the way. Mom started to sing, but no one joined in and she only sang one verse.

At church we had a missionary speaker. He talked about how churches in Africa made buildings out of sun dried bricks, but they needed money to buy roofs. He said \$100 would put a roof on a church. The minister said, "Can't we all sacrifice to help these poor people?" We looked at each other and smiled for the first time in a week.

Mom reached into her purse and pulled out the envelope. She passed it to Darlene. Darlene gave it to me, and I handed it to Ocy. Ocy put it in the offering. When the offering was counted, the minister announced that it was a little over \$100. The missionary was excited. He hadn't expected such a large offering from our small church. He said, "You must have some rich people in this church."

Suddenly it struck us! We had given \$87 of that "little over \$100." We were the richest family in our church! Hadn't the missionary said so? From that day on I've never been poor again. I've always remembered how rich I am because I have Jesus!

There are many ways to look at Mother's Day. It is an opportunity to celebrate unselfish love. It doesn't have to just be birth mothers that we honor. At least we can think again about how important our loved ones are to us. We may not have a lot of this world's goods— but we are never so poor but what we can care about others.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, You have shown your great love to us by giving us your Son, Jesus Christ, who has himself loved us and given himself for us. By your grace, help us to obey this Great Commandment, and love as Jesus has shown us so to do. This we ask in His Name who with the Holy Spirit lives and reigns with You, One God, world without end. Amen

189 UMH *Fairest Lord Jesus*

The Presence of God

Pentecost Sunday

June 11, 2000

East Wareham United Methodist Church, Massachusetts

Whatever happens the next few days and weeks around here, one thing is for sure: it will never be the same again. All things have to come to an end sometime. The closing of a church is a big thing. Change. Uncertainty. Parting. It is not easy for any of us. My heart has been heavy for you, even though we have accepted that it must be.

But strangely enough, I do not have a sad message this morning. I have to recognize the reality of change, yes. But today is Pentecost Sunday, and with it comes exactly, precisely the message you need, and that I need. It is a message about the reality of continuity that is greater even than the reality of any change, of life or death, for time and for eternity. A reality of continuity— reality of good that just doesn't quit, ever, ever, ever!

The situation the disciples were in, from the time the Gospel texts were taken, was a little like the East Wareham United Methodist Church right now. A little like it. Maybe a lot like it! All this we're comfortable with and used to, the comfort of this place and these few people, will not be the same very soon. I am just a small part at the end of this, but yet I feel some of what you must be feeling.

The disciples were puzzled. Jesus had told them he was going away. There was no way this change could ever be for the better. They had Jesus right with them, right there. Change could never be as good as, let alone better. What could be better than waking up in the morning and sitting across the table with Jesus at breakfast? Now he says he is going away? Great!

Jesus promised his disciples that he would not abandon them. It would get very scary. It would seem like all was lost. But Jesus promised: I won't leave you

orphans. I won't abandon you. When I go away it will only be so I can send you another Friend who will be with you night and day from then on to the end of your lives and beyond.

Jesus was speaking of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the other Friend who would be in his disciples very soul and being.

Jesus said that when this Friend came he would do two things. Both of these things were to continue the work Jesus was already doing. Both these things would bring Jesus in a very real way back into the lives of his disciples in a more intimate, personal way than they could at that time imagine. It happened on Pentecost.

When He comes, Jesus said, he will speak to this world about sin and righteousness and judgment. The truth would be revealed again and again as God's people received this Spirit. This is the promise of the reality of continuity of the Word and work of Jesus carrying on and on until he comes again in final glory. It will continue, you can count on it. Churches close. Whole denominations come and go. But the church will not close. It will not fail. We are all part of Christ's body the church. We each can and will have a place in that work until we are translated to glory. Then we can paint on larger canvasses. That is good.

But the word for us now— even better— more personal— the reality of continuity that we need:

When He comes, Jesus said, he will take your hand and lead you into all the truth there is! Jesus is not just building his church "out there" somewhere— Jesus is caring for every last individual member of his body the church. He is not allowing any one of us to get lost, to fall down between the cracks in the floorboards.

Remember, when Jesus said "I'm going away, and you know where I'm going and you know the way" the disciples were NOT sure of what was coming next. They said, "No we DON'T know where you're going. No, we DON'T know where to go from here! No, we don't know the way!"

That is when Jesus began this discourse, He said, "I AM the way, the truth, and the life." And Jesus also said, "When THE FRIEND comes, he will show you– he will lead you! Don't worry! I won't abandon you!"

WHEN HE COMES! WHEN HE COMES! WHEN! WHEN! WHEN!

THAT WAS Jesus's promise THEN. But this is NOW! Here we are facing BIG change. If we only knew when he was coming– if we knew WHEN . . .

But that is where the good news comes in! Do you know the very best part of Pentecost? It is an open secret . . .but the promise is still the same. I have never seen tongues of fire or heard the sound of mighty winds. I have never spoken in languages that foreigners could understand. But I have heard the Promise, and I have believed the promise and I do believe the promise right now!

The promise is not now WHEN HE COMES– but the promise is HE IS HERE! The Holy Spirit has been given to the church. We don't have to wait 40 days or 10 days or any specific waiting time. The disciples waited for the first outpouring until the Day of Pentecost was completely come. It was God's timing. But ever since that day the Holy Spirit has been available to God's people simply for the asking.

Yes– we need to ask according to God's will. Yes, we need to ask in the strength of Jesus' promise. Yes, we need to ask in complete agreement with who Jesus is and what Jesus is doing. But now we simply need to invite the Spirit, to welcome Him and receive this promise; HE WILL BE WITH YOU! HE WILL REMIND YOU OF WHAT JESUS HAS SAID AND DONE. HE WILL TAKE YOU BY THE HAND AND LEAD YOU INTO ALL THE TRUTH THERE IS!

At Home With God

June 20, 2000

(cf May 20, 1995)

John 14:23

As you probably have heard me say before, when I was a little boy my parents were song evangelists. We literally lived out of suitcases, on the road at least 36 weeks a year. Our "home" was simply the address of an aunt and uncle in Lansing, Michigan. I guess I didn't think of traveling all the time as strange because it was the only life I knew. I think I felt sorry for other kids who didn't get to see new things all the time.

But at the same time I looked with great longing at houses, homes, permanent places to live. How I looked forward to coming back to Lansing to be with aunts and uncles and cousins by the dozens! How I valued that aunt and uncle's home!

Still I think I learned something very early in my life that applies to this scripture lesson today. It is good— best perhaps— to have a sense of place and permanence. But being "at home" finally is a people matter. When we did not have any permanent house whatsoever when I was with father and mother I was "at home." Their security was my security. Their peace was my peace.

Occasionally, their discontent was mine, too— for while they were people of integrity they weren't perfect. That first lesson, then, was where the people you love and trust are— there is home, at least in the sense of security for the child.

Later, when circumstances made it necessary for my parents to leave the itinerant ministry, our first-ever house of our own was a bungalow at 610 South Magnolia in Lansing— you know— two blocks over from Hayford Street. I had a room that was mine, and I slept in the same bed every night, and could have my own closet and my own pictures on the wall. It was far from heaven. But there I had my family, and I had a sense of permanence as well.

I know it is a stretch of imagination to apply this homely and personal understanding of what it means to be "at home" with God, but the facts somehow seem similar: The reality is that we are not yet at home. [The choir has sung "I Feel Like Travelling On" because "This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through..."]

The promise of Jesus early on in this great passage is that in the place where he lives are many dwelling places, and that he has gone to prepare a place for us so we can be where he is permanently. The passage from Revelation is not so much descriptive, to my literary understanding, as suggestive of a glorious reality that transcends everything we know now. But the reality also is that God Almighty, YHWH— the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God wants to be "at home" with us while we travel towards home.

This kind of being at home with God isn't the final word on glory or fulfillment or permanence. We are not yet what we are going to be. But if in fact God is wi-i-i-i-ith us!! as the choir sang last Sunday night and Tom Waltermire has been TRYING to sing all week— if God is with us on the road, and we are at home in him— then we need to make sure this has happened in a personal way in each of our lives.

"IF YOU LOVE ME,"said Jesus, "YOU WILL OBEY ME, AND THE FATHER WILL LOVE YOU, AND WE WILL COME TO YOU AND TAKE UP PERMANENT RESIDENCE IN YOU." God not only WITH us— God not only WATCHING OUT for us— God not only SAVING US FROM SIN— BUT GOD AT HOME IN US WHILE WE ARE ON THE WAY! A WORKING DESCRIPTION OF WHAT WE CALL "HOLINESS!"

How do we go about making God at home in us?? Love is the key Love is not a feeling, but a centering, an act of will and covenant In the case of humans there is a submission to covenant In the case of divine-human relationship god is always right He accommodates our weakness but cannot compromise dishonesty or selfishness so he must be obeyed, but obeyed because of trust/love .

The everlasting "YEA" is the doorway to everything of significance in the kingdom of God. You know whether or not you have come to the place in your walk with God

where you have deliberately said "yes!!!! Yes!!! Y E S!!!!!" to god for time and for eternity! That is the place where god moves in to make Himself at home.

An Unfinished Story

August 6, 2000

Bethany Church of the Nazarene, Rumford, Rhode Island

Luke 15:1-3, 31

Introduction:

The sun had already set, and daylight had mostly faded and gone. A big house was dimly outlined under tall trees against the fading glow in the sky. But there was light stabbing out into the darkness from every window, and from the open door of the house. Not only was light piercing the darkness, but there were loud, happy sounds coming out of the house as well. Sounds of music and laughter and people having a good time. Dishes were clanking- a party was in full swing.

In the foreground of this scene stood two figures silhouetted in the light from the door. Two men stood talking quietly. As the light reflected in their faces it was evident they resembled each other. It was a father and his son. They were in a serious conversation.

"I heard you were out here. Why don't you just come on in?"

"You know why! He is in there!"

"He is your brother! You know how I love him. I'm so very glad he is home!"

"How could you? After what he's done! How could you love him?"

You know, of course, that we came in near the end of the story. For those of you who are at all familiar with this great 15th chapter of Luke, and the story of the Prodigal Son, the Prodigal has gone away, and has come home again. The loving Father has permitted him to go, but has watched and waited and welcomed him back home again. Now the older brother is wondering why.

Transition:

Probably ninety-nine times out of a hundred, when we read Luke 15 we think about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. We think of how Jesus seems to tell us that God is willing to move heaven and earth and seek and save and welcome the lost. And that certainly is right. We are not wrong when we say that Luke 15 is about the lost being found. That is surely what our God is like.

Maybe it would be good to look again at that "lost and found" message in Luke for just a minute or two today before I come back to this story's unfinished ending.

I. GOD IS IN THE LOST AND FOUND BUSINESS:

LOST SHEEP, LOST COIN, LOST BOY

- How do people get lost? (Molly Bish, currently in news; tragic)
- Have you ever been lost? (Steve, our son, lost in NYC's M of NH)
- What about when it is their own wicked fault?

The message is clear: God values you. If you are like a poor sheep there is a Shepherd looking for you. If you feel like a coin that has fallen down into the cracks of life there is a light and a broom sweeping your way this very moment! And even if you have been wicked and wasteful and find yourself in a pigpen somewhere if you return to God you will find pardon.

If you know the Lord today you're a sheep, or a coin, or a Prodigal or maybe all three– but you were lost and now you are found! Or– maybe you are now an Older Brother!! Maybe you and I could have become one across the years?

Bridge:

Do you know to whom Jesus was telling these wonderful stories? There is nothing wrong with you and me taking them and believing them, and using them as evangel stories- help in winning the lost. But Jesus originally told these stories to Pharisees and scribes who criticized Him for eating with the publicans and sinners.

[Text Luke 15: 1-3 Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receives sinners, and eats with them. And He spake this parable unto them, saying, . . .] Jesus was

telling scribes and Pharisees– old-time religious people "Don't get in my way when I am eating with sinners and seeking the lost! Don't miss the whole point of faith– God loves everybody!"

II. THE UNFINISHED STORY

In the evening shadows outside that big house, the big house that was shining with light and rocking with laughter and music, the father urged his older son to come in and join the party. In that conversation the father said two things that I have been thinking about over and over this summer. (It may be dangerous to deduce doctrine from narrative, but I think in this case it is valid.)

The father said, (1) Son, you are always with me; and (2) all that I have is yours!

THE ELDER BROTHER WAS A FULL SON, YET HE ACTED LIKE A SERVANT

He served only from duty, or from expectations, or something other than love and shared ownership. It was his farm, too.

We don't just work for God, as good and important as that is. We work with God. I Corinthians 3:9 "We are laborers together with God" Yes, ours is the greatest task in the universe. It gets hard and even tiresome. But love helps transform labor.

[Illustration, maybe? Expectations without love - - love way before expectations . . . ??]

THE ELDER BROTHER WAS RICH, YET HE WAS NOT HAPPY

Careful: Don't make this sound like "prosperity gospel" because it isn't!

His idea of getting ahead was comparing:

"I'm more righteous than he is!

"I didn't get the party he did! "

He had the idea that he had to wait until the old man died until he could take over. The inheritance was later, But the father made it plain: whatever you really need or want is already here for you!

HOW ARE WE "OLDER BROTHERS" RICH?

Are we? Do we really believe that?

What do we have that is better, richer, more wonderful– even more powerful than anything else in this world? When we think of 'making it'— of getting whatever we want, do we think of money? Do we think of security? Is that why "Do You Want to be a Millionaire" is so popular? We think that if we only had enough money, or enough things we could be happy–

What does God already have for us that makes us rich?

1. Grace is ours. The forgiveness of all our sins. The Presence of God to dwell in our every-day-living lives! We are tenderly loved by the heavenly Father!
2. the whole heritage of faith belongs to every child of God
 - creeds
 - saints
 - Fathers
 - martyrs
 - the fellowship of all saints belongs to every child of God
3. Whatever we need to do the whole will of the father is ours!

I'm trying to grasp that! I really believe it!

All the wealth of the kingdom belongs to all of God's children. "You are always with me! All that I have is yours!"

Did the Elder Brother go in? The story ends here. We don't know! But we can still join the party!!

Prayer:

O God, move me away from selfishness and smallness of soul– help me cherish my friendship with You, the great Father of Lights. Help me see how rich I am in the things that really matter. Help me to live in joy and in fellowship with You and with all your children. In Jesus' name. Amen

Hymn No. 617 (Sing to the Lord) *O for a Closer Walk with Thee*

A Question of Love

August 13, 2000

Bethany Church of the Nazarene, Rumford, Rhode Island

John 21:1-19

THE SETTING of the story in the last chapter of John's Gospel is a beautiful lake at sunrise. The wind has died off as it often does just at dawn, and some tired fishermen are rowing their boat through the rising mists the last quarter mile to the beach. The sail hung limp in the stillness, and the only sound was the thump of the oars against the sides of the boat.

It had been more than two weeks since Easter. The disciples had been in Jerusalem for the Passover. It was then that Jesus had been taken from them and crucified. They believed he was alive—resurrected from the dead. They had seen him twice, except Thomas had seen him once. He had said something about meeting them back in Galilee. They weren't quite sure what to expect, whether they would start up their preaching from town to town again, whether now that Jesus had risen from the dead he might set up his kingdom— they really didn't know. The Bible makes that plain.

But they did know that life goes on— and they had to eat. Their boats were still on the beach— their nets were ready. Peter said: "I'm going fishing!" There were finally seven disciples who got into the little sailing vessel and went off into the evening to fish the night through. Now they were coming home empty and tired.

As the boat got close enough to shore to begin to make out shapes through the mist the fishermen could see a figure standing on the beach. The person on the beach called through the still morning air:

"Children— do you have any fish?"

He could have been a shopkeeper from Capernaum looking for fish to sell. He might have been another fisherman wondering where the fish were biting. But we know, and the disciples were soon to find out, it was Jesus Himself.

"Sorry! No— no fish!"

The answer came back clearly through the still air: "Cast your net off to the right side of your boat and you'll catch some."

It was not the first time these men had fished all night and come up empty. And it was not the first time they had been told to try again in the morning light. But as they began to draw their big net back in this time they thought somehow they had snagged bottom. As they kept pulling they realized the net was completely full of big fish.

John immediately said, "That's the Lord! Jesus is on the shore!" And before anyone could say a word Peter grabbed his robe and was over the side swimming and then wading ashore. The other six had their hands full with more than half a ton of fish. The cash flow of several fishermen was about to improve dramatically.

It was probably as Peter was wading up the beach he remembered that there was a cloud in his relationship with Jesus. He was so very happy to see him that he would jump overboard, but then he was afraid to ask him if he was really forgiven for denying him three times the night he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemene. So he just helped secure the boats and haul the nets up on the beach.

THE WARM FELLOWSHIP that followed that morning would never be forgotten by any of the seven men. Jesus already had a fire burned down to a bed of coals for broiling, and had some fish already cooking. He called to the men to bring some more from what they just landed. I don't know what they talked about around that breakfast fire. I know there were a lot of questions yet to be asked. Somehow I am sure that every one of those men was happy just to be near the Lord they loved. But in the heart of one of those men was a big, hard lump that wouldn't go away.

A TENDER PERSONAL SCENE is what came next.

Jesus got up and motioned for Peter to follow him down the beach. It was one of those very private times; only John tagged along. And he took notes. Jesus asked Peter some very tough questions that morning. Three questions— and yet they were all asked with the same words, or very nearly the same words.

Three times Jesus said to Peter— as Peter had denied Jesus three times— "Simon— son of John— do you love me more than these?

"Simon, do you love me?

"Simon—son of John— do you love me?"

Tough questions— and because John tagged along and took notes— and wrote the questions down— and they are part of our scripture— it must be that you and I need to answer those tough questions, too.

"Peter, do you love me more than these?"

OUR LOVE MUST BE BEYOND COMPARING WITH OTHERS

Before Peter denied his Lord and stumbled he "knew" that his love was stronger than anyone else's. His doctrine was purer. His understanding was truer.

But it is always the wrong approach to tell God we love Him in any comparison to others. "Lord, if all these deny you, I will still go to the death with you!" Or, "I could never love the Lord like that person!" If our faith must be in comparison and in contrast to others the chances are it is on shaky ground.

Some churches build their entire message and ministry on "NOT being like 'the unbelievers'." Jesus is not the spirit that takes shots at other followers. Peter had to say "I love YOU, Lord, and not in relationship to THEM."

"Do you love me?"

OUR LOVE MUST BE BEYOND COMPETITION WITH OTHERS

Life is NOT fair— some will have glamorous assignments. Some will die young. Some will suffer while others seem to prosper. Jesus told Peter that hard times loomed ahead for him. That didn't shake Peter. But Peter did say— "Look at HIM, Lord— the one following along here— what about HIM?" It was then that Jesus had what seem like harsh words for Peter. But they are words that every one of us need to take to heart if we are to really tell Jesus we love HIM:

"What is that to YOU? You follow ME!"

"Do you love me?" "Feed my lambs, my sheep!"

OUR LOVE HAS TO GO BEYOND THE WORDS OF CONSECRATION

Each time in response to Peter's anguished answer: "Lord— you know I do! You know I love you..." Each time Jesus said: "Then you take care of my lambs, my sheep!"

Love is more than warm feelings in worship services or quiet times. Peter understood that love is God, not Peter, at the center of life and all.

And it was then, and only then that in the same place as three years before- with the same words as when he started out— Jesus renewed Peter's call: "FOLLOW ME!"

SO, HOW DOES THIS INTIMATE STORY APPLY in a sermon on a Sunday morning in the summer of 2000 A.D.?

Somehow I want to hear Jesus— I want to make certain that there is nothing between Him and me— I want to answer His hard questions: "Lord, you KNOW I love You!"

1. I love you with a love that I will not compare to other's love. I will seek YOU— not the recognition from others that I am seeking you.
2. I love You with a love that does not compete for position. If I am in a place of responsibility, I hold it only on your command. I do not grasp. If you put me aside, or anywhere— in a hard place- that is your wisdom, your will— and I will love you!
3. I love you with a love that wants to be obedient. Not just words, Lord, but with my body, my reasonable service. With Peter I say "Lord, you know all things! You KNOW that I love you! Let me hear you say, 'FOLLOW ME!' "

Prayer Hymn - # 133 I Love You, Lord

The Risk Takers

THE CALL

Genesis 12: 1 - 9 August 13(pm)

Bethany Church of the Nazarene, Rumford, Rhode Island

Matthew 9:9-13

Once upon a time there was a good man. He had a good family. He had good connections. He was living in a reasonably comfortable manner. He was abreast of the latest modern technology. His life was not in crisis. But deep in his heart there was the nagging uncertainty, the question he could not put into words:

"IS THIS ALL THERE IS TO LIFE?"

Then one day this good man became aware that Almighty God was talking to him. Just how this awareness came about I cannot tell you. But God was saying, "Well, no, as a matter of fact THIS isn't all there is to life! And if you are willing and obedient, I will show you exactly what your heart is seeking!"

That day Abraham had a decision to make. He had to decide what one thing was absolutely the most important thing in his life. The way the story puts it: God said, "I want you to LEAVE...your country...your people...your father's relatives. Above all, I ask you to LEAVE your right to say what is right and wrong!" I want YOU to come and walk with ME! And if you DO, I'll bless you far beyond anything you can possibly imagine!" SO ABRAHAM STARTED A TREMENDOUS ADVENTURE. NOW NEARLY 4,000 YEARS LATER WE ARE STILL LEARNING FROM HIS FAITH.

SOME QUESTIONS

Does God Still Call People Like He Did Abraham?

To answer #1: [Does God still call individual people?]

My 'message' is "yes:" Abraham's call IS A BASIC THEME OF THE WHOLE BIBLE! The story of Noah— the Exodus— right through the whole Bible— to Jesus calling the

disciples— the message is DARE TO LEAVE WHAT UNSPIRITUAL, UNGODLY, UNBELIEVING SELFISH WAYS TELL YOU— "Leave the prison of your self-made gods— come away from a Scripture that YOU edit and cut and pick and choose and stand in judgment over— leave the bondage of "what so-called sophisticates might think," — AND STEP OUT ON A JOURNEY OF FAITH WITH ME!

How Would God Get Your Attention If He Wanted To Speak To You?

My personal testimony is "yes:" I know you would expect an evangelical Christian minister to answer in the affirmative. I am certain, convinced, sure, that God spoke to me when I was living selfishly and out of fellowship with Him. He spoke to me by both love and fear; by what I might call "Behold the goodness and the severity of God" (Romans 11:22)

To answer #2 [How would God get your attention if He wanted to speak to you?]

1. To hear God speak, we might just have to be listening! God can't teach us anything if we already know it all! Wes Tracy wrote these words a few years ago:

Aren't you tired of trying to be a classy sophisticate who knows all about things timely— progressive education, career enhancement, political correctness, next season's fashions, and the done thing? . . . Some who take the name of Christ seem owned by their ambitions, chained to a success formula, enslaved by the hunger for prestige— diseases they have caught from our sinful culture. They fill up the ranks of the Christian jet set.

2. To hear God speak there must be faith— an element of TRUST. Trust in WHO is speaking is ALL-IMPORTANT!

In every purely human decision we consider very carefully all the factors and then decide which way to go. And that is only common sense. But when it comes to the deep satisfaction of the heart, and we hear God begin speaking, we have to choose— make a decision— on just HOW important God is to us.

Abraham started out not knowing at first where he was going— only Who he was going with (see Hebrews 11:8.) The "common sense" thing is to say, "God— let me see what You have in mind, then I'll say yes or no" — That works for everything and everyone except God.

Romans 12: 1,2 says "Present yourselves to God for His service and then He will let you know what is his good and acceptable and perfect will!"

So to really hear God speak is a matter of trust!

How Can We Respond To A Call From God In THIS VERY MOMENT?

To hear God speak we may well have to go against the current of what is accepted as Christian by many evangelicals. We have to choose to take SELF off the throne, and seek God's face for Himself alone!

Spirituality is MORE than self-fulfillment. God's way is what we are made for— but it is a way of spiritual discipline that does not have happiness or deliverance or becoming fully human as its final goal— though these may well be by-products. Spiritual fulfillment begins when we realize GOD ALMIGHTY WANTS US TO COME AND WALK WITH HIM ON A JOURNEY WHERE ONLY HE KNOWS THE WAY!

Responding to #3 [How can we respond to a call from God IN THIS VERY MOMENT?]

WE HAVE TO CHOOSE WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT IN OUR LIVES. I BELIEVE GOD STILL SPEAKS, AND THAT HE HONORS THOSE WHO WILL STEP OUT IN FAITH AS ABRAHAM DID.

ONE MORNING for my devotions I opened my Bible to read and get ready to pray. The passage was 1 Kings 3, and I got as far as verse five (5) where God is speaking to the newly crowned Solomon. He, God, tells Solomon "Ask for whatever you want me to give you."

I stopped. I thought. Honestly, now, what one thing would I ask of God if I knew for certain that He would grant me that one thing, and I did not know if He would grant me anything else. What one thing is most important to me?

The Risk Takers

First I thought "You, Lord, You tell me! You decide for me!" That sounds very pious, but somehow it did not let me off the hook. I felt prodded. No — what really is the most important thing?

I was pleased that I didn't think about big bucks, or a palatial retirement home or material things— at least not "up front," but only after a long reflection— reflection that these were "way down the list." I confess I did think of things like not ever wanting to come down to old age and be a burden to myself and others. I thought of what a pleasure it would be to be able to write and speak and teach for years to come.

Do you know what I finally decided was most important?

When I was about six years old— this scripture from 1 Kings brought back a memory I hadn't thought of for a long, long time— when I was about six— a little boy evangelistic singer traveling almost year round— a store owner - I can still dimly see the store— a sort of hardware or Western Auto-type store with wide aisles— anyway, the owner took us— Mother, Dad, and me— to this store after church one night— opened the store, turned on the lights— and said to me,— maybe six years old— "You can have any one thing you want in this store!"

I walked up and down the aisles looking at bicycles and lawn mowers and garden furniture and clocks and house supplies and car radios, items big and small— expensive and relatively cheap. I never would have such an opportunity again— although at that time I was totally unaware of the values, unaware of what my dad might need, or my mother.

This is a true story. I picked up a little wind-up toy car, a little painted car, made in Japan, worth less than a dollar in 1937. I'm not even sure why I remember so well except I think my father was so disappointed I didn't at least pick out a scooter or a bike— but as I recall I was thinking it wouldn't fit in the car anyway. I could have had any one thing up to many times the value of the thing I chose. But that was that— and what would you expect from a six-year-old?

Do you know what I finally decided was most important?

IF WE ANSWER GOD'S QUESTION: WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU IN ANY LESSER WAY THAN SAYING FROM OUR HEARTS "**I WANT TO BE WHERE YOU ARE!** I WANT TO WALK WITH YOU!" WE ARE LIKE THAT SIX-YEAR-OLD BOY IN THE TOY STORE. WE WALK OUT WITH STUFF WHEN GOD WANTS US TO HAVE IT ALL!

WHENEVER THERE HAS BEEN A LIFE THAT HAS COUNTED FOR GOD IT HAS BEEN THE SAME STORY ALL OVER AGAIN. Different centuries . . different countries . . different situations, but the same God– the same call.

The journey won't be easy. It never is. Shallow spirituality, and greed and lusts and cheap grace will try to take us off the track. But they lead only to emptiness. Until we have God we are empty if we are millionaires! And if we are in God's company we have everything if we are shipwrecked or in prison or going through family trauma or whatever!

As Thomas Kelley wrote in his great little book, *A Testament of Devotion: About God's way*, he says,

*Its joys are ravishing,
its peace profound,
its humility the deepest,
its power world-shaking,
its love enveloping,
its simplicity that of a trusting child ...*

It is the life and power of Jesus of Nazareth.

- IS GOD SPEAKING TO YOU?
- ARE YOU LISTENING THIS VERY MOMENT?
- ARE YOU WILLING TO SIMPLY GET UP AND FOLLOW JESUS?

Prayer

Hymn #552 *O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee*

No Short Cuts to Glory

August 20, 2000-Providence

(cf 2/21/99, 9/25/99, 10/31/99)

Matthew 4

He had finally got his chance to make the Really Big Sale. He was going into the final interview on the biggest contract he had ever written. He was ushered into the office of the executive buyer. An assistant brought coffee and left. The atmosphere was cordial.

Then the assistant tapped on the door and re entered the office and spoke briefly with the executive. She stood and said, "I apologize, but I have to tend to a matter. I'll just be a minute or two." She followed her assistant out of the room.

The sales representative looked around the beautifully appointed office. He saw her family pictures on her desk. Then he noticed she had evidently been studying what looked like a contract, a bid from a competitor. Leaning forward, he saw a column of figures, but it was obscured by a diet soda can.

What harm possibly could there be in reading her private information? After all, she had left it out in plain sight. But when he lifted the can it wasn't diet soda; it was 1,000 Bbs that gushed out the bottomless can, and ran all over the desk and cascaded onto the carpet. His attempt to short cut the competition was exposed.

Not every temptation is so obvious. Not every failure is so embarrassing. But every temptation is a challenge. Not even Jesus was spared the choosing.

I. Temptation Is An Enticement To Use A Short Cut To Reach A Desirable Goal.

You want a good grade. Good grades are desirable. They open doors. They bring scholarships. The easiest way to good grades is to let someone else do your work for you. But there is no real short cut to real education.

You want intimacy and the good feelings of love and security. No one has to tell you those are good things. The easiest way to those feelings is the pathway of least resistance. But there are no short cuts to real friendship. There is never an excuse to USE people like things, no matter what the goal may be.

You want success and influence. Within the boundaries of genuine caring those could be very worthy goals. But in our world all too often personal goals are reached at whatever the cost. But there is no short cut to real integrity.

And cheating is always wrong. Adultery and fornication are always sin.

Betrayal of confidence is always heartbreaking. Whatever the reason, remember: there are no short cuts in finding and doing God's will. It is a wonderful thing to come to believe that in God's will we don't need short cuts!

II. Adam And Eve And Short Cuts

Adam and Eve, even in their innocence thought they might be able to take a short cut to God likeness. They were tempted to believe that maybe God was holding out on them. Whatever good was coming, they wanted it NOW! A short cut. The Tempter said, "Did God really say that?" Then he pursued that seed of doubt with philosophical denial. "You won't really die! God has it wrong! You can't really trust Him. He wants a monopoly on Truth!"

But they did die! Their innocence was gone. They were dead in trespasses and sin. And they were expelled from a garden into a wilderness. Their short cut was a tragedy.

In the classic Pilgrim's Progress, Christian and his new companion Hopeful fell in with a smooth talking man named By end, from the town of Fair speech. To hear By end talk the Christian journey required no effort at all. As his name suggests, he took the position that the end always justifies any short cut necessary, just so long as the rugged way of obedience could be avoided.

Just then Christian and Hopeful came alongside a beautiful meadow. There was a fence marking the pathway, but there was a stile over the fence, and they could see

a path running parallel to the Way on the other side of the fence. After some discussion they crossed over to take advantage of easier going on the other side of the fence.

But soon it became less simple. Darkness fell, and it became hard to see. They tried to make their way back to the crossing, but soon they had to stay the night under a tree in the open. Then they were captured by a wicked Giant Despair, and taken to a dungeon in the Doubting castle. A pleasant short cut turned out to be a near disaster.

We never leave the clear known will of God for our lives without bringing on big trouble. The most innocent disobedience brings broken fellowship with God. And there is no such thing as a short cut to where God wants you to be. You can trust His timing.

III. Jesus In His Innocence, Was Exposed To Temptation.

Fresh from his public baptism, and with the blessing of the Father's endorsement ringing in his ears, and in the joy of the Spirit's anointing, Jesus was led into the wilderness to face the challenge to take a short cut. Haggard and drawn from fasting, he was confronted with evil, demonic, powerful, hostile suggestion. The evil enemy attacked every angle. Henri Nouwen summed up the three temptations: be (practical) relevant, be popular (go along), be powerful (seize control).

Be relevant: you have to survive! 'Make these stones into bread. You're famished. This is the real world. A dead Messiah isn't going to do anyone any good.' But Jesus' response in fact said, "No, I don't have to survive! I have to be true!"

It wasn't that Jesus wasn't hungry. It wasn't that he couldn't work a miracle later. He fed 5,000 people with a little boy's lunch. But Jesus was taking orders from no one but the Father, and especially was not about to take advice from the Evil One.

"Man does not live by bread alone," he said, "but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

Be popular: you need to communicate! 'Spiff up your act! What is this "repent stuff!?? Put on a show! Do miracles! Walk a high wire!' But Jesus was never a

performer. He never did things for the effect. It wasn't that he couldn't master the forces of nature. He walked on the sea. He calmed the storms. He raised the dead. And he died and rose again the third day.

"Don't try to put God on the spot!" was his reply.

Be powerful: you need to take charge! 'No one will see you out here in the desert as you compromise and kneel down to me. But then I'll lay off, and you can be the dictator of the world! No competition! A cross is a terrible way to go. You have to take charge of your life! Assert yourself!'

This was not a friendly debate. It was not a gentleman's duel of honor. Weak, exhausted, physically drained, Jesus was facing pure evil at its demonic worst.

Jesus, at his weakest, used the defense that is available to us all if we will just use it. (It is the 'key' that finally unlocked the dungeon of Doubting Castle, and let Christian and Hopeful out.) He did not reason with the Enemy. He reached into the Father's promises. He fled to the first Commandment. He claimed the protection that comes from utterly belonging.

He was God's Son! He affirmed his determination to worship Him only, and to live by the father's Word and way. Satan had to leave. The angels came. There in the wilderness Jesus was refreshed. Then he resumed the step by step following of the Father's will that would take him to Calvary, to Olivet, and to Glory and Salvation for you and me. There would be no short cut.

Conclusion

Temptation Is an Enticement to Use a Short Cut to Reach a Desirable Goal

Temptation is NOT sin. But yielding to temptation IS sin. And sin never, never, never makes good on its promises. There are no short cuts to truly desirable goals.

A workman went to his big boss one day and said, "I'm tired. I think I'll take my retirement benefits and hang it up. It's been great working for you."

The big boss looked disappointed, and said, "I really hate to see you go. I was hoping you could do at least one more big job for me. Will you, just one more?"

Reluctantly the builder agreed to build a house for some important client of the big boss. It was a big house, a lot of work on a golf course, with a lot of detail. But the man's heart really wasn't in it. He threw the house together in record time, and cut corners on material and labor wherever he could. He saved the boss a lot of money, but it wasn't really his best work and he knew it.

Imagine how he felt when he turned the keys over to the big boss, and the boss gave them right back, and fished around in his briefcase and gave him the title and deed to the property on the golf course.

"This is my gift for you!" he said. "Thanks for all your good work across the years!"

Then the builder wished he hadn't been in such a hurry. He wished he hadn't cut corners and taken short cuts just to get the job done.

Life is like that. Exactly like that. We become the product of our own integrity in following after God. Or lack of integrity. We become exiles from innocence when we try to take short cuts to being like God. Or, following our Savior, we use the promises and the commandments of God to resist the tempter's power, and we begin to share in Christ's righteousness.

This is just another Sunday worship service. There isn't anyone here but us. But God is here. And right now is a good time to ask God for His help in deliberately drawing closer to Him. I don't know about you, but I don't want to try to get away with building a shoddy house. I know I'm going to have to live in what I build.

Prayer

#512 Take Time to be Holy

Believing Have life

September 2, 2000

(First used March 8, 1998 Lent 2 as part of [Ashes to Fire](#) series in Wollaston)

John 20:31 *"...and that believing ye may have life through (Jesus') name!"*

In 1997 a group of 34 students from two state universities in Washington State took a study trip into the Amazon jungles of South America. They were led on the last part of their journey by Stephen E. Saint, who happens to be the son of Nate Saint, one of the five Auca martyrs, (Jim Elliot, Pete Fleming, Ed McCulley, Roger Youderian, and Nate Saint,) who were killed in 1956 as they tried to make contact with the Aucas, properly now called 'Huaorani'. What has happened since that first day has been a miracle story. You can read more about it in *Christianity Today* archives. (CT for 3/2/98).

This group of 34 had come to study what they thought would be Stone Age people. Steve Saint has a home among the Huaorani. Some of the very men that speared his father and the others have become like adopted grandfathers to his own children. He has been helping the Huaorani develop ways of raising money for self-sufficiency, and he met this group himself.

The 34 students were taken by jungle bus deep into the forests as far as roads would go, where they were met by three Huaorani men, who led them on a 14 hour hike through jungle trails, followed by a journey in large dugout canoes to a campsite along a jungle river, where they were joined by other members of the Huaorani tribe.

The students quickly learned to respect and enjoy the warmth of the men who guided them. They were welcomed at the camp site, and were so comfortable with their new friends that they asked Steve when they would meet the Stone Age savages they had traveled so far to meet. Steve told them that they had been traveling with them— and they were now surrounded by them. The students did not believe him. So Steve Saint suggested that they ask any of the older people where their fathers might be.

One student took the challenge and nodded to one woman. Steve translated her reply something like: "My father is already dead a long time ago; having been speared he died." Four other Huaorani told the same story. One woman that had really "charmed" the students with her kindness, a very warm and friendly mother of ten, pointed to an old man in the circle: "He hated my family and killed all of them!"

The students were stunned. They had second thoughts about their own safety.

Then Dawa, one of the quietest women spoke up. Pointing at the grand fatherly old man sitting next to Steve Saint she told the students: " He is Kimo. He hating my family speared my father and mother and brothers and sisters and took me for his wife." That really stunned the students. They were deep in the jungle. They had to depend on these people to get them out again. Steve Saint said he thought of what they must be thinking right about then. It occurred to him they didn't know the story we have heard so many times in Christian circles.

Steve put his arm around the old man Kimo's shoulders and told the students, "He killed my father, too." Then there was stunned silence.

At last someone found courage to ask:

"What changed these people?"

Steve Saint repeated the question in the language of the Huaorani. The Stone Age people tried to tell the students how it used to be before they changed. They threw babies away when they were a trouble. They buried people alive so their spirits would not be able to return to torment them. Some had strangled their own children with their own hands. But then they tried to explain WHAT THEY BELIEVE about a God they knew as the Man-Maker the missionaries told them about, who had sent his Son to die for people who were full of fear and hate and revenge.

Then Dawa, the wife of Kimo spoke. I quote from Steve Saint's article: "Badly, badly we lived back then," Dawa said. "Now, walking God's trail which he has marked for us on paper (meaning the Bible,) we live well. All people will die, but if living you follow God's trail, then dying will lead you to heaven. But only one trail leads there. All other trails lead to where God will never be after death."

The students were silent. But then Dawa went on to give her own version of an altar call: "Have you heard me well? Which one of you wants to follow God's trail, living well?" The students were silent again— and then one hand was raised.

Steve said that Dawa understood what that raised hand meant, and clapped her hands and said, "Now I see you well. Leaving we will see each other again in God's place some day!" Then she looked at the other 33 and said "Dying I will never see you again if you don't follow God's trail. Think well on what I have spoken so that dying we can live happily together in heaven."

Thirty-four students of anthropology, from Washington State, had traveled thousands of miles into a South American rain-forest to hear from primitive people about the most powerful life changing force in the Universe. They had heard how believing in the God of love and grace can release life-changing power that can only be called miraculous.

The focus of this true story comes down to this "believing." "Believing" is at the very heart of our faith.

'BELIEVING' IS A STRONG WORD

In our English language "believe" can be a rather weak word. To say "I believe so" sounds a lot weaker than "I know so!" But the word translated "to believe" in both Old and New Testaments, in Hebrew and in Greek, has a much stronger meaning. It is not simply to "think" something, or even to be convinced of propositional truth— but rather it is to trust, to have confidence in, to put a complete reliance in the thing believed.

In Genesis 15:6 we read "Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness." the word there (aw-man) means 'to trust,' and is also interchangeable with a word that means 'to turn to the right hand.' Trusting means a willingness to change directions

In the New Testament the word is always 'to commit one's trust to, to have confidence in the thing believed.

BELIEVING IS NOT trying with all your might to make yourself deny the obvious.

Believing is NOT saying "black is white" simply because someone has told you that is what Christians believe. Believing has a lot less to do with analysis and explanations and dogmatic statements about things nobody knows for sure than a lot of Christians feel comfortable admitting. There are people on all sides of trying to explain away mysteries who simply have never fully surrendered to Jesus Christ. His loving Spirit is foreign to them.

BELIEVING IS DARING to say to the Christ of the Bible: "I believe You are who You say you are! I hear you say, 'Come unto Me!' Here I am! I believe YOU! I will follow You! If You will be my Lord and Savior, I will be Your man! Your woman! Your Boy! Your girl! You be my Savior and my God!" THAT is what believing is about!

BELIEVING IS THE DOORWAY

Trusting Jesus brings us into the real world! In Acts 16 the Roman jailer came to the end of himself— and asked Paul and Silas, "What must I do to be saved?" They showed him the only way: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved along with your household!"

You can't wait to figure out all the mystery, or explain all the ways a great and holy God 'connects' with finite and sinful you and me. You CAN respond directly to the living Christ as God's gift of faith makes Him real to you.

BELIEVING IS MORE— IT IS THE PATHWAY (THE TRAIL) WHERE WE LIVE

Believing is dynamic. It is never static. It is relational. It contacts and keeps contact. (Genesis 15:6) "In the middle of things" Abraham believed God. He had started out— he had been blessed— but he needed to obey and keep on obeying! We are never saved by "works." But believing enables us TO LIVE differently from the way we were "before." The Huaorani peoples' change was dramatic— they quit killing and feuding. But OUR CHANGE is just as needful— and needs just as much a miracle! We can quit gossiping and hating and being jealous and become (Ephesians 4:32) but only through the power of BELIEVING!

James (chapter 2) comments on this text (from The Message by Eugene Peterson): Isn't it obvious that faith and works are yoked partners, that faith expresses itself in

works? That the "works" are "works of faith"? The full meaning of "believe" in the scripture sentence, 'Abraham believed God and was set right with Go,' includes his action. It's that mesh of believing and acting that got Abraham named "God's friend." Is it not evident that a person is made right with God not by a barren faith but by a faith fruitful in works?"

BELIEVING IS STAYING POWER

Psalm 27 closes by saying, "I would have fainted unless I had believed to see the hand of God in the land of the living!" When Abraham was ready to give up he came with his complaint right back to God! Whenever we are in danger of being overwhelmed we can COME BACK TO GOD HIMSELF!

Wherever you are on your spiritual journey— wherever I am— we have the CHOICE to 'TRUST IN THE LORD WITH ALL OUR HEARTS' or to 'LEAN UNTO OUR OWN UNDERSTANDING!" We can BELIEVE the God who sent His Son to show us the way— OR We can waffle by using some lesser definition of what it means to BELIEVE.

Those thirty-four anthropology students from Washington State traveled thousands of miles to the Amazon rain-forest to hear about the miracle of God's love. They saw fear and hatred and revenge that had been exchanged for love and forgiveness and fellowship.

You and I know that same life-changing power is needed just as much right here where we live! Do you think it is easier to be Christ-like in our society? Where we LOVE THINGS and we USE PEOPLE— where we don't kill (usually) with spears— but we do kill with gossip and uncaring and selfishness. The power of BELIEVING— in the full sense of trusting, relying on God— can work just that kind of miracle for us, here, as well as the Huaorani people.

I Challenge you!

Right NOW! Today! This week! In your 'faith' go deeper than simply 'what' you believe (important as that is!) Go directly to God, through Jesus Christ! By faith look him in the face. Say simply, "I will trust you with all I am, now and forever! You show me Your will and i will obey You!"

Believing Have life

437 *Trust and Obey*

The Life-Changing Teacher

October 8, 2000 - Saugus Church of the Nazarene, Massachusetts

(cf 1/7/99 and 10/1/00)

Matthew 5 *You are the salt of the earth . . . I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

BEGINNING

Do you remember an outstanding teacher you once had, maybe a long time ago; maybe for you current students just recently? One that stands out in your memory. If you're like me, you've had so many teachers that you've forgotten many of them. Their faces are sort of a blur. But then along the way a few faces stand out. Some good memories. Some not so good. But maybe one or two teachers that really had an influence on your life. Maybe one even helped with a decision in choosing a major or even a career.

As you think back, was that outstanding teacher one that made no demands on you? It seems strange, maybe, but often we remember a teacher who was anything but a pushover. But at the same time they were demanding, they also made us think what they were teaching was for us. They demanded because they thought we could do what they were teaching. There is a powerful motivation in a good teacher's expectations. (Tough love)

Some time ago I heard a story about a tutor hired by a school system to take lessons to students who had been out with health problems for a period of time. One day the tutor's assignment took him to a hospital, and before he understood what was happening he had been ushered into a sterile room where a very badly burned boy was fighting for his life day by day.

The tutor didn't know how to back out gracefully, so he told the boy he was there to help him with his adjectives and adverbs in English. He went over some material as

briefly as he could and excused himself. The boy asked if he was coming back and the tutor mumbled something about being back in a couple of days.

When the tutor came back in two days he was met by a nurse that said, "What did you do in your lesson the other day?" The teacher was aghast. He hadn't meant to be any kind of burden. But the nurse said, "No, it isn't what you think. The boy has taken a turn for the better. He is fighting back. It looks like he will make it." When the facts were known they found out the boy had reasoned to himself, "It isn't likely they'd send a teacher to drill me on verbs and adverbs and adjectives if I was going to die!" So he started fighting to get better.

Jesus wouldn't teach such a lesson as this one in the Sermon on the Mount to poor sinful mortals unless He thought there was reason to believe grace could help them receive the lesson and respond. The very lesson brings hope! Jesus was certainly an outstanding teacher! Here in the greatest lesson ever recorded by the greatest Teacher who ever lived, Jesus is combining a challenge with confidence: You will have to do better— but I know you can do it!

I. "YOU MUST DO BETTER!"

JESUS CAME RAISING EXPECTATIONS WHILE AT THE SAME TIME HE WAS OPENING WIDE HIS KINGDOM

He said, "Come to me ALL who labor!" He said, "WHOSOEVER believes on God's only begotten Son will be saved!" He said, "I have come to seek and to save that which is lost!"

But then he called his disciples around him and told them, "Unless your righteousness goes beyond the righteousness of the so-called 'professionally righteous people,' you can't really enter the righteous kingdom!"

Jesus isn't into teaching lessons which are non-sense. He is not wasting his time demanding that which can never be understood or obeyed. But how in the world could his disciples beat the Pharisees at their own game? They were "pros" at keeping the letter of the law. Does this lesson— do Jesus demands even apply to us

today? "Unless you do better in righteousness than the professional law-keepers you can't even get into the kingdom!" What does this mean?

II. "BETTER THAN WHAT?"

BETTER THAN THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES

The people Jesus was talking about, could be blameless at keeping the letter of the law. They were strict tithers. They kept a rigid Sabbath. They prayed long and loud and often. Outwardly it was hard to see where they broke any of the Ten Commandments

We do not dare to simply say the Ten Commandments have been superceded. Jesus made it plain that is not what he was doing. We do not dare to take the Law lightly. Jesus says plainly here: "Whoever breaks one of these commandments and teaches others to break them is to be called least in the kingdom of heaven." What Jesus was concerned about was MOTIVATION. He was concerned about what goes on INSIDE a person's heart. In Matthew 23, if you want to take time to read it later, Jesus shows why our righteousness has to go beyond outward righteousness. These people were SELF-righteous. They were concerned with APPEARANCE. They were like WHITE-WASHED TOMBS . . . beautiful little houses full of corruption and death on the inside.

III. "YOU CAN TRUST ME!"

'BUT I SAY UNTO YOU . . .' THE 'BETTER WAY' OUR TEACHER HAS SHOWN TO US

If the world might want to build a righteous man or woman it would begin with what can be seen. It would say I had better have this righteous person join a church. It probably would say I had better have my righteous person begin doing good works, and the more public the better. It would carefully build an image built on things to do, and even more on things NOT to do.

But Jesus begins building a righteous man or woman starting with the inside. Not that the outside is not important. But when the inside is right the outside soon begins to take care of itself.

The Life-Changing Teacher

Jesus said he did not come to do away with the law, but to complete it, or fulfill it. So he had the authority to say, "The law says thus and so . . . but I say THIS!" And every time it was going "inside." Jesus is installing a new center, a new CORE for living, based on God's law written within.

The old law rightly says, "Don't kill." Jesus says, "Don't HATE!" But Teacher, that's a high standard! "Don't BE immoral!" "Don't even THINK immorally!" Teacher, that's too high!!

But then this demanding, loving Teacher somehow says, "You can do it!"

YOU CAN TRUST ME!

It took a while for this lesson to unfold.

There were a few, more than a few glitches along the way.

YOU CAN TRUST ME!

Jesus not only TOLD them. Jesus SHOWED them.

When he died their faith wavered! But he rose again, and came and expounded the scriptures. He told them to pray for the promised Holy Spirit.

Jesus promised them that the same empowering Holy Spirit that had descended on Him like a dove when he was baptized and began his ministry would be available to every one of them personally, just for the asking.

YOU CAN TRUST ME!

And Jesus told them: I'm counting on you to get this lesson! YOU are the salt of the earth! You're the only way I have to preserve and flavor and bring healing to this world! YOU are the LIGHT of the world! I AM the light of the world! But you are going to bring ME, your lives are going to reach wherever there is darkness!

JESUS IS THAT TEACHER, THAT LIFE-CHANGING TEACHER!

AND DO YOU KNOW WHAT?

JESUS MAKES US INTO LIFE-CHANGERS, TOO– IF WE WILL LET HIM!

CLOSING

We never know what power the love of Jesus can release when it is put in practical living. There are pearls of great price all around us, waiting to be loved and challenged to respond to God's love. You never know when the people we deal with every day are just waiting for YOU to show them God's love.

Some time ago I came across an article by Marian Wright Edelman. She tells this story about a school teacher, " Jean Thompson, and a fifth grade boy, Teddy Stollard:

On the first day of school, Jean Thompson told her students, "Boys and girls, I love you all the same." But she did not like little Teddy Stollard. He slouched in his chair, didn't pay attention, his mouth hung open in a stupor, his eyes were always unfocused, his clothes were mussed, his hair unkempt, and he smelled. He was an unattractive boy and Jean Thompson didn't like him. Through school records, the teacher learned that Teddy's mother had died a year ago and his father showed no interest. A previous teacher's note had read: "Teddy is in deep waters; he's totally withdrawn."

Christmas came, and the boys and girls brought their presents and piled them on her desk. They were all in brightly colored paper except for Teddy's. His was wrapped in brown paper and held together with a string. And scribbled on it were the words, "For Miss Thompson from Teddy." She tore open the paper and out fell a rhinestone bracelet with most of the stones missing and a bottle of cheap perfume, almost empty. When the other boys and girls started to giggle she had enough sense to put some of the perfume on her wrist, put on the bracelet, hold her wrist up to the class and say, "Doesn't it smell lovely? Isn't the bracelet pretty?"

"And taking their cue from the teacher, they all agreed. At the end of the day, when all the children had left, Teddy lingered, came over to her desk and said, "Miss Thompson, all day long you smelled just like my mother. And her bracelet, that's her bracelet, it looks real nice on you. too. I'm really glad you like my presents." And when he left, she got down on her knees and buried her head in her chair, and she

The Life-Changing Teacher

begged God to forgive her. From then on, she was a different teacher. She tutored Teddy and put herself out for him. By the end of the year, Teddy had caught up with some of the children and was even ahead of some.

Several years later, Jean Thompson got this note:

Dear Miss Thompson: I'm graduating and I'm second in my high school class. I wanted you to be the first to know. Love, Teddy.

Four years later she got another note:

Dear Miss Thompson: I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy, but I like it. Love, Teddy Stollard.

Four years later, another note:

Dear Miss Thompson: As of today, I am Theodore J. Stollard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I'm going to be married in July. I want you to come and sit where my mother would have sat, because you're the only family I have. Dad died last year.

And so she went and she sat where his mother should have sat because she deserved to be there."

Dr. Teddy Stollard was a pearl of great price. I'm not sure that Miss Thompson had any idea that he was. But the LORD did! HE is the one who is looking for pearls— and he is using us to look! He is living in us to challenge one another to be what God can make us.

I think you'd agree that just one Teddy Stollard would be a pretty good year's work for this church or any church. And I'm sure there are more than one we are in touch with already! We ALL are God's pearls— and we ALL are God's pearl-finders as well.

The task ahead could be overwhelming if we had to do it alone, or had to do it perfectly all at once. We can remember we are not alone— we have God, and we have each other. You and I can do what we can do with God's help. It is HIS work! And we are HIS family. Amen.

Prayer: Lord, Be our Teacher today! Help us see what You see! Help us BE what you see we can become! And, Lord, help us this week let the light of your love shine through us into the lives of those we meet. We ask in Jesus' name.

Closing Hymn/ Benediction/

A Pattern for Personal Prayer

October 29, 2000

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, they were looking for a simple lesson in how to conduct their personal devotions. instinctively they were reaching for the heart of the faith life, for everything stops or goes in relation to the quality of our prayer everything worthwhile in the church, that is.

Have you ever outlined your personal devotions?

What do you do when you get alone with God? Do you just sort of "let it happen"?

Here is a suggested pattern for personal devotions, based on Jesus' response to the disciples' expressed need (which of course is "The Lord's Prayer"):

FIRST, before you actually begin: **FOCUS!** Just what is the aim, the purpose in your life? Why are you coming to the place of prayer? I find it helpful to repeat, not as a prayer, but as a "focus sharpener," these words:

God wants me to be primarily concerned with pleasing HIM, and not too much concerned with pleasing anyone else, no matter how good or godly.

Think about that! It doesn't mean that you don't have varied and sometimes conflicting responsibilities as parent, as church worker, as citizen but in seeking to please God, you will more effectively do everything else that is needful.

THEN, **ask God's blessing on the portion of scripture you READ.** Just as you pause to ask the blessing on your meals, ask for insight and illumination in the Word. Use a notebook, and read with pen in hand. Jot down thoughts that occur, questions that arise, words you don't understand. Always write down the date, for as months and years slip by you will be able to trace God's grace in growth and blessing in your life. Read by some plan that does not limit your reading to just a few choice passages.

BEGIN your prayer time with PRAISE! Whatever you do don't give into the temptation to skimp on this part in order to get to the "important" part of the day's

prayer. In fact, if you are heavily burdened take extra time in praising God. Be specific. I find it helpful to write out three things for which I wish to praise God; don't be afraid to tell God you appreciate His patience with you, or praise Him that you can see Jesus in fellow Christians. Praise Him for godly parents, for blue skies, for a warm home, for the person who introduced to Jesus, for being with you in hard times. Really tell God from your heart how much you love Him, and how you want to give Him praise!

NEXT comes **SURRENDER**. Yes, I believe in consecration and crisis experiences of salvation. I also believe that in a practical way I can give to God in a daily way what I surrendered when I was saved, and when I consecrated my all seeking sanctification. Give God THIS day! Ask Him to make your appointments! Offer to be His instrument, to be used of God. He will use you every single day!

Surrender any failures, too. Don't let temporary setbacks harden. Don't gloss over stupidity or carelessness. Ask for forgiveness and give forgiveness, too. Surrender any temptation to harbor resentment, ill will, or even moodiness.

Surrender is quite naturally followed by **TRUST**. But make it an active trust! Expect God! Expect a fresh infilling of the Spirit! Expect to be used during the day. Don't be surprised when you find yourself really ministering to someone's heartache. And finally, expect God to help you pray as you enter into the final phase of your devotions.

Expect His help as you make INTERCESSION. Pray, by name, for every member of your immediate family. Keep a list of those you pray for daily. Be sensitive and the Spirit will bring to your mind names and faces and needs. How much more keenness and power your intercession AFTER praise and AFTER surrender and EXPECTANT FAITH.

Finally get up and leave the place of prayer, but seek to go in the spirit of prayer and thanksgiving. Be thankful God has heard you. Be thankful He is with you. Let your whole day be the "Amen!"

If you haven't tried patterned devotions before try it for 30 days. Pray all you want, any way you want IN BETWEEN regular patterned devotions. But every day **FOCUS**, and then prayerfully, with your pen in hand, **READ**, and **PRAISE** and **SURRENDER** and **TRUST** and make **INTERCESSION** AND PETITION, with **THANKSGIVING AND OBEDIENCE** as you depart the place of prayer.

It is the pattern Jesus gave. It works!

The Life-Changing Teacher

October 29, 2000 - Falmouth Church of the Nazarene, Massachusetts

Matthew 5 You are the salt of the earth . . 'But I say unto you . . ' .I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

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Do you remember an outstanding teacher you once had, maybe a long time ago; maybe for you current students just recently? There is a powerful motivation in a good teacher's expectations. (Tough love)

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II. "BETTER THAN WHAT?"

BETTER THAN THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES (PEOPLE WHO ARE 'GOOD' FROM THE INSIDE OUT)

The people Jesus was talking about, could be blameless at keeping the letter of the law. They were strict tithers. They kept a rigid Sabbath. They prayed long and loud and often. Outwardly it was hard to see where they broke any of the Ten Commandments

We do not dare to simply say the Ten Commandments have been superceded. Jesus made it plain that is not what he was doing. We do not dare to take the Law lightly.

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III. HOW IN THE WORLD?

WE ARE NOT SUPER-CHRISTIANS! THE ANSWER IS LOVE!!"

YOU CAN TRUST ME!" - 'BUT I SAY UNTO YOU . . .' THE 'BETTER WAY' OUR TEACHER HAS SHOWN TO US

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The Life-Changing Teacher

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We never know what power the love of Jesus can release when it is put in practical living. There are pearls of great price all around us, waiting to be loved and challenged to respond to God's love. You never know when the people we deal with every day are just waiting for YOU to show them God's love.

Some time ago I came across an article by Marian Wright Edelman. She tells this story about a school teacher, Jean Thompson, and a fifth grade boy, Teddy Stollard:

On the first day of school, Jean Thompson told her students, "Boys and girls, I love you all the same." But she did not like little Teddy Stollard. He slouched in his chair, didn't pay attention, his mouth hung open in a stupor, his eyes were always unfocused, his clothes were mussed, his hair unkempt, and he smelled. He was an unattractive boy and Jean Thompson didn't like him. Through school records, the teacher learned that Teddy's mother had died a year ago and his father showed no interest. A previous teacher's note had read: "Teddy is in deep waters; he's totally withdrawn."

Christmas came, and the boys and girls brought their presents and piled them on her desk. They were all in brightly colored paper except for Teddy's. His was wrapped in brown paper and held together with a string. And scribbled on it were the words, "For Miss Thompson from Teddy." She tore open the paper and out fell a rhinestone bracelet with most of the stones missing and a bottle of cheap perfume, almost empty. When the other boys and girls started to giggle she had enough sense to put some of the perfume on her wrist, put on the bracelet, hold her wrist up to the class and say, "Doesn't it smell lovely? Isn't the bracelet pretty?"

"And taking their cue from the teacher, they all agreed. At the end of the day, when all the children had left, Teddy lingered, came over to her desk and said, "Miss Thompson, all day long you smelled just like my mother. And her bracelet, that's her bracelet, it looks real nice on you. too. I'm really glad you like my presents." And when he left, she got down on her knees and buried her head in her chair, and she begged God to forgive her. From then on, she was a different teacher. She tutored Teddy and put herself out for him. By the end of the year, Teddy had caught up with some of the children and was even ahead of some.

Several years later, Jean Thompson got this note:

Dear Miss Thompson: I'm graduating and I'm second in my high school class. I wanted you to be the first to know. Love, Teddy.

Four years later she got another note:

Dear Miss Thompson: I wanted you to be the first to know. The university

The Life-Changing Teacher

has not been easy, but I like it. Love, Teddy Stollard.

Four years later, another note:

Dear Miss Thompson: As of today, I am Theodore J. Stollard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I'm going to be married in July. I want you to come and sit where my mother would have sat, because you're the only family I have. Dad died last year.

And so she went and she sat where his mother should have sat because she deserved to be there."

Dr. Teddy Stollard was a pearl of great price. I'm not sure that Miss Thompson had any idea that he was. But the LORD did! HE is the one who is looking for pearls— and he is using us to look! He is living in us to challenge one another to be what God can make us.

I think you'd agree that just one Teddy Stollard would be a pretty good year's work for this church or any church. And I'm sure there are more than one we are in touch with already! We ALL are God's pearls— and we ALL are God's pearl-finders as well.

The task ahead could be overwhelming if we had to do it alone, or had to do it perfectly all at once. We can remember we are not alone— we have God, and we have each other. You and I can do what we can do with God's help. It is HIS work! And we are HIS family. Amen.

Prayer: Lord, Be our Teacher today! Help us see what You see! Help us BE what you see we can become! And, Lord, help us this week let the light of your love shine through us into the lives of those we meet. We ask in Jesus' name.

Closing Hymn/ Benediction/

Christ the King Sunday

November 26, 2000 - Malden First Church of the Nazarene, Massachusetts

Scripture Lesson

Revelation 1:4-18; (also Psalms 93, 97, 99, verses 1 for each . . .)

Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, 6 and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him. Even so, Amen. 8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End," says the Lord, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

Vision of the Son of Man

9 I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. 10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, 11 saying, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last," and, "What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

12 Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the

feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. 14 His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; 15 His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; 16 He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength.

17 And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. 18 I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death.

The Psalmist boldly declares, again and again, "The LORD reigns!" The LORD is SOVEREIGN. Sovereign: supreme in rank, in power, in authority! The LORD is KING!

We live in a democracy, or republic, where there is no sovereign as such. We (rightly) respect the flag of our country, and give it the respect due to an earthly power, which power the flag represents. We love our country, and we respect the office of president, but we have no sovereign.

We probably get our ideas of kings and queens from watching what is left of the kings of the earth on TV. We enjoy the parades in England when their queen makes public appearances. It is hard for us to understand the feeling British people have for their royals, even while they may criticize them. There is a residue of respect and even reverence. (When Princess Diana was killed I recall the personal grief of one of my dear friends, Brian Farmer, who mourned as if a family member had died.)

Maybe there is something in us that enjoys seeing even an earthly sovereign, especially if we don't worry about losing our heads by his command. To realize 'This person leads a nation!' is exciting. (I saw President Truman in 1948 in Akron, Ohio. I was prepared to scoff and hiss. Instead I stood and cheered!) (I saw the Queen Mum from three feet away in St Paul's Cathedral in London. I may be a softy, but I was thrilled to the core!) But no sovereign in the civilized world today has the power of life and death arbitrarily held over his or her subjects.

(Still) When we read "The LORD is sovereign! The LORD reigns!" we just do not get the depths of what that means!

I. THE LORD IS SOVEREIGN; THIS IS AN ABSOLUTE TRUTH!

We may not understand HOW or WHEN, but the Bible makes it clear and plain that when time as we know it shall cease, and we stand before the Great White Throne, we shall be able to see that all through the ages God IS in charge!

Revelation 11:15 looks into the future and hears the angels singing: "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!" And in Philippians 2, in the passage where Paul tells about how Jesus came and poured out his very life for us, he goes on to say, "Wherefore God has exalted Him, and given him a name above every name, THAT AT THE NAME OF JESUS EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL CONFESS THAT JESUS IS LORD, TO THE GLORY OF GOD!"

We may not understand why bad things happen to good people, or good things happen to bad, but the fact remains that God is SOVEREIGN.

God IS! God is GOOD. And God is KEEPING SCORE! You can take that to the bank!

II. WE RESPOND TO THIS SOVEREIGN LORD!

God has made us in such a way that sooner or later we come up against the fact of God. It may not be as dramatic as a burning bush in the desert, like Moses. It might be in a church on a Sunday morning. It might be on a Saturday night in the jangle of a party somewhere. But sooner or later God says, "What are you going to do about ME?"

The Psalmist looked at God's sovereignty in several ways. I summarize them (oversimplify, perhaps) using the opening verse of three Psalms, 93, 97, and 99. Look at them briefly with me: (93:1) The LORD reigns, he is clothed with MAJESTY! (97:1) The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice! MERCY! (99:1) The LORD reigns, let the earth tremble! JUSTICE!

A. (93)The LORD reigns, he is clothed with MAJESTY!

We have heard a great deal about the mercy and unconditional LOVE of God. That is the message we LIKE to hear, and it is true. BUT WE DO NOT HEAR A GREAT DEAL ABOUT THE MAJESTY OF GOD. We could learn more about what it means to worship in AWE and WONDER.

Did you ever notice in the Old Testament how the word "Lord" is written? Sometimes it is capital-L small-o small-r small-d. And many times it is capital-L and then smaller capital-O capital-R capital-D. In that spelling could be a lesson in reverence for the awesome majesty of God. Do you know WHY LORD is spelled that way? [Explain YHWH , I AM THAT I AM, the name given to Moses; and how it was so revered it became the unspeakable name. It was written, YHWH, but at the same time it was pronounced Elohim, or Lord, because the Jewish people so very high revered the name of God.] We could think of that more often, and not take the name of God lightly. He is MAJESTIC.

B. (97) The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice! MERCY!

But at the very same time, without diminishing the majesty of God for one moment, the Psalmist says, OUR GOD REIGNS, AND WE CAN REJOICE! This great God who fills the earth and sky with his majesty is OUR SHEPHERD! He cares for us! He has chosen us as his very own people! We are HIS people, and the sheep of HIS pasture! Enter into His gates with Thanksgiving! Enter His courts with PRAISE! Rejoice, God know you and still loves you!

C. (99) The LORD reigns, let the earth tremble! JUSTICE!

But this love is nothing to PRESUME upon, or take for granted. Our God is HOLY! Every book will be balanced! The judge of all he earth will bring the living and the dead all together before the Great White Throne, and there WILL BE A JUDGMENT DAY!

If our sins have been sent on before, washed in the blood of the Lamb, we will rejoice! But it will still be a solemn time! Let the earth tremble! Our God is HOLY!

III. JESUS IS LORD!

How will YOU respond to the wonderful fact that God is sovereign? To KNOW that as a Christian is more than just acknowledging it as a fact to be believed in the head. It is a TRUTH to be embraced with all our being. Look at that statement with me, in closing: I will ask you three questions. The answer to each one of the questions is the same: Jesus is Lord! But the emphasis is different for each question. Answer from your heart, if you will embrace God's sovereignty.

1. Question ONE: WHO is Lord?

Answer: JESUS is Lord! Not Jesus AND . . . Just JESUS!

2. Question TWO: WHAT is Jesus?

Answer: Jesus is LORD! Not just your Advisor, or Savior- but LORD!

3. Question THREE: WHEN is Jesus Lord?

Careful, now. This can be, should be– MUST be person for you and me! We believe Jesus WAS Lord when the sun, moon, and stars were created. We believe Jesus WILL be Lord when time has ended. We may even believe Jesus cares and answers prayer for us now. But to say He is SOVEREIGN! To mean that He can order our lives– tell us what to do and be– that is personal! To say Jesus IS MY Lord! That is a powerful, wonderful thing! Let me repeat the question for YOU–

WHEN is Jesus Lord?

Answer: 'Jesus IS LORD!

Bow your heads and affirm your statement of faith with me in prayer:

Lord God, Father of Light and Love and Holiness, we thank you that you loved this world so much you sent your only begotten Son to us that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Christ the King Sunday

Thank You for sending Jesus. We trust that he died for our sins. And from our hearts—
from MY heart- we say "Jesus IS MY Lord!"

We do not yet see all things under His control. We do not know what the future may
hold. But we do believe You are King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

#271 - Jesus Shall Reign

The Christmas Story

December 24, 2000

Malden Church of the Nazarene, Massachusetts

Behold the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which translated means, "God with us." (Matthew 1:23)

Many wonderful and sentimental things come along with the Christmas Season. There is probably nothing at all wrong with that. There is a warm fuzzy feeling, I suppose, along with the shopper's panic and a general free-floating anxiety.

SENTIMENTALITY CAN BE FAITH'S WORST ENEMY

But sentimentality can be faith's worst enemy, when we mistake a feeling for spiritual reality. The true JOY of Christmas is wrapped up in the name "Jesus," which means Savior, and in the name Emmanuel, which means "God with us!" The true message of Christmas is the fact that in a particular time and in a specific place God came to this earth because He so greatly loves you and me. If we begin with this great Fact of Christmas, then probably the other things we add on as traditions or fun things will be on the "plus side." But Christian remember that Christ is not just one part of Christmas; He is the very heart and life of Christmas JOY.

CHRISTMAS IS ETERNAL, BUT NOT TIMELESS

Christmas is NOT "timeless truth." Eternal, yes. But not timeless. The message God gave us in Jesus is not like a lesson or a litany of good ways to live, or a feeling of love that we might hope would last all year. The message of Christmas is not something which, ultimately, can be learned. It has to be believed! And "it" is a Person, JESUS, who can free us from sin and guilt. EMMANUEL, who is God with us.

Our modern Christmas has become so stylized, so red and gold and white that we forget that in the original Christmas story Jesus came into a world of darkness. We have so many wonderful stories about how Christmas is candles and Christmas is silver bells that we forget that Christmas is NOT timeless truth about "all that is good

about mankind" but rather is a particular story about one little Baby being born— and what He did when He grew up! But we all know that story:

MARY BECAME WITH CHILD BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

An angel appeared to Mary. Walter Wangerin, in his book *The Manger is Empty*, pictures this taking place in Mary's bedroom, where she is happily getting ready for bed, with happy thoughts of an impending marriage to Joseph— when suddenly a light begins to shine and to glow and get brighter and brighter until she realizes a glorious being, very real, is standing right there in front of her.

With her holy consent, Mary became with child by the Holy Spirit. This was not just a sermon illustration, or an "idea," or an allegory of how God asks each of us to submit to His will so that He can do good things with our lives. This was a real growing Baby, and in time it was moving inside Mary's womb, and in three months or so it could no longer be hidden.

People 2,000 years ago may not have had computers or airplanes. But they knew very well about the facts of life. Sometimes in the telling of the story we put down the idea of Jesus as the Son of God, very God, very man, as easier for more primitive minds to accept. [It is an allegory, we say; what difference does it make if Jesus were or were not born of a virgin— or, for that matter, if He ever actually lived in the flesh?]

JOSEPH WAS DEEPLY ANGUISHED

Joseph was deeply anguished. Marriage may not have been the romantic scene then that we picture in our Western Civilization fantasy of love, but Joseph knew that in Mary he had the finest, most wonderful person any fortunate husband could ever want. But the evidence was overwhelming. She was going to have a Baby, and he knew that it was not his Baby. People no doubt were already talking about the probability of a hurry-up wedding.

But Joseph, too, received direct word from God's messenger. Joseph's faith was challenged, but he believed, and obeyed. Or perhaps to believe and to obey are one and the same thing.

PERHAPS TO BELIEVE AND TO OBEY ARE ONE AND THE SAME THING

Joseph and Mary went from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Obedient Joseph took Mary into his home as his own beloved wife, where they lived happily ever after— for about three months, when they had to travel 90 miles south to Bethlehem. It was right at the worst possible time for an awkward, beautiful, nine-months-pregnant Mary. Can you imagine walking or riding a donkey ninety miles in that condition?

A BABY WAS BORN

A Baby was born in a cave, where animals were kept behind a rude public house, probably in the spring of the year 4 B.C., although it could have been 6 B.C., depending on which mishandling of the Calendar you accept. Have you ever been in an old-fashioned barn on a small working farm? Have you heard cattle grumbling over their feeding? Have you smelled the body-warmed air, rich with the smell of manure?

What a "particular place" God chose for His Son to be born! A stable is no place for any baby to be born— but the Son of God?

That Baby was toothless and helpless, at the mercy of His loving mother and step-father. When Jesus came down from His glory, He came all the way down to where we live!

CHRISTMAS IS JUST THE OPENING CHAPTER OF THE STORY OF EMMANUEL

But at the same time, all heaven was watching, and somehow some people were made aware, and others were practically summoned to worship, and to make certain that Jesus would be able to come to human maturity. Christmas, of course, is just the opening chapter of the very real story of the God-Man, our Emmanuel.

The Christmas Story

And so it came that in the fullness of time, Jesus, aware of His unique connection with the Father Almighty, and in the full power of the Holy Spirit, lived and died and rose again and sent His Spirit so that every son and daughter of Adam's race could find the reality in the name, Immanuel, God with us!

The JOY of Christmas is far, far deeper than we can ever realize. All the rest of the trimmings of the Season are well and good if they do not obscure the Reality that now God is with us! Our salvation, our life, depends on our somehow hooking up with this event we call Christmas. And this morning, either you know this Christmas reality, or you don't!

There are (at least) two ways to arrive at the persuasion that any story is true. The Christmas story is no exception:

There is the approach that says I will make my decision based on what I can see and hear and fully understand. So, because of all the wonder and all the beauty, and all the ways that Christmas truth and Christmas glory "fit together," I find that there is a warm glow of love and wonder in my heart, and I call this the "truth" of Christmas. Jesus is a cute little Baby in a stylized manger bed.

Perhaps this is as much "Christmas" as some people know. Perhaps they have never been exposed to Gospel preaching, and never have read the New Testament with faith. I feel sorry for them. For there is yet another way to come to the Christmas story:

This "other way" comes by being confronted with the challenge to believe. By "believe" I do not mean to simply accept the facts of an historical Jesus, for that search is another quest, entirely. But the challenge to believe that God came to earth in the Babe of Bethlehem is, in a way, exactly where Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and Peter and Paul and every Christian since have been challenged to begin a personal walk with God.

To believe does not mean we cannot also learn more and more about our faith. It does not mean that we cannot apply methods of historical study to ancient writings, even scripture. All truth is God's truth. But to believe means that, like Joseph, God is

asking YOU to dare to believe that Emmanuel really has come, and that He is waiting for YOU to let Him into YOUR heart!

The work of Jesus is still very much continuing. His work of atonement is finished, but He is at the right hand of the Throne making intercession for us; He has sent the Holy Spirit to testify about the reality of Christmas and all the rest of God's great work in His Son, and He is coming again in power to reign over all Creation.

This way of faith says, "I have heard God speak to me!" It probably is not in the form of the angel Gabriel, or in a dramatic vision. But God still persuades men and women! God still deals with individual people, convincing, convicting, converting. This way of challenge says "I can, I will, I do believe that in the Babe of Bethlehem God entered into our human history."

And so, because the Baby was God Incarnate, and because He grew to Manhood and accepted His role as Servant and Savior, and because He died on a Cross to bear the sins of the world, and because He rose again from the dead, and because He has presented Himself in a personal, real way to your life you personally KNOW the Christ of Christmas, and so all these other allegories and ornaments can find their place in a gallery of praise.

I am as sentimental as anyone here. But the simple fact of Christmas lies deeper than sentiment. The JOY of Christmas is far, far deeper than we can ever realize. All the rest of the trimmings of the Season are well and good if they do not obscure the Reality that now God is with us! Our salvation, our life, depends on our somehow hooking up with this event we call Christmas. And this morning, either you know this Christmas reality, or you don't!

- Do you know, really KNOW the Lord Jesus Christ as your own Savior from sin? Let me tell you, on the authority of God's word: His name is JESUS! He will save you if you ask Him!
- Do you have the CHRIST as your daily Friend and Companion in the stress of life? Let me tell you, on the authority of God's word: He is called EMMANUEL! He will come to live IN your heart and never, ever leave you or forsake you!

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- And whatever else Christmas means, good or sad, forevermore it will mean that this God Almighty who came to earth 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem has accepted YOU as His friend! Will you receive Him today?

Advent is for right NOW! More than 1,000 years ago hymns were written to express the deepest longings of the human heart for Christ, called the "O Hymns, or Antiphon Hymns." The most familiar of all we know as, "O Come Emmanuel!" And that name means, "God with us!" God IS with us, waiting for us to ask Him into our lives where we are right now!

It is in that coming— in the certain knowledge that God is indeed "with us" that there is JOY - an audacious thing, certainly NOT the product of our will and energy, but rather the result of realizing that we are not alone, not lost— but that God Himself is here with us. This Emmanuel does not "fix things" necessarily in the way we think they ought to be fixed. He simply says, "If you will open your heart to me, I will come to where you are and I will never, ever leave you again!" We get the idea that if this is true, then maybe we can face the unthinkable. We're still very human, very fragile. But Jesus is, too— human, that is— and he shares his strength with us.

One very human story illustrates the power of love that comes to where we are:

Henry Carter, a pastor and an administrator of a home for emotionally disturbed children, tells of an encounter he had one Christmas Eve that gave him a new insight and perspective. He was busy with last minute preparations for the worship service, when one of the floor mothers came to say that Tommy had crawled under his bed and refused to come out. He followed her up the stairs and looked at the bed she pointed out. Not a hair or a toe showed beneath it. So he talked to Tommy as if he were addressing the bucking broncos on the bedspread. He talked about he brightly lighted tree, the packages underneath it and the other good things that were waiting for Tommy out beyond that bed.

No answer.

Still fretting about the time this was costing, Henry dropped to his hands and knees and lifted the spread. Two enormous blue eyes looked out at him. Tommy was 8, but looked like a 5 year old. He could easily have pulled him out. But it wasn't pulling that Tommy needed it was trust and a sense of deciding things on his own initiative. So, crouched on all fours, Henry launched into the menu of the special Christmas Eve supper to be offered after the service. He told of the stocking with Tommy's name on it, provided by the Women's Society.

Silence. There was no indication Tommy heard or that he even cared about Christmas.

At last, because he could think of no other way to make contact, Henry got down on his stomach and wriggled in beside Tommy, snagging his sport coat on the bed springs on the way. He lay there with his cheek pressed against the floor for a long time. He talked about the big wreath above the altar and the candles in the window. He talked about the carols all the kids were going to sing. Then, finally running out of things to say, he simply waited there beside Tommy.

After a bit, a small child's chilled hand slipped into his.

Henry said, "You know, Tommy, it is kind of close quarters under here. Let's you and me go out where we can stand up." As they slid out from under the bed, Henry realized he had been given a glimpse of the mystery of Christmas.

Hasn't God called us too, as Henry had called Tommy, from far above us? With his stars and mountains and his whole majestic creation, hasn't God pleaded with us to love him and to enjoy the universe he gave us as a gift?

And hasn't he drawn closer through the Bible, and through preaching, and conviction for sin? At then that very first Christmas God stooped to where we live, and came all the way down to live among us. And we have heard, and received, and found assurance of His salvation.

The Christmas Story

But even this very day, wherever we are in our spiritual journey, One is among us, where we are, that is willing to "get under the bed" with us and stay with us until we have the courage to come out and go with Him, and He will go with us.

PRAYER for Christmas Eve Day:

O Lord, with great might come among us; and, because we often are so easily centered in ourselves, let your light shine on us, to show us how very near You are to us, and how very much You love us. We invite you to enter every part of our lives. O Come and let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen

#155 - A Name I Highly Treasure

A Lesson in Praying

June 24, 2001 - Falmouth Church of the Nazarene, Massachusetts

Luke 11:1-13

Everybody prays. It seems as though prayer is built into our make-up. It is a part of being human. Some prayers may be more direct and honest than others.

Consider some of these direct and honest prayers by "little people:"

- Dear GOD, I would like to live 900 years like the guy in the Bible. Love, Chris
- Dear GOD, If you watch me in church Sunday, I'll show You my new shoes. Mickey D.
- Dear GOD, I bet it is very hard for You to love all of everybody in the whole >world. There are only 4 people in our family and I can never do it. Nan
- Dear GOD, Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy. Joyce
- Dear GOD, It rained for our whole vacation and is my father mad! He said something about You that people are not supposed to say, but I hope you will not hurt him anyway. Your friend. -(But I am not going to tell you who I am.)
- Dear GOD, My brother is a rat. You should give him a tail. Ha- ha . Danny
- Dear GOD, Please send me a pony. I never asked for anything before, You can look it up. Bruce

Everybody prays. Not everybody prays well or even knowing why they pray.

WHY PRAY?

NOT to inform God: If God already knows everything, then prayer isn't in order to inform Him.)

And yet there is MYSTERY! If God already decides everything, obviously then prayer can't change things. But still we pray!!! There are several scriptural reasons why we

should pray, and why we should keep learning to pray better and better. Prayer DOES make a difference : there have been too many solid examples of how prayer. Let me challenge you to think about several reasons WHY we need to pray:

A. Prayer communicates love to God.

The first and great Commandment is: "Thou shalt LOVE the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. God is a Person, not a "Force." Salvation - faith- is ultimately a relationship, not a doctrine or list of rules. The way we keep love going is called "communication." Prayer is communication with God.

It isn't easy or simple to love someone as big and as mysterious as God. But he has promised if we will reach out to Him he will reach out to us. And so maybe it IS simple: we just keep talking to God. Tell Him everything! Little by little we come to realize that He really is our Great Friend for time and eternity.

B. Prayer 'conducts' God's love to others.

Prayer not only is communication with God- it can bring God and those we pray for together. Prayer becomes a conduit or 'conductor' of God's love. When you pray for others, you can release God's love in their lives. Especially when you sense the prompting of the Spirit, prayer can be a powerful release of blessing in other's lives.

Prayer is mysterious in some ways. We do not always see how it works. But James tells us that the effectual fervent prayer of God's people avails much. A dear friend of mine, Jim Couchenour, said "Prayer does not make the work of the church go forward- prayer IS the work of the church. After we have prayed the rest is just mopping up!"

When God's good work goes forward- it will be because in prayer God has shown us how to conduct his love to others.

C. Prayer changes the pray-er.

Finally, prayer keeps us growing. It changes us!

[Sermon-within-the-sermon: The essence of the Lord's Prayer has the potential of keeping the spirit free and pure. In the his letter to the Colossians (Colossians 2) Paul wrote three things about keeping our spirit free:

1. Don't let anyone CONFUSE you with vain or important sounding speculation.
2. Don't let anyone CONDEMN you with their personal so-called convictions.
3. Don't let anyone SIDETRACK YOUR FAITH by getting away from the basic simplicity of the Gospel. With a show of humility they tell you that you don't really know how to worship (esoteric knowledge)

The pattern of prayer Jesus taught if it is used consistently and honestly and humbly will KEEP FAITH SWEET AND SIMPLE!

(Finally WHY pray?):

- D. Prayer changes THINGS! Makes lives over! Receives forgiveness! Brings Joy to life!

HOW, THEN DO WE PRAY?

Of course this is a life assignment! But we can look at this basic lesson:

THE LESSON JESUS GIVES US

- A. he pattern: It isn't the exact words that become a magic formula, although the exact words keep the focus sharp. Rather, it is the pattern:
1. God First, God's name, worship, praise.
 2. God's kingdom bringing order out of chaos. God's will, in all the earth and in the details of *my* life.
 3. Others and self next in God's care.
 4. THEN, "its all right" to say GIVE and FORGIVE and LEAD and DELIVER.
- B. The persistence: On the occasion of this lesson (in Luke's gospel) Jesus added the emphasis of persistency. Here is where we too often fall down. It is human to start BIG and then lose interest and energy and . . . then . . .start BIG all over again. God's ideal is for us to grow IN BETWEEN the camp meetings and the revivals. We do that by talking

EVERY DAY with the Father. We need to encourage each other. We need to pray when we feel like praying. And we need to pray when we DON'T feel like praying! Maybe that kind of prayer means the most both to God AND to ourselves!

A PRACTICAL EXERCISE IN PRAYING

As We Come to the Close of Worship Today

Let's pray again together, with the pattern of the Lord's Prayer in mind:

- God is here. Bow your head– close your eyes– and let God sit down beside you there.
 - In your heart tell Him you love Him, and are proud to be His child.
 - Think of how this world will be when hatred and selfishness cease.
- Tell God you want His kingdom of peace.
 - Tell Him you will be part of His kingdom right now. Tell Him He can tell you what to do– and you'll do it!
- Now think of the people who are dear to you.
 - Family.
 - Children.
 - Parents.

Tell God you want Him to bless them. Give them the gift of God's love in your prayer just now.

Let the face of a person who has hurt you come to mind... Tell that name silently to God... Ask God to help you forgive that person. Give them the blessing of God's love in your forgiveness.

- Silently think of any failure in your life right now. Do you dare to name the sin right now in your life that you feel you most need to confess to God... Tell God right now! Confess it... Ask God to forgive you; and you know what? He will! He does!

- What is the daily bread that you need God to give right now?..

Ask God for it; trust that He will guide you!

You have very much needed God's guidance on some decision and situation in your life...

Tell God right now... Ask to know the will of God for you.

Amen.

Lord, teach us to pray! Help us to pray. Help us to know You, and love You. IN Jesus' name. Amen

Hymn (STL) #630 *Be Still and Know*

Obedience Bible Study

Bible study for "Obedience" lesson, for Sunday April 22, 2001

Manchester Church of the Nazarene

"On Our Way to Pentecost!!"

Joshua 5 The Commander of the Army of the LORD 13 And it came to pass, when Joshua was by Jericho, that he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, a Man stood opposite him with His sword drawn in His hand. And Joshua went to Him and said to Him, "Are You for us or for our adversaries?" 14 So He said, "No, but as Commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped, and said to Him, "What does my Lord say to His servant?" 15 Then the Commander of the LORD's army said to Joshua, "Take your sandal off your foot, for the place where you stand is holy." And Joshua did so.

Acts 5 Lying to the Holy Spirit

1 But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. 2 And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? 4 While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." 5 Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. 6 And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him. 7 Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much." 9 Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." 10 Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying

her out, buried her by her husband. 11So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.

Apostles on Trial Again

27And the high priest asked them, 28saying, "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!" 29But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men. 30The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. 31Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him."

What sort of obedience is God seeking? God begins with the inner life:

Are you living in any known sin? Do you have unconfessed sin in your life?

Is there someone who has wronged you that you have not forgiven?

Do you envy those who seem better off? Do you secretly harbor hatred in your heart?

Do you entertain lustful or covetous thoughts? Do you look at or read filth?

God can not bless us, no matter how gifted, or how doctrinally true or eloquent, if we are speaking from disobedient lips! The "Other Witness"— God's Holy Spirit— is ready and waiting to work with us to carry forward the work of Christ in our homes, in our neighborhoods— through the work of this church! He is more loving, more powerful, more capable than we will ever be. But that "Other Witness" will only come where we are willing to OBEY GOD!

Good News in Strange Places

July 24, 2001

(adapted from December 13, 1998)

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 11:1-6

NOTE: *This is an outline of what I'm working on for Sunday. I'll send you the sermon with a story in the front by another e-mail BUT I don't think the story can be told in translation (??) But THIS is the outline in full: -- Russell*

"And the poor have the gospel preached to them . . ." Matthew 11:5

John the Baptist was a great man. Jesus makes that plain in this story in Matthew's gospel. But even as great as he was, when he was in prison, facing death, he wanted to hear some good news about the Savior he had put his trust in.

"Why didn't Jesus get me out of this?" he may have wondered. At any rate he sent his disciples to say, "Am I mistaken?" And Jesus sent them back saying, "Just tell John what is happening here, and tell him to hold steady!"

(I will tell a story about rich kids and poor kids that I don't think would translate too well to begin the next section of the message)

It is very easy to let our circumstances, our feelings, determine our spiritual faith. It is all too easy to let the worldly culture determine who is right and who is wrong. John is "wrong" because he is in prison; some rich person is "right" because he is a "success."

UNLESS WE ARE VERY CAREFUL OUR VALUES WILL BE LIKE THE WORLD: "HOW MUCH?" "HOW MANY?" "HOW BIG?" EVEN IN CHURCHES!

I. Christian Faith Is Very Materialistic. Nothing Wrong With That.

It matters very much how we handle money and things. Jesus is not an Idea. He is a Person. He came in a particular time at a particular place. He taught us to pray daily

for bread. He told us we ought to pay our tithes. His people share what they have with those who have less.

It is not possible to be a true Christian only in the mind and spirit. We are challenged to present our BODIES as living sacrifices to God. That means God cares what we do with things like money and possessions.

But the Christian faith introduces a different sort of reality from the one that worships money and power and things: IN JESUS' KINGDOM THINGS ARE USED, NOT LOVED. AND PEOPLE ARE LOVED, AND NEVER 'USED.'

In Jesus' kingdom the poor in spirit are blessed, and the last are first, and the lost are found, and material things become tools of the spirit. If the spirit is right we get the material things right. The spirit is everything.

II. Christian Worship Is Of The Spirit.

When we think of "rich" and "poor" we think of belongings. If we see a man who holds a lot of money or land or power, we say he is rich by this world's standards. We think if a lot of things "belong" to a person then he or she is rich.

We have heard Bible verses like "What shall it profit to gain the whole world and lose one's own soul." But still down inside we think we would be happy and rich if we had a few million, or if we had a lot of power.

Would you really like to change places with Bill Gates or Tiger Woods?

Jesus has words that 'fit' here: *And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.* (Luke 12: 15)

Things that "belong" to us can not really make us rich. What we "belong to" is what really makes us rich.

Or more precisely, Whom we belong to— to be accepted into God's house, and be a part of His family. When we really know we are in His kingdom then we dare to believe that he will make all the pieces fit. Our Master said, "Seek first the kingdom

of God and His righteousness, and then all these things will take their proper place in line." (Matthew 6:33, free translation)

We think that if circumstances could just change then we would have faith. If only we could be free from this situation then we could begin to live. If only we had more money— If only. It is human to doubt and be tempted to look to things for security. But Jesus challenges us to follow Him and says he will care for us.

Maybe that was where John was that day when he sent his friends to ask Jesus, in effect: "Have I missed it? Are you really Messiah?"

III. Christian Hope Is For Life As It Really Is Lived.

The question from Matthew's Gospel came echoing out of a prison. It was asked by the greatest prophet in the Bible: Are you really Christ? Are you the Son of God? Why am I here in prison? Aren't you supposed to change things for the better?

Jesus answered John the Baptist's question in an oblique manner. He told John's disciples to go back and tell John what they were seeing.

The lame walk. The deaf hear. The blind see. And the poor have the Good News told to them. The kingdom was already here, and just as Isaiah had prophesied, was already changing lives.

I believe in that dungeon John the Baptist's spirit was renewed and revived. His Master had answered him. From a purely human point of view things were unchanged. John lost his life to a weak and vain King Herod. But John the Baptist was rich beyond understanding, and is wealthy today in ways we can only imagine. And in this country alone today millions of Christians follow John the Baptist in telling their world about the One who came, who comes, and who is to come.

Conclusion

A prison is a strange place to hear Good News. But God's Good News is made for strange places. Wherever YOU are in your spiritual journey today, there is GOOD NEWS! YOU are not a "mission project," but you are a candidate for acceptance into God's family. God's kingdom is here! I leave you with two thoughts:

Good News in Strange Places

1. Hear the Good News for yourself! Like the rich youngsters from Atlanta you may think of the poor and imprisoned as "others." But there are prisons and 'strange places' right here with us this morning:

- There are childhood memories, memories of abuse or worse.
- There are sins that just won't go away, and keep coming back.
- There are "if only" situations of all kinds.
- Some of us face the burden of getting older.
- Some are wrestling with bereavement or depression or fear.
- There are prisons of hurt feelings, or worse: of unforgiving hatred.

We do NOT have to wait until the ideal time comes. We do not have to wait until we feel salvation to come to God and ask for grace. We come just as we are.

2. Pray that you can pass the good word along! Wherever we are we can be agents in the work of Christ. Think small! Think near at home.

(Our next door neighbors on the Cape- we had no idea - but . . .)

The blind and lame and deaf may be nearer than you think. A healing word. A prayer in the morning for filling, and then a watchful eye through the day for sharing.

Prayer:

Step-by-Step with Jesus

August 12, 2001

John Wesley United Methodist Church, Falmouth, Massachusetts

Luke 12:32-40; Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16

Introduction: (In 10:30 service this will be the children's sermon) The Hayford St. gang story ... the big kid who came alongside and saved me from a beating. A true story, but a metaphor for my walk with God. We have a God who comes alongside when we need Him.

Abraham is a BIG man in the Bible. As a matter of fact he is a big man in human history. He is known as the Father of Faith. He was a friend of God. The three great monotheistic religions of the world claim him. (I have been to his tomb-cave in Hebron, and sure enough the Jews and the Arabs as well as the Christians venerate and honor the memory of this man who walked with God.

Abraham is venerated because he DID walk with God by faith. "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going." (text) He left a civilized place, Ur of the Chaldee, to take up a nomadic life in search of his true home, the Promised Land which God would show him. His life and the struggles and growth and sacrifices he made are recorded in Genesis, chapters twelve through twenty-two, and are referred to over and over in the new Testament as well.

The walk of faith is not less frightening in our time. God calls. We hear- and then we pull back. Plenty of people are ready to tell us what we should do. How can we hear God's voice and be sure? How can we walk with God in this modern age? Do we really dare to go across the current?

What IS faith anyway? " Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen ..." (text) WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

1. Faith Is Mysterious:

one side is very SIMPLE: any child can understand. Great philosophers and gifted teachers as well as mentally retarded and little children have the privilege of coming to God through Jesus Christ, our crucified, risen Savior. (Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so was supposed to have been quoted by Karl Barth, the great theologian as the essence of our faith.)

one side is very PERSONAL: it is a response to God that no one else can make for you. Faith is not first of all a system, or even propositional truth. Faith is hearing Jesus Christ saying "Follow Me!" and responding, "Here I am! Help me follow!"

faith is A GIFT of God: Ephesians 2:8,9 "For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God lest anyone should boast."

- I hear you, God!
- I believe you!
- I want you to be my Lord and Savior!

2. Faith Is Heuristic

(I LOVE that word "heuristic". The dictionary definition of heuristic is: "Serving to discover or stimulate investigation.")

Faith ALWAYS leads us onward and upward toward HOME. The HOME of faith is God Himself! Faith is an adventure in living that takes us through life's good times and hard times on our journey home.

THIS WALK OF FAITH INHERITS THE KINGDOM "It is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom!" But the inheritance is a life-long process that extends into eternity. Nearly 4,000 years later we are still amazed at Abraham, who is very much alive and enjoying God's Presence.

In following God's call to live by faith Abraham both became very rich and very poor. He had great possessions on earth, but lived in a tent with a dirt floor. He talked with God face to face, and yet looked for a city yet to come. He made mistakes, and even

did a few foolish things, but God gave him the child of promise, Isaac. And that Isaac was given back to God. The way of faith is so mysterious, and yet so wonderful.

(A PRACTICAL CLOSING)

A PERSPECTIVE ON VALUES

A HEART FOR GOD

HOW? HOW CAN WE BE SURE WE ARE WALKING BY FAITH?

(The channel to the yacht club . . . markers lined up . . .)

1. You can trust the bible
2. You have the gifts of God's peace, his Word his name
3. You can have that Presence! The God who comes alongside.

God is Our Refuge and Strength

September, 2001

Psalm 46

Three vital words to the people of God in a time of crisis:

FEAR NOT FOR I AM WITH YOU

Text, also Isaiah 41:10 - It is all right to want comfort, to seek sanctuary, to confess we are afraid. God's people have His promise: "I AM with you!" Not one cry goes unheard. We may not know the answers- in fact we probably don't even know the proper questions. But if we will stop, and pray and listen, and wait we will find God is already HERE, waiting to be our strength, our assurance. NOTHING can separate us from His love.

RELEASE GOD'S POWER IN INTERCESSORY PRAYER

One mystery we do not appreciate is how God limits Himself in some situations according to the extent of His people's prayers. "You have not because you ask not!" In ways we can but dimly see, good and evil are engaged, and God's people can make a difference with their prayers.

Clearly the forces of darkness would stifle any serious call to turn to Almighty God. But God's people can pray that heaven's powers will be released in ways that will glorify God and turn many people's hearts to Him. We have a president who is a born again Christian and the media for the most part make him out to be a fool. Hold up his hands in prayer. Join with people of faith in confessing our nation's need of God, and in praying for spiritual awakening.

REPORT FOR PERSONAL DUTY, ONE-ON-ONE

Ask God now, today, to fill you with His Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13), not just so you will feel good, or not even so you will personally benefit (as you certainly will!), but in order that you can reflect (re-present) a God of love to your next door neighbors,

God is Our Refuge and Strength

your fellow students, your co-workers who will certainly be feeling the same fears and questions you have felt, but without the assurance that you have in Jesus.

Don't spout wisdom- don't try to be a prophet and say how this all "fits into Daniel or Revelation." Just say "God is good!" Say it with words if necessary, but ask God to help you say it with love and compassion.

Pray WITH your neighbors if the Lord opens the way.

Faith in the Presence of Fear

Words for Our Day

October, 2001

John 20:19-31; Psalm 16

The opening words of Psalm 16 are the cry, "Protect me, O Lord God, for I am trusting in you!" The Psalmist, David, is using what seems to me the language of fear. He probably had good reason to fear, for his life was often in danger.

Do you ever feel fear? Is it a sin to feel negative emotions? Is it evil to have questions or even doubts when it seems everyone else is so certain about so many things?

In the very last chapter of the last book in the Bible (Revelation 21) is a list that sometimes bothers me. It is a list of people who are not going to enter the New Jerusalem. In fact John, the writer of Revelation, says they will have part in "the second death."

Now part of that list I can understand would not fit in heaven: "the abominable, murderers, whore-mongers, sorcerers, and all liars" is how the list ends. But the part that bothers me is how the list begins. The list of those who miss heaven begins: "But the fearful and the unbelieving... will have their place in the lake of fire." What does this mean? Sometimes I feel like the Cowardly Lion, and I admit there are a lot of questions I cannot honestly answer.

Can the feeling of FEAR keep me out of heaven? [Before I go any farther, let me say I believe the answer is NO FEELING will keep you or me out of heaven. Feelings are emotions— feelings are results, not causes— and God is not seeking reasons to exclude, but to INCLUDE. He is not willing that ANY should perish. In the Gospel Thomas is afraid to believe and Jesus comes to him— in the Psalm David is afraid, and he cries out "O God help me!"] No the feeling will not exclude you.

Still, there IS a fear that can keep us from taking hold of the gift of LIFE. And there is an unbelief that is not of the mind but of the heart that says, "I will not submit to God even when He speaks clearly to me." This passage from John helps us understand how we can dare trust the Risen Savior.

I. THE DISCIPLES WERE AFRAID TO BELIEVE HOW MUCH GOD LOVED THEM

They lived in a time and place every bit as scary as our own terror-threatened post-9/11 time. They thought: "It is too good to be true!" Jesus came and dispelled their fears somewhat— it took a while.

But Thomas wasn't there. He said, "I have to SEE for myself." He was afraid to let himself get built up just to be let down again.

Looking again to Psalm 16, David prays for God's mercy, but even as he prays he recognizes how audacious it is to talk to God. He says, "MY GOODNESS EXTENDETH NOT TO THEE." In another place (Psalm 8) David says, "WHEN I CONSIDER THE HEAVENS, WHAT IS MAN THAT YOU ARE MINDFUL OF HIM?"

Many of the theologians of our day (whether post-modern, or process, or deconstructionist, or whatever— I'm probably ten years behind in labels) seem to be saying, "You common people have no idea of how big God really is— and so you can never speak about Him with any kind of certainty!" And some of them carry it so far they are saying 'GOD'S LOVE, IF IT IS THERE, IS TOO BIG, TOO MYSTERIOUS FOR US TO KNOW AND BE SURE ABOUT.' It is almost a blocking FEAR before the mystery of God's love.

BUT THE GOD OF THE BIBLE— WHO TRULY IS BIGGER THAN WE CAN IMAGINE— HAS SPOKEN TO US IN THE LIFE AND DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF HIS SON JESUS CHRIST!

That message is understandable even though we can never understand WHY God should love us! That message IS: GOD LOVES YOU!

Jesus said: "Thomas, I'll help you believe! Blessed are those who have NOT seen, and still believe! FAITH WITHIN US SAYS: Jesus really DOES know and care about ME!

Even after the disciples began to grasp the fact that Jesus was alive, and that He was with them again, there was a hesitation to dare to believe what Jesus was asking them to do (commanding them, actually).

II. THE DISCIPLES COULD NOT BELIEVE WHAT GOD EXPECTED OF THEM

Jesus began outlining his assignment for the church that very night. First, he BREATHED ON THEM, and said: RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT! Be carriers of God! Be contagious with LOVE! Exude confidence that God is GOOD!

I'm sure they did not grasp it fully then— nor even fifty days later at Pentecost— but the disciples— and you and I— are to be the place where God lives on this earth. We are God's housing!

Do YOU think of yourself as a tabernacle of God? Is God welcome in YOUR body? In your relationships? is that a new thought to you? Is it a bit frightening?

God is what this frightened world needs right now! And who do you suppose God is wanting to use to meet your neighbors and mine, face-to-Face?

Jesus began assigning His disciples a role in telling the world that all their sins had been forgiven on Calvary. This is mysterious, and not easy to understand:

"Those whose sins you forgive they will be forgiven... those whose sins you don't forgive they will remain..?"

We can stop and get hung up on the translation of words here— OR we can understand that WE have a part in sharing the Good News of Salvation.

FEAR said, that night, "Lord Jesus we have all been afraid! We have all forsaken you and run away! How can WE ever accept such an assignment?"

But FAITH SAID: "YOU CAN SHOW ME HOW TO BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT! YOU CAN HELP ME SHARE THE MESSAGE OF SINS FORGIVEN!" And that is exactly what happened.

That is all well and good for the disciples... then... and for the worship times in church. But what about the everyday fears that come— AND WHAT ABOUT THE REALLY DARK PLACES IN LIFE THAT COME TO US ALL? Can fear defeat us when we face the worst life can offer? It is frightening to think there are people who hate us just because we live where we do, and believe what we believe- but in the darkness is where even little lights can shine brightly! Jesus loves YOU! He is with you and me! He says "Tell people that God loves them! God is GOOD!"

III. WE ALL FACE FEAR'S CHALLENGE IN OUR DARK HOURS OF THE SOUL

Faith's victory over fear is NOT just doctrine or theory. We cannot help at times FEELING overwhelmed— even pushed toward despair. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus Himself prayed like one who hated, even dreaded what lay out ahead. He prayed, "O MY FATHER, IF IT BE POSSIBLE, LET THIS CUP PASS FROM ME!"

In the Psalm (16) David wrote the script for the Messiah's hope even though it was 800 years or so before the time— he wrote for Jesus— and for all who follow Jesus— "THOU WILT NOT LEAVE MY SOUL IN HELL, NOR SUFFER YOUR OWN TO SEE CORRUPTION"

Our souls somehow become the battlefield of fear versus faith. For insight into that aspect of the emotions of fear and temptation to unbelief there is no better book than The Book of Job. Job loved God— and refused to believe God was anything but GOOD! He certainly did not understand what was going on. But Job said, "GOD KNOWS! I WILL TRUST HIM!" Faith went beyond what it could see, and even what it could NOT see— and reached for the hand of God.

In some of Britain's darkest hours in WW II, the people listened by their radios on New Year's Eve as their king, King George VI, gave his annual greeting to his people over BBC. It was truly a fearsome time. The very existence of their nation was at risk. And the king that night quoted words that have since become famous. He said:

"I said to the man who stands at the Gate of the Year, 'Give me light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied, 'Step into the darkness, put your hand into the hand of God, and that will be to you better than a light and safer than a known way.'"

David said, "In your Presence is joy! If I can just BE WITH YOU I will be all right!" We do not have to wait until we die and go to heaven to know God's Presence. He is near, He is with us today. If we will let Him he will live within us, and walk with us. We may not know all about Him, but we may know Him. He loves us, and his perfect love casts out fear, our own fear, and the fear that we cannot tell our frightened neighbors with assurance: "God is GOOD! God loves YOU!."

Prayer

(Hymn-Chorus, Sing to the Lord #626) *Gentle Shepherd Come and Lead Us*

No Short Cuts to Glory

October 28, 2001 - Wareham Church of the Nazarene, Massachusetts

Matthew 4

He had finally got his chance to make the Really Big Sale. He was going into the final interview on the biggest contract he had ever written. He was ushered into the office of the executive buyer. An assistant brought coffee and left. The atmosphere was cordial.

Then the assistant tapped on the door and re entered the office and spoke briefly with the executive. She stood and said, "I apologize, but I have to tend to a matter. I'll just be a minute or two." She followed her assistant out of the room.

The sales representative looked around the beautifully appointed office. He saw her family pictures on her desk. Then he noticed she had evidently been studying what looked like a contract, a bid from a competitor. Leaning forward, he saw a column of figures, but it was obscured by a diet soda can.

What harm possibly could there be in reading her private information? After all, she had left it out in plain sight. But when he lifted the can it wasn't diet soda; it was 1,000 Bbs that gushed out the bottomless can, and ran all over the desk and cascaded onto the carpet. His attempt to short cut the competition was exposed.

Not every temptation is so obvious. Not every failure is so embarrassing. But every temptation is a challenge. Not even Jesus was spared the choosing.

I. Temptation Is An Enticement To Use A Short Cut To Reach A Desirable Goal.

You want a good grade. Good grades are desirable. They open doors. They bring scholarships. The easiest way to good grades is to let someone else do your work for you. But there is no real short cut to real education.

You want intimacy and the good feelings of love and security. No one has to tell you those are good things. The easiest way to those feelings is the pathway of least

resistance. But there are no short cuts to real friendship. There is never an excuse to USE people like things, no matter what the goal may be.

You want success and influence. Within the boundaries of genuine caring those could be very worthy goals. But in our world all too often personal goals are reached at whatever the cost. But there is no short cut to real integrity.

Cheating is always wrong. Adultery and fornication are always sin.

Betrayal of confidence is always heartbreaking. Whatever the reason, remember: there are no short cuts in finding and doing God's will. It is a wonderful thing to come to believe that in God's will we don't need short cuts!

II. Adam And Eve And Short Cuts

Adam and Eve, even in their innocence thought they might be able to take a short cut to God likeness. They were tempted to believe that maybe God was holding out on them. Whatever good was coming, they wanted it NOW! A short cut. The Tempter said, "Did God really say that?" Then he pursued that seed of doubt with philosophical denial. "You won't really die! God has it wrong! You can't really trust Him. He wants a monopoly on Truth!"

But they did die! Their innocence was gone. They were dead in trespasses and sin. And they were expelled from a garden into a wilderness. Their short cut was a tragedy.

In the classic Pilgrim's Progress, Christian and his new companion Hopeful fell in with a smooth talking man named By end, from the town of Fair speech. To hear By end talk the Christian journey required no effort at all. As his name suggests, he took the position that the end always justifies any short cut necessary, just so long as the rugged way of obedience could be avoided.

Just then Christian and Hopeful came alongside a beautiful meadow. There was a fence marking the pathway, but there was a stile over the fence, and they could see a path running parallel to the Way on the other side of the fence. After some

discussion they crossed over to take advantage of easier going on the other side of the fence.

But soon it became less simple. Darkness fell, and it became hard to see. They tried to make their way back to the crossing, but soon they had to stay the night under a tree in the open. Then they were captured by a wicked Giant Despair, and taken to a dungeon in the Doubting castle. A pleasant short cut turned out to be a near disaster.

We never leave the clear known will of God for our lives without bringing on big trouble. The most innocent disobedience brings broken fellowship with God. And there is no such thing as a short cut to where God wants you to be. You can trust His timing.

III. Jesus In His Innocence, Was Exposed To Temptation.

Fresh from his public baptism, and with the blessing of the Father's endorsement ringing in his ears, and in the joy of the Spirit's anointing, Jesus was led into the wilderness to face the challenge to take a short cut. Haggard and drawn from fasting, he was confronted with evil, demonic, powerful, hostile suggestion. The evil enemy attacked every angle. Henri Nouwen summed up the three temptations: be (practical) relevant, be popular (go along), be powerful (seize control).

Be relevant: you have to survive! 'Make these stones into bread. You're famished. This is the real world. A dead Messiah isn't going to do anyone any good.' But Jesus' response in fact said, "No, I don't have to survive! I have to be true!"

It wasn't that Jesus wasn't hungry. It wasn't that he couldn't work a miracle later. He fed 5,000 people with a little boy's lunch. But Jesus was taking orders from no one but the Father, and especially was not about to take advice from the Evil One.

"Man does not live by bread alone," he said, "but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

Be popular: you need to communicate! 'Spiff up your act! What is this "repent stuff!?? Put on a show! Do miracles! Walk a high wire!' But Jesus was never a performer. He never did things for the effect. It wasn't that he couldn't master the

forces of nature. He walked on the sea. He calmed the storms. He raised the dead. And he died and rose again the third day.

"Don't try to put God on the spot!" was his reply.

Be powerful: you need to take charge! 'No one will see you out here in the desert as you compromise and kneel down to me. But then I'll lay off, and you can be the dictator of the world! No competition! A cross is a terrible way to go. You have to take charge of your life! Assert yourself!'

This was not a friendly debate. It was not a gentleman's duel of honor. Weak, exhausted, physically drained, Jesus was facing pure evil at its demonic worst.

Jesus, at his weakest, used the defense that is available to us all if we will just use it. (It is the 'key' that finally unlocked the dungeon of Doubting Castle, and let Christian and Hopeful out.) He did not reason with the Enemy. He reached into the Father's promises. He fled to the first Commandment. He claimed the protection that comes from utterly belonging.

He was God's Son! He affirmed his determination to worship Him only, and to live by the father's Word and way. Satan had to leave. The angels came. There in the wilderness Jesus was refreshed. Then he resumed the step by step following of the Father's will that would take him to Calvary, to Olivet, and to Glory and Salvation for you and me. There would be no short cut.

Conclusion

Temptation Is an Enticement to Use a Short Cut to Reach a Desirable Goal

Temptation is NOT sin. But yielding to temptation IS sin. And sin never, never, never makes good on its promises. There are no short cuts to truly desirable goals.

A workman went to his big boss one day and said, "I'm tired. I think I'll take my retirement benefits and hang it up. It's been great working for you."

The big boss looked disappointed, and said, "I really hate to see you go. I was hoping you could do at least one more big job for me. Will you, just one more?"

Reluctantly the builder agreed to build a house for some important client of the big boss. It was a big house, a lot of work on a golf course, with a lot of detail. But the man's heart really wasn't in it. He threw the house together in record time, and cut corners on material and labor wherever he could. He saved the boss a lot of money, but it wasn't really his best work and he knew it.

Imagine how he felt when he turned the keys over to the big boss, and the boss gave them right back, and fished around in his briefcase and gave him the title and deed to the property on the golf course.

"This is my gift for you!" he said. "Thanks for all your good work across the years!"

Then the builder wished he hadn't been in such a hurry. He wished he hadn't cut corners and taken short cuts just to get the job done.

Life is like that. Exactly like that. We become the product of our own integrity in following after God. Or lack of integrity. We become exiles from innocence when we try to take short cuts to being like God. Or, following our Savior, we use the promises and the commandments of God to resist the tempter's power, and we begin to share in Christ's righteousness.

This is just another Sunday worship service. There isn't anyone here but us. But God is here. And right now is a good time to ask God for His help in deliberately drawing closer to Him. I don't know about you, but I don't want to try to get away with building a shoddy house. I know I'm going to have to live in what I build.

Prayer

#512 Take Time to be Holy

Also preached:

- September 30, 2001 - Rumford
- September 3, 2000 - Duxbury
- August 20, 2000 - Providence
- October 31, 1999 (am) Falmouth

No Short Cuts to Glory

- September 25, 1999
- February 21, 1999

Miracle of Miracles

December 23, 2001 - Quincy Chinese Church of the Nazarene, Massachusetts

Two brief scriptures:

John 1:1-5; 10-13

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of man, but of God.

Hebrews 1:1-2a

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son ...

Christmas is the biggest miracle Christians are asked to believe. If we can believe what really happened at Christmas then all the other true miracles will take their place. But everything in the Christian faith begins with this one miracle.

That miracle is this: God has spoken our language. A Baby who could not even talk in any language, yet who is God, God's only Son, is the Word that God spoke.

This Baby who we know as Jesus came to tell us what can never fully be said in words. When I say God spoke our language I do not mean the Hebrew language, or English, which was not even dreamed of when Jesus lived on earth, nor Cantonese or Mandarin, which are ancient languages. No, when I say God spoke our language I

mean the common HUMAN language of life the way it is really lived: hopes, and fears, and families, and love.

The Word of God came to identify with us. This is what I mean by the miracle of miracles: how the God of glory was willing and able to come all the way down to where you and I live so He could know us, and we could get to know Him.

The miracle is He really became a human being, and lived the way God intended that every one of us shall be able one day to live: being able to give and to receive love, and to turn from lying and hatred and prejudice and know true fulfillment.

We think of Jesus as growing up to be a teacher, and it is true that Jesus taught with words. He said we don't just live by bread alone, but that we need every Word that comes from God. He said that He did not come to condemn the world, but to seek and save those who were lost. He said that if they would look, the people who sit in spiritual darkness could and would see a light that would lead them to God. And he dared to say that He, Jesus, IS that light.

But the Word that Jesus spoke is more than the lessons that He taught and the words He spoke, as wonderful as they are. As we read the Bible, and as we open our hearts to the Holy Spirit of God, we realize that it was in what Jesus did, and in who Jesus IS that God has spoken.

Jesus, the Word, because He is God, and because He is without fault or sin, was able to take upon Himself the burdens and sins of the whole world. The Word became flesh, our scripture says, and lived among us- and then took our sins and our sorrows with Him to the Cross, which is another aspect of this, the greatest miracle. Then the third day after his death, Jesus, the Word, arose from the dead to say "*Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives and was dead, and behold I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death.*" (Revelation 1:17-18)

Yes, the miracle is that God has spoken our language- the human language- and He has said- and is saying now: "I LOVE YOU!" The Word is a Person- and that Person is God's Son, Jesus.

A Christmas Story to Close With (I don't know where I got it) A story is told of a widowed man who was a great collector of art. He traveled around the world collecting Picasso, Van Gogh, Monet, and many, many other world class objects of art to adorn his mansion.

The man's only child grew up to be both a skilled doctor and a great art collector in his own right. The son became highly respected in both medicine and art circles.

One summer the young doctor left the mansion to go for several months on a medical mission to Central America. When he had been gone only three months a terrible hurricane swept through that country, and communication was cut off from the rest of the world.

The old art collector was anxious, and within a few days his worst fear were confirmed. He got word that his son had died while rescuing a family from a flooded river. He was very sad and lonely as he faced the upcoming Christmas holidays all alone. There would be no joy of Christmas in his house.

On Christmas morning there was a knock on the door of the old man. As he walked to the door the masterpieces that lined the walls only reminded him that his son would not be coming home. Then as he opened the door he was met by a small brown man carrying a large package.

"My name is Jorge Pascodero," the man said. "I was a friend of your son.

It was MY family your sons saved by sacrificing his life." The father invited Jorge in.

"I want to give you this," said Jorge. He placed the package in the old man's hands. Opening it carefully the father saw a great enlarged photograph of the man's only son. It was not very good as art because it was blurred and grainy. The son was holding a small child and speaking to a woman in his clinic. A stethoscope was around his neck, and he was

looking toward the camera. You could see kindness and gentleness in his hands and face. The father was deeply moved. They talked awhile and then Senor Pascodero left.

After Senor Pascodero left the father took down a million dollar Picasso over the fireplace and hung up the grainy photograph of his son. He sat in his chair and spent Christmas gazing at the gift he had been given. He realized that even though his son was no longer with him, the boy's life would live on because he had touched a lot of people with love. He found later that his son had treated literally hundreds of people in the short time he was in Central America.

Two years later the old man became ill and passed away. Because his son has been his only heir the estate would be auctioned off. The art world was really excited at the prospect of such a rich estate becoming available.

When the day of the auction sale arrived dealers from all over the world gathered to bid on the spectacular paintings. Wealthy people from Europe, North America, and Japan came. Millions were at stake.

The auction began with the photograph of the man's son. That was not a piece that was on any of the wealthy collector's "must have list."

"Who will open the bidding?" the auctioneer asked.

The room was silent. Moments passed. No one spoke. From the back of the room someone could be heard: "Who cares about a lousy photograph? It's just a picture of his son. Let's forget about it and go on to the good stuff." Voices echoed in agreement.

"No, we have to offer this first," replied the auctioneer. "Now who will take the son?" Silence. "Come now," said he auctioneer. "There must be someone who will take the son."

Finally the old man's gardener spoke. "I will. I knew the boy from the time he was born. He was a fine man. I miss him. I'd like to have it. I'll take it."

"Give it to him," cried the gallery of collectors. The auctioneer said to the gardener, "The son is yours without cost, sir." Cheers filled the room. Someone exclaimed, "Now get on with the auction! Put up a Picasso!"

The auctioneer looked at the audience and banged his gavel. He announced, "The auction is over! All the paintings in the collection will be registered as the property of the gardener."

The room was stunned! "What do you mean it's over? How can the gardener get anything? There are millions of dollars worth of art! You must explain! What's going on here?"

The auctioneer waved a sheaf of documents at the gallery and replied, "It is very simple: according to the will of the father, whoever accepts the son gets everything the father has!"

Conclusion

God has spoken by his son, spoken in OUR language. He has said, "I love YOU!" The golden text of the Bible tries to put in in words we can begin to understand: "For God so loved the world- you and me- that he gave his one and only Son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

That is the Christmas message- the Miracle of all Miracles. Deeper than the most wonderful words in Chinese, English, or any other spoken language, God is saying to you and me this Christmas: "I love you!"

Jesus and the Lost and Found Business

January 13, 2002

Emmanuel Church of the Nazarene, Wareham Massachusetts

Luke 19:10 *For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost*

(contextual background Luke 15: 1 - 10}

When people began to find fault with Jesus because he was friendly with the wrong kind of people, and even sat down and ate with them, Jesus told them some stories. He talked about what it means to be LOST!

Sometimes when I think about "LOST" I remember the true story of "Lady Be Good."

In the early years of World War II after the United States forces invaded northern Africa, crude airstrips were established on the desert, and bombing runs across the Mediterranean were begun on Axis targets in Italy. "Lady Be Good" was a Flying Fortress, B-17 bomber, that was making these long and dangerous flights. The night this plane was tragically lost the crew had made it to Italy and was returning on a radio beam from the desert air strip. When the beam would come on the Lady Be Good made certain it was on a straight line toward home. The crew never knew until it was too late that they had a strong tail wind that brought them back much sooner than expected. With no visual point of reference they simply overflowed the directional signal and kept straight on until they ran out of gas and came down in the Libyan desert more than a hundred miles south of the coast and water.

They were LOST. They simply disappeared off the face of the earth— no one knew they had overflowed their base into the heart of the desert. Their plane has been almost perfectly preserved in the dryness— the men themselves survived the emergency landing only to die of thirst in the desert with no one knowing where they might be.

The chilling moral of this story, at least to my thinking, is that people can be lost and not even know they are lost until it has ruined their lives or worse. Following rules, even good rules, and doing MY best won't save me. These men were literally "on the beam." "Lost" is being where you're not supposed to be. "Lost" is not really knowing where you belong, or how to get there. "Lost" is having no valid point of reference outside of "self." The worst kind of being lost is not having a clue that you are lost at all.

The people who criticized Jesus were lost themselves and didn't want to hear about it. They were sure and certain they knew all about right and wrong. They didn't need Jesus or anybody else to tell them anything. One thing for sure: those old Pharisees aren't the only people who ever thought they knew more than anyone else about right and wrong. Any time we think we know how to DO RELIGION apart from the love of God, apart from His Spirit, we are already on dangerous ground.

Among people who were only thinking of themselves- of how they could be saved and let the rest of the world be damned, the Lord Jesus was out of step. The Pharisees could find fault with what He said and did.

So Jesus told three fascinating stories about being "Lost and Found". These stories are a rebuke to those who simply DO RELIGION. Jesus was saying that true faith is God-centered, not self-centered. When we become simply judges instead of godly friends to the lost we are exposing the fact that WE are LOST! We are SELF-centered instead of GOD-centered! (AND IT IS TOO EASY TO BECOME SELF-CENTERED!)

Did you ever hear of the McLandress Coefficient?

The McLandress Coefficient

When I was studying pastoral care many years ago I read about the "McLandress Coefficient;" Herschel McLandress was a professor of psychiatric measurement at Harvard Medical School, and he developed a way to measure a person's degree of self-absorption. In spoken and written material he measured the use of "I," "me," and "my" and the "Coefficient" was the longest span of time a person can remain diverted from himself. Eleanor Roosevelt was supposed to have a McLandress

coefficient of two hours; John F. Kennedy's was twenty-nine minutes, and Elizabeth Taylor's was three minutes. The reason I don't make Jesus more at home at times is because I need to talk about me, when maybe he wants to talk about something else.

How is your McLandress Coefficient? How can we claim not to be LOST when everything we do and say revolves around US? Often even in our worship and praying we cannot escape this selfish way of living.

MAYBE THERE IS A LITTLE PHARISEE IN ALL OF US.

We want to get comfortable. We want to think we have discovered the best way to do church, and we don't want to have anyone tell us differently. How do we escape our "Self?" I have GOOD NEWS!

If you even WANT to have a God-centered faith, that desire is from God! Jesus, the Shepherd, the Searcher- the One who goes after the lost is not only looking for YOU - He is looking for YOU TO BE HIS HELPER IN REACHING OUT TO OTHERS!

If you even WANT to not be self-centered, you are a lot closer than you might think. The worst kind of "lost" is the one who has no idea he or she IS lost. If you have an inkling that maybe you need to find and move closer to the Eternal Point of Reference, then you can be sure that grace is already at work in your life.

I remember a story of the sea from days gone by.

A sailing vessel had become becalmed off the coast of South America and had drifted for days with not enough wind to go anywhere. Their supplies had been low when the wind had died, and now they were becoming desperate for drinking water. They prayed for rain, prayed for a wind, but all they got was scorching sunshine. Then over the horizon came a coal-burning steamship. They shouted and hoisted flags, and soon the ship turned and came toward the becalmed vessel. They shouted as soon as they could make themselves heard "Do you have any water for us?

We're dying of thirst?"

They thought they heard the reply "Let down your casks into the sea?"
They asked again— and got the same strange answer. Anyone knows that to drink sea water doesn't quench thirst and is inviting death. "Let down your casks where you are right now!"

Someone threw over a bucket on a line and hoisted it on deck, and, amazingly, it was sweet and fresh. The reason— they has drifted into the mouth of the Amazon River, which is 100 miles wide when it flows into the ocean. They had been dying of thirst with water to drink all around them.

How, do you suppose, can we return to a God-centered life? How can we put God at the center of our worship and our everyday, walking- around lives?

Could I suggest a couple of ways to begin with?

Right where we are, here today, God's grace is all around you, and waiting for you to say "I'm sorry of I've been selfish or thoughtless, please forgive me and fill me with your love and help me be like YOU!" We don't have to DO anything to bring God where we are. He is here, waiting for us to recognize Him and ask His help in putting him at the center of our lives. YOU don't have to be dry and cold in your walk with God!

If you have never made a definite decision to make Jesus Lord of your life, and give your self over to Him, you do not have to wait one hour longer!

You can let down your faith into His promises right now.

BUT TODAY I'M ALSO THINKING ABOUT EMMANUEL CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE.

YOU'RE A GOOD CHURCH! A GREAT HISTORY! YOU HAVEN'T BEEN SELF-CENTERED!
YOU'VE SENT OUT PREACHERS AND MISSIONARIES!

YOU'VE REACHED OUT. AND YOU ARE REACHING OUT INTO THIS COMMUNITY!

If YOU and YOU and YOU will ask God, and join faith, and determine not to be small and selfish in any way - YOUR VERY BEST DAYS ARE AHEAD OF YOU!

(A new pastor arrives here this week. Is HE (Pastor Shaw) "the answer"? No, JESUS is the Way, but you will work with the one who is called to be your LEADER! Will some great new "program" be what will make Emmanuel great? No- of course you will need\ plans and projects!)

BUT "THE ANSWER" IS: WE HAVE A SEEKING GOD! AND HE WANTS US TO JOIN WITH HIM IN LOVING THE LOST AND INTRODUCING THEM TO HIM!

And do you know, there are people not far from where we are right now who are drying up in spirit, and dying of spiritual thirst with the provisions of God all around them. We don't have to DO anything to bring God where they are. If He is in us, He will use us to help HIM find the lost!

(Exhortation)

If our faith, or church, our religion is a burden, when our so-called "salvation" consists of what WE DO, of how good WE are, we are like the Pharisees that day a long time ago that watched Jesus and criticized Him, to whom he told these stories.

It doesn't have to be that way! God is seeking every one of us— to bring us to Himself— to give us His Spirit— to make us his own.

Pray with me:

Lord Jesus— I turn my life over to You. I don't want to be the center— I want YOU to be Lord. Forgive my self-centeredness. Forgive my trying to DO salvation. Help me to BE Your own dear child. I ask this according to Your own great promises. Amen.

Sing with me: *Just a Closer Walk with Thee*

God is Good God Loves You

Trinity Sunday

May 26, 2002 - Community Chapel, Nashua, New Hampshire

Psalm 8; Matthew 28:18-20 "*Baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*"

When Trinity Sunday rolls around it gives a good occasion for ministers to make fools of themselves. When we get to thinking we can explain the great mystery of the Triune God. I think of the little boy in kindergarten wearing his father's old white shirt for a paint smock, busy daubing paint on a newsprint easel.

"What are you painting?" his teacher asks him.

"I'm painting a picture of God!" is his humble answer.

"But no one knows what God looks like," says the teacher.

"They will when I get done with this picture!" says the confident kindergartner.

Maybe we aren't quite as naive when we tell people about God. Still, it is all too easy to get comfortable with a God who we think we "understand", but any God we could comprehend is absolutely too small.

It is good to have a Sunday when we think about how absolutely unspeakably wonderful is our great God. We shut ourselves off from unspeakable wonder and grace when we think we have arrived at any stage of our journey into the wonder of knowing God.

Make no mistake about it- I believe we know God! But then I remember Reuben. Once I heard him say, "I know Jesus!" But then he went on to say, "But sometimes, I feel like I hardly know Him at all!"

I. A HIGH VIEW OF GOD IS ESSENTIAL TO TRUE SELF DISCOVERY

What we think of God- how we relate to Him- the quality of our heart's worship will determine the measure of our soul here and our soul satisfaction in eternity.

People are lost until they get a glimpse of the glory of God, and then begin to realize that we are made for that glory!

II. THE BIBLE REVEALS A GOD OF MYSTERY, MAJESTY, AND MERCY

Mystery! But mystery which has revealed enough of itself to let us know that at its essence it is GOOD, and that it LOVES us! Mystery that defies comprehensive analysis, and yet is more real than the four dimensions we experience with our five senses. The mystery of God is not irrational or illogical. It simply goes past the highest and the best we can see. Faith is always heuristic. I feel sorry for those who have explained every dimension of their salvation.

- **Mystery!** I remember sitting in church on a Sunday morning hearing the good pastor say how God told someone (it was Moses) that his name is I AM THAT I AM. Even as a little kid I thought that was strange, a strange name. But in more than sixty years since, I have yet to get to the bottom of that name. Our God is the great I AM!

Mystery! We begin to discover who WE are as we learn to relate to the true Reality, the great I AM.

- **Majesty!** Authority to go along with the glory! True dignity and worth! The Risen Savior is the glimpse we have into the life we will share with God; a life that has already begun if we will only begin to recognize it.

I'm an incurable romantic. I love a parade. I have been deeply moved in some of the great cathedrals people built 1,000 years ago to the glory of God. But most of man's majesty is empty. Most of our parades don't go anywhere, really.

But our God has a majesty and glory which one day all the world will see. He has the authority to go along with the pomp and circumstance.

- **Mercy!** I have tried in a few sentences to express how beyond our comprehension God is great. But maybe the most difficult part of thinking of the Trinity is the fact that God is not only great and good, but that this Universe-filling God knows me and loves me. He knows YOU, too. God knows us, and not just how we are here on Sunday, but every good and bad thing we've ever done. And yet I say with deep conviction: GOD, THIS GREAT GOD, LOVES YOU!

Not 'God will love you if you jump through some hoops' or 'God will love you when you get your act together.' God loves YOU just as you are, right now!

He may not love all the ways we come short. He cannot love rebellion and willful sin. But still his mercy is there.

III. HOW DO WE BEST DRAW NEAR TO THIS GREAT GOD?

We don't- at least we don't find God. He already is close to us; He finds US!

SOMETIMES WHEN GOD IS TALKING, SO AM I! MAYBE I NEED TO LEARN TO LISTEN!

We need to learn to listen. In his great love this Mysterious, Majestic, Merciful God has already made overtures to every one of us. Because he has first loved us, we are enabled by grace to respond to HIM.

CLOSING STORY:

A professor at a great university began a key course with a lecture in which he brought out a large jar and set it on the lab table at the front of the lecture hall. He reached under the desk and pulled out several large rocks that just barely fit through the mouth of the jar and placed them together until they filled the jar.

"Is the jar full?" he asked. "How many think so?"

A few raised their hands. The rest didn't know where he was going, so they waited. The professor then got out a dish of smaller stones and he dropped them in and shook the jar until the empty spaces around the

larger rocks were pretty much filled. "Is the jar full now?" he asked. "Do you think so now?"

A couple more raised their hands, but the rest thought there might be a trick so they waited.

Out came a few cans of dry white sand. In a little while with some help from a couple on the front row the professor had filled in every crevice, and the stones were pretty much hidden. "How about now?" asked the prof. "Is it full?"

The students were pretty sure this was it. But before they could answer the prof reached for the hose at the sink and began to fill the jar filled with rocks and sand with water. "Is it full now?"

Now they weren't sure. But the prof said, "I could get some more stuff in chemically, but that will do. It is pretty full now. So- what have you learned from this exercise? "

Thoughts of how to cram the very most facts in the least time into their limited heads passed through their thinking. How to be the most economical of space and time. But the professor surprised them all when he told them:

"You have to put the big rocks in first!" Conclusion

You cannot simply add God in to your ideas and plans. Believe me, He is FOR you! But He has to come in on the ground floor!! We cannot CASUALLY enter into intimate relations with this great I AM THAT I AM.

We CAN know Him! We can become friends with HIM. We can learn to talk with Him and know His loving responses. GOD IS GOOD! GOD LOVES YOU! Prayer:

The Assurance of Salvation

GOD IS GOOD! GOD LOVES YOU!

June 2, 2002 - Community Chapel, Nashua, New Hampshire

Matthew 7:21-29

One thing that marked the beginnings of the Methodist revival in England, and later here in America, was the message that WE CAN BE SAVED, and that WE CAN KNOW THAT WE ARE SAVED. 250 years later I wonder how important we think that certainty is? 'Everyone' knows what it means to be saved. Do YOU know that YOU are saved? HOW do you know?

Sometimes people put the bar way too low. They say, "Oh, God is too good and merciful to ever send anyone to hell!" And so they adopt a tacit universalism. Others say "Except you dot your 'i' and cross your 't' exactly as WE do, you will be damned!" They show the world an unholy exclusionism.

The Bible makes it plain that God is interested in saving everyone. IT IS HARDER TO BE DAMNED THAN SOME PEOPLE MAY THINK. The Bible says, "Whosoever will may come!" The Bible says, "If you confess with your mouth and believe with your heart you shall be SAVED!" (Romans 10:9-10) I believe that!

As we come to the table of the Lord today to celebrate our salvation I would lift out three figures of salvation that the scriptures use to help us in our assurance.

1. One is the figure of the Ark of safety; the story of Noah.
2. A second is the figure of a journey; the Savior's call that echoes down the centuries: "Come! Take up your cross! Follow Me!" wherever it takes us.
3. A third paradigm is salvation as a HOME that is built or being built on a solid Rock.

I. SALVATION AS AN ARK OF SAFETY

This is the lesson of Noah. An evil generation is doomed. Only a few are saved. Salvation is entering into an Ark where God Himself shuts the door. Either you are

"IN" the Ark, or you are "OUT."

There are a few problems making this figure stand for all that salvation means. It is a "static" salvation; it is salvation, as it were, in a "box." I do believe salvation is freely offered to all. Entering is not hard (Romans 10:9,10 !) But is that all there is, really, to this life in Christ?

Also- who built the Ark? GOD didn't build it! He gave the plans to Noah, but God didn't drive a nail or saw a board. Maybe, just maybe, the ARK is the figure of the TRUE CHURCH- the Body of Christ. Jesus IS building His church with the help of His Body here on earth!

II. SALVATION AS A JOURNEY WITH JESUS

"If anyone would come after Me, let him . . . follow Me!" Here is a call to leave all and follow Jesus. Our Reformed and Calvinist brothers and sisters (and they ARE brothers and sisters!!) think we are preaching salvation by "works" here, perhaps. But I am more interested in getting right what Jesus said than in interpretations of static and passive salvation.

The journey can get rough. The going can get hard. Storms WILL come. You can count on it. Abraham will be asked whether he loves God or Isaac more. And so will every one of us. But when we cry to the Lord in the storm, you can be sure HE HEARS EVERY CRY!

As we come to the Table this morning, WHEREVER YOU ARE ON YOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY, CRY OUT TO JESUS! He hears every cry! You can be assured that He is with you. This is not a static, dead thing: it is DYNAMIC, ON-GOING TRUST!

III. SALVATION AS A HOME (BEING) BUILT ON A ROCK

Matthew 7:21-29

Jesus didn't preach CHEAP grace. Salvation IS free. But Jesus made it clear (as He closed the Sermon on the Mount) that our lives would be consistent with our confession of faith. We are NOT saved by "being good."

By the same token we are NOT damned and cut off when we stumble and sin unless we rebel and continue in rebellion.

But we ARE saved finally and eternally as we trust Jesus enough to build a life day-by-day in obedience and trust whether we feel like it or not.

A workman went to his big boss one day and said, "I'm tired. I think I'll hang it up—take my retirement benefits and get in a hammock. It's been great working for you."

The big boss looked disappointed, and he said, "I really hate to see you go. I was hoping you could do at least one more big job for me. Will you, just one more?"

Reluctantly the builder agreed to build a house for some important client of the big boss. It was a big house, a lot of work, on a golf course, with a lot of detail.

But the workman's heart wasn't really in it. He threw the house together in record time, and cut corners on material and workmanship whenever he could. He saved the boss a lot of money, but it wasn't really his best work, and he knew it.

Imagine how he felt when he turned the keys over to the big boss, and the boss gave them right back; he fished around in his briefcase and gave him the title and deed to the property on the golf course.

"This is my gift for you," he said. "Thanks for all your good work across the years!"

Then the builder wished he hadn't been in such a hurry. He wished he hadn't cut corners and taken short cuts just to get the job done.

Life is like that. Maybe our assurance of salvation is like that, too. We become the product of our own integrity in following after God. Or our lack of integrity. We become exiles from assurance when we cut corners in our walk with God.

IV. AN INVITATION TO THE TABLE OF THE LORD

We can be saved! And we can KNOW that we are saved!

The Assurance of Salvation

Do YOU know you are saved just now? Are you clear in your heart between yourself and God? Between your heart and your brother or sister? HOW do you know you are right?

- I invite you into the ARK of safety! You are welcome!
- I invite you on a life-journey with Jesus Himself! "Whosoever will may come!"
- I invite you to hear the words of Jesus- and take them seriously enough to BUILD YOUR LIFE ON THE SOLID ROCK!

GOD IS HERE! Right NOW is a good time to ask God to help you draw closer to Him! I don't know about you but I don't want to try to get away with building a "shoddy house" because I know I'm going to have to live in what I build!

***WHAT THIS TABLE IS:**

Memorial, Promise, best of all PRESENCE!

***WHO MAY COME?**

You who truly REPENT! What about "back-sliders" "never-been-saved" ??? IF you believe Jesus died for YOU - and IF you WANT to trust Him- YOU COME!

***PRAYER**

make this a true sacrament - make us able to receive YOU - The Lord's Prayer -

****WORDS**

Jesus BROKE the bread- he TOOK the cup- This is my BODY, BLOOD

BENEDICTION

The Risk Takers

June 9, 2002 - Community Chapel, Nashua, New Hampshire

Genesis 12:1-9; Matthew 9:9-13

- A. Once upon a time there was a good man. He had a good family. He had good connections. He was living in a reasonably comfortable manner. He was abreast of the latest technology.

His life was not in crisis. But deep in his heart there was a nagging uncertainty, the question he could not quite put into words. But the question was shaped something like this:

IS THIS ALL THERE IS TO LIFE?

- B. Then one day this good man became aware that Almighty God was talking to him. Just how this awareness came about I cannot tell you. But plain as day, God was saying, "Well as a matter of fact, NO!, this ISN'T all there is to life! And if you are willing and obedient, I will show you exactly what your heart is seeking!"
- C. That day Abraham had a decision to make. He had to decide what was absolutely the most important thing in his life. The way the story goes, God said, "I want you to LEAVE . . . your country, your people, your father's relatives, and above all, I want you to LEAVE your right to try to tell ME what is right and wrong!"
- "I want you to come and walk with Me. And if you do, I promise you I'll bless you beyond anything you can imagine!"

[Right here I want to ask some audacious questions:]

SOME QUESTIONS

1. Does God still call people like He did Abraham? (Does he still promise He can give people exactly what their hearts are seeking?)
2. How can we expect to HEAR God if He wants to speak with us?
3. How can a person respond to God in 2002?

QUESTION NUMBER ONE: DOES GOD CALL?

1. My "professional" answer- my "message" is YES! YES! You would expect a Christian minister to say God calls people. But I am convinced that God calling people is the basic theme of the Bible: "Adam! Where are you?" "Noah!" "Moses!" The EXODUS- right down to Matthew- the Bible's message is:

DARE TO LEAVE THE SELFISH WAYS OF THE GODLESS (Psalm 1) AND STEP OUT ON A JOURNEY OF FAITH WITH ME!

2. I believe my "message" but I want you to know MY PERSONAL ANSWER IS ALSO 'YES! YES! YES!' When I was living selfishly, and out of fellowship with God I am certain that God spoke to ME! Both by LOVE and by FEAR he showed me I needed what only He could give me.

QUESTION NUMBER TWO: HOW MAY WE EXPECT TO HEAR GOD?

1. We have to listen. God can't teach us anything when we think we already know the answer. God can't talk to us if we are ourselves talking.
2. To hear God speak there has to be some element of faith. Of TRUST! We have to come to the point where we say: if I know it is YOU, I will OBEY You! Our human relations have taught us to be careful- to not believe everything we're told; all well and good. But Abraham stepped out with God NOT KNOWING WHERE GOD WAS LEADING- ONLY KNOWING IT WAS GOD THAT WAS DOING THE LEADING.
3. The "common sense" thing would seem to be to say, "Now God, let me see what you have in mind and then I'll say yes or no." But the attitude has to be instead: "God, if we know it is YOU, then we say "Yes!" already!" THAT is an attitude to which God will respond!
4. To hear God speak sometimes we have to go against the current of what is accepted as Christian by many evangelicals. We have to take SELF off the throne, and forget about a Gospel that is JUST interested in SELF-fulfillment. God's way WILL deliver exactly what we are designed for- we are MADE for God, BUT HAPPINESS OR DELIVERANCE OR BECOMING FULLY HUMAN are not the GOALS we seek- they are the BY-

PRODUCTS OF WALKING WITH GOD! There is no greater call than to be a friend of God: that's where Abraham was headed!

5. These interim days are good days for Nashua Community Chapel to be LISTENING! If you LISTEN, if you ASK! If you cry out to God you will find that God has something vital to say.

QUESTION THREE; HOW MAY WE RESPOND WHEN WE HEAR GOD?

1. We have to CHOOSE! We have to decide how important God is to us! Most people seem to want to "add God" into their schedule- and nothing much really happens. But God honors those who step out in faith like Abraham did, who say "I will absolutely obey God when He speaks to me!" ("I'll say YES, LORD, YES!- Earl Lee)
2. Some time ago I opened my Bible to read and get ready to pray. The passage was I Kings 3, and I got as far as verse five (5) where God asks Solomon, who has just been newly crowned king, "Ask Me whatever you want Me to give you!"

I stopped and I thought. Honestly now, what one thing would I ask of God if I knew he would grant me that one thing, and I did not know if he would grant me anything else. WHAT ONE THING IS MOST IMPORTANT TO ME?

First I thought, "Lord, YOU tell me! YOU decide for me!" That sounds very pious, but somehow it didn't let me off the hook. I felt prodded. No- what really IS the most important thing?

I was pleased that I didn't think of big bucks, or a palatial retirement home or material things- at least not "up front." After some reflection I realized that I wanted those things but they were somewhere "way down the list."

I confess I did think of not wanting to come down to old age and find myself helpless, a burden to others. I thought what a pleasure it is to be able to preach and write and teach for years to come. But do you know what I finally decided was most important?

When I was about six years old- this passage from Kings brought back a memory I hadn't thought of for a long time- when I was about six, a little

boy evangelist singer traveling almost year round- a store owner- I can still dimly see the store in memory- a sort of hardware or Western Auto-type store with wide aisles- anyway the store owner took us, Mother, dad and me to this store after church one night. He opened the store, turned on the lights, and said to me- maybe six years old- "Now Sonny, you can have any one thing in this store that you want! Whatever you want- you can have one thing!"

I walked up and down the aisles. I looked at bicycles and lawn mowers and garden furniture and clocks and house supplies and car radios, items big and small, expensive and relatively cheap. I never would have such an opportunity again.

I was totally unaware of values, or of what my mother or father might need. This is a true story: I picked up a little wind-up toy, a painted tin car, made in Japan, worth less than a dollar in 1937. I'm not even sure why I remember so well, except I think my father was disappointed I didn't at least pick a bicycle or a scooter. But as I recall I was thinking a big thing wouldn't fit into the car anyway. I could have had any one thing up to many, many times the value of the thing I chose. But that was that. And what would you expect from a six-year-old?

Do you know what I decided was most important?

If we answer God's CALL in any lesser degree than saying from our hearts "**I WANT TO BE WHERE YOU ARE!** I WANT TO WALK WITH YOU!" then we are like that six-year-old boy in the hardware store. WE WALK OUT WITH STUFF WHEN GOD WANTS US TO HAVE IT ALL!

CLOSING

The Gospel story- the call of Matthew- different century- different circumstances- same God, same call: "Is this all there is to LIFE?" "NO! Come, follow ME!" And Matthew simply got up and followed Jesus!

Once there was a good woman. Her name was Esther. She was in church every Sunday. She was a good church member. But somehow she wasn't satisfied. She had that unspoken question: IS THIS ALL THERE IS TO LIFE?

Honestly I don't know exactly how she heard God say, "No! This ISN'T all there is!" I was her pastor- and her friend. But Esther seemed to say, "All right, Lord!" and as she followed God some rather amazing things happened.

[notes on telephone poles ... meals in front of city hall... Quincy Crisis Center... Mary Martha Learning Center, Hingham... \$800,000 annual budget by the time she died (I was with her and her family then)... on-going QCC in her name: Esther Sanger, the 'Mother Teresa of the South Shore'.]

I'm no Esther Sanger, or Matthew, or Abraham. Neither are you. But the faith we follow is more than simply words and rules and little prayers we pray. Until we are walking with God we are missing what God wants us to be even if we are as rich as Bill Gates! And if we ARE really seeking to walk with God we will have everything we need even if we are shipwrecked or in prison or going through a family trauma or whatever!

Thomas Kelly wrote, in a wonderful little book called "A Testament of Devotion": (About God's Way, Thomas Kelly says:) "Its joys are ravishing, its peace profound, its humility the deepest, its power world shaking, its love enveloping, its simplicity that of a trusting child! It is the LIFE and POWER of Jesus of Nazareth.

And Jesus is calling YOU: DO YOU DARE COME WALK WITH ME?

Options before/with **PRAYER**

#484 - **A Covenant Prayer** (from John Wesley's Covenant Service)

A Capella Chorus "*In My Life, Lord, Be Glorified*" ("Your Church")

What Price Peace

GOD IS GOOD! GOD LOVES YOU!

June 23, 2002 - Community Chapel, Nashua, New Hampshire

Background lesson: Genesis 21 (story of Hagar, etc.)

(Galatians 4:6-9;22-24;28-31)

Text: Matthew 10:34-39 (38-39 Paraphrased:) *If you do not take up your cross and follow after me you are not worthy of me. If you grasp selfishly after life you will lose it; if you lose your life for my sake you will find it.*

The words of Jesus here in Matthew 10 seem somehow different from what we expect to hear from him. They do not seem to be the mission of his life; isn't he the prince of peace? Here he is saying, "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword! The members of one's own household will be divided!"

What can this mean?

Certainly it does NOT mean that Jesus does not bring peace to those who seek him as Lord and Savior. What Jesus is saying is that following him will not be easy. When we start out to follow Jesus and do God's will, count on it, we will be opposed.

THERE ARE MANY EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

Surely many people will say right off: the devil will oppose those who seek to follow Jesus. It is true, there is evil in this world that hates God and seeks to fight God through discouraging his people.

There are people in this world that hate religion, who ridicule and oppose and would persecute where they can. More people have been martyred in the last hundred years for their faith than any other century in history!

There are (even) Christians who let us down, who may betray our confidence— who may turn back. All these external challenges are serious, and real, and can cause pain. But they are to be expected— and by God's grace they can be overcome.

MUCH HARDER TO FACE ARE THE CHALLENGES CLOSER TO HOME

A divided home is always a challenge to faith. When people we love and are bound to by ties of blood and ties of covenant do not share our faith, we have challenges that are harder to face than external challenges. People who love us and whom we love have the power to hurt us the most! Jesus never asks us to "hate" loved ones. That is not what this language means.

A divided home may cause us to have to change course— but we can still seek to follow Jesus, and we can show those closest to us His Spirit of love.

Sometimes that may have to be very tough love. Only the Spirit can give us wisdom to know how to carry forward. Still, the hardest challenge of all is not a divided HOME— but

A DIVIDED HEART IS THE HARDEST CHALLENGE OF ALL!

There is something inside every human being- until it is dealt with scripturally- something that is not willing to trust God and simply obey Him.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO HAVE VICTORY OVER A DIVIDED HEART?

Here is where the ancient story of Abraham 'connects' with us where we are, even in the dawning of the 21st century! I love Abraham because his story is your story and my story— the story of everyone who has ever tried to leave old ways and start following God's will. The New Testament writers used Abraham over and over as a living allegory of the Pilgrim's Progress. It FITS!

Abraham on his pilgrimage of faith faced this opposition Jesus was talking about. He faced external opposition. He struggled in Egypt with enemies of faith— and finally overcame. He struggled with his nephew Lot and was generous and prayerful and he overcame. But the very hardest thing Abraham ever had to do was settling the division in his own heart and mind.

The heart of Abraham's struggle was his love; love for his God, for his sons, for his own ambition.

Maybe you know the story of Abraham and Isaac. That is the famous story. But Abraham had TWO sons. Ishmael was the son of Abraham's own self-assertion. Ishmael represented Abraham's own answer to God's promises. When God finally gave Abraham and Sarah the son of His own promise, Isaac, the other son, the older son— Ishmael began to bully and struggle and compete with Isaac. The conflict really began— Ishmael was strong and older— he bullied Isaac.

This becomes a painful story. Abraham and Sarah sent Hagar and Ishmael away— a cruel thing to do in our 21st century perspective. A very hard thing to do back then. This hard thing represents to us that whatever it costs us, we need to make sure that we do not tolerate a divided heart! We need God's help to help us put away our precious efforts to be righteous on our own— and to simply obey and trust Him. In Galatians 4 the Apostle Paul tells us clearly that our life in Christ is like the gift of a son of promise to Abraham:

(Listen to these verses:)

(Galatians 4:6-9) Because you are God's children, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out "Abba, father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has also made you an heir. Formerly when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God— or rather are known by God— how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable things of the world? Do you want to be enslaved by them again? (21-24) Tell me, you that want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was the result of a promise. These things are an allegory, for the women represent two covenants. (28-31) Now brothers, you, like Isaac, are children of promise; at that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does the scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son,

for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son. Therefore brothers (and sisters) we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.

Jesus said the opposition will come. But Jesus also tells us how to find victory and peace. In Abraham's story we know what he had to do. He sent Hagar and Ishmael off into the desert so Isaac could grow up as the child of promise. "Cast out the bond woman and her son!" But in our day and age, what in the world does this mean? How can we end the conflict of a divided heart?

Jesus calls this ending of INNER conflict "taking up our cross." It is a decision to follow Jesus, and make him master over even our own will and desires. Then it is a carrying through with His help, day by day. It is the sincere decision of our heart in covenant to Him: NOT MY WILL, BUT YOURS BE DONE! (Remember #484 in our hymnal! Wesley's Covenant)

Jesus is NOT telling us to be hateful to our parents, or to those in our households that oppose. He IS saying, "Follow ME, whatever it costs!"

Whatever it takes to make an end of our own division— to end that thing within that says, "I will not let anyone, even GOD, tell me what do!"— whatever it takes, we can and must do it! Our own will can be submitted forever to God's will, and we can know peace and freedom on the inside. The external challenges will be with us until we die.

This surrender— this "casting out our own self-assertion"- does not have to be dramatic and emotional. Whatever it may take, by a deliberate surrender, saying to God that AT ANY COST He can have us for time and eternity— our hearts will be opened to the Spirit in a new and fresh way that can and will set us free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:1,2)

There is an eternal "YES!" that can be said to God's will that changes forever how we approach the future. We have many little "yeses" that will follow. But the great decision can and must be made!

Does it mean an end to temptation? No— of course not. Does it mean we can never fall into sin? No— I wish it did mean that.. but we are still free moral agents. But if

with all your heart you ask God for the grace to cast out the self-seeking, self-righteous way— God will meet you in a new fresh way with His Spirit.

When we get to heaven surely we will be free from the tyranny of sin. But to be free here and now-is that possible?

English pastor Spurgeon used an illustration of a wealthy American woman who brought her "servant" aboard a British ship anchored off the port in which she lived. (Servant = slave!) The rich lady made the observation that if she sailed to Britain, and the servant went ashore on British soil, she would be "free." But the captain said, "She was a free woman the moment she walked on this deck!" And the black woman refused to go ashore with the woman that had been her mistress. She sailed to England a free woman!

When we step aboard with Jesus, under HIS flag- the cross- we are free to live for HIM! The struggle is not for us to try to be free- to be holy. No, the struggle is to BELONG, wholly, without reservation to Jesus. What belongs to HIM is holy! He will see to it that we are free!

This is what we call "Sanctification! Entire sanctification" — entire— because it holds nothing back!

But it is not finished, ever! it is a total surrender of self—

PLUS asking for all God's fullness! Have YOU surrendered your SELF for time and eternity?

Prayer

#33

Three Ways to Worship

July 7, 2002 - Community Chapel, Nashua, New Hampshire

John 4:4-26

She lived on a dead end street. I don't mean one of those nice cul-de-sac dead end streets where kids can play in safety. I mean dead end like the end of the line. Like no-where. Like no hope.

She had been married and divorced five times. She was living with a man she hadn't bothered to get married to. Whatever the reasons, her fault or not, this is the story of a tragic life.

This is also a great, great story. It is a wonderful chapter in John's Gospel. This is the longest conversation ever recorded of Jesus one-on-one with an individual, and he said some tremendous, life-changing, deep, profound things. He said them to ONE person. That person was a Samaritan. Samaritans and Jews did not ordinarily speak. She was a woman. Jewish men did not speak to women that they did not know.

But Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman on her dead end street, and something like joy was kindled down deep in her heart. Something like hope began to bubble up. Faith was born. She had met Messiah, and her life was changed forever. And so was an entire village.

That part of the story- how Jesus changed a dead end street into a highway of hope- is wonderful and could be a lifetime of study in and of itself. Wherever we are on our spiritual journey Jesus is not very far away and he has hope for you.

But just now I want to lift out a little comment that Jesus made to this lady when it seemed as though she was dodging the line of questioning he had started. After asking for a drink, and then telling her he had living water, Jesus told her to go call her husband. When she said she didn't have a husband Jesus said, "That's the truth- you don't have ONE- you have had FIVE- and the one you're living with now ISN'T..."

Three Ways to Worship

So our dead end street lady said, sort of out of the blue: '**WHAT IS THE PROPER WAY TO WORSHIP?**'

"We Samaritans worship under these mountain peaks- You Jews say we need to come to Jerusalem. WHO IS RIGHT?" [And we think the 'worship wars' are something new!]

Jesus surprised her. He said, "Well, there are three ways to worship. Three ways that sincere people try to connect with Almighty God."

He said, "You Samaritans worship what you do not understand" (THAT'S ONE) We Jews worship what we DO know. We have Torah. We have David's Psalms. We have the Prophets. God has given us scripture. Informed worship. We KNOW what we worship. (THAT'S TWO)

But then Jesus went on to add "There is a third and better way for us all to come to the Father. The time is coming, and as a matter of fact, it has now come, when true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and in Truth. (THAT'S THREE)

THREE WAYS TO WORSHIP! Look at them again with me. This lesson isn't in the Bible just to be read as history. Jesus outlines how people worship God to this very day! This is deep. This is profound. But you know, even I can begin to understand it! To this day there is **UNINFORMED, OR IGNORANT WORSHIP**.

Good, sincere, even sacrificing people who do religious things, and if you ask them why they couldn't give a good reason. "My mother always did it this way." "All good Nazarene (read Catholic, Baptist, Irish, left-handed people) have always done it this way. To this day there is **INFORMED, INTELLIGENT WORSHIP BASED ON BIBLE REVELATION**.

"God said it, I believe it, that settles it!" "Don't you know what the Good Book says? Thou shalt! Thou shalt not!"

Believe me, this is miles better than no reason at all. If people only lived by the Book we could save a lot of money on jails and store security people. But God is still

looking for a higher form of worship. [I'm not talking worship STYLE here- not "high church/low church/ contemporary/traditional"-not at all!]

To this day GOD IS LOOKING FOR VITAL, **SPIRITUAL WORSHIP THAT COMES FROM A LIVING, BREATHING RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD**. This is a little harder to describe, maybe. But something like, well, you know God spoke to me one day. (Really?) Yes, He told me I was lost but that He loved me. He forgave my sins. He walks with me day by day. I actually LOVE God! I honestly believe he loves even ME! Right now! Wow!" THREE WAYS TO WORSHIP - How do YOU worship? Would you believe that in every church, to this very day, there are all three ways represented?

- ARE THERE IGNORANT WORSHIPERS HERE? (Hint- "ignorant" doesn't mean stupid) Not in OUR church, surely! How about the children? They don't know the scriptures yet but they can and do worship. They can and do get introduced to God. "Jesus loves me, this I know!"
- ARE THERE INTELLIGENT WORSHIPERS HERE? Informed, by-the-Book Christians? That is the way I was raised. It isn't bad- it is good! BUT, informed needs to move on to "spiritual" or it can and will become LEGALISTIC. Some of the meanest, nastiest people you will ever meet know the scripture inside and out and can beat you to death with it if you don't watch out.
- ARE THERE SPIRITUAL WORSHIPERS HERE? I would certainly hope so. People who let God into every nook and cranny of their lives. People who actually pray between Sundays!

But how about YOU? How about ME? I'm thinking there can be a little of all three ways in me all at once!

I may do some religious things for no other reason than it has always been done that way and it certainly feels good and religious when I do it. That doesn't mean it is bad. It just means I do it because my godly mother did it, or my beloved pastor did it. She was (probably) right. But don't ask me to back it up with scripture. (Illus: Dr J. Fred Shields an the Red Sox vs. my 'conviction' about baseball)

Three Ways to Worship

I may do other things, good things, for the good reason that I know what the Bible says, and I know the rules and regulations of my church and believe they are good and right. I respect what I call "corporate conscience." That is a good reason!

But where our lives are changed and we meet with God is when that wonderful third way happens! LOVE! We see how much God loves us! We are able to at least in some small way return that love!

We begin to see God as a loving heavenly Father who loved us enough to give his Son. We begin to see Jesus as loving and caring and praying for us NOW, and not just a dim figure who lived 2,000 years ago. We respond to His Spirit and we find we are loved and able to return love. That is what Jesus was talking about that day to one Samaritan woman at the well by Sychar.

To one woman. And that one woman got so excited she left her water pot and trotted off in the heat to the village shouting, "Come and see! Messiah is here! He talks to Samaritans! He even talks to women!"

Three ways to worship- and God is always challenging us to do it on that highest level! That highest way can become a LIFESTYLE. It can celebrate a PRESENCE! Prayer - into communion (May the Mind of Christ my Savior live in . . .)

Why Jesus Came

December 15, 2002 - Community Chapel, Nashua, New Hampshire

John 10:9-11

"I have come so that YOU may have life, and might have it more abundantly"

Introduction

I am this day 72 years old. I celebrate my birthday with you. The older I get the message I speak becomes more simple. It has come down to just two words: GOD IS GOOD! And GOD LOVES YOU! Everything I say simply tries to explain those two sayings.

EVERYBODY WANTS A GOOD LIFE.

We have different thoughts on what makes life good. I have 14 grandchildren. Sometimes I think what they do for fun is more like insanity. Loud music. Video games. But then I am 72 years old, and maybe my ways are old. But all the same there ARE some things that finally all would agree make life good.

There is PEACE. There is JOY. There is LOVE.

Through the centuries men everywhere have looked for peace and love and joy. They have sought for good life in many places. Sincere wise men have discovered many deep and wise truth. But something always has seemed to be missing.

In the Bible we have the Ten Commandments of Moses, and the words of the prophets. (Thou shalt have no other gods. Thou shalt not kill. Honor your father and mother. Thou shalt not steal. And so forth.) Some people think of God's commandments as simply ways to make us more miserable, saying "No" to everything that seems like fun. Maybe like I feel sometimes about my grandchildren? But even in the commandments, God is trying to say "I love you." How can Ten Commandments that mostly say "Thou shalt not" have anything to do with "I love you!" from God?

Why Jesus Came

Let me tell you a short parable story: (The village that was cursed with land mines.)

Once in a faraway land there was a village that was cursed because an enemy had planted explosives, land mines, all around the countryside. People were being injured and even killed almost every day. They did not know what to do.

Then one night the village elder had a dream. In his dream he saw a map of his village. On that map he could see the location of every enemy land mine.

Quickly he rose up from his sleep and wrote down what he had dreamed. It was true! Now he knew where the bombs were planted. So he called his village together. He showed them the map. They were all very happy and thankful. Now they knew where NOT to go. They didn't need to be killed that way any more.

And that is something like what the Commandments of God are like. They are there to help us see where the "land mines of life" are.

But do you know what?

EVEN THE TEN COMMANDMENTS CANNOT BRING LOVE, PEACE, JOY

As true as the Ten Commandments are, or as true as all the good wisdom of wise men of the ages may be, they still cannot really bring peace and joy and love. Even with a "map" people cannot resist temptation to go away from the way of Life.

God saw that a "map" was not quite enough. The Bible is absolutely true, and it is God's holy Word. But the Bible cannot by itself bring life. So God sent One to walk with us through the minefields of life. Jesus is God's gift to each one of us who will receive Him. By his Spirit Jesus comes not only to say "God is GOOD!" but to say to each one of us "God loves YOU!" He says "I know you!" I will walk with you through the minefields of this life.

Look at these words of scripture again:

I AM THE DOOR.

Jesus, Himself, is the entrance into a way of life that is forgiveness of all our sins. That is PEACE.

He is entrance into A FELLOWSHIP OF FAITH, for all who go through this Door become FAMILY. That is JOY.

Jesus brings us into HARMONY AND FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD the Father. We have a new LIFE that is eternal. It never ends. That life is LOVE. That is what we are created for!

Jesus is more than just a DOOR, he stays on to be our GOOD SHEPHERD.

I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD

That is what Christmas is about- GOD IS GOOD! GOD LOVES YOU! To enter the door does not mean we know all the answers to life. We do not even know all the QUESTIONS. But it does mean that from now on, we do have One who will walk with us. If we stay near Him he will help us through the minefields of life. And we will know PEACE, AND JOY, AND LOVE.

Prayer:

The Hospitality of Jesus

(Outline.)

September 5, 2004 - John Wesley united Methodist Church, Falmouth,
Massachusetts

Luke 14

A leader of the Pharisees invited Jesus to dinner. It was NOT because he wanted Jesus' company for fellowship. Jesus was "watched intently." This was a fault-finding expedition.

Have you ever gotten into an awkward social situation?

But Jesus was watching them, too. There they were, jockeying for position. He also saw something, someone, they did not see. He saw a man that needed help.

He asked them, do I keep your rules, or do I heal this man on the Sabbath. (He was NOT "breaking" the Sabbath!)

I. JESUS EXPOSED THE INSINCERITY OF SOCIAL CONNECTIONS BUILT ON APPEARANCE RATHER THAN SUBSTANCE

When people say what they think other people want to hear . . .when they don't dare to be who they really are . . . they are NOT reflecting the simple love of Jesus! God's people seek to speak the truth in love.

II. JESUS SHOWED THAT HOSPITALITY IS A HANDS-ON ATTITUDE, RATHER THAN A "LONG-DISTANCE" IDEA

Hospitality is having room in our heart for another.

WHAT GOES ON INSIDE A CHURCH IS OFTEN THE KEY TO WHAT WILL HAPPEN OUTSIDE!

III. AT THE LORD'S TABLE WE ARE HIS GUESTS, RECEIVING HIS HOSPITALITY

We take our place at the family table, and share the family's meal.

IV. BUT SOMETIMES, AS THE LORD'S FAMILY, WE HAVE THE PRIVILEGE OF INVITING OTHERS TO COME INTO THE HOSPITALITY

WHEN WE ARE INVITING OTHERS to Christ's banquet Jesus says our motives must be meeting THEIR NEEDS, and not simply making OUR church bigger. Jesus saw a man who had a need while all the others seemed to be looking for the best seat. Listen to a part of the Epistle lesson again, from The Message:

"Stay on good terms with each other, held together by love. Be ready with a meal or a bed when it's needed. Why, some have extended hospitality to angels without even knowing it! Regard prisoners as if you were in prison with them. Look on victims of abuse as if what happened to them had happened to you. Honor marriage, and guard the sacredness of sexual intimacy between wife and husband. God draws a firm line against casual and illicit sex.

Don't be obsessed with getting more material things. be relaxed with what you have. Since God assured us, "I'll never let you down, never walk off and leave you," we can boldly quote, "God is there, ready to help; I'm fearless no matter what. Who or what can get to me?" (Hebrews 13: 1 - 5)

IV. JESUS DEMONSTRATES HIS HOSPITALITY HERE AT HIS TABLE THIS MORNING: HE HAS INVITED ALL WHO WILL TO COME, TO PARTAKE.

The hospitality Jesus expects of us is simply a reflection of the kind of hospitality He extends to us as He invites us to His table. Jesus does not exclude those of us who are weak, or sinful, or imperfect in our service. He does not invite those who can afford to pay their own way. He calls to you and to me.

Will you come if he asks you? Will you try to be more like Him?

Where is God in the Dark Night of the Soul

September 9, 2004

Sooner or later, just about every believer faces some crisis of life that becomes a personal dark night of the soul. What may begin as a normal reaction to loss or change may take on what seem to be spiritual dimensions. Days, weeks, even months may go by with no sense of blessing. When prayer and worship become blocked and meaningless, and when that emptiness continues and continues with seemingly no end in sight, we may be in one of life's supreme tests. We wonder what has happened. Where is God?

The dark night of the soul is not a fun place to be. We've all had our ups and downs. Mood swings are more or less normal. They come to us all. We feel lousy, but we try to soldier on. We wait for the clouds to pass, and they may tarry, but pass they do. The dark night of the soul is something else. The lights go out. The screens go black. The lines are dead. God is not answering his phone. And as hard as we look, there is no light at the end of the tunnel. Where is God now? Where can we look for answers? How do we articulate the questions? Are there any points of reference? Where are the life-lines?

Let me begin by distilling all the years of my pastoral perspective into two short statements: God is good. God loves you. I really believe that. The dark night of the soul will pass! You may not see the light at the end of the tunnel. But believe me, the dark night of the soul comes to the believer with God's permissive knowledge, and though at the time unseen, with his support of his child in the furnace. You won't feel it. You certainly will be tempted not to believe it, but God knows, and God cares. With God's help you can hold steady in the darkness.

There are no quick fixes, or cheap solutions, but there are sources of strength to which we may turn. The fellowship of God's people can be a vital support. As Reuben Welch said by the title of his book a few years back, *We Really Do Need each Other*. When the usual avenues of prayer seem to have dried up, take the advice of

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someone who has 'been there, done that,' and don't add the burden of guilt to the load. There are things we can do to sustain and strengthen us as we wait for the dawn. A trusted counselor may be of great help. Perhaps the resource most likely to reach us will be the written Word.

An old country pastor was asked for a promise from the Bible to use in tough times. He said, "My favorite verse is, 'It came to pass!' And pass it will. But in addition to his sage advice, and keeping in mind that there are many promises the Holy Spirit can use for healing, I would recommend two passages from the scriptures in this attempt to answer the question, "Where is God in the dark night of the soul?"

The first scripture passage with great life-lines is the story of Job. Job's story is the premier handbook on the believer's dark night of the soul. Take hold of the Book of Job as best you can. It is not a simple book. Crises of faith are never simple. But there are some life lines in Job's story that can be grasped and trusted.

Careful! Not all of the apparently profound statements in the Book of Job are to be taken at face value. Job's story is given in the form of a drama, and the different characters voice opinions and would-be solutions. Look and listen to how Job faced his profound darkness.

Job resisted simply giving up. He refused to play the blame game. He said, "The Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord!" (Job 1:21) Even when his wife told him to curse God and die, his reply was, "Don't be foolish!" And later in his agony, he said, "Even if God should kill me, yet I will believe He is good; I trust Him!" (paraphrase of 13:15)

Job cried out to God in prayer and told Him how he felt. "I don't know where You are! I'd like to present my case in person!" (paraphrase of 23:3,4) He prayed "Show me why I'm going through this!" (paraphrase of 10:2) But even when Job couldn't find God anywhere, he determined to hold his faith. "God knows where I am," was his testimony. "When this test is over I will come forth as gold." (23:10)

Some of the most sublime words in all scripture are Job's testimony in his darkest hour, *"I know that my redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand upon the earth in the*

latter days. And though worms destroy my body, yet in my flesh shall I see God, whom mine eyes shall behold, and not another!" (19:25-27 KJV)

At the end of the drama none of the characters, including Job, had it all figured out! The "why" of it all was a mystery to the humans involved, and remained a mystery. Job and his counselors thought they needed "answers." They tried to analyze and diagnose and prescribe. But at the end of the story when God breaks in and speaks Job is satisfied! God never explained, and Job didn't ask. What Job needed, and what we need in soul darkness, is for God to move in with that unmistakable, powerful Presence. Just to KNOW God knows, and cares, and that He is with us brings an end to both the question, and to the dark night itself.

Job's story makes it plain that the dark night of the soul is not an indication of God's displeasure. God permits these times, but God does not bring them about as punishment. There is absolutely no indication that Job's trial came because he had broken God's laws. Quite the contrary. Satan was permitted to use terrible circumstances to attack Job's relationship with God. He was unsuccessful.

Circumstances may trigger spiritual darkness in the believer's life. Severe illness, loss, a heart attack may bring us to feel God's absence. Circumstances come to all. They do not prove anything bad or good about our walk with God. If we have sinned God is faithful to show us exactly where, and is faithful and just to forgive us as we confess. The dark night of the soul is not so easily understood.

Job's story is a window on the place of friends and counselors in the times of darkness. Job's 'comforters' were a sorry lot. As long as they just kept him company and kept quiet they were probably some help. But then came the great words of 'profound wisdom', usually ending with a diagnosis of guilt! And sure enough, it will be very easy to find some modern relatives of Job's comforters who will very kindly give advice. Often that advice is some form of "you get what you deserve" or, in other words, "Your fault! Snap out of it!" But remember, the dark night of the soul is not an indication of God's displeasure, nor of judgment for sin.

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One important but mysterious lesson from Job is this: we don't know how our holding steady may bring honor to God. In the scriptural account, Job never knew about how proud God was of him, how God valued Job's relationship with Himself. Job never knew that he was proving to heavenly beings the question that Satan asked: "Does your servant Job serve You because he loves you, or just for what he gets out of it?" (my paraphrase of Job 1:9)

In Ephesians Paul hints that just maybe this sort of cosmic testimony is still going on: *"...the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places."* (Ephesians 3:10 KJV) A careful reading of this passage would seem to indicate that whenever the God's people are faithful in trial, God's wisdom is being manifested in realms beyond our human understanding. When you and I as members of the Body of Christ hold steady in our dark night of the soul, and prove that God is good and faithful, then Job's faithful testimony is presented again, and again. In the dark night of the soul God is watching, with love. And Jesus is at the right hand of the throne of God where He is praying for you.

The second scripture passage is Hebrews 12:1 -3, and the Passion, Ascension, and Session of Jesus that it invokes. Remember who and what Jesus said He IS: the Good Shepherd, the Way, the Truth, the Life, The Light of the World. Listen again to His invitations: "Come unto Me! Find rest! Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out!" But above and beyond even that, in your dark night of the soul, take hold of the Passion and Session of Jesus. The Passion is what Jesus did for us; he endured the cross, and despised the shame so that He can be the author and the finisher of our faith. Then Jesus Ascended to the Father, where He is in Session. The Session is what Jesus is doing now for us: making intercession, praying for each of us. (Romans 8:34) The Passion and Session of Jesus are a strong life-line.

Hebrews 12:1-4 has proved a powerful, practical help to me. In this passage we are reminded that 1) Jesus is the Author and Finisher of our faith. What he has begun he is capable of completing. 2) Jesus knows the darkness. He endured the dark night of the soul himself. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed alone. On the cross he

cried, "My God, why?" 3) Jesus triumphed, not only for Himself, but for you. He is in Session! He is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God where he is making intercession for those of us who by faith are following after him.

"Consider Him who endured...lest you be discouraged!" (Hebrews 12:3 NKJV) The writer of Hebrews urges us in the dark night of our own soul agony to look to Jesus, and trust that He knows and cares what we are going through, and to hold steady regardless of how strong the winds are blowing and how pitch dark the night.

In looking to the scriptures, to the example of Job, and above all, to Jesus Himself for guidance in our darkness, there are some very practical measures we can determine to take. We can determine to hold steady no matter how we feel! The dark night of the soul is a poor place to think about quitting. No one gets off the train when it is halfway through the tunnel! Take courage and do what you are able to defy the darkness and affirm your praise of God even in that darkness!

In addition to the purely spiritual dimensions of finding an answer to the question, "Where is God in the dark night of the soul?" let an old pastor offer some personal, practical advice:

DO get physically tired. A wise medical doctor once told me "It is almost impossible to have tired thigh muscles and maintain a high level of anxiety." I know dark night of the soul is not exactly the same as mental and emotional depression, but emotional depression almost always is part of the package, and needs to be addressed. Mental exhaustion is real exhaustion, but getting the muscles tired to match the mental and emotional stress can bring about a more healthy sort of tiredness that enables sleep to "knit up the raveled sleeve of care," with apologies to William Shakespeare. DON'T over-extend or tire yourself schedule-wise. Leave extra time for a nap AFTER a long walk, jog, or reasonable exercise.

When the rugged prophet Elijah lay under a juniper tree physically exhausted and emotionally drained and spiritually feeling isolated he certainly experienced a dark night of the soul. God's prescription was sleep. He was already physically tired. When

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he woke, an angel had prepared a light lunch, and then, more sleep. Then Elijah was ready to wait for the still small voice.

DO find a compatible prayer group to join. Your pastor may be the one to guide you into a small group support setting. DON'T isolate or shut yourself away from friends and family. But by the same token, be very selective in sharing your heart. You don't need Job's comforters. A good Christian counselor can sometimes help point to that light at the end of the tunnel.

DO tell God how you feel. He can handle your feelings, but remember He is on your side whether you believe it at the time or not, so remember He will have the last Word! DON'T worry if and when your prayers are difficult or impossible. One thing is certain; we've said it before: the dark night of the soul will not last forever.

Let me close with a final thought that is so simple it just might prove a help. Remember that between Psalm 22 and Psalm 24 is Psalm 23. Now isn't that profound! But Psalm 22 is the dark night of the soul! It begins with the words of David that became the cry from the Cross: *"My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?"* But Psalm 24, just one short chapter away, begins with a magnificent shout of assurance: *"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof!"* David is saying "All's right with the world! Living is great!" It seems a long way from Psalm 22 to Psalm 24, emotionally and in terms of assurance. Maybe it is just a coincidence, but isn't it interesting that in between Psalm 22 and Psalm 24 there it is- Psalm 23!!

The way from darkness of soul to full assurance is in the personal Presence of the Shepherd of the soul. Sixteen times in those six short verses that we all know by heart, David uses the personal pronoun to affirm that "the Lord is MY shepherd," and that "the Lord restores MY soul!" The way these scriptures are arranged are a reminder that the path from desolation to assurance is in the personal, assuring Presence of the Shepherd.

"The Lord is MY shepherd!" begins the journey from darkness to glory.

Welcome Back! Join the Party!

September 12, 2004 (cf September 13, 1992)

Text Luke 15:1-10

Luke 15:6 "rejoice with me" Luke 15:9 "rejoice with me"

Luke 15:32 "It was right that we should make merry"

Introduction

Anyone knows that this chapter is about being lost and found. We learn a lot about a seeking, caring God from these three brief stories. But there is more to these stories than meets our first glance. It is significant WHY Jesus told these stories— and TO WHOM! These parables are as much about the attitude God's people should have toward those who are lost as they are about salvation itself.

[When Jesus told these stories He was going about His business— doing what He normally did. He and His disciples were taking the kingdom of God into the weekday world. They were expressing their faith outside the temple as well as they faithfully worshiped inside. They were eating with publicans and sinners. And the religious elite, who were always looking for flaws in Jesus, grumbled about it.]

I. THE PEOPLE THAT PROMPTED THESE PARABLES

- A. The people to whom Jesus addressed these stories were learned; especially in the written law; they were scribes and Pharisees— people who literally lived and breathed the Torah.
- B. They were grumblers; or in some translations, they were murmurers— complainers. To "murmur" means a soft, low complaint— a whine— they talked among themselves instead of openly asking Jesus about their concern. And complainers and murmurers and grumblers are basically unhappy people.

Welcome Back! Join the Party!

- C. They were out of touch with the basic work of God in Messiah. This basic work is exactly what Jesus had come to do.

[This basic work of God in Christ— WHAT IS IT? Precisely what the stories were about.]

II. WHY JESUS CAME: RECONCILING THE LOST TO GOD

- A. Jesus came to bring God down to where we live in order that he might bring us up to fellowship with God forever! The whole entire idea of "lost" is being away, separated, out-of-touch with God!
- B. And so— this lesson: "Variations on the theme of lost-ness" Three stories on one theme: being LOST is serious business— God Himself is interested in finding the lost— and all heaven is pleased when the lost is brought back!
- C. Being LOST is something to which we can all relate to some extent: "Have you ever been truly LOST?"

[**Illustration:** My son Stephen was (at least mis-placed) in the

Museum of Natural History in New York City. He was nine years old. For more than an hour— and there was concern on his part and ours: "Where were you?!?"]

1. **Lost like a sheep:** "All we like sheep.. turned each one to HIS/HER own way! An introduction to THE UNIQUE ISOLATION OF DAMNATION. Hell will be full of isolated individuals wrapped in their unique selfishness... Hell calls out "Do your own thing! Be yourself! Rise above the masses!" The shepherd simply goes after us one by one! See Him seeking... calling.
2. **Lost like a coin:** "Many of life's forces are 'set' before birth. You are the product of many forces beyond your control: Your IQ... your \$\$.. your limits... your country of birth... God comes SWEEPING AWAY THE DARKNESS— valuing His image— "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" Think about that! Every man, woman, boy, girl is a coin with God's image stamped on it— and Father God is looking for His precious coinage!

3. **Lost by deliberate, bull-headed choice!** The third "lost" in this chapter is— a lost child! A Prodigal. A lost that must have a response of WILL in order to be found!

- D. The disciples understood what Jesus was about: Jesus was where He was and was doing what He was doing BECAUSE HE LOVED THEM ALL! And He especially was there to bring us all— all lost without Him— to bring us all to God!
- E. But there is another part to this message: ALL THREE STORIES END WITH REJOICING! One measure of our faith is- what makes us really HAPPY!

[These sour intellectuals weren't happy until others could dot the "i" and cross the "t" like they did— and then they didn't have it right— but they couldn't see that Jesus was finding the lost before their very eyes!]

III. WHAT IS THIS PASSAGE SAYING TO YOU AND ME, HERE, NOW??

The "usual" application is vital: God is seeking YOU! God loves YOU! Whether you are lost by carelessness or by (seeming) circumstances— or even by deliberate choice— God still loves you and is seeking you! God is waiting for you to "come home to HIM!"

- A. IT IS TRUE: PEOPLE ARE LOST UNTIL THEY "CONNECT" WITH GOD! They are not lost because they are not keeping your rules or because they are "liberal" or "fundamental" or "educated" or "simple." They are lost if they are living as if God does not matter!

God is always concerned about the lost. He is illuminating, revealing, sweeping the corners; He is calling, carrying, bandaging, forgiving. What God can do in regard to the lost, God does. If we are away from Him, then it is important— absolutely the most important thing in the world— that we be saved! Sheep - coin - son/daughter – God is moving heaven and earth to bring you INTO FELLOWSHIP WITH HIMSELF.

- B. But that is not where this lesson ends.
- C. WE ARE CALLED TO BE LIKE GOD HIMSELF: NEVER GIVING UP ON THE LOST. We ARE God's candle— God's broom— God's under-shepherds— TELLING

Welcome Back! Join the Party!

EVERYONE: "HEY! GOD IS GOOD! HEY! GOD LOVES YOU! " When we cannot go and force people to come, we must be like the Father in the story, praying waiting watching— ready to run down the road and say "Welcome into the FAMILY!"

CONCLUSION

GOD IS ALWAYS LEADING A CELEBRATION OVER THE FOUND! God is a cheerleader, who applauds every sincere effort toward the light— who makes heaven ring with music when anyone takes a step toward faith and God.

OUR HAPPINESS IS COMPLETE WHEN IT IS LIKE GOD'S OWN JOY; IN SEEING THE LOST COME HOME! This chapter just a hint into what God's heart must be— how much God loves YOU and ME— how he spares no effort to locate us— and Jesus loved even the scribes and Pharisees! He was seeking THEM, too!

Prayer: On this Homecoming Sunday thank You for welcoming us into Your House and Home. Help us to be like You- Amen

A Servant Named Shrewd

THE WISE MANAGER

September 19, 2004 - John Wesley United Methodist Church, Falmouth, Massachusetts

Luke 16:1-13

No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other; or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

This is one difficult scripture! The main character in Jesus' story is a very smart person who is "just a little but" off course. It isn't always easy to detect when you are dealing with a SHREWD character. (Particularly if you are trying to get a good price on a different car!) But the sad fact is that sometimes I think there are remnant of this character lurking inside my own heart and mind! I try sometimes to be SHREWD!

This servant called Shrewd is convinced that faith is real. The only thing is that Shrewd thinks that he is an exception to the rules. In some situations– which he decides upon– it is all right for him to cheat on his Master. To depart from what he knows his Master would want him to be doing.

You have to admit that Shrewd is forward looking. There is nothing wrong with planning for the future. The only problem is that Shrewd's forward look is not FAR enough forward looking. He is thinking about next week and next year. He doesn't think about the fact that he is going to live forever.

Shrewd bargains away from total honesty. Away from keeping faith with the Master. Shrewd says "I'll

- ... put extra into the offering
- ... build a hospital
- ... underwrite a scholarship

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- ... certainly a Christian doesn't have to live his whole life in obedience to God.

Shrewd missed the point entirely. Dealing with God is NOT done with a sharp pencil and fine print. Dealing with God is a LOVE BUSINESS!

Is it OK to cheat just a little in our LOVE relationships?

Unfortunately, most people do! Just a little! BUT CHARACTER IS BUILT ON INTEGRITY! (Verse 10) "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much! "

WE DON'T HAVE TO SERVE GOD WITH PERFECTION. WE DO HAVE TO BE HONEST WITH HIM. WE SERVE GOD BY LOVE, NOT BY SHREWDNESS.

Postscript to sermon, in view of 40 Days of Purpose beginning next Sunday (Sept 26, '04):

Beginning next week in the bulletins will be an insert with questions to be thought about and answered, having to do with the church-wide emphasis on seeking to draw closer to God.

There were questions for this pre-launch Sunday. They were:

1. **WHAT DOES GOD WANT?** The answer given is: "MY WHOLE LIFE"
God doesn't want what we have– God wants US! He loves US!
2. **WHAT DOES IT TAKE?** The answer is: "DISCIPLINE" I would put that in my own words by saying pleasing God takes: A deliberate decision to tell God we love Him by our willingness to obey Him.
3. **WHY SHOULD I DO IT?** The answer is: "THE CROSS" How else can we respond to genuine LOVE? God so LOVED us that he gave his only begotten Son. 2 Corinthians 5: 15 he died for all that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again.

Two Kinds of Rich

September 26, 2004

(cf September 27, 1998 (am) #4 in series "Letters to Live By")

1 Timothy 6:6 ...godliness, with contentment

Luke 16:19-31

I. JESUS TELLS A STORY, A STORY OF CONTRASTS

Here in Luke 16 is a story full of contrasts. Jesus has painted a word- picture— a sketch, really— of two men who could hardly have been more different from each other in every way. One had more money than he knew what to do with. The other was poverty-stricken. One evidently had the best in health care. The other had disgusting open sores. One had great parties with the V.I.P.-types over for dinner. The other ate out of the garbage.

While they were alive not many people would have wanted to be Lazarus. After they both died NO one would trade places with the rich man. They were contrasts in their eternal destinies as well.

Why do you suppose Jesus ever told this story? What was He telling us? (Well, actually a story is a story. And you might get a different lesson from the one I get.) I can tell you what I hear Him saying. And I can tell you what Paul told Timothy in Letters to Live By.

Jesus is NOT saying that it is a sin to be rich. Jesus is NOT saying that it is good to be poverty stricken. Jesus IS saying that there are spiritual dimensions in life that go far beyond even extremes like these in the story.

Jesus is also saying— at least I am hearing— that it is not what we have or do not have that ultimately makes us "rich." It sounds impossible, but the truly "rich" are those who have discovered, or are discovering the "contentment factor." This spiritual "contentment" is not a loss of the challenge to grow in every way. It is not a

slovenly laziness that believes that "the world owes me a living." It is the sense that even though we are on a journey, and we haven't arrived, yet we are walking with our Father, and we are in the center of His will for NOW!

Jesus is saying that money can't buy LIFE. "You can gain the whole world and still lose your soul !!" Jesus IS saying that hardship and extreme circumstances can't keep a person from eternal life. The angels knew where to find Lazarus. The name "Lazarus" is a clue, I really believe. Lazarus is the Latinized form of the Hebrew Eleazar which means "God is my help", and he is the only character mentioned by name in any of our Lord's parables.

We are pilgrims on a journey. This world is not our final home. Still we can be "at home" while we are on our way home. God is our contentment. "Godliness with contentment is GREAT gain!"

It isn't a sin to have a lot of money. It isn't any fun to be in poverty. But money is NOT the "bottom line" for Christians. There are spiritual dimensions in life that will make us or break us eternally. This is where our "Letters to Live By" lesson from Paul comes in:

II. LOVING ADVICE ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

- A. Paul is very practical. He says: Your attitude toward money will make you or break you! He deals directly with the matter of "riches." But before we look at his advice let me return to a theme from last week. I believe it is important enough to stress one more time. Hear what he says to Timothy, a young man— his "son in the faith": (1 Timothy 6:11) "But you, O man of God!!!"

Paul (the seasoned veteran) addresses Timothy (the "next generation") as "MAN OF GOD!" Paul challenges Timothy to step up and be a full partner in the Body of Christ! Yes, it takes time to develop the gifts and graces God gives each of us. BUT we do not need to be "second-class Christians" even one day! We, you and I, are called to be men and women of God! You are not the church of yesterday if you happen to be retired! You are a vital part

of the church right now! You are vital, you are needed! You are a man of God! A woman of God!

You are not the church of tomorrow if you happen to be in school! Your task, your job right now IS SCHOOL! You are to prepare and sharpen your skills. But right now! YOU ARE A MAN OF GOD! YOU ARE A WOMAN OF GOD!

- B. Paul warns: Your attitude toward money will make you or break you! It is very easy to be driven by a financial "bottom line." Here is an often misquoted verse; how many times have you heard MONEY is the root of all evil?? Of course Paul does not say that at all. He says, "The LOVE of money is a root of all kinds of evil." The ambition solely to make money is a trap that feeds selfishness. Money is a wonderful servant, but it is a deadly master. Jesus said, "You cannot serve both God and money."
- C. Then Paul repeats the "call to arms" that we heard last week. Remember then he said "That you might wage a good warfare." Your attitude toward money will make you or break you! Do you recall the weapons he mentioned then? Faith and a good conscience. Here Paul gives two battle commands: [Flee, run away, shun,] AND [pursue, follow, cling to].
- Flee the selfish ambitions of this world: (see 4 - 10)
 - Follow, pursue: righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness.

III. CALLED TO TRUE RICHES

Quality of life is always a spiritual dimension. But we still do not believe it! Proverbs 30:8 says "Give me neither poverty nor riches . . ."

A very wise young pastor and academician named John Piper wrote a book several years ago called "Desiring God: Confessions of a Christian Hedonist." The idea of connecting the words "Christian" and "hedonist" caused some raising of eyebrows. But Piper got his point across: the best and highest satisfactions come from God's blessing of making Himself known to us, his children.

Two Kinds of Rich

The name-it-and-claim-it people set their sights far too low. They are despicable, like the government lottery industries are despicable; they play on the hopes of poor people to suddenly find all their problems solved by winning a sweepstakes.

God does not exist to be our servant, to give us every whim we think we need or want. We are not the center of the spiritual universe. God is at the Center of all Existence. The heavens declare his glory. The angels sing his praises. The Eternal Son of God came to earth saying, "I delight to do Your Will, O God!" When we begin to get this relationship straight and understand the Covenant, we find that as God is our helper (Lazarus, Eleazar) and as we seek to live to His glory we are rich beyond all understanding!

Selfish ambition - to wealth, or to power, or to fame - can never find satisfaction.

Stay the course!

You will find tribulation and challenges and pain whatever course you choose. But if you make it your purpose to walk with God you will find that you have a Companion with you in joy and sorrow.

Conclusion

One day Peter said to Jesus: "Lord, we have left everything to follow You!" Do you remember what Jesus said in reply?"

Jesus had said that it was harder for a worldly-type rich man to enter the kingdom than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. (See Mark 10) But when Peter said what he said, that he was "poor," Jesus answered:

"Truly, no one leaves anything for me but he receives a hundred-fold back in this life! Yes, there is persecution! There is pain! But you will have family! You will have shelter! You will have what you need! And in the world to come you will live with Me forever!"

Prayer

O God, who declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

#707 Freely, Freely

The God Connection

40 Days of Purpose, Week 2, Worship

October 3, 2004 - John Wesley United Methodist Church, Falmouth, Massachusetts

2 Timothy 1:1-7 "Rekindle the faith that is in you" "God did not give us a spirit of fear, but of power, of love, and of a sound mind."

Luke 17:5-10 "Increase our faith!"

THE SCRIPTURE LESSONS FOR TODAY connect powerfully with our "40 days of Purpose" emphasis. Paul tells his son in the faith "REKINDLE THE FAITH THAT IS IN YOU!" The apostles, God's chosen twelve, as Jesus: 'INCREASE OUR FAITH!' That is exactly what we are praying and striving to do with God's help as we march through these 40 days of purpose.

KINDLING faith that we already have- INCREASING faith that we hold precious- and FINDING FAITH IF WE AREN'T SURE- that is what these 40 days are all about.

LAST WEEK WE BEGAN by thinking about how much God loves YOU and ME! We were created for God's pleasure! We were made for fellowship with God- and God wants us to return his love. RETURNING GOD'S LOVE IS THE MOST WONDERFUL, SATISFYING THING HUMAN BEINGS CAN DO!

As we go through this study we will see that there are FIVE basic ways we can bring pleasure to God- and in so doing find utmost fulfillment for our own lives. Those five ways include FELLOWSHIP, and DISCIPLINE (OR GROWING IN GOD'S GRACE), IN FINDING OUR MINISTRY OF SERVICE, AND FINALLY IN SHARING IN GOD'S MISSION FOR THIS WORLD. That is FOUR of the five- but the KEY to all the rest of what we do is what we're talking about this morning is: WORSHIP!

WORSHIP IS THE GOD-CONNECTION THAT MAKES ALL THE OTHER THINGS WE DO COME ALIVE!

That's what I'd like to focus on just now. As we learn to worship better-WE WILL STIR UP OUR FAITH! If we WORSHIP better OUR FAITH WILL INCREASE!

WHAT IS WORSHIP?

I can tell you some things that worship is not!

WORSHIP is NOT simply what is done in church. Not music. Not any performance. Worship IS very rewarding to us but (surprise, surprise!) THAT IS NOT WHAT WORSHIP IS REALLY ABOUT! It is about GOD– not US!

"WORSHIP" is derived in English from "Worth-ship" Ascribing WORTH– giving GLORY– telling GOD we love Him, and appreciate that He loves US WORSHIP IS NOT ONE DENOMINATION'S OR ONE brand of theology's 'WAY' OF COMING TO GOD.!

WORSHIP IS RETURNING LOVE TO GOD!

WORSHIP IS ... MORE THAN I CAN TELL YOU BUT LET ME TRY:

- "Worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God" - Archbishop William Temple
- "Worship is our human side of a mutual fellowship with the Almighty." - RFM
- Worship is being aware of God, and responding to that awareness in love and obedience with the totality of living, reflecting God's glory from every facet of the personality." - RFM

WORSHIP IS BEING WHO YOU REALLY ARE– AND GOD LOVES OUR DIFFERENCES:
(Gary Thomas lists 9 ways people draw near to God:

- Naturalists - inspired by out-of-doors, nature
- Sensates - love God with their senses and appreciate beautiful worship and music and all the senses, not just hearing
- Traditionalists - appreciate liturgies, traditions, unchanging structures (that's me!)
- Ascetics - approach God in solitude and simplicity
- Activists - confront evil, battle injustice, work to make the world a better place

- Caregivers - approach God by meeting other people's needs, caring (Mabel!, others)
- Enthusiasts - want to celebrate! The more exciting the better!
- Contemplatives - love God through adoration
- Intellectuals - love God by studying with their minds

The best way I can describe what I understand WORSHIP to be is to say it is the highest, most fulfilling, most challenging kind of LOVE RELATIONSHIP you will ever know.

WORSHIP IS:

- It is a PERSONAL relationship. God is a Person. God loves YOU! Personally!
- It is a MYSTERIOUS relationship, because God is so great no one can ever comprehend Him.
- It is meant to be a SIMPLE relationship, even though it is at the same time very PROFOUND. It is a life-long quest. It is also a "blessed assurance."
Before I completely muddy all the waters...

This LOVE is MORE than a feeling. Oh, there will be great feelings along the way. But this love goes deeper. Our worship is meant to encompass all we are.

- We worship God with our MINDS! "The Bible tells me so..."
- We worship God with our HEARTS AND SOULS! "We love Him because He first loved us!" 1 John 4:19
- We worship God with our OBEDIENCE! "I delight to do YOUR will, O my God!" Psalm 40:8

WE CAN GET AS CLOSE TO GOD AS WE WANT TO ! "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you!" James 4:8

QUESTIONS IN THE INSERT - Here is what we will discover this week as we study together:

- MY 1ST PURPOSE IN LIFE IS TO WORSHIP GOD .
- WORSHIP IS MY RESPONSE TO GOD'S LOVE

The God Connection

- WORSHIP IS GIVING BACK TO GOD
- GOD WANTS ME TO LOVE HIM...
 - THOUGHTFULLY - "with my mind"
 - PASSIONATELY - "with my heart and soul"
 - PRACTICALLY - "with my strength"
- WORSHIP IS FOCUSING MY ATTENTION ON GOD.
- WORSHIP IS EXPRESSING MY AFFECTION TO GOD.
- WORSHIP IS USING MY ABILITIES FOR GOD

Segue into **COMMUNION**

For ME, one of the facets of worship I enjoy the MOST is the Table of the Lord– Holy Communion.

Informal invitation

You can't RE-KINDLE faith unless you already HAVE faith. If you are not sure you have a covenant relationship with God, all you need to do is OPEN YOUR HEART AND LIFE TO GOD.

God is GOOD! God loves YOU! God has a purpose for everyone here– God has a GOOD PURPOSE FOR YOU!

Believe that!

Then simply INVITE JESUS CHRIST INTO YOUR LIFE! Pray with me an affirmation, JESUS, PLEASE COME INTO MY LIFE! FORGIVE MY SINS! BE MY LORD AND SAVIOR!

Invite Jesus in!

(Pray for wisdom-pray for me!)

The Forever Family

40 Days of Purpose, Week 3 - "Fellowship"

October 10, 2004 - John Wesley United Methodist Church -

Epistle Lesson Philippians 2:1-11

1. Don't be selfish. Esteem others.
2. Look out not only for self– but look out for the interests of others.

Gospel Lesson John 13:34-35

1. A new commandment give I unto you, that you love one another AS I HAVE LOVED YOU.
2. By this shall all know that you are my disciples IF you have love for one another.

REVIEW: Where have we been; where are we going; are we having a good time??

There is nothing we will ever do that is more important than WORSHIP. But if we truly WORSHIP well, God will guide us into the other FOUR BASIC TASKS OF THE CHURCH. These tasks, in addition to WORSHIP, are Discipleship or Becoming more like Jesus, Ministry, or sharing our gifts, and Evangelism, or telling others about God's great love. But today, and this coming week we will be looking at the SECOND purpose in life, which is FELLOWSHIP.

ASIDE: Re-introduce "40 days of Purpose"– still not too late to be a part of this church-wide effort. We will GIVE YOU A BOOK The Purpose Driven Life and you can be a part just by doing three things: Read the book, a short chapter every day. Attend the worship here at John Wesley the remaining Sunday mornings. And IF AT ALL POSSIBLE catch on with one of the many small groups that are studying week by week. We'll get you a study guide. It isn't hard. It is pretty exciting.

WORSHIP IS VITAL: IT IS THE GOD-CONNECTION

Worship is the VERTICAL relationship. WE ARE SAVED ONE BY ONE. WE COME TO KNOW GOD PERSON TO PERSON. IT IS AN INDIVIDUAL THING. GOD CARES FOR

YOU. YOU ARE UNIQUE. GOD WANTS YOU TO BE YOU...BUT

WE ARE NOT SAVED IN ISOLATION!! WE ARE SAVED INTO A FAMILY! WE PLEASE GOD BY NOT ONLY LOVING HIM BUT BY LEARNING TO LOVE GOD'S FAMILY.

FELLOWSHIP IS VITAL: IT IS LEARNING TO LOVE GOD'S FAMILY

It is easy to over-emphasize the INDIVIDUAL aspect of faith. What do I get out of worship? How can i develop MYSELF? How can I maintain that vertical relationship best? What is all-important– JESUS AND ME ME ME!!

That is NOT how God intends for us to live! Did you know that the word "saint" is very, very rare in the Bible? It may appear ONE TIME in most translations of the New Testament. The words is just about ALWAYS IN THE PLURAL: SAINTS!! THERE IS A REASON FOR THAT.

We are made for God's family. Together we are Christ's BODY. Together we are the CHURCH. Together we are THE BRIDE OF CHRIST. Together we can continue the work of Jesus!

WE PLEASE GOD BY LEARNING TO LOVE GOD'S FAMILY!

FELLOWSHIP IS GOD'S WAY OF TAKING THE LONELINESS OUT OF LIFE

It is one of the worst pains in the world to feel alone and shut out.

God fully intends that we will NOT be alone; he has set us into a family.

When we receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior WE ARE ADOPTED into the family of God. We receive the Spirit of adoption, which cries "ABBA, Father! (Translate: DADDY!) Romans 8:15

FELLOWSHIP IS GOD'S WILL FOR YOU AND ME

It takes work. We will be disappointed from time to time. We won't find a perfect church to join– and if we did—

But we have this assignment; LEARN TO GET ALONG– NO, LEARN TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER– AS I HAVE LOVED YOU!

When Jesus was ready to leave his disciples he gave them what he called "a new commandment."

We know that Jesus had already said the greatest commandment is to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; the second is like unto it: Love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:26) But here he seems to ratchet it up a notch– don't just love your neighbor like you love yourself– BUT LOVE AS I HAVE LOVED YOU!

This kind of fellowship - this love will be the BADGE of belonging to Jesus! He said (text) BY THIS SHALL ALL KNOW THAT YOU ARE MY DISCIPLES IF YOU HAVE LOVE ONE FOR ANOTHER!!

MEMBERSHIP: FELLOWSHIP IS A DELIBERATE CHOICE

Believers should be BAPTIZED. NOT re-baptized. But it is proper to re-dedicate. To remember your baptism. It is important– but the METHOD is NOT. Don't be intimidated. We need to commit to a local, visible congregation. We need to support with our spirit of boosting, praying, presence, and giving. A church family will keep you from being isolated, self-centered.

FRIENDSHIP: FELLOWSHIP IS LEARNING TO SHARE

A church family will help you get perspective. MY problems seem overwhelming–until I see others with the same that are coping. OR I see others with greater problems than my own – and can help them and myself at the same time.

Talk about important things. Dare to pray together. Give the gift of TIME!

The small groups are an ideal place to begin learning to share.

[Fifteen- maybe 18 years ago– I started a small group in Wollaston. "I'm not spilling my guts to anyone!" THIS NEXT WEDNESDAY THEY'LL BE MEETING! They'll pray for ME! Wow!]

PARTNERSHIP: FELLOWSHIP IS FINDING THAT WE HAVE A(N IMPORTANT) PART IN THE BODY OF CHRIST (DOING MY PART)

Some people never stay long enough to find out what they do in the body. Rick Warren calls them "bunny Christians" that hope from one church to another. In a healthy church there are many different "organs" that supply what the body needs to function.

YOUR gift is important! As you WORSHIP and FELLOWSHIP you will discover that you are not only LOVED, but that you have a vital part in making Christ's body complete. For US it means making John Wesley an instrument of God's love right here where we live.

It would be great if as we worship and fellowship somehow the whole world would see how good Jesus is— and maybe that will happen. BUT WHILE WE'RE WAITING, MAYBE THERE IS SOMEONE WHO LIVES NEAR YOU THAT COULD USE A SMILE, AND A SINCERE PRAYER, AND SOME FELLOWSHIP OVER A CUP OF COFFEE!

KINSHIP: FELLOWSHIP COMES FINALLY TO BE LOVING LIKE FAMILY

Families don't always run smoothly; they disagree sometimes. "Christians are not brought together because they like each other, but because they share a common life in Jesus and are faced with the task of learning how to love each other as members of THE family." WRDNEO - Reuben Welch 31

Insert Questions (for last sheet of sermon)

MY 2ND PURPOSE IN LIFE IS FELLOWSHIP.

FELLOWSHIP IS loving God's Family.

FOUR LEVELS OF FRIENDSHIP

- LEVEL 1: MEMBERSHIP: CHOOSING TO BELONG
- LEVEL 2: FRIENDSHIP: LEARNING TO SHARE
- LEVEL 3: PARTNERSHIP: DOING MY PART
- LEVEL 4: KINSHIP: LOVING BELIEVERS LIKE FAMILY

Prayer: Thank you, Father, for the gift of belonging. Help us to love you and worship you, and help us to love each other as you have loved us, and your Son Jesus Christ has loves us, and as the Holy Spirit continues to guide us into true fellowship. We pray in the Name of the One who has taught us when we pray to say:

OUR FATHER...

Gods Adult Children

40 Days of Purpose, Week 4, Discipleship

October 17, 2004

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5 "continue in what you have learned" "be persistent"

Luke 18:1-8 "pray always" & "do not lose heart"

Just about everyone loves a baby! God made babies heart-smashing. They smile at you and its all over! "Gas pains, my eye! She SMILED at me!"

Of course, when you consider what babies demand of their young parents, and the really BASIC sort of things they DO, it is a wonderful thing that babies CAN smash our hearts. They CON us into taking care of them and loving it! (And it is one of the perks of being a grandparent that you can hand the baby back to Momma when it smells funny.)

Maybe the very best thing about babies is that they begin to grow up. From day One they begin to change. Every new thing they do is a celebration. They get housebroken. Before too long they can start putting on their own clothes. Getting them to pick them up when they take them off may take a little longer!

One of the tragedies in life is when a baby refuses to stop being a baby. The goal of a baby is to grow up. When you're a little kid you can't wait to get big. It seems like you'll never be big enough to drive a car. Then when you DO get old everything changes again!

Our lectionary scriptures resonate with this week's emphasis in our 40 Days of Purpose- which is BECOMING LIKE CHRIST. The Epistle, 2 Timothy, urges us to CONTINUE IN WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED, and to BE PERSISTENT. The Gospel tells one of Jesus' stories on prayer, about a woman with need and an unjust judge who gave her what she needed because she KEPT ON ASKING and WOULD NOT GIVE UP. (A story in CONTRAST. God is NOT like the judge; He WANTS to give us what we need- AND WE NEED TO 'GROW UP'.)

Persist! Keep growing! This is a THEME of the entire N.T. In order for us to become mature, Christ-like, "God's ADULT children" and not remain "babies in Christ" we will want to:

1. KEEP GROWING IN UNDERSTANDING

- from a literal, concrete "rules" mentality, TO
- TO catching the SPIRIT OF BELONGING

2. KEEP GROWING IN OBEDIENCE

- from not just "supposed" to do it this way, "I said so!"
- don't 'change the bed-time story' even one word!!
- TO trusting there is a "WHY" that is good and right

3. KEEP GROWING IN DEPTH OF RELATIONSHIP

- little children can be very literal, very self-centered
- even adversarial– baby-bottle Christians
- TO collegial relationship

[Illus. I recall the first time I "consulted" with Steve when a family needed counsel.]

MY conclusion:

Growth, physically, is more or less in the genes, automatic. GROWTH, SPIRITUALLY, IS A DELIBERATE CHOICE!

Come back to Romans 12:1,2. We do not grow INTO grace; THAT is God's free gift to receive. But we MAY grow IN grace, and that takes OUR COMMITMENT. Because God has loved and received us, let us OFFER HIM OUR BODIES– OUR TIME - OUR OBEDIENCE! Together with God we CAN GROW UP! We can be GOD'S ADULT CHILDREN!

Sermon, short, leads into "fill in the blanks":

Here is what I have for the bulletin **inserts**:

MY 3RD PURPOSE IN LIFE IS TO BECOME LIKE CHRIST

"Discipleship"

THREE UNEXPECTED TOOLS

1. GOD USES TROUBLE TO TEACH US TO TRUST HIM .
 - Keep a spiritual journal .
 - Remember the reward . (You aren't home yet!)
2. GOD USES TEMPTATION TO TEACH US TO OBEY .
 - Keep focused on good thoughts .
 - Get a spiritual partner .
3. GOD USES TRESPASSES TO TEACH US TO FORGIVE .
 - Remember God has forgiven me .
 - Remember God is in control .

Prayer:

Father in Heaven, we are grateful to be part of your family. Help us to continue to grow in grace and be more and more like your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you for your patience with us. We really want to learn to please You so we can take our place in the Family that You have for each of us,

In Jesus' name, who taught us when we pray to say,

OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN . . .

The Compassion of Jesus

June 12, 2005

Matthew 9:36-38

"And seeing the multitudes, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest."

You probably have heard this scripture many times before. But what comes to your mind when you pay attention to these words? (Text) The first thing I see is the compassion of Jesus. Jesus cares! The word compassion means to come alongside with caring.

I. THE COMPASSION OF JESUS— AND 'HOW I FEEL ABOUT IT . . .'

Jesus cares! Jesus feels the heartbeat of those who have need. The primary motivation of Jesus is LOVE!

My motivation - apart from God's grace - is usually something else. As I look at the kids in their baggy pants, and listen to the rap I think of the 'good old days' when swing and Benny Goodman was driving the old people crazy. When I hear of TV shows where people are eating bugs for money I am not moved with love so much as wonder when they'll bring back swallowing live gold fish. When I think about them changing the way we worship – I wonder why don't people see things RIGHT? The WAY I SEE THEM? The idea is: Jesus can love them – I'm not sure I can – so who is right? Jesus or me? In my fear or whatever?

Of course Jesus is right – but how can I begin to see life as Jesus sees it? How can I feel a way I don't feel? What can I DO about it?

II. THE COMMAND OF JESUS - AND WHAT I AM TO DO ABOUT IT

The command that comes out of Jesus mouth first is NOT "Go do something about it!" He doesn't even say, "YOU better love those people, too!" NO - Jesus first command is:

"Pray the Lord of the harvest that he will send forth laborers into the fields." This command resonates with the command Jesus gave just before his Ascension, when he said, "Don't leave town! Don't go start your work yet! Wait until you have prayed! Wait until the Holy Spirit has had a chance to do a job on your hearts!" Here Jesus says, in effect, 'Before you try to do something yourself and really mess up – PRAY! Tell God what is really on your mind when you look at the situation! Make God at home in your heart and then see what HE wants to do with you.

Which brings me to the Old Testament lesson for today – the story of Abraham's hospitality – how this old man made God welcome to his tent. (Genesis 18:1-15)

Abraham is an old man – 99 years old. He is very wealthy. Fulfilled –in a manner of speaking. Pretty much convinced he has seen his best days. Sarah is 89 years old.

Abraham makes God welcome, but he is totally unprepared for what God has to say. God says, "You're not done yet, old man! My promise is that you will be a blessing! Next year at this time you will have a son!

Sarah in the tent door hears – and laughs! It is ridiculous. Faith now would be audacious! Old people clip coupons... They put their feet up – they go fishing. But it is a dangerous, wonderful thing to make God welcome! To pray HIS way! To say, "Lord of the harvest – send forth workers into these places where I don't understand!

IF WE WILL PRAY – DO YOU THINK GOD WILL ANSWER A PRAYER THAT JESUS COMMANDED US TO PRAY?

III. THE COMMISSION OF JESUS - AND MY PLACE IN HIS PLANS

Most of us won't be like Charlie and Alice and Donna and the others that have gone to Ghana for hands-on work with needy people in foreign lands. That is good work, and

rewarding. But there are lots of so-called LITTLE THINGS which we CAN do after we have prayed.

Big things sometimes swing on "little hinges of prayer."

Let me tell you, at the risk of sounding like bragging, which honestly I do not mean to do – of a little hinge or two of prayer – that enabled Jesus' love to reach a small portion of "the multitudes."

Second Church in Dorchester stands in Codman Square, built in 1808, with fellowship halls and a sanctuary that seats 1,000 and a gymnasium. For many years it was in decline. Tom Jones. Don Brickley. Ruth Richardson. Merritt Nielson. Driving around the church in prayer. Today – Haitian, West Indian, Cape Verdean as well as 'main church' will worship in that building.

Fifteen or twenty years ago Asians started moving into Quincy. For the most part these were upscale people, many from Hong Kong, who came with all their savings in a suitcase and bought homes for cash. The schools' honor rolls were flooded with Asian names. The churches wondered what in the world to do with these people.

Rev. Merritt Nielson, my associate for sixteen years in Wollaston, came up with the idea of getting a consultant, a Chinese man with church growth experience, to come and give us some advice on what to do.

Rev. Sam Chung came and walked with us in the streets of North Quincy. He met with a Bible study group that met in our church on Saturdays. He spoke to our congregation on Sunday morning.

That Sunday evening Helen and I met with Rev. and Mrs. Chung at the home of Dr. and Mrs. Donald Reed where they were staying for the weekend. We talked about the "multitudes" and the compassion of Jesus. Then around the table where we had eaten some pie and ice cream the six of us held hands and prayed. Sam Chung said, "Pastor, if you ask us, we will come here to pastor a Chinese church!" Quincy Chinese Church of the Nazarene was an idea that evening six or seven years ago now. They meet every Sunday now, with 140 as an average attendance, and with a vision to see four more churches on the South Shore.

The "vision" for these two projects never played out the way I thought they would. I have preached in both churches, but only as a visitor. I never pastored them. The "vision" developed FAR from what I thought.

Conclusion:

Seeing the multitude, Jesus had compassion! Jesus STILL has compassion on us! And if we will obey Jesus and PRAY about the harvest fields IN THIS COMMUNITY – in Ghana - in Iraq – in whatever area our hearts are stirred,

1. (1) GOD WILL SEND LABORERS! But even more
2. (2) GOD WILL CHANGE OUR HEARTS SO WE LOVE THE 'MULTITUDE', TOO!
 - We will have INTEGRITY to BE like Jesus!
 - We will KNOW JESUS BETTER in His Word
 - We will BE WHERE HE CAN USE US IN PROJECTS BIG OR SMALL!

Prayer: Lord, we DON'T see the world like YOU do. But we pray YOU will send workers into the places that concern us. And do it YOUR way; we say "YES!"

Amen.

The Sacrament of Baptism

Baptismal service

Intro:

One of the difficult things for Protestants is fixing in their minds the relative importance of the sacraments of the church. Of all the means of grace, they are possibly understood the least.

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SACRAMENTS AS MEANS OF GRACE

I would like to ask you a very simple question:

A. WHAT IS GRACE?

Grace is unmerited favor of God; grace is that which bestows God's great LOVE on us; grace is God's attitude of forgiveness toward the sinner; grace is a quickening and strengthening of life within the soul.

B. AND MEANS OF GRACE ARE just that: the ways and means, the vehicles or channels by which God bestows His LOVE on our hearts.

And what are the 'means of grace?'

My list may not be complete, but I submit seven:

1. WORD OF GOD; and with this I include the faithful the preaching of the Word, as well as reading in order to obey God's will.
2. PRAYER IS PROBABLY THE PRIMARY MEANS OF GRACE; and prayer combines with power with the use of the Word.
3. THE FELLOWSHIP OF GOD'S PEOPLE is a significant and powerful means of grace. God never intends for us to make our way to heaven independent of other individuals, or of other families, or even other groups of believers. God intends that we bear one another's burdens.

The Sacrament of Baptism

4. CORPORATE WORSHIP, in the large groups or celebrations, in the smaller groups united around a lesson or a ministry (congregations,) as well as in the accountability groups of prayer and sharing (cells,) is a means of grace.
5. PERSONAL WORSHIP may be the same as #2, prayer; but it involves the carrying forward of life in the spirit of 'the living sacrifice.'
6. The good old Nazarene theologian, H. Orton Wiley, lists THE SABBATH AS A MEANS OF GRACE! It was introduced at the time of man's creation, and belongs to mankind generally and perpetually.

I am convinced that there is great spiritual power waiting to be released in the lives of the people who can tap the resources of the Lord's Day by observing it joyfully, not in bondage, but in rest and worship and refreshing.

7. But the last 'means of grace' I would mention are THE SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH THAT WERE INSTITUTED BY JESUS.

C. WHAT ARE 'SACRAMENTS?'

We use the term 'sacrament' to signify an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given to us, ordained by Christ Himself as a means of receiving that grace, and as a pledge or assurance of Christ's promise. From the earliest times, the sacraments have been understood by the church to be religious rites that carry the most solemn obligation of loyalty to Jesus Christ and His Church.

1. The RC church teaches seven (7) sacraments: baptism, the Lord's supper (or "mass",) confirmation, ordination, extreme unction (or 'last rites,') penance (or 'confession,') and marriage.
2. All Protestant churches recognize but two: baptism and the Lord's Supper.

SACRAMENTS ARE PLEDGES OF LOYALTY TO JESUS CHRIST; THEY ARE TESTIMONIES THAT MARK CHRISTIANS AS SEPARATE, DIFFERENT FROM THOSE WHO DO NOT BELIEVE.

- D. It is vitally important that we reach out for God's grace in every way we can. [Perhaps we do not take seriously the parables of Jesus when He warned us that it is mortally dangerous to have talents and not use them!] We are responsible not only for what we are, but for what we might be by God's free gifts of grace!

Along this line John Wesley once said: (in 1736) "I think the rock on which I had the nearest made shipwreck of the faith was the writings of the Mystics; under which term I comprehend all, and only those, who slight any of the means of grace." GFH, p541

In other words, Wesley said that even people who seem to be so very, very spiritual nearly led him astray when they picked out which means of grace they would adopt, and which they would avoid.

Wesley was saying 'I want to be faithful to God through Christ's church!'

- E. And if you wonder what John Wesley thought the 'true church' consisted of, here is a quote from H. Ray Dunning:

"There were two major means that Mr. Wesley seemed to identify as constitutive of the church: the pure Word of God preached, and the sacraments duly administered. This puts him squarely in the Reformation tradition." GFH p542]

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF BAPTISM AS A MEANS OF GRACE

Baptism is clearly one of the sacraments of the church. It was instituted by the Lord Jesus, first by His example, and then by His unmistakable command (in the words of the text:)

Baptism means three things for the believer:

- A. BAPTISM MEANS IDENTIFYING WITH JESUS in His baptism.

John the Baptist baptized many people in the Jordan. This was not clearly outlined in Old Testament law, but it could have some meaning of preparation for the coming of a new order, in that just before the giving of

The Sacrament of Baptism

the Law on Sinai, God told Moses to sanctify the people, and He specifically said: "Have them wash their garments!"

But the baptism of Jesus was unique. Jesus was identifying with sinners, even though He knew no sin. In coming with the sinners, JESUS TOOK THE ROLE OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT; and in the descent of the Holy Spirit HE CLEARLY EXEMPLIFIED THE ROLE OF THE ANOINTED ONE, THE MESSIAH.

No one else was sinless that day, or any other day. But Jesus identified with everyone who has failed; he came to bear our sins and sorrows to the Tree.

No one else could ever hear the Father say: "This is my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!" and have the Holy Spirit descend without measure.

But if Jesus identified with us, with sinful humanity that day of His baptism; then we, as His spiritual sons and daughters identify with Him.

We are not called on to die as the sinless sacrifice; but BAPTISM IS THE WAY OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT; and we identify with Jesus in death to sin (He died for sin.)

We cannot know the fullness of the Holy Spirit as Jesus knew Him, but WE ARE CALLED TO ACCEPT THE ANOINTING OF GOD, indwelling us, and live in the new life and power of that life the Holy Spirit brings.

- B. BAPTISM MEANS INCORPORATION INTO THE CHURCH. The washing of baptism by John indicated a preparation for a new age of the Spirit of God. But Jesus transformed John's baptism, and made it the sacramental portion of His Great Commission: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
- C. BAPTISM MEANS THE INITIAL RECEPTION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. The Holy Spirit is the gift of the Son, and of the Father.

He comes to make Jesus real to us. He is the Spirit of Jesus. He does not testify of Himself, but is the fulfillment of the promise:

"Lo, I AM with you always, even to the end of the age."

The connection of baptism with the reception of the Holy Spirit seems clear in the New Testament. Sometimes the people received the Spirit as, or after they were baptized; sometimes it was a witness or a seal after they had already been saved.

Acts 2:38 (Peter says:) "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, AND YE SHALL RECEIVE THE GIFT OF THE HOLY GHOST." Here, clearly, the people to be baptized did not yet have the Holy Spirit.

But later, at Caesarea, Cornelius and his household received the Holy Spirit as Peter was preaching to them. And the question there was: "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, WHICH HAVE RECEIVED THE HOLY GHOST AS WELL AS WE?"

In obedience to the command of Christ, we can expect that the sacrament of baptism will be a confirmation of the promise of God the Father and God the Son to bestow the Holy Spirit, personally, and powerfully, into each believer's heart!

January 5, 1992 - To this class of girls being baptized:

We have talked together about Romans 10:9,10, and what it takes to be a Christian.

It is so very simple— and yet cannot be done without the life of God being breathed into us:

1. to truly believe that God has raise Jesus from the dead is in large part the work of the Spirit within;
2. to confess with the mouth that Jesus is Lord is something which we can do by God's help.

This act of baptism is one way that you confess, loud and clear, that Jesus is LORD!

In just a few moments as part of the ritual of Baptism I am going to ask you three questions. Your answer will be, in part, that second part of Romans 10:9,10— for you will be saying publicly that Jesus is YOUR Lord, that you love Him, and that by God's help you will serve Him and do His will!

Right Place, Right Time, Right Word

May 14, 2006

Scripture: Acts 8:26-40

Background to the passage.

He wasn't an apostle- in fact he had been elected a 'steward,' a table waiter. There aren't many lines in the Book of Acts dedicated to his biography, but what a great man of God was this man Philip! In the first persecution that scattered the church in all directions from Jerusalem, except for the apostles who no doubt went underground (see Acts 8:2), Philip ended up in Samaria. He preached Christ to the Samaritans, and such a great many people responded that when the word got back to headquarters in Jerusalem the church leaders thought it best to send Peter and John to take charge. A lesser sort of man with an ego problem might have felt a twinge of possessiveness. In the middle of revival excitement God spoke to Philip. He had a place, a time, and a word in mind for this man of God.

The Right Place

8:26 "...the Lord spoke to Philip saying, Arise, and go ..."

It seems like half the stories in the Bible are about God getting people from one place to another. Sometimes He tells them where to go. Other times He says, "I'll show you in good time." There is absolutely nothing else in all the world as satisfying as being exactly where God wants you to be. Often it takes a deep breath and a lot of faith to simply step out and be obedient.

Where God was asking Philip to go would hardly seem the "right place" for ministry. It was desert. Philip was a powerful preacher. The 'Samaritan Pentecost' began under Philip's ministry, and right then Samaria was an exciting place to be. Many were coming to salvation. (see 8:10). But Peter and John had come to Samaria from Jerusalem to take the leadership there. Philip got the desert assignment. Philip arose and went south as he was told. There he met one man.

From the right place in witnessing to many, Philip was led to the right place to meet one hungry soul. As he approached Gaza he saw ahead of him an obviously important person in an impressive set of wheels. God said, "Catch up with that chariot!" So Philip ran and came alongside.

Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch had a quiet conversation. It was quite a contrast with the excitement of multitudes coming to hear the Gospel. But when that one man was saved, he became the first member of a flourishing church in Ethiopia.

The Right Time

The timing in this new assignment had to be exquisite. After days of foot travel, he met one specific chariot making its way along the road to Egypt and beyond. An hour later and he may have missed altogether. Sheer coincidence? Every seasoned Christian can recall those kinds of "coincidences"! God has ways of bringing His people into situations where they can represent Him if they will.

The "coincidence" of timing continued. The man in the chariot was reading as he rolled along. Evidently a devout Ethiopian Jew who had been to Jerusalem on holy pilgrimage, he was reading the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah. But not just any place in that magnificent book, for as Philip came near the chariot he recognized the 'Servant Song' of the familiar words of Isaiah 53. God had this meeting timed to the very minute!

"He was led as a lamb to the slaughter," the man in the chariot read aloud. Philip knew the words by heart. He had the audacity to engage a VIP in conversation: "Do you understand what you are reading?"

"Come up here and explain it to me," was the reply. Philip gladly obliged.

The Right Word

The "word" Philip used that day in the desert was the same "word" he used in the crowded streets of Samaria. He told the Ethiopian about Jesus. "Jesus" is the right word. "Jesus" is a living word, and it comes with saving power when it is spoken at the right time and in the right place by the right person.

What Philip did there in the desert to bring a hungry soul to faith is almost exactly the approach of the risen Jesus Himself! On the Road to Emmaus (see Luke 24:27) Jesus began with Moses and the prophets and showed two heartbroken disciples how He is the fulfillment of all the hope of the scriptures. And on the Gaza strip, when the eunuch asked whom Isaiah was describing, Philip was ready. He couldn't have asked for a better set-up. Philip told this important man about Jesus in words he could understand, backed up with the Scripture.

Faith was stirred in the heart of this devout seeker. "What is preventing me from being baptized?" he asked. They were passing an irrigation pool. Philip was encouraging: "If you believe with all your heart you are a candidate for baptism!"

The eunuch gave a clear and ringing confession of faith: "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God!"

He gave the command; the chariot stopped. The two men went into the water, and a new life in Christ began. The Ethiopian eunuch went on his way southward absolutely in transports of joy.

Philip apparently got a mysterious transport to Azotus. (See 8:39,40) He then made his way north, preaching in towns and hamlets, until he came to the magnificent marble Roman-built city of Caesarea on the shore of the Mediterranean. There Philip made his home and raised a fine family.

Echoes of John 15:8

Philip was tremendously fruitful in his life, in different kinds of situations; in large movements of the Spirit, in itinerant ministry, in one-on-one witness, as well as in his own family relationships. (See Postscript on Philip)

One of my life verses is John 15:8: "Herein is my Father glorified: that ye bear MUCH fruit" (KJV) As we abide in Christ, and his words abide in us, the promise is that we can bear MUCH fruit. Only God finally defines what "MUCH" may be in each of our lives. John 15:8 had not yet been written, but Philip was already proving it. Only God knew that day how Philip's faithfulness would play out in glorifying the Father. Only God finally defines "MUCH."

In Samaria Philip had been faithful, and many people sought the Lord. A town, a local region was blessed. In the desert Philip was faithful to one man. One man had been saved. No doubt Philip won many others to Christ during his lifetime. Although he was not an apostle, he was deserving of the title "evangelist." But however many Philip may have led to follow Jesus, he never had a better day than when he went to a desert place and met one man who was ripe for salvation. Through that one man a reigning queen, and an entire nation was touched with the Good News.

Postscript on Philip

A number of years after Philip witnessed to the Ethiopian, he hosted Paul the Apostle and Luke in his home. Luke wrote of coming with Paul to Caesarea on Paul's last journey back to Jerusalem. They stayed, Luke said, in the house of the evangelist Philip. Luke also mentioned that Philip had four grown daughters, and every one of his grown daughters was a preacher! MUCH fruit! Paul and Luke and their party so enjoyed Philip's hospitality in that beautiful seaside city that they stayed many days! (See Acts 21:8-10.) For them it was the right place, and the right time. That was nothing new for Philip! I'm sure he had the right words, too!

Crossing Cultural Barriers

May 21 2006

Acts 10:34-49 (+)

This chapter in Acts is a fascinating story about two very different men from very different cultures, and about how the love of God brought them together with life changing results for both of them.

Two Very Different Men

Cornelius was a Roman, and a soldier. He was wealthy and powerful, the commander of occupying soldiers in a land that was foreign to him. He was a Gentile, and certainly did not observe the many ritual observances of the Jews. But Cornelius was a sincere seeker after God, and a seeker after God's truth. He was a man who cared about people, and who prayed to God for light to find the way (10:2).

Peter was the acknowledged leader of the followers of Jesus. He was a great Christian- even though the actual word "Christian" had not yet been coined. People actually sought Peter's shadow as he passed so they could be healed. He had been imprisoned more than once by the Jewish authorities, but an angel had released him from Jerusalem's inner prison.

Peter was a strictly observant Jew, and had strictly kept all the rituals of his ancient faith all his life. He found no problem at all simply bringing his Jewish disciplines into his genuine faith in Jesus Christ. In fact he probably saw the new faith as an extension or continuation of his devout upbringing. And at the time of this story there had been no Gentile converts to Jesus. Jesus had told the disciples that his message was for the whole world (see Luke 24:46 and Matthew 28: 18-20.) But it was not easy for strictly observant Jews to reach outside their comfort zone. They were not sure but that Gentiles might have to become Jews before they could be good Christians. It would take clear and vivid directions from God to help cross the cultural barriers. God would have to work on both sides to build a bridge of communication.

Maybe when we read this passage the broad reach of God's love slips past us. Maybe we are sometimes so occupied with our own brand of Christian tradition that we miss the difference between acceptance and approval of the life styles of others who may be sincerely seeking after God. Sometimes it takes a breakthrough vision to see how to connect with people who seem very different from us. That is what happened in this story: not one vision, but two!

Two Visions From God

The first vision came to the Gentile Cornelius. (10: 3 - 6) As Cornelius was praying an angel appeared to him. It was a vision, but it was a direct answer to Cornelius' seeking. My "take" of the conversation is something like this:

Angel: Cornelius!

Cornelius: (understandably terrified) What do you want?

Angel: God knows you are seeking Him. God loves you a lot. Here's what you have to do: Send to Joppa. On the waterfront there is a tanner named Simon. Another man, Simon Peter, is staying at his house. Peter will come and tell you the next step.

The angel vanished. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, and within the hour Cornelius had sent off two trustworthy servants and a Roman soldier whom he also trusted. They set out to go thirty miles to the south to look for this house by the sea and a man called Peter. They would arrive at their destination by early the next afternoon.

The second vision came to Peter. It was about noon the day after Cornelius had had his conversation with the angel. Actually, Peter was on the roof patio of the tanner's house, praying. Maybe he was praying for lunch, because the scripture tells us he was very hungry (10:10). While he was waiting for the call to dinner he drifted into a trance-like state. In a vision Peter saw a huge sheet held by its four corners like a big seine purse. In the net were all kinds of animals, kosher and non-kosher- pork chops, lobsters, ham sandwiches- a Jewish nightmare! The accompanying word from heaven was downright puzzling.

Peter heard, "Get up, Peter. You're hungry! So have a ham sandwich!"

But Peter immediately responded. In his dream he knew this was the Lord speaking. But Peter also remembered his strict upbringing. In all his life Peter had never tasted food that was not on the approved list.

"Lord, I will not! I have never had a non-kosher meal in all my life!"

But in his vision the word from God came back, "What I call clean is not for you to call unclean!" This happened three times.

This is the point where the two visions connect. Just as the sheet was disappearing from view in his vision there was a commotion at the front gate of the tanner's house. Exactly at that time the Holy Spirit said to Peter, "There are three Gentiles downstairs looking for you. Not to worry, I have sent them. Go with them."

And so three Gentiles came into an observant Jewish home and had a strictly kosher meal and rested the rest of the day, and spent the night together with Peter and Simon's family. That was a miracle in itself. Then the first thing next morning a group of strict kosher Jewish Christians and Gentile members of a Roman occupation officer's household started out on a day-and-a-half journey together. That had to be a first!

The next day, the fourth day since Cornelius first had his vision, the little group reached Caesarea. They had made the thirty miles in good time.

And that is where our scripture lesson for this lesson actually begins.

Two Prayers Being Answered

The story began with two very different people praying. The Bible does not give the content of their prayers. Maybe they were something like this: "Lord, I am a seeker after You. Show me how to draw nearer." And, "Lord, I am an 'old' believer. Show me how to tell others how much You love them." These are two prayers that God will always answer. Period.

God heard both prayers. God was working with willing hearts, and the results were spectacular.

Cornelius was ecstatic when the group from Joppa showed up. He was willing to almost worship Peter, but Peter stopped that. Peter had begun to learn a lesson that maybe he had to learn again and again. (See Galatians 2: 11 - 14) God had shown him, Peter said, that he should never, ever count anyone out as not being precious to God. God cares for everyone. That is a great lesson for every one of us to learn.

Then Peter began to preach. He told the household of Cornelius about Jesus and his grace and mercy. He told them of his atoning death on Calvary. He told them how Jesus carried our sins away. "Whoever believes in Jesus", Peter said, "will receive remission of sins." (10:43)

As Peter spoke the same manifestations of the Holy Spirit's power came on the household of Cornelius that had appeared on the Day of Pentecost (in Acts 2). It was as though God was making it plain that here was a Gentile Pentecost, even like the first time the Holy Spirit was poured out with power at the birth of the church at Jerusalem.

Two Lives Changed

Cornelius, Gentile and Romans citizen, became a baptized believer in Jesus Christ that very day. He became a Christian. Cornelius never did become a Jew. He never did embrace kosher ways, so far as we know. The powerful officer of the greatest government in world history bowed before a Jewish carpenter who had never been more than ninety miles from where he was born, and yet who was and is the Son of God come down from heaven.

Peter remained a Jewish Christian. He was more comfortable that way. The disciplines reminded him of all the promises of the Bible he knew. But from that moment in Cornelius' house a new day had begun in the church. The big fisherman got a new insight into just how much God loves all people, and not just those who know all the rules.

A wall had come down. God had been working on both ends of a relationship, the seeker and the speaker. He still does. That day old and new praised God together because of His great love.

The Jews stayed on in the house of Cornelius for a few days, and felt right at home.

Jesus Plan for Adequacy

July 30, 2006 - John Wesley United Methodist Church, Falmouth, Massachusetts

John 6:1-21 - (Ephesians 3:14-21)

*"...that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." –
Ephesians 3:19b*

A PRAYER, AND A STORY

The lesson from Ephesians is a prayer Paul prayed for the church there in Ephesus. In that prayer the apostle asks that God will not only live in the church, but that the church will be filled with God's power and love, filled to overflowing. Then he adds that God is able to do exceedingly abundantly even more than we can ask or even think. It is a prayer for adequacy.

The gospel lesson seems to have no connection whatsoever to this grand prayer. But it does! It is probably dangerous to do theology out of stories; that is, to take a story and then define doctrines from them. But stories wonderfully illustrate good doctrine. And the gospel passage is about Jesus being there when we need him- and that is adequacy,

NO ONE EVER SURPRISES JESUS

The gospel lesson today has two parts. The first begins with the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000.

This was such a remarkable miracle that all four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, include it in their version of the story of Jesus. It is interesting to read them all and see the little variations. But one thing comes through clearly, there were a lot of people and not very much to feed them with. Some of the disciples said, "Send them home!" But Jesus had other things in mind. (verse 6 "(Jesus)... had in mind what he was going to do.")

As I said, all four gospels tell the story, but only John tells us where they got the five loaves and two small fish. John tells us that it was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, who said, "There is a lad here... with five small barley loaves and two small fish... but what are they among so many?"

Andrew noticed a small boy, and brought him to Jesus. We only see Andrew a couple of times—Peter his brother got all the headlines. But every time you see Andrew in the Bible he is bringing someone to meet Jesus!

Everything we do for Jesus is part of a team effort. That is the way it is. That is the way it is supposed to be. Andrew couldn't feed the 5,000. He didn't have ANY food. But he could look around and encourage someone who DID have food to be a part of the plan. The little boy with the loaves and fishes couldn't possibly feed the 5,000. But he could and did give his lunch to Jesus! Jesus COULD have called down bread from heaven- BUT HE DIDN'T! AND HE DOESN'T! But Jesus could, and did, take what Andrew and the lad brought to him, and there was enough! No- actually—there was MORE than enough!

We don't know why the young lad had five loaves and two fishes there- or what he had intended to do with them. But there they were- gone! True, he had a meal. But if he had been supposed to have some left over—well—Jesus told the disciples to gather up the fragments. "Don't waste any good food!" And the disciples gather up twelve baskets full!

The boy had as much bread and fish as he could carry, and yet there was more!

What is the 'theology' of this story? It would seem to me that you can't go wrong in giving what we have to Jesus. We can trust him with our treasure.

Maybe I shouldn't bring it up here, but this reminds me of a different kind of story about giving. In the 5th chapter of Acts there were two disciples that wanted to make a show of their giving. No one told them they should give, or that they had to give- but they saw how others were bringing gifts, so they pretended to give a gift 'so big,' but they really gave for show, and held back most of the profit.

Their names were Ananias and Sapphira, and they lied by pretending to be big givers when they were not. The end of their story was tragic. But I'll bet you never heard a sermon about them!

JESUS HAS LOTS OF SURPRISES FOR US WHO LOVE HIM!

The second part of the lesson began when Jesus sent the disciples back across the lake by themselves. Evidently Jesus still wanted to have some quiet time alone, so he sent them back across the corner of the lake to Capernaum, their home base, where Peter lived.

Now it is important to remember that the disciples were doing their best to obey Jesus. The disciples went because Jesus sent them. He told them to go. But while they were obeying, what started out to be just a little sail in fairly calm waters became a 'very interesting' session with very fresh wind and rising seas. Even though they were doing what Jesus told them they were in a big storm!

Meanwhile, Jesus had finished his prayers and decided he would walk back to Capernaum. Only instead of going around the lake shore ten miles or so he decided to cut straight across, maybe four or five miles. ACROSS the lake.

It must have been a full moon behind the storm clouds that night, or maybe there was actually some sort of glow around Jesus as he walked because there was enough light for the disciples to see this form striding through the storm, catching up with them- and starting to go past. It scared the living wits out of them!

"Don't be afraid!" It was that familiar voice. "It is I!" Jesus knew where they were, and soon everything was back to whatever normal is supposed to be. (Matthew also tells of the adventure of Peter, who dared to try water walking for himself!)

How about the 'theology' of this part of the story? What I'm getting is that even when we obey Jesus as best we can we are not exempt from the storms that blow. But we can and do have the assurance that Jesus knows where we are. And Jesus is with us! He will not abandon his own!

SUMMARY

A PRAYER FOR OVERFLOWING FULLNESS

In the epistle lesson (Ephesians 1: 15 – 22) Paul's prayer for them, the Ephesian Christians, and for us here today, is that we might find that overflow- the twelve baskets of fragments- that richness of spirit that comes from belonging lock, stock, and barrel to Jesus. We all have only five loaves and two fish—and if we hang on to them—or even if we give them away one by one as we think best- in the end not much will happen.

But I believe with all my heart that when we do our part in God's scheme—whether it is like Andrew simply saying to Jesus "There is a boy here!" or to the boy or girl or neighbor, "There is a Savior here!" Or whether it is bringing our lunch to Jesus, or to someone who needs it in Jesus' name—when we do our part in God's scheme we will begin to know how Jesus works.

Nothing ever surprises Jesus! He knows what he intends to do!

We can all have the fullness of God's blessing if we really want it! This prayer cannot be frustrated, except by our own carelessness or sin. The fact that we all have burdens, or hard times, or challenges cannot keep us from being God's people.

We've all been through storms of life. I don't like them! When I'm in a storm I pray for God to help me through. And maybe sometimes the worst storms are when you care about a loved one, or feel a brother or sister's pain and don't think there is anything you can do. But when the storms come, watch out! Jesus surprised the disciples in that storm on Galilee.

And Jesus never stops surprising his own! As St. Paul wrote in another letter: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"- 1 Corinthians 2:9

Amen. Let us pray:

A Mission for Ordinary Times

May 18, 2008 - John Wesley United Methodist Church, Falmouth, Massachusetts

Matthew 28:16-20 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Introduction:

Trinity Sunday, just after Pentecost Sunday, marks the end of the special" season when the church recalls the earthly life and work Of Jesus, from Advent and Christmas to Lent and Easter, and finally to the Ascension and Pentecost and the birthday of the church.

Trinity also marks the beginning of "ordinary time" when the Book of Acts begins the story of how the Holy Spirit is poured out on ALL believers (not just prophets and priests) and the work or mission of the church is carried forward— in a sense we continue to write the Book of Acts.

As the "TEXT for today's Trinity sermon I want to use our own church's mission statement. The mission statement for John Wesley United Methodist Church is: ("on the bulletin every Sunday; do you know it?")

To know God, and to become disciples of Jesus Christ, and to go into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit.

I. To Know God

Hebrews 11:6 Them that come to God must believe that He IS, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him. (also) The place to begin to know God is

with a healthy, God-given respect for the wonder and greatness we can never fully comprehend: (we are altogether too casual and glib about the most important thing in all our lives!) In every place where God is truly revealed there is that sense of awe:

Psalm 8 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

On this Trinity Sunday I cannot "describe God." The greatest theologian, whoever he or she might be, who says "THIS is God!" is like the little boy painting at his easel in kindergarten class, with his dad's old shirt for a smock.

"What are you painting?"

"I'm painting a picture of God!"

"But no one knows what God is like!!"

"Well, they will when I get done with this painting!"

But this great, holy, Creator God beyond all our comprehension has revealed Himself as loving. The promise in the Bible is "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you." (James) But this drawing near is not a casual arrangement.

To "know" God is the work of a lifetime, or more properly, the privilege of eternal life. The universe as we can see it is almost beyond description. It reflects the majesty of

our God. It is right and proper that we come to Him with reverence. He has promised to meet us. To seek to know God is to draw near to the majesty that is God...

Transition: But God has not only spoken by "general revelation." He has spoken by His Son, Jesus Christ. The Bible from cover to cover speaks of a seeking God, and one who calls to us: "Where are you?" The WORD God has spoken is Jesus. Which brings us to the second statement in our mission for ordinary times:

II. To Become Disciples Of Jesus Christ:

Ephesians 4:32

Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you.

We may never fully understand the Mystery that is God, but God has made us in His image, and then sent his Son to show us how to live. It was a great Methodist missionary of a generation ago, Dr. E. Stanley Jones, who said, profoundly: "We have a Christ-like God!"

So Jesus came, and showed us how to live, and taught us how to live, and brought to Word to life before our eyes. Then Jesus took our sins and our failures on himself and died on the cross of Calvary. More than an example, Jesus became our Entry into eternal life. (John 3:16)

Romans 10:9,10 reads: "If we confess with our mouth the Lord Jesus, and if we believe in our hearts that God has raised him from the dead, we shall be saved!" How we get to that confession, and how that faith to truly believe in Jesus comes to us is something of a mystery. But no one who comes to Jesus sincerely is ever turned away!

It is important that we have this personal relationship with Jesus! We are HIS disciples! We want to be like HIM! And the "bottom line" in my understanding is this: what sort of spirit is manifested? The chorus we sing says, "They'll know we are Christians by our love!" And that's where this life verse, Ephesians 4:32 becomes important, at least to me: BE YE KIND!

Trinity Sunday!

The majesty and mystery and LOVE of the FATHER!

The grace and forgiveness and kindness and LOVE of the SON!

But there is more: It is not enough for us as Christians simply to "be good" or to be "saved," as important as that may be. The third part of our text/mission today is:

III. To Go Into The World In The Power Of The Holy Spirit

John 15:8 Here is the way the Father is glorified:

If You bear MUCH fruit; so you will be My disciples.

Jesus loves us very much—it is great to have fellowship with Him and with one another! But the Gospel text this Trinity Sunday was what we call the Great Commission of Jesus, and it is about GOING INTO THE WORLD WITH THE GOOD NEWS WE ARE FINDING OUT ABOUT GOD! It is about going to the world with this TRINITARIAN message, baptizing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit!

We are not all we can be if we are simply content to be "saved." Did you know that each one of us has some way we can join with the Father and the Son and by the Holy Spirit make a difference where we are?

John 15:7 is a favorite verse for people who study prayer and praying; it is a great promise: *"If you abide in Me, and my words abide in you, you may ask whatever you will, and it shall be done unto you."* But we don't always connect that verse with its context! We begin thinking selfishly! Whatever I want I'll ask for!

But the very next verse, verse 8, says: "THIS is the way the Father is glorified, IF YOU BEAR MUCH FRUIT,; THAT WILL PROVE YOU ARE MY DISCIPLES!

It is the HOLY SPIRIT, who was the Gift at the first Pentecost, who gives us what we need to carry on the work of Jesus. The Book of Acts began with the coming of the Spirit to the church. Its chapters tell the story of ORDINARY, VERY ORDINARY

PEOPLE who dared to ask for God to live in them and have all of them, and simply did what the Spirit led them to do.

There are 28 chapters of Acts in our Bible. But the Book of Acts has never been finished. Each generation has an opportunity to write another chapter! Sometimes I even think some of that chapter might be written in John Wesley United Methodist Church right here in Falmouth!

Jesus said, in Luke 11:13 that we can have the Holy Spirit just for the asking. I'm not saying this lightly or casually, but these are Christ's words from Luke's Gospel:

If YOU, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, HOW MUCH MORE, will the Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?

Do we dare ask again:

Let us pray . . .

A Light In the Darkness

Psalm 118:24-29 This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it. . . . God is the Lord which hath showed us light; bind the sacrifice with cords, even unto the horns of the altar.

We have come with Jesus to the Upper Room. Passover is a FAMILY meal, and yet Jesus has made us family. We still love our flesh-and-blood relatives very much. But this is a "forever family" somehow . . .

The Upper Room is borrowed — and yet it, like all the earth, is His. We have come here especially to celebrate the Passover. It is Thanksgiving and Christmas and reunion and worship. For almost 2,000 years the people of God have been remembering deliverance. There has been some kind of disturbance. An uneasiness. Jesus has talked about betrayal, and of sorrow and death. We have all denied, of course. We don't want to ruin the fellowship. Judas has suddenly gone out into the night. But now we go on with the Passover ritual.

We sing the usual songs of praise, the "hallel." The 118th Psalm— about the joy of God's Providence, and His provision for coming into His Presence. Somehow these words seem to take on weight: The stone which the builders have rejected— IS become the headstone of the corner. THIS is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it. Never mind that in just a few short hours the darkness of Gethsemane will be over us. God has showed us LIGHT! Then the Master does a NEW thing: He takes the bread and breaks it and speaks of His broken body; He takes the cup and passes it and speaks of His shed blood. We do not fully understand it— yet somehow— this Passover becomes...

I. A CELEBRATION THAT SPEAKS OF SACRIFICE FOR SIN

The Paschal Lamb was first a sacrifice, its blood sprinkled on the lintel and doorposts . . .

THEN it became food for the journey; strength to escape from bondage and move toward the Promised Land . . .

II. A MEMORY THAT IS ALSO A HOPE

Passover looked BACK — but THIS Passover looked to the immediate tomorrow. NOW we look back to Calvary— but we also look forward to a time when we shall celebrate Passover at the married supper of the Lamb!

III. A LIGHT WHICH NO DARKNESS CAN EXTINGUISH

We will lose our way in the hours ahead. We will grope in utter darkness. We will lose our sense of faith. Our faith will slip into the past tense. But we will remember this New Passover! And Jesus will call our faith back into newness of life! And then ever after this, when we eat the bread and drink the cup, we will remember — and look forward to living forever with Jesus!

And NOW— the sacrifice must be bound to the horns of the altar! BUT REMEMBER! God's MERCY endures forever!

Invitation to Communion:

Dedication of the Elements of Communion; of our own selves before God to worship, to receive of God's grace.

Invitation to come, to partake.

A Man of God in the Church

Philip, the Evangelist

Acts 21:10

Intro:

When Paul was on his last journey before his arrest and transportation to Rome, he stopped several days at a home in Caesarea. It must have been a spacious home, and I'm certain it was a pleasant home. The entire party traveling with Paul were made comfortable there.

The name of the home's owner was Philip. Not Philip the Apostle, but Philip the evangelist— the same man who was chosen to be part of the first "church board" and serve tables, as recorded in Acts 6.

Even though Philip was called an "evangelist," I'm not sure he was an evangelist like we think of evangelists. He was a layman, not part of the recognized clergy. But he was chosen to a place of leadership because he was full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.

We get the first glimpse of Philip in Acts 6, where he is chosen as one who help in practical ways within the church. Philip is the second deacon mentioned.

A second passage highlights two episodes of evangelism in which Philip had key roles. In Acts 8, Philip is used to spark a revival in Samaria, and then leads an Ethiopian official to faith in Jesus Christ.

The last passage in Acts 21 we have read. It mentions that Philip has four daughters, all of whom are prophetesses. You might say in summarizing this man of God's life that he was (1) a servant in the church; and (2) a witness to Jesus in the world; and (3) a Christian in his own home. It was because of men and women like this that the church of Jesus Christ changed the course of history.

I. PHILIP WAS A SERVANT IN HIS CHURCH

If the church is really a unit bound in the life and love of Christ, there is no room for rivalry, jealousy, or pettyness. There are no "mean" positions. There are no "privileged classes." And all exist to serve the good of the whole body. Jesus Himself served. Mature Christians will serve the church because in so doing they are serving Jesus.

II. PHILIP WAS A WITNESS IN HIS WORLD

The 8th of Acts tells of persecution, and the church, including Philip, had to leave Jerusalem. They proclaimed Jesus wherever they went. Proclaiming Jesus is the total task of the total church! Proclaiming Jesus is all that the church needs to do. But proclaiming Jesus must be done by each one of us. Proclaiming Jesus is done from the pulpit. But proclaiming Jesus is done wherever Christians go, and whatever they do. It is much more than preaching. In fact, the pulpit is NOT the primary means of evangelism in God's agenda!

In Samaria Philip proclaimed Christ. I wish I had more details (Acts 8) but it seems a community was stirred because of Philip's witness. As we said above, the "clergy" saw fit to supplant Philip, but that was "all right" with him! In the desert (where the Holy Spirit led him) Philip proclaimed Christ to a solitary man. but in so doing Philip may well have influenced an entire NATION for Jesus Christ!

If we are willing, and if we ask God to fill us with His Spirit and keep us full day by day, we will have opportunity to proclaim Jesus! It is exciting! It is rewarding! It is what we are all called/privileged to do!

III. PHILIP WAS A CHRISTIAN IN HIS HOME

As we read at the beginning, the last reference to Philip has to do with his home in Caesarea, and his four daughters who were all engaged in Christian endeavor. (Acts 21)

It is great to serve in the church. It is perhaps even better to witness to Jesus in the world outside the church walls. But to my mind, the real acid test of a Christian, and

the kind of Christian that makes the church a healing place is the woman or the man who is at home the same kind of Christian he or she professes to be in the public arenas of life. A powerful Christian is one who is a Christian in the home!

How might we describe such a home? What sort of man was Philip at home?

There has to be "reading between the lines" here. But when a godly man has godly children, there is something wonderful and holy going on! I would make these suggestions:

In a Christian home there is:

A. DISCIPLINE THAT IS UNSELFISH

Discipline is good and necessary. But it must flow from LOVE, and not from fear or selfish ambition.

[Illus: I saw "ambition" that grabbed a little boy's arm in anger—]

B. FAITH THAT IS HEURISTIC

We "do things" in certain ways. But we learn to serve God for better and better reasons. We are not spiritual because we copy our godly mothers and fathers. We are spiritual because we dare to break new ground and follow Jesus.

A mother or father that is growing in his/her faith will NOT confuse the children in the home. They are smarter than that!

C. COURTESY BEYOND ETIQUETTE

Some people think that courtesy is a matter of rules. there is a right way and a wrong way to hold a knife and fork, and a proper order in which to pass the dishes. And that is all well and good.

But happy is the home that has discovered that the heart of courtesy is respect for the individual, and kindness. [Who was it that said that "a gentleman is one who never inflicts pain"?]

And happy is the home that considers every member of the household worthy of courtesy!

There is weight in words!

Too often parents become prophets with their prophecies of gloom and doom, with their pronouncements in anger.

"You are no good!"

"You are stupid!"

Say that to your BOSS! Or to a perfect stranger! But don't say it to your little daughter or son!

Conclusion:

Perhaps I've taken a little poetic (or prophetic) license in filling our Philip's life. But I believe the outline of Acts will bear me out: He was (1) a servant in church. He was (2) a witness in the world. And (3) He was a Christian in his home!

I think we can each do all three of these things!

1. We can have a servant-spirit in our church, and relating to our church. We can "find the open man!" We can talk up our brothers' and sisters' strengths!
2. We can proclaim Jesus in our world! Make this a matter of prayer— to ask Jesus to give us a chance to talk about Him outside the walls of the church each week!
3. We can pray every day we live for grace so that we can live like Jesus in our homes!

We cannot afford to omit ANY of these three things. But if we MUST— lets not omit #3!!!

Contrasts

Luke 16:19-31

Jesus was talking to people who were scoffers. They were wealthy, and self-righteous; the Bible says they were lovers of money. Finally he told them this story. It may or may not be a parable; but it is obviously told for a purpose:

I. THE PURPOSE OF THIS STORY

1. It is not obviously a parable; but if it were, what is its purpose? Why did Jesus use it in His teaching?
2. It seems to say that God 'evens things out.' The poor are more pure than the rich. But is that what it really says?
3. It says, with unmistakable simplicity, that there is a life after death; and that there will be rewards and punishments.
4. It says, too, that it is "safe" to live by God's special revelation: by Moses and the prophets— by the Bible.
5. But it says, finally, THAT THIS LIFE IS NOT ALL THERE IS TO LIVING; AND THAT WE DO WELL TO PREPARE FOR ETERNITY.

II. IT IS A STORY OF OBVIOUS CONTRASTS

Jesus was certainly not saying it was wrong to be rich; for the subjects of the two immediately preceding parables were both rich and good. But it seemed He wanted to show as much contrast as he could between the way the worldly, materialistic-minded people set their values, and the way that God sets His values. So this was a story of contrasts.

1. There were contrasts in material surroundings.
rich vs. beggar sumptuous fare vs. longing after crumbs purple and fine linen vs. a covering of sores ...
2. There were evidently hidden contrasts in life purpose.

3. There were contrasts that became apparent in death: Oh, I'm sure that the funerals carried on the contrast.

The rich man had the mayor/flowers/car vs. just a few family to grieve a big 'obit' and pix vs. nothing in the *Ledger* . . .

But Jesus gives us a little insight when He says: "The angels carried Lazarus into Abraham's bosom!"

III. BUT THE FINAL CONTRASTS LIE IN ETERNAL, UNCHANGING VERITIES

[**Conclusion:**] The contrasts that were obvious were not necessarily the important ones: what had these men lived for? For whom had they lived?

A. THIS STORY IS A CLEAR WARNING

What is the real "key" to this passage? Look at vv 14,15: "Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things, and they were scoffing at Him.

"And He said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.'"

1. It is a warning to self-sufficient men and women. This is the "text" of the story we have read!

Hear it again: ' You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.'

2. It is a reminder of the eternal perspective we all need. We must make sure our possessions are working for us, and not the other way around. We need to see if what we think is important is detestable in God's eyes.
3. It is a healthy reminder that we can prepare NOW to die. Death is part of life, and it is not morbid to prepare well for it.

B. THIS STORY IS ALSO A SOURCE OF ASSURANCE

No matter how insignificant or unloved, God does not forget His own people; the angels know their address— they do not die unnoticed. (Is it morbid to think on death?)

It makes sense! We must prepare!

But how do we prepare?

1. WE SHALL DIE AS WE LIVE

[Proverbs 14:32] "The wicked is driven away in his wickedness; but the righteous hath hope in his death." It is a fact we must accept; we are never really quite 'prepared' for death; it ALWAYS comes at an inconvenient time.

2. So: WE CAN'T "GET" READY... WE HAVE TO "BE" READY!

Some people are waiting for an unusual sign or signal before they get right with God! Dives said: 'If someone were to rise from the dead then certainly my brothers would give heed!'

But Abraham, in Jesus' story, said, 'No- If they don't heed their everyday opportunities, they wouldn't be saved if someone came back from the dead!'

We must LIVE in a right relationship with God.

3. But if we are saved, and if we are walking in the light, how will we know what to do when we come to cross over?

That's the beautiful part; we don't have special preparation! When we belong to God, it is THEN DYING GRACE IS A 'GIVEN!'

And then: We don't have to "get" ready!

#244 (Wesley) *I Do Believe!*

#246 *Is Thy Heart Right with God?*

Covenant for Life

THANKSGIVING SUNDAY

2 Chronicles 7:14

On a Friday morning, April 21, 1747, to be exact, John Wesley rode his horse into the village of Thirsk, about 25 miles north of York, in beautiful north Yorkshire, England. John Wesley came intending to preach and conduct religious services. But if the countryside there is beautiful, the spirit of the town, as, indeed, the spirit of much of the entire nation, was ugly.

Wesley wrote in his Journal that night: "I called at Thirsk; but finding the town full of holiday folks, drinking, cursing, swearing, and cockfighting, I did not stop at all, but rode on to Boroughbridge, and in the afternoon to Leeds."

In Thirsk, as well as in all of Britain, Wesley and his Christian contemporaries faced a sea of evil. The people were scripturally ignorant and illiterate. The living was hard. The character of the average man in the street was coarse. What could one man, or a few people, or even a few hundred people do to stem such a degenerate tide?

WHAT COULD GOD'S PEOPLE DO?

- THEY COULD RESOLVE TO BE HOLY.
- They could live to please God!
- And THEY COULD MAKE THEMSELVES AVAILABLE TO GOD.

And a relatively small number of people set out to do exactly that. They had no delusions of grandeur, but they knew that they served a great God. And they determined to live to please Him. AND GOD, THROUGH THOSE RELATIVELY FEW PEOPLE, BROUGHT ABOUT A SPIRITUAL AWAKENING!

Perhaps it is not possible to make parallels between our modern culture and early 18th century England, and draw spiritual and moral conclusions. But I feel challenged by what I perceive to be almost identical spiritual confrontations. I have no way of knowing whether our pornography and abortion and political corruption are worse or

better than the brutality and prejudices and class discrimination which Wesley faced. BUT I DO KNOW THAT WE ARE IN DANGER OF SIMPLY ACCOMMODATING THE WAY WE LIVE TO THE TENOR OF THE TIMES.

We go home from our worship service, where we all agree that sin is bad and God is good— and we tell ourselves that we are on God's side with all we have. And maybe we are. But I also do perceive that UNLESS MORE HAPPENS TO STEM THE FLOODTIDES OF EVIL IN OUR DAY THAN IS HAPPENING NOW, THEN WE SHALL SINK QUICKLY and quietly into a post-Christian, hedonist, Godless society that will swallow up our children and our own faith as well!

I believe I sense some of the same frustration that Wesley may have felt as he rode his horse into Thirsk that spring morning. I believe that he was at least tempted to say, "What can one person do against such emboldened evil!" I know that I am tempted! But WE KNOW AS CHRISTIANS WE MUST DO SOMETHING!

[Transition:]

I'm sure that it is natural to think first of all about doing; and particularly about acting politically. It seems natural to see the sinful conditions of society and begin by attacking those evils, wherever and however we are able. It might do us well, instead, TO LOOK TO Wesley for a working model, and beyond Wesley, to THE SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLES WESLEY USED in the spiritual awakening which came during his lifetime.

These principles come into sharp focus in the words of our text: (2 Chron. 7:14)

THIS IS A COVENANT STATEMENT.

It is not "contractual;" it does not give service rendered for value received, and in no way can a spiritual awakening ever be earned, merited, deserved, or "prayed down." But it is a covenant statement.

GOD SAYS "I'LL BE RESPONSIBLE AND DO CERTAIN THINGS, IF YOU WILL BE RESPONSIBLE AND FOR YOUR PART, YOU WILL DO CERTAIN THINGS!"

I. THE PART WHICH FALLS TO GOD'S PEOPLE IS CLEARLY OUTLINED:

1. IF MY PEOPLE, which are called by MY name

I have made this phrase a separate "condition" even though it isn't something to "do;" but it DOES tell WHO is called to be the agent of God's healing. The call of God is not first of all to militancy against the evils of society, but to the people called by His name, that they will come to Him. The call is not to reform the terrible conditions we see on the outside (although we must do what we can when and where we can.)

GOD'S CALL IS TO SEEK HIS FACE, and His promise is that if HIS people will hear and believe Him, then HE will heal the land. This task of land healing is too big for any of us, and it is too big for all of us put together! But it is NOT too big for God!

[Somehow I see Abraham standing on the edge of the mesa overlooking the valley of the Dead Sea below. I hear him interceding to God for Sodom and Gomorrah, and hear God saying, "If there are 40 righteous, I will spare the city! If there are 30 righteous, I will not destroy the people!"]

[And somehow I wonder who is holding back the fire and brimstone of God's wrath on a society that has absolutely no time for any god but pleasure and convenience and comfort?]

2. SHALL HUMBLE THEMSELVES

This means putting ourselves into the "servant role." We see ourselves as the agents of God's work; 'any great awakening depends on US!' BUT GOD SAYS HUMBLE YOURSELVES!

Recognize the helplessness of all flesh apart from God! Cry out in desperation to God! WE'RE so "cool!" WE know so "much!" Just a few more seminars— a few more hard prayers— a little more sweat and busy-ness— and we'll bring in the New Jerusalem all by ourselves! WE THINK!

God says: Either I do it— or it won't get done!

3. "Humble yourselves . . . AND PRAY AND SEEK MY FACE"

This means giving God TIME and giving Him ATTENTION for AS LONG AS IT TAKES, until we get ourselves lined up with His good, and acceptable, and perfect will.

It isn't a matter of praying to change God's mind. God is not reluctant to help us against the forces of evil. He is ready and able right now to move in and change our world under our feet. But our problem is praying, without mixture, "I delight to do YOUR will, O God!" Your kingdom come! In YOUR way!

God says: "Pray and seek my face until your whole being is on the stretch for more of ME!"

4. AND TURN FROM THEIR WICKED WAYS

And how will we know when we are coming near to praying and seeking God's face enough? The answer is: WHEN WE ARE WILLING PUT THE WAY WE LIVE ON THE LINE, WHATEVER IT COSTS US TO OBEY GOD'S WILL! We think of "wickedness" as violence and impurity and flagrant greed and denial of God. But GOD SAYS WHEN HIS PEOPLE STOP PUTTING OTHER THINGS FIRST AHEAD OF HIM— WHEN THEY ARE WILLING TO PUT COMFORT AND SECURITY AND LEGITIMATE PLEASURES WAY DOWN THE LIST OF THEIR LIFE PRIORITIES, and absolutely put God FIRST— THEN GOD'S PEOPLE WILL BE LEAVING THEIR WICKED WAYS!

[This is 'our' side of the covenant. But God Himself has made a promise of what He will do for His part of the covenant!] And WHEN IT IS GOD THAT MOVES IN, then the dynamic, and the wisdom, and all the glory are HIS!]

II. AND THE COVENANT PROMISE OF THE LORD GOD ALMIGHTY IS CLEAR: THEN WILL I:

1. HEAR FROM HEAVEN

YOUR PRAYERS WILL "CONNECT!" Did you ever have a prayer "connect?" I'm not sure how to describe "praying through." And I know that we are called upon to pray in faith no matter how we "feel," and I am also sure that some of our most effective prayers are "embattled prayers." We are to "be instant in season and out of season." (2 Timothy) BUT IT IS GREAT WHEN PRAYERS "CONNECT!" It makes all the difference when, beyond mere emotional feeling, there is the assurance, the certitude that God is not just "aware" of what you have prayed, but that God has heard!

2. WILL FORGIVE THEIR SIN

WHOSE SIN? The sins of the abortionists and drug pushers? Not yet— THE SINS OF HIS OWN PEOPLE! The sins of NEGLECT— of BROKEN ALTARS and NEGLECTED BIBLES and UNKIND ATTITUDES and PRAYERLESS DAYS and WEEKS. THIS FORGIVENESS IS KEY!

WHAT SIN? Once again— THE SIN OF BEING "DISCONNECTED" from the Source of Goodness and Life and Light. The connection once again will be established. God will have a voice in the land. God's Word will be heard in its glory!

3. HEAL THEIR LAND

If the job is too great for us— and the sickness too profound, it is not for the great God we serve. This is a covenant statement! AND ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, GOD WILL HEAL THE LAND OF THE PEOPLE WHO KEEP COVENANT WITH HIM! And make no mistake, we will have a part, and an important part to DO. For THERE DOES COME A TIME FOR "DOING!" GOD WILL ASK US TO PUT OUR LIVES ON THE LINE! But it begins with HUMBLING, and continues in PRAYER, and SEEKING GOD'S FACE, and TURNING FROM SELFISH WAYS!

Because God does the healing does NOT mean that we will not have any part in the healing process. John Wesley was certainly an instrument in the awakening of His day. GOD WILL USE HUMAN INSTRUMENTS IN THE AWAKENING WE SEE. But remember: THIS COVENANT PROMISE CLEARLY DOES MEAN THAT THE HEALING WILL COME FROM GOD.

Conclusion:

Wesley was dismayed and temporarily dismissed in Thirsk and a number of other places because of the prevailing spirit of lawlessness and sin in his times. But Wesley went back to Thirsk another day... and another and another! There are 14 entries in his Journal that record visits to Thirsk. After 1747 there are entries like June, 1755:

- Thirsk: a little society; June 1763: intended to preach by a house, but asked by gentlemen to preach in the marketplace; to a large, deeply attentive congregation;
- June 1764 "exceeding large congregation"
- May 29, 1766 I preached in the new House (chapel) at Thirsk.

And Wesley kept on recording visits to Thirsk until 1788, a year before his death! And if you go to Thirsk today there stands what to Americans is a very old, substantial chapel built of brick, built by the people called Methodists. Indeed, in just about every hamlet and village in Britain there is a Methodist chapel that testifies to the truth of our text, that: "if God's people . . .!"

It is past time for another awakening in our world! And we are frustrated— we are helpless. We cannot begin by starting out to tilt against the windmills of evil in our own righteousness and our own strength and power.

WHAT CAN WE DO AGAINST THE CURRENT OF DEGENERATE TIMES?

- WE CAN RESOLVE TO BE HOLY.
- We can live to please God.
- And WE CAN MAKE OURSELVES AVAILABLE TO GOD.

Prayer: Lord God, The task is too large! And we are so very small! But we are NOT alone! Together with Your people today all over this world we pray! Heal our land! Your kingdom come! In US as it is in heaven! Amen.

Draw Near to God in Prayer

A Lesson in Praying

Luke 11:1-13

Everybody prays. It seems as though prayer is built into our make-up, a part of being human. Some prayers may be more direct and honest than others.

Consider some of these direct and honest prayers by "little people:"

- Dear GOD, I would like to live 900 years like the guy in the Bible. Love, Chris
- Dear GOD, If you watch me in church Sunday, I'll show You my new shoes. Mickey D.
- Dear GOD, I bet it is very hard for You to love all of everybody in the whole >world. There are only 4 people in our family and I can never do it. Nan
- Dear GOD, Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy. Joyce
- Dear GOD, It rained for our whole vacation and is my father mad! He said something about You that people are not supposed to say, but I hope you will not hurt him anyway. Your friend. -(But I am not going to tell you who I am.)
- Dear GOD, My brother is a rat. You should give him a tail. Ha- ha . Danny
- Dear GOD, Please send me a pony. I never asked for anything before, You can look it up. Bruce

Everybody prays. Not everybody prays well or even knowing why they pray.

WHY PRAY?

If God already knows everything, then prayer isn't in order to inform Him. And if God already has things all 'set in cement' then prayer can't change things.

There are several scriptural reasons why we should pray, and why we should keep learning to pray better and better. Prayer DOES make a difference : there have been

too many solid examples of how prayer. Let me challenge you to think about several reasons WHY we need to pray:

A. Prayer communicates love to God.

The first and great Commandment is: "Thou shalt LOVE the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. God is a Person, not a "Force." Salvation - faith- is ultimately a relationship, not a doctrine or list of rules. The way we keep love going is called "communication." Prayer is communication with God.

It isn't easy or simple to love someone as big and as mysterious as God. But he has promised if we will reach out to Him he will reach out to us. And so maybe it IS simple: we just keep talking to God. Tell Him everything! Little by little we come to realize that He really is our Great Friend for time and eternity.

B. Prayer 'conducts' God's love to others.

Prayer not only is communication with God- it can bring God and those we pray for together. Prayer becomes a conduit or 'conductor' of God's love. When you pray for others, you can release God's love in their lives. Especially when you sense the prompting of the Spirit, prayer can be a powerful release of blessing in other's lives.

Prayer is mysterious in some ways. We do not always see how it works. But James tells us that the effectual fervent prayer of God's people avails much. Jim Couchenour said "Prayer does not make the work of the church go forward- prayer IS the work of the church. After we have prayed the rest is just mopping up!"

When our Chinese work goes forward- when our missionaries find strength to carry on- when we see new avenues of ministry, perhaps in the inner city- it will be because in prayer God has shown us how to conduct his love to others.

C. Prayer changes the pray-er.

Finally, prayer keeps us growing. It changes us!

[Sermon-within-the-sermon: The essence of the Lord's Prayer has the potential of keeping the spirit free and pure. What the pattern of prayer Jesus taught will do if it is used consistently and honestly and humbly is KEEP FAITH SWEET AND SIMPLE! Keep the

[If the occasion warrants I could share my focus verses here: Hebrews 11:6 SEEK, John 15:8 MUCH. Ephesians 4:32 KIND, and LUKE 11:13 'ASK!' (For the Holy Spirit!)]

THE LESSON JESUS GIVES US

- A. **The pattern:** It isn't the exact words that become a magic formula, although the exact words keep the focus sharp. Rather, it is the pattern: God First, Others and self next in God's care. God's name, worship, praise. God's kingdom bringing order out of chaos. God's will, in all the earth and in the details of *my* life. THEN, "its all right" to say GIVE and FORGIVE and LEAD and DELIVER.
- B. **The persistence:** On the occasion of this lesson (in Luke's gospel) Jesus added the emphasis of persistency. Here is where we too often fall down. It is human to start BIG and then lose interest and energy and . . . then . . . start BIG all over again. God's ideal is for us to grow IN BETWEEN the camp meetings and the revivals. We do that by talking EVERY DAY with the Father. We need to encourage each other. We need to pray when we feel like praying. And we need to pray when we DON'T feel like praying! Maybe that kind of prayer means the most both to God AND to ourselves!

As We Come to the Close Talking ABOUT Prayer, would you let me LEAD YOU in prayer?:

Let's pray again together, with the pattern of the Lord's Prayer in mind:

- God is here. Bow your head– close your eyes– and let God sit down beside you there.
- In your heart tell Him you love Him, and are proud to be His child.

Draw Near to God in Prayer

- Think of how this world will be when hatred and selfishness cease. Tell God you want His kingdom of peace.
- Tell Him you will be part of His kingdom right now. Tell Him He can tell you what to do– and you'll do it!
- Now think of the people who are dear to you. Family. Children. Parents. Tell God you want Him to bless them. Give them the gift of God's love in your prayer just now.
- Let the face of a person who has hurt you come to mind...
- Tell that name silently to God...Ask God to help you forgive that person. Give them the blessing of God's love in your forgiveness.
- Silently think of any failure in your life right now. Do you dare to name the sin right now in your life that you feel you most need to confess to God...
- Tell God right now! Confess it...Ask God to forgive you; and you know what? He will! He does!
- What is the daily bread that you need God to give right now?..
- Ask God for it; trust that He will guide you!
- You have very much needed God's guidance on some decision and situation in your life...
- Tell God right now...Ask to know the will of God for you.

Amen.

Lord, teach us to pray! Help us to pray. Help us to know You, and love You. IN Jesus' name. Amen

CHORUS: *O GOD YOU ARE MY GOD . . .* STEP-BY-STEP

Entering the Kingdom

Matthew 7:13-23, 13-14: "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. "For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it."

21-23 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'"

INTRODUCTION:

We have spoken in this brief series about the Sermon on the Mount as "an inaugural" message for the Church, the kingdom of heaven on earth. We have spoken of its spirit, and of its heroes. We have looked at its values, and priorities; and have acknowledged its righteous laws.

But toward the close of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus talks about entering the kingdom of God. He begins to speak of a narrow gate, a disciplined way. And He says "Not everyone that calls me 'Lord Lord' is going to get in! It is sobering!

But let me ask you:

1. How did YOU enter the kingdom? [We all came in the same way— and we each one came in a different way!]

And let me ask you perhaps an even tougher one:

2. How would you give instruction to someone else who wished to enter the kingdom of heaven? [Even though we all are individuals, there are certain 'absolutes' that apply to Christ's kingdom:]

I. THE KINGDOM IS ENTERED ON THE LORD JESUS CHRIST'S TERMS

There will always be people saying: Go there!" "Do this!" "Believe our way!"

But the kingdom is not any one man or one group's monopoly. Should we do this? Do we have to do that? Don't ask MAN— be open- - ask God! OBEY HIM!

Jesus reveals God's terms to each of us! He is perfectly capable of making us KNOW we have been dealt with personally! The Holy Spirit makes it seem that the truth is written just TO us, just FOR us!

Jesus confronts us (lovingly) where we are! Sooner or later we need to deal with the sin question. Jesus never compromises with sin. Sooner or later we need to identify with the visible kingdom and be baptized. Sooner or later we get our values established, and start to grow in grace. [He spoke to the woman at the well about her five husbands. He saw the rich young ruler walk away sorrowful because he loved his money more than eternal life. He called Zaccheus down from his sycamore tree and went home with him, a despised tax gatherer, when no one else would have anything to do with him. Jesus always deals with us where we are!] BUT WE DON'T TELL JESUS HOW WE SHALL COME, OR WHAT OUR TERMS WILL BE! THE TERMS ARE ALWAYS "YOU FOLLOW ME!" I'll do the leading!

II. THE KINGDOM IS ENTERED BY FAITH IN THE LORD JESUS HIMSELF

It takes that strange thing we call FAITH to enter Christ's kingdom!

Faith always has the element of volition; of willingness to obey. We are not saved by doing; but it isn't faith unless there is more than idle curiosity; unless and until

In Luke 17 when the Pharisees asked when the kingdom of God should come— Jesus said: "YOU can't see it— you can't observe it- - but the kingdom of God is already HERE! The kingdom is where Jesus is!

- A kingdom of righteousness, of peace, of life. A kingdom of sin defeated, through justification by faith in Christ's blood (Romans 5:1)
- A kingdom of death defeated, through the gift of eternal life, called regeneration (2 Corinthians 5:17 a new creation)

- A kingdom in which isolation and loneliness and separation are defeated by adoption into God's great family: (Romans 8:15)

But these are just empty theological terms apart from Jesus. Jesus is our righteousness! Jesus is our regeneration! Jesus redeems us from being alone in this universe, lost in space! The call is not "Come and learn your way INTO the kingdom!" The call is "COME UNTO ME!"

III. WE ENTER THE KINGDOM IS TO SERVE HIS PURPOSE! AND IT IS THE ONLY WAY OF SAFETY ... HE IS JUST !

Make no mistake! Storms are coming! As He comes to the close of the inaugural message Jesus speaks of gathering storms! Every Sunday School child has learned "The wise man built his house upon the rock!" But every grown up Sunday School child has known the rains coming down, and the floods coming up!

Jesus spoke of rains and floods. And in later conversations about the kingdom Jesus referred explicitly to Noah, and again to Lot.

He made it plain that the Old Testament stories could be used as powerful warnings about the need to prepare for judgment! The only way of safety is knowing Him, and trusting Him personally!

So, we can speak profitably about "justification" and "adoption" and "regeneration," but still the 'bottom line' of salvation is to know Jesus Christ.

When we meet Him face to face He will not first be concerned with what we KNOW, or even what we have ACCOMPLISHED! But His acceptance will be whether or not we have been occupied with the Father's will. And His rejection, seen here in His own words, is on the basis: "I never KNEW YOU!"

Conclusion:

At the beginning I asked two questions. I asked "How did you enter the kingdom?"

Jesus said the days would be evil— but He reminds us that Noah was saved because he believed!; and Lot was snatched from Sodom because he was RIGHT with God!

Entering the Kingdom

It is important that we know that WE are in God's righteous kingdom! And we can know!

Have you answered that question? If you do not have a clear- cut answer, you can enter the kingdom if you answer the call of Jesus to come to HIM. Where Jesus is, there is the kingdom! If He calls you, you may enter the kingdom now.

I would like to give an opportunity for YOU to enter Christ's kingdom, receive His salvation, join HIS church!

Jesus says: "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. "For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it."

May we PRAY?

#227 Jesus I Come

Freedom in Becoming

Lesson Romans 8:18-25

Text: 8:21 *"... the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God."*

INTRODUCTION

Holiness is belonging to God. [This is what we have been talking about the past three Sunday mornings.] Holiness is also the freedom to enter into the glory of being God's children (text.) Holiness is being like Jesus, or at least, becoming like Him, the One who was and IS pure and holy. As the hymn writer penned it, and we pray as we sing:

"Give me, Lord, the mind of Jesus, Make me holy as He is; May I prove I've been with Jesus Who is all my righteousness."

Is it realistic to speak of becoming like Jesus Christ? One thing I am sure of, if any Christ-likeness is possible, and if it ever takes place in your life and mine, it will be the result of God's grace!

I. ROMANS: A HANDBOOK ON GRACE

A. We think of "grace" as salvation FROM sin— and so it is. There certainly is a glorious negative side of God's GRACE:

1. FREEDOM FROM A "WORKS SALVATION"

Romans 4 - Freedom from having to EARN salvation: [Romans 4:4 "Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. 5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness." 6: "... David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works ..."]

2. FREEDOM FROM SIN'S GUILT

Romans 5 - Freedom from the GUILT of confessed sin: peace WITH God / justification [Romans 5:1 "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ..."]

3. FREEDOM FROM SIN'S DOMINION

Romans 6 - Freedom from the DOMINION of sin ... [Romans 6:1 "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid!" 6:22 "But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, you have your fruit unto holiness (i.e., sanctification) and the outcome, eternal life!"]

4. FREEDOM FROM "LEGALISTIC SALVATION?"

Romans 7 - Freedom from LEGALISM: [Romans 7:6 "But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter."]

B. GRACE ALSO HAS A POSITIVE ASPECT! We are not merely set free FROM EVIL, [although we have just looked at quite a litany of God's great grace!] NOW HERE COMES Romans 8— which speaks of the victorious LIFE IN THE POWER OF THE INDWELLING SPIRIT!

Where may we look for an example? Who, do you suppose, best embodies what this life in the Spirit can be? You are right! Jesus does!

II. ROMANS 8: FREEDOM IN THE SPIRIT: A PROFILE OF JESUS

[It may seem strange musing on Romans 8 as a profile of Jesus. But when you think about it, EVERY high point in the NT is a lesson on how we can and should live, and is a candid shot of Jesus. These great chapters of the Bible are not simply theological wonders. They serve to help us become holy. And to be holy is to be like Jesus!]

A. JESUS LIVED IN THE FREEDOM OF THE SPIRIT. Can anyone doubt or deny that? If ever anyone was filled with the Spirit, it was Jesus! If ever anyone lived to please God the Father, it was Jesus!

Not in an ideal, sterile situation, but in the living out of real life at its best and its worst, Jesus showed us how to live in the freedom of the Spirit:

Romans 8:1

1. [Jesus was accused! But] JESUS WAS FREE FROM CONDEMNATION

Freedom from condemnation, but not from controversy. Accusation will come to us all! Remember how it came to Jesus?:

Brothers: You are crazy! Pharisees: He has a devil! Pilate: This man is irrelevant! Priests: He saved others! He cannot save Himself!

God the Father: This is My Son!

2. [Jesus was tempted! But] JESUS PLEASED THE FATHER!

Romans 8:8 (Those who are in the flesh cannot please God" ...but we know that Jesus pleased God!)

Jesus lived above sin, He was FREE from its power, but not from temptation. Recall how He was tempted?:

Temptation of the flesh: (Make bread from stones.) Temptation of the spirit: (Cast yourself down!) Temptation to get things done quickly: (Compromise! Short-cut!)

3. [Jesus HAD to pray!] JESUS HAD A VICTORIOUS PRAYER LIFE!

But even Jesus had times when prayer was not easy! He had freedom and victory, but even He was not free from groaning. (8:34 Says that this praying Christ intercedes for US!)

4. [Jesus knew loneliness!] JESUS WAS ONE WITH THE FATHER

But even Jesus was not excluded from the realities of the struggles of the spiritual realm.

And on the Cross He suffered alone-ness like we will never need to know! Because He loves us! (8:37-39 We overwhelmingly conquer

through HIM that loved us... nothing .. shall separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus our Lord.")

- B. Jesus is our Great Example of the Life of GRACE! We can actually read Romans 8 by overlaying it with Jesus' life; and we can know Jesus better by seeing in HIM all this fullness of the Spirit. If we want to, we can know Jesus ... and become LIKE Him, by the power of His Spirit! (text) "Free from slavery ... into the freedom of the glory of the children of God!"

III. ROMANS 8: LIFE IN THE SPIRIT: IS FREEDOM TO BECOME LIKE JESUS!

- A. (Verse 2) THE LAW OF THE SPIRIT OF LIFE IN CHRIST JESUS HAS SET (US) FREE ... [look at that phrase!] We are enabled to become all that has been described here: free from condemnation, victorious in temptation, coming to God in prayer, never to be separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

- B. THIS IS NOT A SELFISH, SELF-CENTERED 'FREEDOM'

- 1. By looking to Jesus, we see that "FREEDOM" GOES BEYOND MERE "INDIVIDUALISM."

It is wonderful to be set free so that we can be ourselves. It is wonderful even to LIKE ourselves! (Most of us are at least a little ambivalent.)

We tend to relate freedom to individualism. But individualism can be a prison, a strait-jacket, if we descend into the strictures of our own desires. Hell, said one very wise man, could be getting exactly what we want for all eternity!

Individualism can be a prison— about the size of a small telephone booth— bounded on all sides by our own limitations. Freedom in Christ is more a freedom TO BECOME a part of the larger community. A church is a community of incomplete and imperfect people who can find completeness as they come together in Christ and His family.

The kind of "freedom" that glorifies "Individualism" can be a conformity to non-conformity. Some of the saddest uniforms I ever see are garish fashions, or punk dictations, which say: "We will NOT conform!" From kindergarten on, we are somehow taught to be afraid to be different. [I know one missionary who returned from a different culture and at some expense bought his children everything that the other children had, so far as he could tell. But the "things" were not the right "brands." And the children were humiliated! And by other "Christian" families' kids!]

Jesus was Unique! And he has made every one of us an "original!" But Jesus also bound Himself to you and me— to His church— which He loved! Our FREEDOM is to be like Him!

2. JESUS DID NOT LIVE OR DIE TO HIS OWN INDIVIDUAL GLORY He came to be the Father of a new kind of race. In 1 Corinthians 15:45 Paul writes: "The last Adam (Jesus Christ) became a life- giving spirit."
 - a. Jesus was to be THE FIRST-BORN AMONG MANY BRETHREN (8:29 "His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren.")
 - b. Jesus lives to MAKE INTERCESSION FOR US (8:34)
 - c. Jesus LOVES US (8:38-39 "Nothing can separate US from HIS love!"

C. IT IS REALISTIC TO SPEAK OF BECOMING LIKE JESUS CHRIST! The FREEDOM is there! The Holy Spirit makes it possible to begin!

But if we are like Jesus

1. WE will live for others, like Jesus did!
2. WE will PRAY for others (become INTERCESSORS) like Jesus did!
3. His LOVE will UNITE us with God and with each other, just as Christ's love reaches you and me!

CONCLUSION:

Freedom in Becoming

Paul writes (in Philippians 2) "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus!"
Here in Romans is something of the power to make it really happen!

- That dynamic is God CALLING us to conform to the image of His Son!
- That dynamic is the GRACE to be free FROM guilt, and from slavery to sin, and from ugly legalism!
- That dynamic is the Spirit of Christ Himself dwelling in YOU and in ME to make us HIS CHURCH!

If God calls you, you can be FREE! But remember, you aren't REALLY free unless and until you are not just free FROM ... but free TO BE, to BE BECOMING.. like Jesus Himself!

#60 Sitting at the Feet of Jesus

Holiness: The Lamb of God

John 1:29 *Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.*

Introduction

Here is great good news! The sin of this world is going to be taken away! Can you imagine what this world would be like without any sin? It is going to happen! The Son of God will destroy all the works of the devil.

And here is great good news for every one who will receive the Lamb of God! Not only is the Lamb of God come to take away the sins of the world, but He is come to take away the burden of sin from your life and from mine.

But how was Jesus the Lamb of God? How will He deal with the sin of the world? In what ways does He deal with your and my sin? And what, really, is sin? The word in the text is "hamartia" which is the most common word translated "sin" in the NT, and means "to miss the mark."

Wherever there is sin, there the Lamb will prevail. I cannot tell you the details of how one day the Lamb of God will cleanse this entire world of its murder and cheating and child abuse and war and famine and all that is wrong. But I do know the Book of Revelation (in Rev 6:16) speaks mysteriously of the terrible "Wrath of the Lamb" from which the nations sought to hide in rocks and mountains to avoid; and in Rev. 17:14 we read of the forces of evil warring against and being defeated by the Lamb. We may not know how, but we may be certain that Jesus, the Lamb of God, will cleanse this whole creation from sin.

And, I cannot fathom the depths of God's love that makes it possible, but the Bible tells us a little more about how the Lamb of God can and does take away the sin of individual men and women, boys and girls who simply ask Him! If you have any kind of a sin problem— the Lamb of God can and will take it from you!

I. JESUS Is The Lamb Of God That TAKES AWAY THE GUILT OF WILFUL COMMITTED TRANSGRESSIONS

Every last one of us has done things in times past of which we have every right to be ashamed! We have turned to our own way! If sin is "hamartia," and "hamartia" is "missing the mark," this kind of sin is missing the mark of righteousness because of deliberately choosing to shoot at evil. It is wrong-doing because of wrong choice. This is the sin of which Paul writes when he says: "The wages of sin is death!"

This is the sin of living for all purposes just as though there is no God; it is living without regard to God or His law or His good will. No real Christian lives in this kind of out-broken, habitual, deliberate, willful rebellion against God. And those who do— and at one time this has included us all— those who do are deserving of death. (Romans 6:23.)

But Jesus came to pay the penalty for our willful transgressions: Our iniquity has been laid on Him (Isaiah 53); and If we come to Him for forgiveness he will not cast us out (John 6:37.) The only willful sin which Jesus cannot forgive is the sin which we will not bring to the blood in confession.

[But this is not the only burden the Lamb of God takes from us: for]

II. JESUS Is The Lamb Of God That TAKES AWAY THE POWER OF SIN TO MASTER US

It is one thing to be forgiven and be free of guilt. It is quite another thing to be able to quit habitually sinning.

The reason we shoot at the wrong target, deliberately choose evil, is because sin masters us. In John 8:34 Jesus said: "Whoever commits sin is the SLAVE of sin." We may begin to sin wilfully because we choose to sin— but once we are enmeshed in sinning, we cannot extract ourselves from its filthy grasp.

But in the Exodus, when the Passover Lamb was first revealed to the people of faith, God did not simply want His people to be free from Egyptian bondage, toiling as slaves to make bricks without straw; God wanted His people out of Egypt, and free in

their own Promised Land! And when we come to God for salvation, by the power, the authority of this Lamb of God, we are free NOT to sin willfully any more!

The power of sin is not broken in a second work of grace we call "entire sanctification." The power is broken in the grace of regeneration. We don't stop the life of sinning when we get sanctified! We stop shooting at the wrong mark, deliberately choosing evil, WHEN WE FIND CHRIST AS SAVIOR!

(Indeed, for most people the testimony is that sin begins losing its grip when real "Holy Spirit conviction" comes! You don't even have to be saved to be sick of sinning, and turning away from sinning! When the Holy Spirit begins to press home the rights of a holy God on your allegiance— when He shows you the depths of your need— sin then begins to become "exceeding sinful" (Romans 7:14.) Christians need to re-learn the lesson that it is possible to focus prayers on lost friends and loved ones until this kind of liberating conviction takes powerful hold in their lives.)

[If this were all that the Lamb of God could do for us until He comes in awesome power to cleanse the whole world of sin, it would be wonderful. But it is NOT all, for:]

III. JESUS Is The Lamb Of God That TAKES AWAY THE POLLUTION AND STAIN OF SIN

If the power of sin is broken when we are forgiven, until it is possible NOT to sin— still the pollution and divided aims and goals of life remain. Sin is caused ultimately because of corrupt inner springs of motivation. We miss the mark in our actions, and fall under the mastery of sin because there is within us a twist or a bent to unbelief. We may now be shooting at the right target— but when the air clears we see that there are still at least TWO targets out there for us to aim at. There is God's holy, righteous way— and there is OUR own selfish will and way.

The Lamb of God cleanses from indwelling sin, too. The pollution— the double mind, the "bent to sinning" is REMOVED by the INDWELLING FULLNESS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Peter testified (in Acts 15:9) that on the day of Pentecost, the sanctifying Presence of God "PURIFIED OUR HEARTS BY FAITH!"

And Paul, writing to the Thessalonians prayed that "The very God of peace would SANCTIFY THEM THROUGH AND THROUGH, THAT THEIR WHOLE SPIRIT, SOUL AND BODY BE PRESERVED BLAMELESS TO THE COMING OF OUR LORD"

[All this is pretty straightforward doctrine— and it is good, sound, scriptural. Jesus is the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world.]

What a privilege it is to be able to say:

I AM FORGIVEN! I AM WASHED! I AM WALKING IN THE LIGHT! MY HEART IS FOCUSED ON ONE SINGLE PURPOSE!

But can there be anything more? Yes, there is:]

IV. JESUS Is The Lamb Of God That TAKES AWAY THE CONTAMINATION, THE ROAD-STAINS OF SIN

One of the great blessings which Christians can and must learn is that

1. they do not need to live in willful sin; and at the same time
2. it is all right to pray the Lord's Prayer all the way through; i.e., to ask God for forgiveness on our shortcomings.

Looking at this frankly I have to ask: Is there any place for Wesleyans and sanctified people to ask for forgiveness? Can we ever say: "Forgive us our sins?" We are pretty well locked into Wesley's definition of sin as "a willful transgression of a known law of God"— which is a viable and valuable instrument to keep us from being careless with God's known will. But what about the Lord's Prayer as Jesus taught his disciples? We use the Matthew version (opheelima=debts, that owed, error)— but what about Luke's version which uses plain old "hamartia."

I know there is great wisdom in the old Methodist adage that says "If we start calling mistakes (debts, errors) sins, pretty soon we will be calling sins mistakes." But perhaps one of our greatest strengths- genuine freedom from sin— is also

misunderstood, and becomes the source of one of our greatest weaknesses: we are afraid to admit we ever come short of the mark of perfection in our Christian walk and our service to God.

I am not trying to make any excuse for willful transgression, or for breaking God's commandments. As Christians we don't willfully transgress God's known laws! But what do we do with our feelings? What do we do when we're "left out" and the feeling stays on and we hold it just a little longer than we should (even though we know we ought to pray immediately about it)? What do we do when we're under pressure and we are irritable with the ones we love the most? DO WE JUST IGNORE IT? Do we call it weakness of the flesh and assume it is automatically forgiven? Well— perhaps in God's mercy it is. But it is still WRONG! And if we simply ignore these spiritual failures they become cumulatively destructive!

We all do come short of God's glory, and we all live in a world that is unfriendly to God's love, and we all are touched by the filth and grime of sin every day. And so we need the cleansing grace of the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world to keep us clean and pure, day by day.

We don't need to carry ANY of the load of sin. So we need to hear it (even though Jesus has said it:) IT IS ALL RIGHT TO ASK FOR FORGIVENESS AS A SANCTIFIED CHRISTIAN!

No, IT IS NOT JUST 'ALL RIGHT' TO PRAY FOR FORGIVENESS EVERY DAY; IT IS MANDATORY! BUT NEVER PERFUNCTORILY, NEVER JUST RITUALLY.

It is an abomination if we presume to keep ourselves clean and unspotted from the world apart from humble dependance on the Lamb of God.

Conclusion

It is your privilege to live clean and pure and holy in this world that is so dirty and stained with sin. John the Baptist points us to Jesus Christ, and he says: BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD WHICH TAKETH AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD!

I Thirst

John 19:28 After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst.

I. THE WORD OF HUMANITY

There is always a danger that the most sacred things we know will become mere matters of record. William Barclay recalls another preacher talking about 'running around the burning bush taking photographs from suitable angles instead of taking off our shoes from our feet because the place whereon we stand is holy ground. He speaks of theologians who put their pipes in their mouths and stick their feet up on the mantelpiece and talk about theories of the atonement instead of bowing down before the wounds of Christ.'

I don't like to talk about the suffering of Jesus. I am afraid we might think of it as another statistic or story. How many TV killings have we seen? How cheap does human life appear?

But suffering can never be a matter of statistics.

'I THIRST' must remain a cry of mystery.

The One who created the seas needs a drink of water. Somehow we understand that Jesus Christ is very MAN as well as very God. He is forever committed to be one with YOU and with ME. He is forever one of US!

But 'I THIRST' is assurance of understanding at the throne. At the heart of God is one who KNOWS what it is like to be human and to suffer — to be alone — to hurt — to weep — to thirst! When WE hurt, Jesus hurts! For He cares!

And 'I THIRST' is qualification for representation at the throne. At the heart of God is One who represents the thirsty of the world!

II. JESUS SAID SOME THINGS ABOUT WATER AND THIRST:

1. John 4:14 (to the woman at the well:) But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be a well of water springing up into everlasting life.
2. (At the Feast of Tabernacles) John 7:37-8 In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, "If any man thirst let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth in me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.

We are to share this living water. To slake our own thirst — and then share what we have received. I don't mean to entirely spiritualize this business of thirst and water. BOTH aspects are here.

III. AND JESUS STILL IS SAYING: "I THIRST!"

"I thirst!" is a cry that we must learn to listen for where we are — and with what water we have!

Matthew 25:35, 42 "I was thirsty and you gave me a drink!", or, "I was thirsty and you gave me NO drink."

We cannot do ALL . . . but we all can do what we can do, in Jesus' name. By God's love and grace we can do better.

We can never know why or how Jesus is fully human, and why and how He needed a drink there on the cross: but the One who said 'I THIRST' can satisfy our thirst, and make you and me channels of living water!

Jesus is Lord

Lesson: Matthew 25:31-46

"JESUS IS LORD!"

Christ the King Sunday

Introduction

This is the last Sunday of the church yearly cycle. Next week we begin the wonderful season of Advent. The last Sunday of the year is called "Christ the King Sunday;" when the final chapters have been written, and the books are balanced and closed, the Bible tells us all Creation will acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord of All.

God's Word for today is found in this 25th Chapter of Matthew; Jesus is speaking what shall come to pass. These words are sobering:

I. WE HAVE HERE A VISION OF CHRIST'S GLORY (not A Parable!)

- A. The people knew Jesus as the lowly Nazarene. Now Jesus tells them He is coming again as King and Judge. All the angels of heaven will be with Him— the angels that sang when He was born, and that fill heaven even now with praise— that run to and fro at the bidding of God— now will attend around a throne of great glory and splendor.
- B. Jesus here tells us that human history will be brought to account. What we celebrate on Christ the King Sunday is vividly illustrated in the last enigmatic book of the Bible. The Revelation is a mysterious book which no one fully understands. But the message of Revelation is loud and clear, and that message is that we know who wins the war between Good and Evil!
- C. Certainly not everyone believes this. Darkness and chaos abound; city streets are stalked by fear, and lawlessness has reached into every corner of our land. There are two kingdoms existing side-by-side; there are two ways of looking at life. Jesus tells us we can count on it: He will be here to take charge. The light that shined in the darkness has not been snuffed out; and the darkness cannot comprehend it. Jesus tells us that all Creation must join in the chorus: Worthy is the Lamb that was slain!

But this is not simply majestic and dramatic. Jesus has promised us

II. HERE ALSO, THE PROMISE OF ACCOUNTABILITY FOR US ALL

- A. All nations shall be gathered before this glorious Throne where the Son of Man shall sit. The Apostle's Creed says that Jesus Christ is seated at the right hand of God the Father, "from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead."
- B. This raises questions of "narrowness" and "sectarianism" and "triumphalism." But Jesus Christ is God Almighty, and if God Almighty is Faithful and True, then there must be, there shall be a final accounting. The concern at the Judgment is: HAS THERE BEEN LOVE IN YOUR HEART? HOW HAVE YOU EXPRESSED THAT LOVE?

The moral and spiritual world that is without form and void, and that has darkness upon the face of the deep will hear again the word of Power: "LET THERE BE LIGHT!" And then IN THAT JUDGMENT LIGHT every sin will be exposed, every evil thought and intention of the heart will be brought into full view, and every motivation will be fully understood and rewarded in kind. That is what Jesus is telling us here.

Explain away or edit this passage if you can. Many people will, and do. Tell us what it really meant to those who heard it, or those who thought they heard it and wrote it down in this form. I choose to believe that by the Holy Spirit this is the solemn word of God writing history before it happens. I cannot understand how or where or in what way this Great Azzize will take place. But YOU will be there. And I will be there. I will answer then for this message, and for the life I am living. And so will you.

[This is not a triumph of "us" over them. God is NOT on OUR side. God loves all people, everywhere. But how important it will be then to really be on HIS side!}]

III. AN AMAZING PART OF CHRIST'S PROPHECY: BOTH GROUPS ARE SURPRISED BY HIS JUDGMENT!

They have an identical response! Their love, or lack of love expressed, has been for the most part totally unconscious! "When did we ever see You? When didn't we do

what we were supposed to do?"

IV. WHAT WAS/IS THE DIFFERENCE IN THIS DIVISION OF THE NATIONS?

(After all, these are NOT real sheep and goats; they are people!) THERE WILL BE A DIVISION OF HUMANKIND!

NICODEMUS ASKED THE QUESTION: "What do I need to DO in order to enter the righteous kingdom? And what Jesus told Nicodemus is what we need to remember when we think of Christ the King, and the Day of reckoning:

YOU MUST BE... AND THEN YOU WILL DO!

[How may we "prepare" for the time when we shall stand before this throne of splendor? How do I make sure that I will be on the right hand in the Day of Judgment? Do I set out to be more sensitive? do I make sure I do the good things I should? Do I begin to love more and better?

DOESN'T THIS REFLECT A WAY OF THINKING THAT IN OUR BETTER MORE LUCID MOMENTS WE REJECT— THAT SALVATION REALLY AND FINALLY IS A MATTER OF WORKS AFTER ALL? IF I AM GOOD, THEN I WILL BE SAVED ... AND IF I AM BAD I WILL BE DAMNED?

If I want to be a sheep I don't start out simply trying to act like a sheep. I don't give Jesus "an important part of my schedule;" or start doing good things, and associating with Christians and joining the church; but rather, like Nicodemus I need to hear Jesus say

UNLESS YOU ARE BORN AGAIN YOU CANNOT EVEN SEE THE KINGDOM!

If Jesus and the things of God are a more-or-less important part of my life, the chances are that I am not a Christian. If I am trying to become a citizen of the heavenly kingdom without swearing allegiance to the King I will never be anything but an illegal alien. To see the church as kingdom is much different from being a part of a "church" that exists as an auxiliary to life and living. If we are the sheep of God's pasture, if we are kingdom people, then the church must be a way of life for us. If we

Jesus is Lord

are NOT kingdom people, then we by default become part of the rest of the world, the kingdom of chaos, and hopelessness.

When, by the Spirit of God, I see that God so loved ME that He sent His only-begotten Son to die for me— when by the Spirit of God I see that Jesus has raised from the dead for MY life, for MY victory over sin and death— then I am coming close to birth into this great kingdom.

And when by the Spirit of God I pledge allegiance to the great Kingdom by saying from my heart:

JESUS IS LORD!

then I leave the rank of the "goats" and have been born again as a child of God— I may be counted among His sheep!

We are not saved by ACTING LIKE SHEEP== we are saved by BEING GOD'S PEOPLE OF GRACE, THE SHEEP OF HIS PASTURE— AND THEN LETTING HIS GOD-LOVE FLOW OUT THROUGH US!

AND THAT GOD-LOVE COMES WHEN WE SAY FROM OUR HEARTS: JESUS IS LORD!
DO You indeed say it from your heart this morning?

1. It is a gift of faith to look to the past and see Jesus hanging between heaven and earth, dying on the Cross for you and me, and to truly believe that the Cross was not the end for a great martyr—BUT THE OPENING OF THE DOOR TO ETERNITY BY THE LORD OF LORDS AND KING OF KINGS! It is good, and it is right to say,
Jesus WAS Lord!"

It is a gift of faith to look to the past and see the open entrance to an empty tomb, and know that THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS DEFEATED SIN AND DEATH AND HELL! In the Resurrection,

Jesus WAS Lord!

2. It is also a gift of faith, and even more thrilling to look to the future when our Lord shall return, and the promise is that EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW AND EVERY TONGUE

SHALL CONFESS THAT JESUS CHRIST IS LORD TO THE GLORY OF GOD THE FATHER! I say with all my heart, and I believe it is true that, JESUS WILL BE LORD!

3. But what does SAVING FAITH say? It says, Jesus IS Lord!

Right here and now, in the midst of problems! Right now, when the church is imperfect- right now, I affirm that JESUS IS LORD!

Prayer Read together 125 Yours Is the Kingdom Sing 123 All Hail King Jesus

Scriptures for Christ the King Sunday - November 21

Ezekiel 34:11-17 For thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out. As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day. And I will bring them out from the people, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land, and feed them upon the mountains of Israel by the rivers, and all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be: there shall they lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel. I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord God. I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick: but I will destroy the fat and the strong; I will feed them with judgment. And as for you, O my flock, thus saith the Lord God; behold, I judge between cattle and cattle, between the rams and the he goats.

Psalms 95:1-7 Come let us sing unto the Lord; let us shout for joy to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving and raise a loud shout to Him with praise. For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the caverns of the earth, and the heights of the hills are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands have molded the dry land. Come let us bow down, and bend the knee, and kneel before the Lord our Maker. For he is our God, and we

are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. Oh that today you would hearken to his voice!

Matthew 25:31-46 When the Son of Man comes as King, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his royal throne, and all the earth's people will be gathered before him. Then he will divide them into two groups, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats: he will put the sheep at his right and the goats at his left. Then the King will say to the people on His right: 'You who are blessed by my Father: Come! Come and receive the kingdom which has been prepared for you ever since the creation of the world. I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.' The righteous will then answer him: 'When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we ever see you a stranger and welcome you into our homes, or naked and clothe you? When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you?' The King will answer back, 'I tell you, indeed, whenever you did this for one of these poorest brothers of mine, you did it for me!' Then he will say to those on his left: 'Away from me, you who are under God's curse! Away to the eternal fire which has been prepared for the Devil and his angels! I was hungry but you would not feed me, thirsty but you would not give me drink; I was a stranger but you would not welcome me into your homes, naked but you would not clothe me; I was sick and in prison but you would not take care of me.' Then they will answer him: 'When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and we would not help you?' The King will answer them back, 'I tell you, indeed, whenever you refused to help one of these poor ones, you refused to help me.' These, then, will be sent off to eternal punishment; the righteous will go to eternal life. I Corinthians 15:20-28 But the truth is that Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised. For just as death came by means of a man, in the same way the rising from death comes by means of a man. For just as all men die because of their union to Adam, in the same way all will be raised to life because of their union to Christ. But each one in his proper order: Christ, the first of all; then those who belong to Christ, at the time of his coming.

Then the end will come; Christ will overcome all spiritual rulers, authorities, and powers, and hand over the kingdom to God the Father. For Christ must rule until God defeats all enemies and puts them under his feet. The last enemy to be defeated will be death. For the scripture says, "God put all things under his feet." It is clear, of course, that the words "all things" do not include God Himself, who puts all things under Christ. But when all things have been placed under Christ's rule, then he himself, the Son, will place himself under God, who placed all under him; and God will rule completely over all.

Just As I Am and Waiting Not

Abide...and Ask! John 15:7,8

Introduction

Much of God's truth seems to us PARADOXICAL. We aren't sure whether doing or growing are more important. We are to be BUSY for the Lord, and yet God is more interested in what we are, more than what we do.

We are children of the King, rich beyond all understanding, and yet we are to have the mind that was in Christ, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit!'

Jesus indicated that when He returned He expected a return on His talents; yet Jesus said about a poor woman who cast two pennies into the treasury: "She gave more than anyone else!" The answer to these paradoxes of faith is usually not "either-or." It is "both-and!"

Some of these paradoxes are

1. We are never to be rushed, in haste, at least in the sense of being panicked by situations or crisis. Busy-ness, for the sake of being busy, is not necessarily a good thing. It is hard to imagine God all out of breath, or Jesus overwhelmed by His schedule to the point of frustration; but at the same time...
2. We need to live with a sense of urgency! An urgency that does not comfortably put off until tomorrow that which God expects us to do today! An urgency that sees men and women as lost until they meet Jesus (Jesus at well: "Look at the harvest!")

In other words— we are told to:

1. Wait on the Lord! Be patient for Him! In HIS good time He will come through with His good will! But at the same time we are told,
2. There is a time when we don't wait any longer! There is a time to throw ourselves into the battle:

Judges 4:14 "Up, this is the day!"

Ecclesiastes 9:10 "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might, for there is no work in the grave, whither thou goest!"

I. THE TASKS AT HAND FOR CHRIST'S CHURCH

A. The church as a whole, and as individual congregations:

God has called us to WORSHIP, to WITNESS AND EVANGELIZE, to TEACH OUR CHILDREN AND OUR CONVERTS in the way; and we are also called to FELLOWSHIP, to nurture and encourage one another in the faith- fellowship is more than good times and parties— it is a vital function of the Church of Jesus Christ. Finally, we are called upon to SERVE, to give a cup of cold water, or a blanket, or what we can give to those OUTSIDE the fellowship.

Anything LESS than this, and we are not fulfilling our role as a church.

Anything MORE than this and we have gone beyond what God has called us to do.

B. Could I look at these five functions one time, slowly, with you?

Worship: the central task of the church out of which all other tasks take their strength.

1. To WORSHIP is "the primary task" of the church— and I believe it is impossible to worship well and not be challenged into all the other aspects of the church's task. WORSHIP will be shaped and colored by the culture of the people who worship; native New Guinea people worship far differently from the solid citizens of Scotland. But worship is NOT a matter of simply "doing things right or wrong." Worship is a matter of putting God in the center of all of life and living- worship is the dynamo that makes everything else the church is called to do possible.

2. To EVANGELIZE is a first priority for the church. The last challenge of the Lord Jesus Christ to the church was:

"Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature!"

A church that is not witnessing and winning is at best a sick church, in danger of the Laodocian warning. How a church evangelizes, once again, will be shaped by the situation; but God Himself is the power and the wisdom behind evangelization, and a church that wants to witness finds that, by God's grace, it CAN witness and win!

3. To FELLOWSHIP may not seem such a high priority. But that is because we have emphasized other commands and tasks and have not heeded the imperatives of some other commands, just as vital:

Ephesians 4:32 may just be one of the most important verses in the Bible! and Galatians 6:2 "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

[[HERE DEVELOP THE IDEA OF 'ACCOUNTABILITY' WHICH (1) MORTIFIES THE FLESH; (2) PROVIDES SUPPORT FOR EVERY GOOD IMPULSE]]

We think of fellowship in terms of special occasions, of dinners and get-togethers— and they are good and vital. But the Church is called on to be a center of love and encouragement— a SANCTUARY from the world that lives in isolation and selfishness. Fellowship is the church really being 'FAMILY' in the best sense of that term.

4. To EDUCATE is also a first priority. Only as a church indoctrinates its children and converts can it hope to bring them to maturity; only as it educates can it hope to be more than a 'first stage rocket' in the plan of God to get into His orbit.
5. To SERVE is a vital part of every church's ministry. Jesus Himself gave the example; He washed dirty feet the night before He went to the Cross for the salvation of the world!

C. EACH CHURCH WILL HAVE A DIFFERENT 'PROFILE' OF THE EMPHASES OF THESE TASKS THAT WILL FIT THE TIME AND PLACE IT SERVES.

That is why "programs" often do not transplant well. Bus ministries, circles of concern, friendship evangelism, and all— must be totally adapted to the situation by much prayer and by humility of lay and clergy leadership in not pretending to know all the answers in advance.

II. THE TASKS AT HAND FOR EACH MEMBER OF CHRIST'S CHURCH

Where do "I" fit into this plan, these tasks— how may I be a part of the church of Jesus Christ as He would have me to be ?

A. I HAVE A UNIQUE ROLE.

Just as each church has its own profile, so each Christian is different from every other. God does not expect us to do what He has not equipped us to do.

Every command of God— as it becomes personal— is also a promise and an enabling! What God expects of ME is what will suit ME best!

B. MY ROLE WILL 'SPECIALIZE' TO A DEGREE, BUT WILL ALSO TOUCH ON ALL THE TASKS OF THE CHURCH.

I will certainly need to WORSHIP! I will witness, I will have a role in education somewhere; I will certainly need to receive and to GIVE the encouragement of fellowship. And every last one of us must seek to have the servant heart that Jesus had.

Still God calls each of us to be strong in one or two areas of this work of the Body of Christ.

C. "JUST AS I AM, AND WAITING NOT..."

This is the altar song we believers need to sing to ourselves! I must be up and about what God wants me to be and do! The key is NOT WAITING!

1. Not waiting for some celebrity to lead... God's work is NOT validated when it becomes popular and we see it on TV. It is validated the minute we hear God speak. Contrary to much thinking, the majority of God's work is done without fanfare and is done in the local situation.

2. Not waiting FOR THE FULL PROGRAM. It is great to get organized, and even greater when the organization is on fire with holy zeal. But we can be used of God every single day! We can be channels of blessing, even when the program hasn't been fully developed yet.
3. Not waiting UNTIL I HAVE A CLASS TO SHOW ME HOW... although such classes are wonderful— but simply LIVING TO PLEASE THE LORD... 'reporting for duty every day!'
4. Not waiting FOR THE ONE WHO CAN DO IT BETTER. This is a particular cavil (frivolous objections) of the larger church.
5. Not waiting UNTIL I AM IN THE INNER CIRCLE. In a large church it seems more people are 'outside looking in'— or think they are. But actually we need to seek our strokes from God Himself, and plunge in even when we feel 'left out' at times. It is amazing how God will sweep us into the center of the stream of His grace when we take this attitude.

Conclusion:

The 'bottom line' of the Christian faith— the REAL Christian faith— is L I F E !! If we live in Christ the Vine, it will get out on us! We will EXPRESS that life.

Many charismatic and near-charismatic ministers emphasize the "expression" of praise, by which they mean hands raised, and "Amens!" And that is good . . .but . . . Somehow I think the expression of life will also be manifested in doing the works of Jesus Christ: HEALING the brokenhearted, LOVING the unloved, BEARING one another's burdens,

Remember the great promise of John 15:8 - which, amazing to behold, comes right after John 15:7

This may be 'The Year of Christ's Return! In any case, let's live this year by the PARADOX: Let's WAIT as never before! And let's live with a new urgency to do our Master's bidding!

#190 - A Charge to Keep I Have

Make Way for Hope

Isaiah 12:1-6 "...with JOY shall ye draw water from the wells of salvation..."

Romans 15:4 "Now the God of HOPE fill you with all JOY and PEACE in believing, that ye may abound in HOPE, through the power of the Holy Ghost."

(Introduction:) " We've all heard the innocent expression, 'Thank God It's Friday!' But that innocent statement is really a confession! A confession about the quality of HOPE! The idea of 'hope' for many people is limited to something on the level of a WISH that the weekend weather won't be too bad."

I. LIFE WITHOUT REAL HOPE IS LESS THAN LIFE! IS INTENDED TO BE

- A. We might be so bold as to speak of 'The Curse of TGIF!' It is a confession of failure when a person really comes to live by a TGIF total mind-set. It is a tragedy when people only are alive part of the time. It is a tragedy when people are only alive when they are being excited or thrilled or somehow escaping the life sentence of eternal boredom.
- B. What TGIF really is is a kind of HOPELESSNESS! It is the confession that life, for the most part, is a dead end street. It is saying that all of life does NOT have meaning. HELL IS LOOKING FOR A BREAK ON THE WEEKEND THAT NEVER REALLY COMES!

The saddest fact I know is that people can live out their lives in an empty "Thank God it's Friday" mind-set, and go out into an eternal night and never have known the joy real HOPE can bring!

[Transition: But a change takes place when people meet the Lord Jesus Christ! Same old job— same old "personality traits"— same old situations, perhaps. But somehow everything is different!]

II. SALVATION BRINGS WITH IT A MEASURE OF HOPE

A. Grace opens the eyes of HOPE

Salvation changes the WAY we live, but salvation also begins to change the way we LOOK at living! We not only receive adoption and regeneration and justification, we have the makings of an entire new OUTLOOK ON LIFE! We start with the persuasion deep within that somehow life in Christ Jesus is worth the living!

B. But HOPE must be deliberately pursued, developed!

There is the possibility of a full assurance of hope! In Hebrews 6 there are verses which read: "And we desire that every one of you show diligence... to the full assurance of hope ... that we might have a strong consolation ... to lay hold upon the hope that is set before us." We need diligence in pursuing hope to a full assurance!

C. God's grace will naturally lead us into HOPE if we diligently endeavor to walk with God.

Romans 5:2-5: *"We have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only so but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience experience; and experience, hope: and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us."*

III. MILLIONS ARE WAITING THIS FOR WORD OF HOPE!

A. A world in darkness is waiting for a word of hope.

Born-again Christians need hope for themselves. They need to recover the joy and the power that come from living in full assurance of hope.

But beyond this basic selfish reason for the need of hope, there is another powerful, compelling reason why we must lay hold of hope! We don't dare leave the Advent-type HOPE to the faithful of the Old Testament! Our God is

coming again light and in power— and He wants us to be beacons of His light!

"The people who sit in darkness" are not just those who lived in Isaiah's time! And all those who don't know Christ and salvation would love to be convinced that there really is HOPE in THIS dark hour! The unsaved world is waiting for a word of hope.

- B. But, sadly, even a great segment of THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST is living far below the level of HOPE that our text calls us to! There are many Christians, born-again believers, who would love to think that there is more to being saved than just hanging on by our teeth and our toenails until Jesus returns to bail us out of this mess. Especially new converts, instead of hearing older Christians take a defeatist attitude, would like to hear a genuine note of HOPE sounded!

William J. Abraham, in a challenging new book, *The Coming Great Revival*, says, "There is a vast army of new Christians hungry for initiation into a modern version of the Christian faith that will integrate DEEP PIETY, SOCIAL ACTION, and CLASSICAL THEOLOGY in a penetrating expression of the Christian gospel. A renewed evangelical tradition that holds in tension both its unity and its diversity can provide exactly this." (p 112)

All the world would like to hear a genuine word of HOPE!

IV. HOW DO CHRISTIANS 'LAY HOLD' ON HOPE? (HOW MAY WE BECOME PEOPLE OF HOPE, AND THEN, EXPONENTS OF HOPE?)

- A. First: HOPE is NOT dependent on the size of our talent, OR the happy circumstances of our situation. Hope has to do with saying "YES!" to LIFE!

Listen to these words from Howard Thurman:

"Granted that the daily routine is monotonous, that the personal equipment is extremely limited, that all the options were frozen long ago, that there is nothing on the horizon that sounds the trumpet call to the great adventure or the high demand— granted all of this. But there is always available to the

individual another alternative even where options are frozen. One can make an offering of the self to God... to respond to life where I am without bargaining or bartering."

And somehow a life deliberately given to God gathers HOPE like a magnet gathers iron filings! CAN GOD HAVE YOU JUST NOW? WILL YOU SAY YES TO LIFE! ?

- B. Second: Saying "YES!" to LIFE must be on God's terms, and must be HOLISTIC. We cannot start out by "knowing in advance everything God wants us to do!" But we may be certain that our response to LIFE must involve EXPERIENCE, and PRACTICE, and also CREED or DOCTRINE! ALL THREE FACETS OF LIFE IN CHRIST!

Too often we see a part of this truth— and think the answer is DEEPER PIETY, or BETTER SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY. But we must be open to the possibility that our DOCTRINE, our UNDERSTANDING, has limited both our faith and our hope. In a large measure, all throughout the evangelical church— we Christians are more involved in defending a particular position than in opening our hearts to the power of God's truth!

- C. (I know I am prejudiced, but) I BELIEVE WE WESLEYANS HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE A CATALYST IN A REAL RENEWAL RENEWAL OF HOPE!

We stand (in a sense) between the extremes in doctrine and practice— between fundamentalists and charismatics. If somehow as a CHURCH we could recapture the genius of Wesley in his deep reverence for scholarly theology and ecclesiology and couple that with his sacrificial dedication to the poor and needy, the orphan and the prisoner, and put that together with his God-given gift for folding each and every convert into a spiritual-life group— we would be a powerhouse of HOPE in a dark and needy world!

William Abraham said:

"Wesleyans need to recover not just the genius of the Wesleyan heritage in its theology, they also need to recover its genius for organization, social involvement, ecumenical action, and world mission. For example, the single

greatest loss over the years within Wesleyan circles has been the abandoning of the pattern of pastoral care established in the class meetings. Unless this or a modern equivalent is restored within Wesleyan circles, renewal will be mostly cerebral and cosmetic. Without this, young converts will not develop the spiritual stamina needed to survive in the modern world."

I am praying that in some measure we here can catch this vision.

- D. But sermons are not just to churches, they are to individuals, too. And each one of us needs to be 'taking hold on HOPE!'

We need to have the same kind of Advent-type hope the faithful men and women of God in the Old Testament had as they looked forward to Christ's coming!

1. We personally need to recover the reality of the experience of a clean heart. We dare not settle for shibboleth or second-hand assurance here. But we also need to go into the Word in a measure that we have not commonly done:
2. We personally need to recover the disciplined and methodistic love of creedal, scriptural truth and doctrine! And all this time...
3. We, each one of us dare not neglect the debt that all Christians have to society!

[Conclusion:]

Maybe I haven't convinced you that "Thank God it's Friday!" is the major curse of the world today. But just maybe I have been able to challenge you not to wish your life away, and seek to escape from the boredom of life, but instead to decide to live by HOPE, hope that makes life worth the living!

Micah on Main Street

Micah 6:8 He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

The Old Testament is the Bible Jesus used. The God of the Old Testament is not to be disparaged, for He is the God of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And the prophecies of the Old Testament must be read with faith and obedience for today, and not merely with a critical eye and an editor's pencil. ["Oh, This is not relevant; and that is what was meant— we don't have to pay any attention to Old Testament words!"]

Micah's message is amazingly fitting to today— this time in which we live. He speaks with precision to the spiritual situation of our time.

It is true that being translated from another language much of his pungent style is lost, for by our marginal notes we can see and understand that his mind turned to puns and ironic twists on the names of towns that stood in danger of judgment. [GATH meant 'tell,' so Micah said "Tell it not!"; BETH OPHRA meant 'dust,' so Micah said "Roll in the dust!"] But if Micah were preaching today he would say: "Philadelphia! City of Brotherly love! What do YOU know about brotherly love? Los Angeles! City of Angels! or Providence! You have forgotten the Provider! And so forth!"

But even though we miss something of the keen use of language which Micah had, as Mark Twain said, 'it isn't what is hard to understand about the Bible that disturbs us— it is what we cannot help but understand that hammers us into the admission that we need God! Micah is like that.

I. MICAH ON MAIN STREET: THE MESSAGE

- A. Micah cries against a religion without a vital connection to God (3:5-6 says the Lord, concerning the prophets who lead my people astray; when they have something to bite with

their teeth they cry, "Peace," but against him who puts nothing in their mouths, they declare holy war. Therefore it will be night for you- without vision, and darkness for you- without divination. The sun will go down on the prophets, and the day will become dark over them.") The last thing in the world that I wish to become is a holier-than-thou-type separatist; I thank God that there are many, many non-Nazarenes who are part of the Church of Jesus Christ.

But at the same time we need to be careful that we worship and align ourselves with people of the Book, of the Spirit, of the 'sold-out-to-God!' In the name of social progress we will be called on many times in the near future to join forces with political expediency, which is fine so far as it goes. But we need to be careful of using religion to give legitimacy to humanist causes! Try calling a prayer vigil at the mausoleum in Quincy Square in the cause of Right to Life, instead of Amnesty International! See what kind of "spiritual coalition" emerges!

- B. Micah also cries out against all witchcraft and soothsayers: (5:12 "I will cut off sorceries from your hand, and you will have fortunetellers no more. I will cut off your carved images and your sacred pillars from among you, so that you will no longer bow down to the work of your hands.") It is an insult to Almighty God when His people look for guidance to the horoscope charts and the tea leaves of infidels or druids. Jesus said that when the Holy Spirit is come, HE will guide you into all truth! What possible connection can God's people have with the occult, except to their own shame and darkness?
- C. Micah denounces widespread covetousness and grasping and materialism: (2:1,2 - and many other places- "Woe to those who scheme iniquity, who work out evil on their beds! When morning comes, they do it, for it is in the power of their hands. They covet fields and then seize them, and houses and take them away. They rob a man and his house, a man and his inheritance.") There is the distinct possibility (it seems to me) that we in America, in the Church of Jesus Christ, are where the Church of Laodocia was as described in the Third Chapter of Revelation: we think we are rich, and so very wise, and have need of nothing! And the Third World church that has so little is becoming vital while we decline!
- D. Micah was not afraid to cry out against corrupt government, even in a totalitarian regime that could kill him! (7:3 Concerning evil, both hands do it well— The prince asks, also the

judge, for a bribe, and the great man speaks the desire of his soul; so they weave it together. The best of them is like a briar, the most upright like a thorn hedge.) What would Micah say in our society— where most politicians are much more interested in getting elected than they are in integrity; where, if a wealthy white man and a poor black man commit the same crime one will pay a comparatively light fine and the other will go to prison ? What would Micah say about the lawmakers who have knuckled under to power blocs and pressure groups and have made laws to kill babies, and to legitimize perverted and deviant behavior like blatant homosexuality, calling it 'alternative lifestyle?'

We can be certain that he would decry it! He certainly cried against these things in his own day! And yet, against such a bleak and seemingly hopeless backdrop, MICAH'S MESSAGE WAS A MESSAGE FULL OF HOPE!

II. MESSIAH WILL TRIUMPH!; THIS IS THE HOPE!

- A. A vision of PEACE over all the earth: (4:1-3 And it will come about in the last days that the mountain of the Lord will be established as the chief of the mountains. It will be raised above the hills, and the peoples will stream to it. And many nations will come and say, 'Come and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord and to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may teach us about His ways and that we may walk in His paths.' For from Zion will go forth the law, even the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And He will judge between many peoples and render decisions for mighty, distant nations. Then they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they train for war.) This vision of peace will be fulfilled in the Reign of Jesus Christ.

But remember when He comes He will not come peacefully! He will not slip in as a bringer of "peace at any price!" THAT will be someone else!

- B. That vision is centered, not in human politics or wisdom, but in the Person of Messiah! If we will look, all truth is centered, ultimately, in GOD, THE PERSON! (5:2 But as for YOU, Bethlehem Ephrata, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel, His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity... and (v4) He will arise and shepherd His flock IN THE STRENGTH OF THE LORD IN THE MAJESTY OF THE NAME OF THE LORD HIS GOD. And they will remain because

at that time He will be great to the ends of the earth. AND THIS ONE WILL BE OUR PEACE!)

And all this is well and good— even gripping and vital, as Micah speaks to our day and age.

(transition)

But the challenge of Micah goes beyond the world-wide— and beyond warning and hope for the world at large— and becomes a challenge of what God requires of ME in the midst of all this!

God's complaint against His people is a clear, concise statement of what God asks of HIS people. AND THIS REQUIREMENT IS STILL VALID:

III. A HOLY PEOPLE: THE STANDARD GOD REQUIRES

- A. Micah shows us the total failure of earning our way to heaven: (6:6.7 With what shall I come to the Lord and bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, with yearling calves? Does the Lord take delight in thousands of rams, in ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my first-born for my rebellious acts, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?) How can we make it up to you, God, for the rotten way we have lived? And the awful answer comes back: YOU CAN'T!

But then comes this simple, easy-to-understand outline of our text:

- B. The simple outline: "DO!" "LOVE!" "WALK!" (6:8 - text)
1. What we DO reflects what we are!
 2. WHY we do is the basis for God's judgments! (Our INTENTION! Perhaps we cannot understand all our motivation, but we can ask God to purify our heart springs; and we can deliberately side with God on every issue!)
 3. But we can neither DO nor LOVE apart from WALKING HUMBLY WITH OUR GOD! That is the secret of power in our faith!
- C. The DYNAMIC of holiness: Walking humbly with our God!
1. (Apart from God's constant company) the best of human intentions are actually ARROGANCE! Saying/thinking that WE know already what the Bible

means— we reflect that we have eaten from the Tree of knowledge of Good and Evil, but NOT from the Tree of Life!

2. (But also apart from God's constant company) the best of human intentions fail to relate to the whole orb of truth. "We put little parts of the puzzle together" with no understanding of the significance of the whole.
3. (Apart from God's constant company) even the Sermon on the Mount becomes an impossible ideal. For the law of love must be imprinted on the human heart by the fires of a personal Pentecost, a time when the Holy Spirit comes to reside and to preside in the heart forever!

CONCLUSION: (Thus:)

D. To walk humbly with our God means:

1. A deliberate CHOICE! (Amos 3:3) "Can two walk together except they be agreed?"
2. To walk with God means there has to be some change/ some adaptation on the part both of God and of man!
 - What stooping God has done! But He cannot compromise with falsehood and sin!
 - What JOY surrender means for us! HOLINESS makes us fit to fellowship with God!

E. Such a walking means:

1. Fellowship with God!
2. Direction of life into MEANING!
3. An unbroken relationship that goes beyond DEATH into

ETERNITY (Enoch-like) for us ALL!

#241 His Way with Thee

Ministering from Maturity

Holiness and Maturity

1 Peter 1:16

I. 'Holiness' Is A Way, Not An End

In the right and proper emphasis holiness preachers place on experience, we have sometimes heaved a great sigh of relief and joy when good altar work is completed, feeling that somehow our hardest work is done.

Perhaps the hardest work is done when the crises have been met. But being justified, and even being sanctified wholly, are not points of 'arrival.' They are more properly points of departure, entry points into fellowship with Jesus and His church.

We are made holy in entire sanctification, not in order to parade righteousness or exult in our sanctimony, but in order that we may have to do daily with the Holy One. "Be ye holy, for I AM holy!" is the command.

II. What Are The Goals Of A Mature Holiness Ministry?

The following list is hardly comprehensive.

1. Child-like faith that is not childish.

The mature Christian increasingly learns to live with paradox. as, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" and "You are complete in Christ; seated with Him in power" (Colossians 2:10,3:1), or 'God is Sovereign' and 'Men and women are free moral agents' or 'God is Transcendent' and 'God is Our Friend', etc.

And part of this mature child-likeness will ponder the imponderable questions, as 'Why do the righteous suffer?' and 'What about those (billions) who have never heard of the Lord Jesus Christ?'

2. Ministering from Completeness.

Part of the paradox mature Christians must accept is that the poor in spirit are blessed and that mature Christians are complete in Christ, sharing His authority.

Ministering from completeness reflects a basic concept of God. Somewhere in the backs of our minds we have hidden something we heard once in VBS, that God made all the beautiful things like the sun, moon and stars, but then God was lonely, and so out of His loneliness and need God said: "I will make man so that I can have fellowship!"

It sounds nice— but it isn't so— and it is very dangerous. God never could lack anything! It sounds nice to say "He has no hands but our hands!" and there is an element (paradox) of truth in the statement. But we need to remember that God the LORD is GOD! God is Sovereign! God is complete!

He made us out of His love and completeness! And so when we serve we must serve, not with the idea of building merit or seeking to save our own souls, but rather we must serve from love, like God! We must seek to serve in the power of His might, and do His will, in His power.

3. Gathering and Scattering.

The mature church will gather to share the joy of God's Presence in worship. "Training" will take place although the sermon cannot possibly detail how to proclaim Christ in every situation and circumstance. But if we can "gather" to celebrate the Presence, and then in various groups "reinforce" the purpose of our existence and clarify our gifts and call, then we will "scatter" to take Jesus Christ in His beauty and life-changing power wherever it is that we work or play or fellowship.

4. Diversity of ministry.

A mature church may well have many different expressions of proclamation. Many of them will be "church-owned" and church- directed. Missionary endeavors such as work-and-witness, support groups, prayer and Bible

study groups are just a few of the varied church ministries that along with youth work and Sunday School are the staples of mature ministry.

But there will also be church-related or church-approved ministries, and even "non-religious" work done by Christians that are no less called to their assignment than the clergy.

Perhaps only 20% of active members should be engaged in maintaining local church activities. That leaves a full 80% to be engaged in carrying out those ministries, or serving Christ with the support of the local body where they are placed.

[I have one woman who used to be a district missionary president who is now executive secretary for a judge in public social work. She influences many people for Jesus, and often brings them to church with her. (Doris Restricks)]

5. World Vision.

A mature church does not have to be a large church. But it will not be small in its vision or thinking. A mature church will cross lines of membership and even denomination to support the larger picture of God's work in its area. There is a "Church of Jesus Christ" in every area to which a local congregation may seek to be an active part. It is possible to be totally loyal to the Nazarene church family, and to the local church family, and at the same time seek to be a catalyst for revival and Christian love and brotherhood throughout the great Church of Jesus Christ.

For your participation: If personnel and money were no limitations, what would you attempt for God in your present situation?

Our Father

An oldie but goodie.

The air conditioning in the Catholic Church had broken down, so they had to hire a man to crawl around in the ducts to figure out what was wrong. As the man peeked down through one of the vents in the sanctuary, he saw his neighbor, an elderly lady who was kneeling by the altar apparently saying her rosary. The man just could not resist the temptation to mess with this poor lady's mind. In his most authoritative voice, he said, "This is Jesus. Your prayers will be answered."

The little old lady didn't even blink; she just kept on saying her prayers. The man decided maybe she didn't hear him, and tried again. "This is Jesus, the Son of God! Your prayers will be answered!"

Again, she didn't react at all. Mustering up a big breath of air, the man decided to try one more time. He loudly repeated, "This is Jesus Christ, the Son of God! Your prayers will be answered!"

This good Catholic woman looked up and answered, "Young Man. Quiet, please! I am trying to talk to your mother!" [i]

Prayer. It can be humorous. It can be frustrating. It can be rewarding. It was apparently rewarding for Jesus, for he appeared to his apostles so energized after a night in prayer that they asked him to teach them how to pray.

It's interesting that the apostles had to ask Jesus how to pray. He had taught them many things, tools they would need in their ministry. Why hadn't he taught them to pray? Perhaps because the only real prayer, the one that's always answered, is the prayer that asks for the Holy Spirit. Jesus says at the end of today's gospel "If you, evil as you are, know how to give good things to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" (Luke 11:13).

But you can't tell someone to pray for the Holy Spirit. They have got to want to; they have to feel the need. And that's something Jesus couldn't force on the apostles. But when they finally did ask him, when he saw they had the need, then he taught them to pray.

Also, for Jesus prayer was a private matter. He had seen too many hypocrites crying out in the public square, praying to draw attention. Jesus told his apostles to go their room and pray in private.

Jesus spent nights in prayer. He must have felt the need for prayer as greater than the need for sleep. "True prayer, the sincere unburdening of one's soul before God, may not change things but changes people. As C. S. Lewis said: 'Prayer doesn't change God; it changes me.' [ii]

True prayer is finding out what God wants us to do, not getting him to do what we want to do. "A disciple goes to an elder and says, 'I really like it here, and I'd like to stay. But I need to know, does your God work miracles?' The elder replies, 'It all depends on what you think is a miracle. There are those who say that a miracle is when God does the will of the people. But we say here that a miracle is when people do the will of God.'" [iii]

A minister was invited to speak at a women's conference. During the program, the chair of one of the organization's committees announced plans for a new mission project and challenged the membership to take on the goal of raising several thousand dollars for the project. After her presentation, the chair turned to the minister and asked if he would pray for God's blessing upon the project. But to her surprise, the minister graciously declined.

"You already have the resources necessary to complete this mission project right here in this room," he told the women. "It would be inappropriate to ask for God's blessing, when God has already blessed you with the abundance and means to achieve this goal. The necessary gifts are in your hands. As soon as we take the offering and underwrite this mission project, we will thank God for freeing us to be the generous, responsible and accountable stewards that we are called to be as

disciples." [iv] God rejoices in our persistence to have him grant our prayers. He wants to work in coalition with us. We see this in the first reading where Abraham barter with God on how many just people need to be found in Sodom and Gomorrah for God to spare the city.

"Does this mean that without Abraham's mercy God would not have had mercy? Who knows? It didn't happen that way. What did happen was that a creature pressed the Creator for mercy and it was granted [for ten just men. Unfortunately not even ten could be found].

In that light the strange teaching of Jesus in Luke 11 becomes clearer. God encourages persistence in praying because in that way a coalition is formed. The compassion of a creature joins with the compassion and power of the Creator, and a situation turns from rigid legalism to mercy. Abraham discovered in his persistence that God was not always a rigid legalist. Abraham also discovered in his persistence that God invites dialogue, even though to some of us it may seem aggressive. God asks for strong partners. [v]

Abraham shows persistence. Jesus also underlines this quality in prayer in a small parable he tells at the end of the gospel about a friend coming at night to another friend and knocking on his door till his friend got up and gave him what he wanted.

"There is a company in the Midwest that specializes in handling subscription mailings for various magazines. Among other things, they send out renewal and expiration notices. But one day the company's computer malfunctioned. As a result, a rancher in Powder Bluff, Colorado, received 9734 separate mailings informing him that his National Geographic subscription had expired and that it was time for him to renew. In response to that flood of notices, the rancher drove the ten miles to the nearest post office and sent in his money for the renewal. In addition, he sent along a note that said, "I give up! Send me your magazine." In a way, the subscription company learned that persistence does pay off." [vi]

Heartwarming is the encouragement that persistence will make a difference in the ultimate outcome. God will not fail to meet our needs. That's not the same as assuming God will meet all our wants. There's a difference.

God's initial silence after we come with a pressing need should not reduce us to a bitter cynicism that wonders whether prayer is worth the effort. God's silence doesn't necessarily mean "No." The silence is more likely a testing whether our prayers are truly expressive of our need, truly representative of our desire to share our greatest hopes and fears with God. Overriding everything is the great truth that, unlike earthly fathers who may or may not provide what their children need, God will never fail us because God is both eager and able. That is the final and great lesson.

The challenge for us, I should think, is not how well we can craft touching prayers when we have ample advance notice. It is rather how well we know that our words don't matter a bit but that what counts is how well we trust. When faith and trust move us, the most illiterate peasant will be able to pray as well or better than the most eloquent preacher. Best of all, no one should feel the need to ask, "Lord, teach us to pray." [vii]

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a prayer, and a miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune would be averted. Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to say the prayer, he would go to the same place in the forest and say, "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer." Again, a miracle would be accomplished. Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say, "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place, and that must suffice." Once again, there was a miracle. Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God, "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and that must be sufficient." And it was sufficient. Again a miracle occurred

and the misfortune was avoided. There is nothing magical about the Lord's Prayer. Rather the reward of prayer is found as we consistently turn to God in faith. [viii]

And finally, if you make your life a prayer, you can end up like grandpa.

A little boy approaches his slightly older sister with this question: "Susie, can anybody ever really see God?"

Busy with other things, Susie curtly replies: No, of course not, silly. God is so far up in heaven that nobody can see him."

Still wondering, he approaches his mother: "Mom, can anybody ever really see God?"

"No, not really," his mother says gently. "God is spirit and he dwells in our hearts, but we can never really see him."

This answer satisfies him for the moment, but he still wonders.

A few days later his beloved old grandfather takes his grandson on a fishing trip. They have a great time together - it has been an ideal day. As the sun begins to set, the grandfather stops fishing and turns his full attention to the beauty unfolding before their eyes. On seeing the peace and contentment on his grandfather's face, the boy thinks for a moment and asks hesitatingly: "Grandpa, I - I wasn't going to ask anybody else, but I wonder if you can tell me something I've been wondering about for a long time. Can anybody ever really see God?"

The old man does not even turn his head. A long moment slips by before he finally answers. "Son," he responds quietly, "it's getting so I can't see anything else." [ix]

[i] Frank Lyman, "Friends come through for friends," *Dynamic Preaching* 16 (3): 29 (Seven Worlds Corporation, 310 Simmons Road, Knoxville TN 37922) July 2001. Fr. Gerard Fuller, o.m.i.

[ii] Lyman, pg. 32.

Our Father

[iii] Mark G. Boyer, "Hearing and acting on God's word," Readings - 111, Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (The Thomas More Association, 205 West Monroe St. — Sixth Floor, Chicago IL 60606-5097) July 2001.

[iv] "The gift is in your hand," Seventeenth Sunday of the Year, Connections, (MediaWorks, 7 Lantern Lane, Londonderry, N.H. 03053-3905) July 2001.

[v] R. Clint Hopkins, "Serving the word," Homily Service 34 (4): 59 (Homily Service, The Liturgical Conference 415 Michigan Ave. NE, Suite 65, Washington D.C. 20017-1518) July 2001.

[vi] "Staying in touch," Lectionaid 9 (3): 33 (LectionAid, Inc., P.O. Box 19229, Boulder, CO 80308-2229. J. Nichols Adams, publisher) July 2001.

[vii] Gerald Oostervan, "Pastoral implications," Lectionary Homiletics 12 (8): 32 (Lectionary Homilitecs, Inc., 13540 East Boundary Road, Building 2, Suite 105, Midlothian, VA 23112) July 2001.

[viii] "Staying in touch," pg. 33-4.

[ix] __Connections.

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Our Living Lord

Romans 8:34 Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.

On Easter Sunday my temptation is to try to be profound. After all, this is the day the most people come to church. Except at college churches. The fact is that the simple message itself is beyond enlarging. And that simple truth is encapsulated in this one verse:

I. JESUS DIED . . .

With every other person who was ever born it would be a great wonder if they did not die; with Jesus it is truly remarkable that He did die. By His own words (John 10:18) "No man taketh my life from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord." And then—"Father, Into Thy hands I commend my spirit."

- A. Christ's death was a triumph of love. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13)
- B. Christ's death was a mighty, effective redemption. "By His own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us." (Hebrews 9:12)

But the text goes on:

II. JESUS ROSE AGAIN . . .

This is the most incontrovertible fact in all of history. The disciples believed Jesus was alive again. And people do not martyr themselves for lies and deception.

- A. His rising was a PERSONAL triumph. It was a vindication of His integrity. He was who He said He was! As Peter said on the day of Pentecost: "It was impossible that death should hold Him!" (Acts 2:24)
- B. But His rising is also a triumph for the whole human race (a whole NEW race! "But now is Christ risen from the dead and become the first fruits of them that slept." (I Corinthians 15:20)

(Transition:) But this triumph is not just sometime in the dim future when we die, for:

III. JESUS ASCENDED TO GLORY . . .

A. Jesus came to do a task. He came to defeat sin, to destroy the works of darkness and hell; and having finished that task He assumed again the glory that was rightfully His.

"I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Thou Me with Thine own Self with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was." (John 17:4-5)

B. This dazzling brilliance is hard for us to comprehend! The risen Lord is still the same Jesus—yet He is somehow gloriously different!

1. He must be spiritually revealed/discerned: Mary, Peter, Cleopas, Upper Room
2. He is awesome, even to the beloved disciple (Revelation 1:8.17)

But perhaps best of all:

IV. JESUS MAKES INTERCESSION FOR YOU . . .

In this glory and power at the center of the Universe, this risen Christ is now engaged in His great work.

A. Jesus is forever identified with us. He became like us so that we may be like Him.

"Beloved NOW are we the sons of God, ... we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him." (1 John 3:2)

B. At the throne we are loved! Romans 8:35 (the next verse after our text) asks: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Friends are not easily offended!)

C. And we are prayed for at the Throne!" Not just in our hour of death . . . (which is in itself wonderful) . . . but power over spiritual death and separation.

Conclusion

Because Jesus lives, we have all that we need in order to live in the power of the Resurrection here and now! These are the simple, profound facts of Easter: Jesus

DIED, Jesus is RISEN, Jesus is SEATED IN GLORY, and Jesus MAKES INTERCESSION FOR US so that nothing can ever separate us from His love.

But the simple truth of Easter is not just something we "learn;" it is a Person we RECEIVE!

1. If we will receive Him, Jesus will personally reveal Himself to each of us:
2. He will forgive our sin and our rebellion;
3. He will assure us of eternal life; and
4. He will unfold His will in the living out of His grace.

Prayer

Worthy is the Lamb! Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever. . . Amen!

EH #36 Alleluia! Alleluia!

Parable of Seed and Soil

Luke 8:4-15

Introduction

This is a familiar parable. It appears in Matthew and Mark and Luke. And Jesus even explains it Himself. So even a child can understand it easily. It is so simple that we may not take the time to look at it carefully.

But it is both simple and profound.

And it is a very important parable. Look with me at the explanation Jesus gave. He spoke first of all about the seed. Before He talked about the different kinds of soil, and what they signify, Jesus said something vital about the seed that was to go into the soil. He said (verse 11) that the seed is the word of God.

I. THE LIFE IS IN THE SEED IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT THE TRUE SEED BE PLANTED.

There can be no compromise. No matter how GOOD we are— nor how cultivated and sincere and earnest we may be, until the seed of God's word has been sown by the Holy Spirit within our minds and hearts and lives we cannot grow into Christ-likeness.

[ILLUS: Can you imagine a farmer saying "We're going to make extra effort for a big crop this year. We're going all out.

"We're going to do extra cultivation. We're going to do extra fertilizing. we're going to put in a new sprinkler system and water whenever there is dryness.

"But good seed is so expensive that we're going to plant rye grass instead of expensive wheat." [IDIOCY!]

THERE CAN BE NO COMPROMISE ON SEED!

- The SEED is the LIFE. The seed is life. There is LIFE in the word when it reaches into our heart by the Holy Spirit.

- The SEED is the GOSPEL! The seed is the Gospel - the truth of the cross and the empty tomb. But it is MORE THAN FACTS. By the Holy Spirit the WORD gives LIFE! We understand [we come to believe] that God wants to make His home within us!
- The SEED is GOD'S LIFE SET FREE, RELEASED, GROWING WITHIN US!

The seed is "unlike" the full plant in its appearance; and we may reject ITS WEAK APPEARANCE; it seems to wrong thing to want to overcome and so to plant the seeds of submission and surrender and confession and the like.

BUT THE POWER OF THIS SEED IS INDOMITABLE.

II. THE SECRET OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS RECEIVING AND HOLDING THIS SEED AS IT GERMINATES AND GROWS

The familiar part of this story is the story of four kinds of soil. We remember: some fell on the path and the birds got it; some fell on rocks and sprang up only to wilt when the heat was on; some fell among thorns and when the wheat grew so did the dandel and so the wheat was choked.

Think with me about this familiar part again:

1. THE SEED THAT THE BIRDS GOT.

[People that are "so smart" that God never has a chance to let them know genuine LIFE!]

The seed never germinated. Never really had a chance. Hardened. Busy, busy place. No reception into incubation. NEVER REALLY GOT THE MESSAGE THAT GOD CAN COME RIGHT INTO OUR INSIDES AND LIVE WITH US AND LOVE US DAY BY DAY!

2. THE JOYFUL SKYROCKET!

[People who live ONLY by how they FEEL!]

Warm reception. Lots of feeling. No real soil preparation; no discipline whatsoever.

Here is the classic case of perpetual immaturity! We are fond of saying: "Purity is NOT maturity!" and looking the other way when people continue to live on the basis of how they FEEL long after they should be living by what they KNOW!

Maturity is not usually considered as part of holiness. It is "OK" to stay juvenile— or is it? It is OK to keep wrestling with the battles of identity over and over again (and I AM sympathetic! There is childishness in ALL of us to some extent!) But when do we stop living for hard rock and settle down to breaking up the depths of our souls for Jesus to have us clear to the bottom? Skyrocket goes up like a bullet, explodes like the creation of the world, and then goes out into darkness that seems darker than it was before.

Maturity is one of the goals of true holiness!

3. THE SEED THAT GOT CHOKED.

[People who lose sight of the most important things in life!] Here, to my mind, is a real tragedy!

A lot of work went into this ground. It was pretty well prepared. Ground that is tender catches more than just good seed, however.

Gardens have to be tended. No exceptions. RELATIONSHIPS SIMPLY WILL NOT MAINTAIN THEMSELVES! There is an enemy that specializes in sowing tares— darnel, false wheat-and there is enough bad news to go around.

Jesus said: "As they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, AND BRING NO FRUIT TO MATURITY!"

And so, finally, all the hard work goes for nothing! If the LIFE that was in the SEED is not manifested, the garden is a failure!

4. THE NOBLE GARDEN.

There are reasons for the other kinds of soil. But this is where we need to live! And by God's grace we CAN!

Parable of Seed and Soil

Jesus says: "These are those who hold the LIFE in an honest and good heart AND BEAR FRUIT WITH PERSEVERANCE!"

It isn't hard to bear fruit!

You don't even have to TRY to bear fruit!

What is hard is STAYING OPEN AND OBEDIENT AND GIVING THE CHRIST-LIFE A CHANCE TO GROW WITHIN YOU! If the life is there, and if you hold it with an honest and good heart and don't quit, YOU WILL BEAR FRUIT!

III. WE MUST LEARN TO TRUST THE SEED!

[As James says (Jas/ 1:21) "Receive with meekness the engrafted WORD which is able to save your souls!"]

1. THE SEED OFTEN DOES NOT RESEMBLE THE MATURE, FULL-GROWN, FRUIT-BEARING PLANT.

The human way to seek "success" is to focus on HUMAN MODELS. We want to "stick an adult plant into the ground." We look for results, and we look to methods, and to models.

God's way is to let the LIVING WORD sink down into our hearts and do a miracle that is both unique and powerful.

2. In our PERSONAL lives: Assurance, soul-winning, growth in grace spring from humility, and openness before God, from confession and weakness before the Lord.
3. In our corporate life, CHURCH-WIDE: We look for results, for numbers—to 'Pastor Cho' and his church of 200,000 members, we take trips to seminars to see how/what others are doing. (And seminars have their rightful place!)

But healthy, growing, powerful churches are UNIQUE! They spring from healthy seed (the Gospel) in well-prepared ground!

Conclusion

We can be abundantly fruitful, both personally and as a church!

Let's claim the power of John 15:8— which comes right after John 15:7 ! Here is a prayer that cannot fail! All we have to do is pray it honestly and openly—

"By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples." (NASB)

IF in fact the Holy Spirit has planted the seed of christ's gospel, the life of Jesus, within our hearts and beings!

Exalt Him #66 *May the Mind of Christ, My Savior*

Peace Through a Higher Focus

THE SPIRIT OF JESUS

Lesson: Philippians 4:6-9 Text: 12-18 ("What then?")

Preface: If a man in prison can tell me how to experience real joy and peace- tell me in practical terms- and can demonstrate the same- I'll buy the book! But we all already have the book! Let's look at it these four Sundays in August! [One would-be master writer ... with means ... made an idyllic place to write (I've forgotten his name;) ... Paul wrote about LOVE and about JOY and about PEACE from prison!]

INTRO:

'DEFINING' "PEACE"

1. The word 'peace' is almost a cliché. What really is peace? Defining "peace" is a little like defining "health." We usually use negative terms: absence of disease. But health is MORE than just not being sick; and God's peace is more than just absence of tension and the storms of life. (Harmony/ tranquility/ serenity)

One thing we know is that Jesus gives peace to His people as their right: He wills that we shall know His peace.

But having it in the "will" and appropriating real peace are two different things.

2. 'Peace' does not mean we will never face tension or struggles or storms of life. Peace does not mean we sail the wide seas no more.

Many of us struggle with emotions that will not behave at times; some people know acute emotional stress. Still I believe that peace that passes understanding, peace that keeps the heart and the mind are for me and for you!

WHAT ARE THE ELEMENTS OF THIS PEACE JESUS HAS FOR HIS PEOPLE?

I. The Foundation For God's Peace Is A FREEDOM From THE GUILT And The DOMINION Of SIN.

There is a lack of awareness of sin in much of our world today. That does not erase the fact that existential unrest - lack of peace- exists where SIN, its GUILT and its POWER have not been dealt with.

TO ENTER GOD'S PEACE WE MUST KNOW OUR SINS FORGIVEN, AND OPEN OUR HEARTS TO GOD'S CLEANSING

II. The Structure Of God's Peace Is A SELF-WORTH That Comes From Belonging To God, To His Family.

This peace connects directly to what we call VALUABLE in life.

We cannot have peace if our self-worth depends on secondary good things. WE CAN NEVER HAVE REAL PEACE IF OUR GOALS IN LIFE ARE WRONG, OR IF THEY ARE FUZZY!

1. Real PEACE is built upon a separation from the idols that the world worships. Almighty God is the enemy of all false gods, and He will never give peace to those who worship lesser deities, whether they are pagan idols, or whether they are "things" and "positions" and "feelings."
2. Many of the things that the world worships are good servants, and God is not diametrically opposed to "things;" He simply will not give peace to those who make "things" first in their lives.
3. TWO THINGS are wrong with setting our first priorities on 'lesser gods.'
 - a. If we don't achieve them they frustrate us!
 - b. If we DO achieve them they frustrate us! To know God's peace we can deliberately surrender our goals for God's transforming light ... ask Him to show us the privilege of being His children, and ask Him to show us His goals for our lives!

III. The Experiencing Of God's Peace COMES IN 'LETTING GOD BE GOD!'

[Easy to say; not always easy to do!] It is when we can find 'detachment' from God's work! (We don't have to do it ourselves!)

GOD IS SOVEREIGN, HE IS IN CONTROL! AND GOD IS THE MASTER- BUILDER, HE WILL ACCOMPLISH HIS PURPOSE! We can trust Him that He will do what He says He will do!

A. WE CAN EXPERIENCE Peace in the matter of CONTROL:

1. WE DON'T HAVE TO SEEK TO CONTROL OTHER PEOPLE (We can't make over that spouse! We are not living through that adult son or daughter!)
We cannot seek to STEER other people, situations!

2. WE DON'T HAVE TO BE STEERED BY OUTSIDE PRESSURES!

B. AND WE CAN LEARN Peace in the matter of RESULTS!:

PAUL isn't building the church! Paul isn't RESPONSIBLE for building the church! Paul IS responsible to do Paul's job! Paul belongs to Jesus.

But when Paul has done his best and ends up in jail Paul can honestly say, "So WHAT!" God WILL do what God alone can do! WE CAN BE FREE FROM RESPONSIBILITY FOR RESULTS!

HOW CAN WE EXPERIENCE THIS PEACE THAT JESUS GIVES?

Conclusion

A simplistic start toward renewed peace in your life ... foolish enough to speak of three simple steps:

1. We can OPEN UP to God! Don't hide anything! Tell Him how you feel! But be sure to confess your sin, your need of Him. And that doesn't END when you are soundly saved! STAY OPEN! That's the foundation!
2. We can continue to SEEK AFTER God! [Paul: This ONE thing I do!] Don't insist on YOUR way — and don't let any person or any group tell you what God's will is! Surrender your claims, your rights to God alone! Ask HIM to give you life goals and values! Don't stoop to be a multi-millionaire if God wants you to be a servant!

3. And, by God's grace we can learn to LET GOD BE GOD! (20 'Christ will be exalted in my body') This is a LEARNED thing! But as we do our faithful best to obey because we love ... Paul says: THE PEACE OF GOD WILL KEEP YOU! AND THE GOD OF PEACE WILL BE WITH YOU! That's how Paul could say: "So what!" Let HIM be responsible for the results! Perhaps you and I are a bit behind Paul in the school of perfect personal peace. But I am pretty certain that even Paul himself had to work at the job of maintaining his peace.

You don't have to have a perfect setting to have peace .. nor [thank God] do you have to be in jail, either!

#409 Singing I Go

Personal and Professional Guidelines

April 18, 1999

ONE - Only ONE God!

Try to focus every day on pleasing God:

"God wants me to be primarily concerned with pleasing HIM, and not too much concerned with pleasing anyone else, no matter how good or godly."

TWO- Two Tables of God's Law

- I. No other gods
- II. No idols
- III. Holy Name (reverence)
- IV. Holy Day (time apart)
- V. Honor father and Mother (family)
- VI. Do no murder
- VII. Do not commit adultery
- VIII. Do not bear false witness
- IX. Do not steal
- X. Do not covet

Jesus summarized them: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all your heart, soul, mind" and added, "The second is like unto it: Love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

The first "table" enables and empowers the second; they cannot be separated.

THREE - THREE OFFICES OF CHRIST

- Prophet - challenge of the Word
- Priest - Mediator between God and humanity (you, me)
- King - Focus of cooperative relationships of the kingdom

This ties in perfectly with our observance of the church yearly cycle:

- Advent - a vision of God so loving that he sends his Son . . O Come, Emmanuel
- Lent, Good Friday, Easter - the Son of God as both sacrifice and High Priest
- Pentecost - the ushering in of the church which must be "organized" by coordinating power of the
- Holy Spirit "He has made US to be kings and priests" the disciplinary grace of God to organize and vice-regent our own sphere.

FOUR - FOUR MARKS OF THE CHURCH

- One
- Holy
- Catholic
- Apostolic

FIVE - FIVE TASKS OF THE CHURCH

- Worship - VERTICAL
- Evangelism -OUTWARD
- Fellowship -INWARD
- Education -INWARD
- Service-OUTWARD

. . . .that's all (for now) folks! :-)

Personal and Professional Guidelines 2

IN SUMMARY (2)

I. AUTHORITY

Wesleyan Quadrilateral

Scripture

Tradition

Reason

Experience

. . . Heavily weighted to Scripture.

II. EVANGELISM

or, how people come to know God and salvation:

(Wesleyan)

1. Awakening
2. Enrolling
3. Justification
4. Sanctification

(Modern) (George Hunter in Church for the Unchurched)

1. Discovery We matter to God

2. Relationships

to God's people

to God (discovering prayer)

3. New Life

desire to do God's will

discovering a love for God's people

a freedom in Christ (from sin's power; legalism)

4. A New Life-style

in the world but not of it (different drummer)

service and ministry (discovering gifts/purpose)

witness (telling others- mission)

we discover who we are (identity)

AUTHORITY

Who tells the church what to do? Who is my boss?

The Bible, of course!

"God said it, I believe it, that settles it!"

Sounds great . . . So why 200 denominations?

NAZARENE - WESLEYAN - ARMINIAN

So- my boss is a denomination? A D.S.?

In one respect, I suppose so . . . But remember

GOD WANTS ME TO BE PRIMARILY CONCERNED WITH PLEASING HIM, AND NOT TOO MUCH CONCERNED WITH PLEASING ANYONE ELSE, NO MATTER HOW GOOD OR GODLY.

So how do us Wesleyans come out sort of thinking the same way?

WESLEY'S "QUADRILATERAL"

Scripture

Tradition*

*Tradition is the living religion of people who have died

*Traditionalism is the dead religion of living people . . .

Reason

Experience

HOW PEOPLE COME TO GOD AND SALVATION

Wesley (probably over-simplifying)

Awakening

Enrolling

Justification sought and found

Sanctification pursued

Modern Adaptation (George Hunter)

Discovery

New Relationships

New Life

New Lifestyle

Discovery

People matter to God

YOU matter to God

New relationships

With God (through prayer)

With God's people (the usual pocket hit)

New Life

Seeks God's will (into the Word)

Loves God's people (finding fellowship)

Finds freedom (sin's power broken)

New Life Style

In the world, but no longer OF the world (does not "follow the crowd")

A heart for others/ service (gifts that build up the Body)

A desire to share (witness of word and life)

Discovering identity; unique yet Christ-like

MOTIVATION & MORALS

The discovery of Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development was a breakthrough in helping me with motivation.

I thought of motivation as getting people to do something– usually what I thought they ought to do– to give, to witness, to build the church.

People do "the right thing" for widely different reasons at different stages of their lives.

III. POST-CONVENTIONAL (PRINCIPLED LIVING)

II. CONVENTIONAL

I. PRE-CONVENTIONAL (peek UP from bottom on this one)

I. PRE-CONVENTIONAL

Rewards and punishment– right is what is rewarded. Wrong is what is punished.

Or

Quid pro quo - I'll do right by you so you'll do right by me

II. CONVENTIONAL

By definition where most people live:

"Right" is doing what is accepted as the thing to do.

"Right" is living by the rules that make one a "good citizen" or "good scout" as long as it is what is seen as acceptable.

III. POST-CONVENTIONAL

"Right" is what is perceived as good for all concerned; behavior is not changed whether or not other people know or see what is being done.

"Right" is living by principles seen as universal; observed by the "Unseen Observer"

So– what does this have to do with my basic pastoral understanding?

JOHN 4 - JESUS AT THE WELL

'THREW AWAY' A POWERFUL UNDERSTANDING OF 'WORSHIP'

JESUS SAID THERE ARE THREE WAYS TO WORSHIP GOD

IGNORANT

INTELLIGENT

SPIRITUAL

Promise of Joy

December 12, 1993

&=bsp; A =ROMISE OF JOY

Sometimes I wonder, since the Bible tells =s that Jesus was born like a light shining into a darkened world, how much darker the =orld could have been then than it is right now! A hundred years ago optimistic Christians in this country were saying that with just a =it more education we would usher in the Millennium. And yet in =his century more people have been killed in wars, and in religious persecution, and in so-called ethnic cleansing than in any other period in recorded history, and perhaps more than in all previous history combined. If ever we needed Messiah's Light, we need it just now!

Jesus has changed this world already. =any millions have found that He is as good as His word. It is impossible to imagine what =his world would be today apart from the leavening influence of the Holy Spirit holding back the tides of evil and darkness through the Body =f Christ on earth. But unless something like a new challenge to turn =o the light is heard and heeded our civilization is headed for anarchy and chaos. I do not need to re-play the evening news; you did not come to church to be depressed. But what this world needs is the message of John the Baptist: Prepare the way for God to come!

I. (John 1:6-8) A MAN WITH A PROMISE

A. He was a strange, mysterious figure, this man they =all 'the Baptist.' His looks were odd; he might be called a "mountain =an" in our day. His social skills were unorthodox to say the least— =e spent most of his time in solitude, or at least with just a few disciples in the desert.

Promise of Joy

But this man was sent from God! He =as a man! And he was sent! John the Baptist bridged the gap from Old Testament prophet to New Testament evangel. He had a rugged, uncompromising message. =e called sin by name. He did not despise the poor; he even gave soldiers (fighting men) hope of salvation.

John the Baptist was remarkable for his =umility. He had disciples, which indicates that people believed in his integrity. =ut John did not claim more grace than he had. And when Jesus came =long John pointed the way to the Light. His testimony was "He must increase! I must decrease!"

John came for the purpose of proclaiming = PROMISE! "God has spoken," he declared. "One is coming after me who will baptize =ou with the very Spirit of God!"

B. The church today needs to recover this same message: PREPARE =HE WAY OF THE LORD!

We are bearers, like the herald angels, =f a promise of great JOY! Like John, we may be voices crying in the wilderness. =ut if we will cry, the message will be heard! Only God knows what would =eed to take place for us to see one last Great Spiritual Awakening. =e may not bring about Millennium. But we can tell the world they may trust God's Promise of GREAT JOY!

II. (Psalm 126) TEARS BEFORE HARVEST

A. A hole where JOY should be

The world probably does not understand =hat JOY really is.

There is a lot of laughter around, but not too many really happy people. There are many kinds of so-called =quot;entertainment," but not very many people can say they are truly "fulfilled." And =atever JOY might be, there is an extraordinary amount of un-joy around. =here are many refreshing exceptions, but a lot of what we are being =aught

is selfishness, hedonism, nihilism. The popular expression is "Take care of number one!"

So we have people bruising people. People hurting, and being hurt. Thank God in the Christian community sometimes we remember the admonition, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ!" But sometimes even we forget!

B. That HOLE is "God-shaped

The seemingly logical answer to the need for joy is to seek after it. But it is not ever quite that simple. For JOY is not an obvious end in and of itself. That is, if we set out simply to please ourselves we can never quite make the speed that kicks us out of our self-bound orbit. Joy comes as the mighty by-product of delightful relationships! Joy is difficult to define, and there is a mysterious aspect of this "fruit of the Spirit." But we might say that JOY IS AN INNER HARMONY OF POWERFUL SATISFACTION THAT COMES AS A WITNESS TO RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS, AND THE PRIMARY RELATIONSHIP OF ALL IS PERTICAL!

B. (Psalm 126) The Psalm today gives two interesting aspects of this joy.

1. Surprisingly, the first is not our joy at all, but God's! See it there on the back of your worship folder:

I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in My people, the sound of weeping and crying will be heard in it no more.

It is thrilling to me to think that the very heart of God rejoices when we, His children, look to Him with love. It is a source of joy to any child to realize that he or she is bringing pleasure to a parent. [How long has it been since you sincerely took pleasure in your child, and expressed it?]

Promise of Joy

2. But the other aspect of joy is the =eliberate investment that is demanded if we are to be able to rejoice in God and in His assignment for us.

Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of =oy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, =ill return with songs of joy carrying sheaves with =im.

If there is no sowing, there will be no harvest of joy. Joy is =lways the result of having faith in a dream or a vision or a promise— and then investing in that promise:

the JOY of a game well-played and won
the JOY of V-J Day, when a great deal more was =t stake
the JOY of the last BAPTISM here in this =anctuary, as the candidates testified to DEATH TO SELFISH WAYS and to LIVING WITH AND FOR JESUS CHRIST!

C. (I Thessalonians 5) This is how Paul can urge us =in the epistle (see it there on the back of your worship folder:)

Be joyful always! Pray continually! Give =hanks in all circumstances! This is God's will for you =n Christ Jesus!

We may rejoice for the God who calls us to His holy fellowship is =he God who makes us able. We become His new creation!

III. (Isaiah 65) CREATION NOW!

Isaiah 65: 17-28 The promise of a new heaven and new earth; the call =o rejoice in what God is creating; and His greatest creation is YOU!

The changed nature - "The wolf and =he lamb shall graze together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox; and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not do evil or harm in all my holy mountain, says the Lord."

This is a return to the theme of Peace under the Rule of Messiah; the theme of what we sometimes call "The Millennium," as seen in Chapter 11. Prophecy literalists see only a time in the future when these beasts of such different and incompatible instincts get along and "a little child shall lead them."

Certainly this poetic prophecy speaks to us of God's ability to create that which He has promised. A new heavens, a new earth will be remarkable. But the kind of creation spoken of here is beyond belief, apart from the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

 x x x

When the shepherds finally came to announce the birth of Messiah, after the silence of centuries their first words were

Behold I bring you glad tidings of great joy which shall be to all people . . . Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of good will.

There was immediacy in that announcement. At that very time Jesus Christ had come! Immanuel was not just a promise any more, for in the very flesh here was God, bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, in the manger of the stable of the inn in Bethlehem.

There was also promise of that which was yet to be in that announcement. The angels sang of a joy which shall be to all people. The darkness had not yet been dispelled. The light was shining, small as it seemed. The promise was that the light would never be extinguished, and that in fact it would one day illumine the whole earth.

Real Solutions to Real Problems

SUNRISE MEDITATION

2 Corinthians 5:17 Therefore if any person be in Christ they are a NEW creation; old things have passed away, behold all things are become new!

The Revelation Moment We revere the Christ of Calvary, for there He poured out His life in order that we might forever live in Him. But Calvary is not the end of the story! The empty Tomb, the Risen Savior manifested, is the necessary climax of the drama of eternal life.

And did you ever ask yourself how YOU know Jesus is really alive? I. DRAMA AT THE EMPTY TOMB

All our salvation can be epitomized in a sunrise moment:

Mary, empty, sad, weeping, even worshiping, comes to do homage to a dead Hope, a dead Lord. She has heard the words of life. She has known the Savior so very well that no one could ever deceive her.

Still- Mary did NOT know Jesus when He met her that first Easter morning. Why, do you suppose? Tears in her eyes? Marred, mutilated face? Darkness?

"Mary!" When Jesus spoke her name something happened!

"Rabboni!" Joy! Faith! Understanding! LIFE! WAS THIS 'RECOGNITION MOMENT' UNIQUE TO MARY?

When we speak about the Risen Lord we are speaking about the mysterious, wonderful LIFE that is the place where heaven touches the earth! It is true what is written in this Book we call the Bible. But just knowing it and even believing it intellectually does not mean that we know the risen Lord! II. PAUL AND THE CORINTHIANS

Some of them had heard Jesus preach. They had seen Him; they said to Paul, WE knew Jesus— YOU did not!

But Paul said, (II Corinthians 5:16) Even though we have known Jesus after the flesh, yet from now on we do not know Him that way any more!

WE must know Jesus in an even more intimate way than the disciples who walked with Him and ate with Him and heard Him speak knew Him! Can you believe it?

Jesus must be personally revealed! III. DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN THE HOLY SPIRIT SPOKE TO YOU ABOUT YOUR NEED OF A SAVIOR?

Jesus calls YOUR name! He says, YOU have sinned! YOU need a Savior! I love YOU! And He calls YOU by name!

And YOU say, with Mary: RABBONI! MASTER!!

That is what 2 Corinthians 5:17 is all about: IF ANY MAN, IF ANY WOMAN, IF ANY BOY, IF ANY GIRL BE IN CHRIST, THEY ARE A NEW CREATURE! All because Jesus, by the power of His Holy Spirit, the Risen Jesus, comes near and makes Himself known! That is the "recognition moment!"

Prayer: O Jesus, Be Thyself to Me— a living, bright Reality! Amen!

The Abiding Reality of Pentecost

John 14:23; John 16:8-11

John 14:23 "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him."

Introduction

When we say, "What happened at Pentecost?" we often see what we have been taught to look for; we have the answer before we have the experience and the personal sense of need. To be exposed to the holiness teaching is for the most part very good indeed; it helps us into the experience of full surrender plus faith that brings cleansing and power and fullness of the Presence! But all the same, I'm convinced that much of what took place cannot be analyzed and explained. And yet I believe with all my heart that the same Holy Spirit that came to and into the church in the second chapter of Acts still comes to live in the church today.

What does the Bible show us about the abiding Presence of God in the church and in our individual lives? WHAT HAPPENED AT PENTECOST ?

I. SENSIBLE EVIDENCES AT PENTECOST

The Initial Signs of Pentecost:

A. RUSHING MIGHTY WIND:

Signifying the uncontrollable nature of the Spirit, (not that we are 'out of control, and made puppets; but He, God's Spirit, is NOT simply at our beck and call, for us to use); cleansing, powerful, breath of God Himself. This very evidently was NOT something "private," or confined to the immediate participants. The NOISE was heard. It brought a crowd.

B. TONGUES OF FIRE:

Cleansing, powerful, fire from the altar of God. It reminds us of Isaiah vi.

C. OTHER TONGUES:

Intelligibility, universality, THE REVERSE OF BABEL; when man is glorified it does not 'make sense;' when God is glorified, there is communication from God to man to man; giving of the law into the very heart.

II. UNFOLDING PROMISES AT PENTECOST

The mighty work of the Holy Spirit begun:

A. THE HOLY SPIRIT A TEACHER (John 14:26)

The Helper will TEACH you all things; and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.

B. THE HOLY SPIRIT LIFTING UP JESUS (John 15:26/ John 16:14)

When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, He will bear witness of ME. He shall glorify ME; for He shall take of Mine, and shall disclose it to you.

C. THE HOLY SPIRIT CONVICTING SINNERS OF THEIR NEED OF SALVATION (John 16:8,9,10,11)

And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment;

D. THE HOLY SPIRIT GUIDING THE CHURCH IN ACTION (John 16:13)

But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide YOU into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. All these BEGAN to come to reality as soon as the disciples received the fullness of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

There was no higher Lordship than that of Jesus; AND WHEN THE CHURCH RECEIVED THE SPIRIT, THE WORLD BEGAN TO BE CONVICTED OF SIN, AND RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND JUDGMENT! THAT IS STILL THE FORMULA!

III. THE OPEN SECRET OF PENTECOST

JESUS, WHO WENT AWAY INTO HEAVEN, CAME BACK IN THE PERSON OF THE HOLY SPIRIT TO ABIDE IN HIS DISCIPLES' HEARTS

The ABIDING Reality: God making Himself at home in the human heart.

The word "abiding" has various connotations: as constant, enduring, eternal, immutable, lasting, permanent. To "abide" also has the connotation of "being at home." Of "living there!"

Look again to our text for this Pentecost Sunday evening: John 14:23 "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him." THAT is Pentecost!

A. THIS ABIDING, SO FAR AS WE ARE CONCERNED IS INITIATED BY LOVE FOR JESUS CHRIST:

("If anyone loves ME!") We do not receive the "abiding reality" if we do not love Jesus!

B. LOVE IS GENUINE WHEN IT INVOLVES A DESIRE TO PLEASE:

("If anyone loves Me he will keep my words.")

C. LOVE FOR JESUS IS RETURNED: THE FATHER RESPONDS WHEN WE SEEK TO BE LIKE JESUS.

("My Father will love him")

D. The result: "WE" will come to live with the one who loves Me! My heart God's HOME!

Conclusion

In our holiness tradition we give great importance to the experience of heart holiness. We understand that consecration plus faith will bring the fullness of the Presence! WE DARE NOT STOP SHORT OF THIS EXPERIENCE! We must have the fullness! We must know the blessing!

But the EXPERIENCE is vitally connected with our RELATIONSHIP- the way we think about God, and act toward Him!

The Abiding Reality of Pentecost

We say: "What has God DONE for you?"!! "Do you have the EXPERIENCE?"!! And sometimes we talk as if the EXPERIENCE was something like a "thing" or a "gift" that we can have in and of itself.

The way into EXPERIENCE is by RELATIONSHIP! The question is not so much, "What has God DONE for you?" but "Who IS God to you?" It is not so much asking God to GIVE us— but asking God to help us LOVE HIM, AND GIVE OURSELVES TO HIM!

Jesus said: "If you LOVE Me . . . WE, the Father and the Son, by the ministry of the blessed Holy Spirit, will come to you, and live IN you!

Prayer: Lord Jesus, Make it so! Amen

#63(EH) We've been singing Wesley all day. Charles Wesley. I'd like for us to close with a song by Paul Gerhardt, a German— but one that John Wesley thought so much of that he translated and rhymed it into English: Jesus, "Thy Boundless Love to Me"

The Atonement - What is Salvation

Romans 5:1-11

Introduction

In answering the question, "What is salvation?" it is absolutely necessary that we deal with the need for atonement.

There is only one place in the entire New Testament where the English word "atonement" is used, Romans 5:11, although the same Greek word (kat-al-a-GAY) is translated "reconciliation" in several other places. And "atonement" or "reconciliation" is at the heart of being "saved", being right with God.

There are at least six shades of meaning that can be brought to mind when we use either the word "atonement" or "reconciliation," or seek to express the truth these words convey.

- It can mean that which brings together estranged parties, making them "at-one-ment" or, of the same mind.
- It can mean the state of mind itself that exists when reconciled parties have been brought together.
- It is sometimes used to mean an apology; sometimes a grieving or apology to those who have died, and we cannot make amends directly to them.
- Most frequently "atonement" means a substitute for a penalty— a person willing to step in and take care of the punishment or fine.
- The Old Testament idea has the idea of a covering, and applies to anything that might hide a person's sins from God.
- But in the New Testament is the highest expression of the meaning of atonement. There it speaks of the propitiary sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross for the sins of mankind.

In non-technical words: the Bible tells us what we already know by instinct- that somehow we want to be near God, but are out of touch with Him; but by His love to

us in Jesus Christ, we can be brought near, made to know and love and have fellowship with Him. This "coming near" is by Christ's atonement.

I. SOME DOCTRINAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE ATONEMENT

A. A DEFINITION

I know it is extremely old-fashioned to quote theologians, especially conservative theologians. But on this world-wide communion Sunday I want to define what we mean by "atonement:"

1. We define the atonement of Jesus as "The satisfaction offered to divine justice by the death of Christ for the sins of mankind, by virtue of which all true penitents who believe in Christ are personally reconciled to God, are freed from the penalty of their sins, and entitled to eternal life." (Richard Watson, in his monumental Theological Institutes, 1851.)
2. Or, another definition, "The atonement is the satisfaction made to God for the sins of all mankind, original and actual, by the mediation of Christ, and especially by His passion and death, so that pardon might be granted to all, while the divine perfections are kept in harmony, the authority of the Sovereign is upheld, and the strongest motives are brought to bear upon sinners to lead them to repentance, to faith in Christ, the necessary conditions of pardon, and to a life of obedience, by the gracious aid of the Holy Spirit." (Thomas O. Summers, Systematic Theology.)

I understand this simply to say that in Jesus Christ, by His death on Calvary, we have been offered the free gift of eternal life. LIFE HAS BEEN OFFERED TO ALL WHO BELIEVE!

B. A NECESSITY

I also know it is extremely naive to believe that atonement is necessary. For "sin" has all but disappeared from the vocabulary and from the thinking of our culture. We live in a no-fault, no-sin society.

But all the same, all have sinned, and desperately need to be reconciled to God. We may have the image of God, but not all people everywhere KNOW God or have Him in their thoughts. So atonement is needed, on your part and mine, because we have sinned.

And atonement is needed on God's part, also. For He is perfectly holy and just. And even though He yearns with love for His creatures, He cannot fellowship with sin. And so He needs Someone to take away the creature's sin so that God can know again (what Dr. Bob Hubbard called last Tuesday) "the Eden experience."

C. A CENTRAL SCRIPTURAL TRUTH

Before I leave this "doctrinal side" of my message, I would show how the scriptures clearly point to Jesus as the only One who can reconcile us to God.

1. In the Old Testament, the doctrine of atonement unfolded beginning with the primitive sacrifices of the pre-Law, pre-Mosaic time, when Abel and Noah and Abraham, and no doubt many others who sought after God offered sacrifices and were accepted of God.
2. Then came the sacrifices prescribed by the Law, and given in detail in Exodus and Leviticus, where God made it plain that life was precious, that the life was in the blood, and that without the shedding of blood there was no remission for sin.
3. But the high point of Old Testament understanding of "atonement" came in the prophetic statements of the One Who would come to bear the sins of the world.

Listen to Isaiah 53:4-5:

"Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed."

II. JESUS HIMSELF IS OUR ATONEMENT

But all doctrine, and all necessity, and all scriptural fulfillment are found in Jesus Christ Himself. And Paul, the greatest theologian of all summed up my understanding of the atonement in four words, found in Romans 5:8. They are the words of my text for this communion worship hour: "Christ died for us."

Will you say them with me, reverently? "Christ died for us."

The closing part of my meditation today has three parts, each of which I will open with a question. And the answer to each question is the text, these four words: "Christ died for us." But the emphasis is different, with the stress being laid on the obvious answer. You will understand as we go along.

A. WHO died for us? "**CHRIST** died for us!"

It is a humbling thing to be died for! And we all have had moments of reflection when we have pondered the wonder of ordinary men who have gone off to some foreign land because they loved this land— and there they have died so that we would not have to be enslaved. Maybe THAT is old-fashioned and corny, too. But I have stood at Arlington National Cemetery and felt deep emotion to think that here lie men who have died for me.

But all others who have died for us have bought life and freedom that is limited, and that will one day end. They themselves were sinners, and needed atonement. If there were only someone who were NOT a sinner, who was willing to die, and would not have to purge his own sins— then his death would have vicarious, substitutionary grace.

And if that perfect, sinless person were God Himself, infinite in power and grace and life, then his acceptance of our penalty would satisfy perfect justice. And this is exactly what happened. As Cecil Alexander wrote in the hymn,

There Is a Green Hill Far Away:

"There was no other good enough To pay the price of sin He only could
unlock the gate of heav'n, and let us in."

But there is a second question:

B. Christ DID WHAT for us? "Christ **DIED** for us!"

Jesus Christ not only came to reveal God, as the Eternal Word, He came to make us the sons and daughters of God as we receive Him by faith!

And so He has fully paid our penalty for sin. If we will receive the free gift of atonement, as the Holy Spirit enables us to reach out and take it by faith, we shall be saved. NOT because sin is not deadly, and NOT because we have not sinned, and NOT because God has simply "excused" sin. But because Jesus DIED, and so we do not need to pay the penalty ourselves! Jesus DIED for us!

And there is a final question:

C. Christ died FOR WHOM? "Christ died **FOR US!**"

This is where God the Holy Spirit makes the truth of "atonement" very personal! The truth of salvation is magnificent, and hard to grasp in all its splendor— that God should care for mortal men and women. But that He should care for common, ordinary people like me and you is incomprehensible apart from divine revelation.

But God does care! And Jesus died not only for great and famous people in other times and other places; Jesus died for you, and for me— for us who are gathered right here and right now in this place!

The atonement is HERE!

The Challenge to Faith

Exodus 4 and 6, selected passages

When Moses first attempted to lead his people out of Egyptian bondage, his efforts were a resounding and total failure. He was gifted, and well-trained, and he was utterly sincere. He was willing to put his life on the line. But the very best that Moses had to offer was far too little for the task at hand. And somehow God did not seem interested in helping Moses in his project.

The failure of Moses was the final scene in what we could call "Act I" of the drama of his life. And Moses' life was dramatic! It began with the faith and love of a mother and father that hid him in a basket in the bulrushes along the Nile. It continued with the almost unbelievable adoption into the royal family of Egypt, but with his own Hebrew mother as his nursemaid and teacher. There is no doubt that Moses felt in his own heart that he was destined for some role of leadership and noble greatness. But at the age of forty Moses tried to fill the role of emancipator, tried with all his own strength, and was bitterly rejected by his own people. He turned his back on Egypt and left, a failure.

But now, forty years later- yes, at an age when many people have no strength at all- Moses was back on the scene in Egypt. How he got there, and what he had done and seen and experienced is a thrilling story. We know that he had encountered God! The hot-blooded, impulsive, arrogant Moses was now Moses the meek. Somehow in the first attempt it had been 'Moses the gifted whiz-kid' pitting his talents against injustice, with the hope and prayer that God would see the wisdom of siding with him.'

But now it was Moses the meek, obedient to God's direct commandment, and instead of Moses against injustice, it is now GOD and Moses against the injustice! And that is quite a difference! But remember, it was still the same person- Moses. The same human being, a lot less glamorous, a little less sure of himself, a bit sun-baked, with leathery skin, perhaps. The same leader that the children of Israel had rejected out

of hand before. And now they believe him! The Exodus is about to begin. And I am very interested in just what made these people decide that this message was really from God. Just what constitutes a LEGITIMATE challenge to faith?

I. FAITH IS ALWAYS A DECISION AND REQUIRES COURAGE AND EVEN DARING!

- A. Leaving the story of the Hebrew children in Egypt for just a moment, it is important to see that in every age and time, whenever God speaks to men and women it is decision time. God is NOT in every voice that makes a claim on our spiritual allegiance. Every human being has deep feelings and needs that may be exploited as well as ministered to. Have you ever thought about the decision that had to be made in the hearts and minds of many people during the earthly ministry of Jesus? The struggle to decide whether or not He was really the promised Messiah?

We are so sure and certain that we would have recognized Him! We would have followed Him without question! But I am sure that it was not that simple!

And this struggle to know if this salvation-dream/vision is from God- if it is within the realm of possibility that we can be free under God- or, if this is just a pipe-dream of some false messiah- this struggle is very much a part of the Exodus story. There was a great deal of drama in those first meetings of the people with this desert-man Moses who had returned after all these years— and after his encounter with God.

- B. Let's look at how the Hebrews came to their decision of faith:

Just to meet together was an act of daring and courage. It tells us how desperate their situation really was. But then they had to decide: are we willing to risk all, and stand up to our oppressors, or shall we just recognize the situation as hopeless, and get along as we have, as best we can? And, as it turned out, it was NOT a nice, neat, one-time-for-all kind of struggle of faith.

The first meeting seemed to go pretty well. (Exodus 4:31 So the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord was concerned about the sons of Israel and that He had seen their affliction, then they bowed low and worshiped.) The meeting was called; the people dared to attend; God's LOVE for them and God's PROMISE to them was revealed. And there was faith! It was small, imperfect. But the people believed! This is God!

But then— instead of the doors simply flying open, and things getting better and better until they simply walked out of Egypt and bondage with a handshake from the dictator, things began almost immediately to get worse!

Faith was being tested! Sifted! Honest doubt began to surface, along with a great deal of carnal unbelief and self interest and cowardly fear. And from that very time of decision until the night of the Passover the struggle to believe God and follow Him on the basis of faith in His Word was ON! The conviction that God wanted His people free had begun! WHEN GOD CONVINCES (CONVICTS) THE BATTLE OF FAITH IS BEGUN! It isn't saving faith as yet! But the battle is joined! Will God prove Himself TRUE?

II. FAITH IN GOD IS ALWAYS VINDICATED! GOD IS NOT CAPRICIOUS!

Just how bad things got when the people began to believe is recorded in Exodus 6. The taskmasters, or slave-drivers among the Egyptians increased the daily tally of bricks required, and at the same time they cut back on the supply of ingredients necessary to come up with that tally. The making of bricks required straw. Evidently this had been provided by the Egyptians before they had requested their freedom. But now the task of gathering their own straw was added to the heavy burden of brick making, and the load became humanly intolerable. Faith was being sorely tested!

What could Moses say to the people now? His response to the challenge of faith was to repeat God's words to the people (Exodus 6: "Say therefore, to the sons of Israel, 'I AM the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I

will deliver you from their bondage, I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I AM the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession; I AM THE LORD."

Note the POSITIVE emphasis here. God does not merely say. "You will be free from this trouble... you won't be slaves any more." But from the very beginning God wanted the people to understand that their goal was to come to KNOW HIM AS THEIR GOD, and to make them possessors of their own land.

To Pharaoh and his people it was obvious that this was a religious matter.: "Let my people go so that they may worship Me!" was God's word to the Egyptians. The lines of battle were spiritual lines. Of course there were social and economic elements to the problem. Human greed has always sided with the forces of evil.

But to His people, God was revealing Himself as FATHER and FRIEND and GUIDE. The ultimate purpose of Exodus for the children of Israel was not merely freedom, nor was it getting a new set of religious habits, nor even the possession of their own homeland in Canaan, as important as those were. The ultimate purpose was TO KNOW GOD! (Sound familiar? Wollaston Church Mission Statement)

These words of the Lord God rang true with the will of God that had been revealed to them by word of mouth from their forefathers. Not an Israelite lived that had not heard of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Perhaps the Word of God was not as clear to them as the revealed Word we call the Bible today. But it was the same truth, from the same Source, and it was unmistakable.

They knew that Abram had followed God's call from Ur of the Chaldeas. They knew that Isaac had been born a child of promise. They knew about Jacob and his ladder to heaven, and they remembered Joseph's dying words (Hebrews 11:21 'a reminder that Egypt was not to be the Hebrew's home.')

So the challenge of Moses, their challenge to faith for deliverance, went along perfectly with the revealed word and revealed will of God that had been passed on to them. Their hope for freedom was now based on the character and integrity of God, and not the talents or programs of a human leader.

The challenge unfolded step-by-step, not all at once, and not neat and clear-cut. It had its set-backs, and struggles along the way. Not everyone who decided to leave Egypt made it all the way through to the Promised Land! As these early chapters close, the people are still slaves.

But by the time God and Moses were through dealing with Pharaoh, ten plagues had come. The people's faith had been raised to the point where they were willing to follow God's appointed leader. Their faith had progressed from conviction to persuasion to obedience. And THEN the actual Exodus began! A horde of slaves was in the process of becoming— the people of God!

III. THIS SAME CHALLENGE IS WHAT FAITH IS ABOUT TODAY!

Dare to follow God! Dare to be God's people! This call of faith is still being heard! The Exodus is both history and an object lesson. And it isn't any easier now to decide to put your life on the line and follow Jesus than it was for the Hebrews to believe Moses, believe that he had heard from God and had God's message for them. It isn't any easier for us than it was for Matthew and Nicodemus and the others to believe that Jesus really IS the Messiah and worth living for— and if necessary, worth dying for! It was hard for the slaves to believe that the Master of the Universe had heard their pitiful cry, and was asking them to follow Him out of their misery. It is hard for us to believe that God sees us in our sins, and in our weaknesses, and in our habits and in our dead-end relationships or situations— and that He cares about us and wants us to follow Him to freedom and power and into KNOWING HIM! Vaguely we think we know that when God calls we will have to change our life-style, or give up this or that. But give up WHAT? Go WHERE? How do we start?

So many conflicting and confusing elements enter in when we think of changing the way that we live. So many voices are eager to give us free advice! So many claims

on our allegiance! Everywhere we turn someone has it all figured out, and knows exactly what we should do!

Everywhere we turn someone claims to be "Moses" or "Jesus" and says: "Follow me!!!"

HOW CAN WE BE SURE? WHAT TESTS ARE THERE FOR SAVING FAITH TO TAKE HOLD OF?

Conclusion:

There must be the conviction: this is the voice, the will of God! But everyone claims to be sent of God. And often there are wonders and emotions and miracles and success attending false prophets. (Worldwide Church of God is immensely wealthy. (In Zimbabwe the believe-and-get-rich church is booming.)

1. FAITH MUST COINCIDE WITH GOD'S PROMISES.

Not by proof-testing; not in a special revelation to an individual or small group. When God reveals new truth He does so pretty much to the entire believing church. When He comes every eye will see Him.

2. FAITH WILL ULTIMATELY BE POSITIVE.

God's promises are not based on sheer negativism; not on simply getting rid of bad habits, or beating some evil scheme. The end of salvation is to bring us into the JOY of the Father-child relationship! God challenges our faith because He loves us!

3. FAITH WILL CENTER IN GOD...

... and not in men or women! Not in Moses! Not even in FREEDOM! (Although it is bondage that makes us understand how much we need help!) In a PERSONAL way, God lets YOU know! Follow ME!

The Christian Passover

LENTEN SERIES #1

Sunday evening communion.

Lesson: Hebrews 9:11-22

But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.

For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance. For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is of force, after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth. Whereupon neither the first testament was dedicated without blood. For when Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and of goats, with water, and scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book, and all the people, Saying, This is the blood of the testament which God hath enjoined unto you. Moreover he sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle, and all the vessels of the ministry.

(22) And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission.

Introduction:

As we come to the Table of the Lord again this evening, coming from a world that is not in any way sympathetic with the things we hold sacred and dear, we may be tempted to say: "What does Communion have to say to me that makes sense in the world in which I live? What does the Lord's Supper have to do with the real world?" Is it relevant?

I ask you this evening, solemnly, "What IS the 'real world'?" I'm sure that God is not confused by computers, and that He understands all the nuances of onrushing history. Still, who do we think we are by asking God to make Himself "real" to us on our terms? Who are we to say to HIM what is important?

If God is God, and if we are His people, we need to acknowledge that we need to be made relevant to the Truth, and not try to adapt the Truth to our avenues of reality.

We look to an ancient story to show us how to obediently share in the Table of the Lord: the story of Passover. Communion is the Christian Passover.

I. THE CHRISTIAN PASSOVER

- A. This is the covenant service God ordained that the children of Israel observe perpetually to commemorate His deliverance of them from Egypt and slavery, and forming them into a people He called His own.

(We can easily listen to those who speak disparagingly of "repulsive" blood rituals; so crude and so easily relegated to the dim, dark past.)

What we do NOT realize is just how this ritual contrasted with the other religions of the time; it highlights conflict - the conflict with the pagan superstitions and sacrifices; man-centered religion; sacrifice of human beings, children;

And it is easy for US to fall into man-centered thinking today, too. We are "so sophisticated." Why do we need to speak of the cross and of the blood of Jesus?

Instead we are sacrificing OUR generation's children! -literally, in abortion- and just as literally, in materialism, damning our children to life with no moorings or moral foundations...

- B. God is God! We cannot "adapt HIM to us! We need a God who is beyond our manipulation; a God who is the great I AM THAT I AM, and who cannot be reasoned out of what is true.

There are good reasons for every command of God! The love of God is behind His law. But all we need to know to begin with is: GOD SAYS SO!

II. REGULATIONS OF PASSOVER FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

- A. GOD SAID: IF YOU WILL OBSERVE PASSOVER I WILL DELIVER YOU

The problem of credulity versus faith: DOES GOD REALLY INTERVENE IN OUR LIVES? ... a God who intervenes on His terms

- B. GOD SAID: DO IT THIS WAY! Obedience versus accommodation.

1. Purging out leaven ...
2. Preparing a sacrifice: revealing a principle: the innocent for the guilty

- C. GOD SAID: DON'T EVER FORGET!

A continuing covenant/ observance. God had great and noble aims in mind for His people even when they could only think of salvation in "negatives" (i.e. free from).

- D. IT WAS AT THAT PASSOVER THAT JESUS ESTABLISHED THIS SACRAMENT

III. CHRIST OUR PASCHAL LAMB

- A. At once a challenge and a great lift to our faith.
- B. Our obedience must be CHRIST-CENTERED. We must not accommodate rugged truth to our defective sensibilities. Christian faith is not some sort of beautiful game we play!

THE 'OFFENCE'- the offensiveness of the cross is real! It is NOT a beautiful ornament, even though we often wear it as such, and forget its meaning. It is a means of execution, of death

THE LOVE OF JESUS - the innocence of the Lamb; the cross reminds us of the hatred God has for sin and rebellion. It cannot simply be forgotten. It must be forgiven!

C. A TIME FOR PURGING OUT OLD LEAVEN- Our preparation should be sincere!

D. OUR OBSERVANCE WILL BE REWARDING!

- The Paschal Lamb became the food and sustenance for the journey out of slavery and degradation. The unleavened bread became the traveling food.
- The faith and the sustenance of the obedient observance of Communion is genuine!

IV. LIVING BY LOVE

- We have been taught to "live by the rules" and we have learned to "do" and "not do" until we can be comfortable in our outward conformity.
- The secret of Communion is that we share it with Jesus Christ the Lord

[Close service with EH #24 *I Cannot Tell*]

The Coming of the Dawn

Isaiah 8:11-9:2

Text: Romans 13:8 *The night is far spent, the day is at hand; let us therefore put off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light.*

Introduction:

Advent is the time of year just before Christmas when believers think about the coming of the Lord Jesus. We think about the light and the love that His coming has brought into the world. And we wonder, if we had been living before His coming, would we have heard and heeded the promises of Messiah?

Advent is a time when we look to the promises of the Old Testament prophets, especially Isaiah. We see his message as beautiful poetry signifying the coming of Jesus Christ into a benighted world. We try to think of how it must have been to be in the darkness before Christ came. We wonder if we would have had the faith to look to the east for the streaks of dawn.

All this is excellent. But Advent is also a time to do more than speculate about the past. It is even more than a time to recall with joy and wonder that Jesus came. Advent is a time to hear for ourselves living promises that speak about light that overcomes darkness.

And Advent is a time to be looking toward Christ's coming again. Advent is a time to make certain that we are not blocking our hearts from one of God's most priceless gifts— the gift of hope!

I. THE WORD FROM ISAIAH REGARDING A LIGHT IN DARKNESS: 8:11 - 9:2

A. ISAIAH'S MESSAGE SAID, "YES, THERE IS DARKNESS!"

But God's people do not need to live in fear of the darkness!! (Isaiah 8:11-13) God says "DON'T walk in the way of the people... in fear of death and

dying. RATHER, sanctify the Lord God in your hearts. Be more afraid of displeasing Him than you are of what the darkness can do to you! And this faith/fear will be your sanctuary!"

How can we describe "fear" of God? Does it mean terror? Does it negate the fact that God is full of loving-kindness and tender regard for His children?

The fear of God is a healthy respect for Holy POWER— tremendous regard for the sheer POWER of God's hatred for sin and injustice. God IS tender. But God is HOLY. The closer men and women are privileged to approach to God, the more they will regard Him with awe and holy fear.

To come closer and closer to God does NOT mean becoming more "casual" and "familiar" with Him, or becoming more careless regarding living to please Him! There is no contradiction between tender, giving, sacrificial love and the demand for high ethical and moral standards of conduct!

B. ISAIAH'S MESSAGE WAS THAT GOD WILL GIVE HIS PEOPLE LIGHT TO WALK IN!

The times may be dark, but God is interested in leading His own people where they ought to go! And God is particularly jealous about NOT having His people looking elsewhere for guidance!

(8:19) DON'T look to secular or un-godly sources for directions on how to live!

(8:22) When God's people look to earthly sources for help they find trouble and darkness. It is insulting to Almighty God to profess to love His light, and to profess to be people of light— and then

1. to stumble along exactly like un-believers; and
2. even to look to God's enemies for guidance in the affairs of life and living.

C. THE MESSAGE OF ISAIAH IS, "IT IS NIGHT NOW— BUT DAYLIGHT IS COMING!"

It may be dark, but Isaiah proclaims: (9:2) You cannot keep the sun from rising! The light of God is coming! If you are faithful— Messiah will come!

If you are NOT faithful— Messiah will still come! But those that look to God for light will NOT be disappointed.

TRANSITION: WE CAN AND DO SEE THIS AS BEAUTIFUL POETRY SIGNIFYING THE COMING OF JESUS CHRIST INTO A BENIGHTED WORLD.

We think of how it must have been to be in the darkness before Christ came. We wonder if we would have had the faith to look to the east for the streaks of dawn. But this is MORE than beautiful poetry. It is talking about living in a world that is AGAINST God and holiness and light, and yet living victoriously in HOPE in the loving fear and holy fellowship of the God of LIGHT!

Paul sounds this note in our text this first Advent Sunday

II. A WORD FROM PAUL ABOUT DARKNESS AND LIGHT (TEXT)

A. THE STATEMENT OF FACT: THE NIGHT IS FAR SPENT, THE DAY IS AT HAND.

When Paul wrote these words it was still night, but he could see daylight coming. We could be cynical, and say, 'See, 2,000 years have gone by and it is still night. Paul was mistaken.' But for Paul, and the generation of Christians he served, there was already an abundant dawning. They were people of the morning. And every generation of Christians since has had the opportunity to be children of light.

B. THE CALL TO ARMS: TO BELONG TO THE CHILDREN OF THE MORNING!

Paul says "Put off the works of darkness, put on the armor of light." At the very least, this is a call to wake up, to 'get out of bed!' This is no time to be 'sleeping in,' when worlds are being changed, transformed. But for most who hear this message, it is a call for people who would be people of faith to stop living by fears and un-faith like people who don't know God!

'Putting on the armor of light' might be amplified in rereading Ephesians 6:13-18: "Put on the whole armor of God..." And in I Thessalonians Paul speaks of "... the helmet of the HOPE OF SALVATION!" We are at war with darkness!

C. [RECURRING THEME]—WE SEE THESE PASSAGES AS BEAUTIFUL POETRY

... signifying the coming of Jesus Christ into a benighted world. We think of how it must have been to be in the darkness before Christ came. We wonder if we would have had the faith to look to the east for the streaks of dawn.

But this is MORE than beautiful poetry. It is talking about world conditions and personal situations very similar to the world in which we live, and the situation in which you find yourself this very day!

Can we grasp what the "Evangelist Isaiah" is saying about seeing a great light? Can we understand what Paul says in our text: "The night is far spent, the day is at hand!"?

"Yes— this means that Jesus Christ is going to return SOME DAY. That is what we have been taught. That is what we believe. That is what we are supposed to say!" But the facts are: We are not really very much creatures of HOPE!

Perhaps MOST Christians are in a "SURVIVAL MIND-SET" rather than being filled with HOPE about the DAWNING! We are not too excited about Christ's coming again— and we are not even sure WHY we are supposed to be excited about it! But Jesus Christ is Lord! Holiness shall conquer!

If we are faithful, Jesus will come again. If we are NOT faithful, we can be certain, Jesus will come again!

Whether or not we are people of hope, Christ's kingdom will come! We do not control the movements of the sun and the moon and the stars. Those movements will happen inexorably. But even more unstoppable are the movements of the Son of God! We do not CONTROL the movements of light, BUT WE CAN, BY GOD'S GRACE, BE PEOPLE OF HOPE! We can hear what the Holy Spirit would tell us about hope:

(text:) *The night is far spent, the day is at hand; let us therefore put off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light.*"

And a few paragraphs later, Paul prays (15:13) "*(May) the God of HOPE fill you with all JOY and PEACE in believing, that you may abound in HOPE by the power of the Holy Spirit!*" God wants us to abound in HOPE! And we may! HOW?

(How to be people of hope:)

1. Center your life around the will of God. Personalize the promises. You can be all that God wants you to be!
2. Seek ways to share hope with those who look on the dark side. One way to witness is to think of faith and non-faith as light and darkness; people NEED light. Believe that Jesus came— that He comes! — and believe that He is coming again!
3. LIVE TO THE LEVEL OF JOY! (Rom. 14:17 *The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost!*) And most of settle for the first, or the first and the second.

But JOY is a by-product of living that is GOING SOMEWHERE! Joy is the privilege of every believer! Don't "settle!" Delight in the Lord.

We can make a difference in this dark age in which we live! We can, by God's grace, be people of HOPE! LET'S BE AWAKE FOR THE SUNRISE!

#192 *Lo! He Comes, with Clouds Descending*

The Death of Jesus

Luke 23:44-49 [...and the veil of the temple was torn in two. And Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "FATHER, INTO THY HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT." And having said this, He breathed His last.]

Introduction

THERE IS A MYSTERY that is always a part of coming in contact with the reality of Jesus Christ. Nowhere is that mystery any more electric and powerful than in the death He died for us on the cross. It is there that God destroyed the works of Satan, death was defeated, tragedy was turned inside out. We always must approach the cross reverently and in the awe of wonder.

THERE IS PARADOX in this death Jesus died for us: just a little while ago we heard Him say, "My God! My God! Why have You forsaken Me?" Now here are words of trust and commitment and confidence.

I do not try to "explain" the mysteries of faith. But in part we can see and try to understand that Jesus, the Paschal Lamb, bore our sins alone, and as the Sin Bearer He experienced that horror of isolation from the Father which is the very essence of hell itself.

But now, here in this word from the cross, His work finished, JESUS IS SHOWING US HOW TO DIE. He is dying exactly in the spirit and manner in which He lived.

I. DEATH, THE LAST ENEMY

1 Corinthians 15:25 "...the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death..."

Death is a very real part of the human experience. But we do not like to think about death as a reality. We think superficially when we must think about it. We dress up our dead and say how healthy they look. We simply find it hard to bear the thought of the finality of mortal relationships as we now know them, of the separation, and of the struggle with what the scriptures call 'the final enemy.'

I DO NOT TRUST SO-CALLED 'NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES.' We dare not expand our Bible to accommodate either optimistic or pessimistic 'revelations' that in any way contradict what the Bible teaches us of this mysterious journey which one day we all must take.

In ages past the 'near death experiences' that were reported seemed to be horror-filled, frightening. Now in the "Kubler-Ross" era, they are almost universally warm and glowing— and the message to atheist and believer alike is: "There is nothing to fear!"

THERE IS SOMETHING TO FEAR. There is the unknown. Perhaps I am not a normal Christian. But I believe there is something to fear in death. [If I were going to take a trip to Moscow tomorrow, with all expenses paid, and all possible needs cared for, I would still be somewhat apprehensive simply because of the "unknown factor." I know that my guide would be with me; and I know that all bills are paid. But I have never been to Moscow before, and I'm a bit frightened.]

BUT CHRISTIANS HAVE A GUIDE and a Companion in life and in death. Jesus has removed the bitter sting of death.

II. WE MAY TRUST AND FOLLOW JESUS IN LIFE AND IN DEATH

If we cannot trust human testimony about death, what and whom may we trust?

WE CAN TRUST GOD'S WORD. The unlikely source of a word of wisdom here is the tragic prophet Balaam, who said, "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his."

WE SHALL DIE AS WE HAVE LIVED. It was John Wesley who said, "Our people die well!" There are such things as near-death conversions. But it is a risky business to presume to live life in one way, and then, just before the end of life, to swerve, to change direction, and thus avoid the precipice.

SUPREME AMONG THE EXAMPLES, beyond comparison, is the life and death of our Lord. Jesus died as He lived! **HOW DID JESUS LIVE?** [Three observations:]

A. JESUS LIVED OPENLY BEFORE GOD.

Thus when He came to die, His life was an open book to the Father. There were no hidden areas; no reservations in his agenda for life.

Jesus was limited with the limitations that He Himself as God had self-imposed on His incarnation: limitations of physical strength, of being subject to His human parents, of experiencing temptation in all points even as we are tempted. Paul tells us (Philippians 2:5-11) that Jesus poured Himself out. But within these limitations there was no holding back whatsoever.

IS IT POSSIBLE for other, imperfect, sinful human beings to live perfectly openly before the heavenly Father?

It is hard to 'open up' what we do not even see or understand ourselves. We pray David's prayer (Psalm 139) of willingness to be searched and known.

Perhaps we cannot be as open as Jesus was before God. But by God's grace we can be as open as we can be! No secrets! For when we are open before God we are forgiven and cleansed of guilt, and of the power of sin to condemn us.

B. JESUS LIVED OBEDIENTLY BEFORE GOD.

It is almost a corollary of openness with God to be obedient. And Jesus did not shrink back from the will of the Father. He said an everlasting "YES!" to the will of God. And even when it meant suffering and shame Jesus prayed: "Not My will, but Thine be done!"

IS IT POSSIBLE for imperfect and sinful human beings to live perfectly obediently before God?

Before we lightly dismiss this, and say "Of course we can't!" we need to at least consider the question. Of course we can never give perfect service, and follow God's will without error or flaw. But we may by God's grace say an everlasting "YES!" to the will of God, and deliberately surrender our will

to God's will. Paul challenges us (Romans 12:1,2) to make our redeemed beings living sacrifices of obedience to God's good and perfect will!

[The obedience of Jesus had brought Him to the cross. There He had faced history's darkest hour- alone. He had lost all sense of support, spiritual and emotional. But He had been obedient. And so having obeyed, in the moment of death, Jesus died as He had lived, committed to the Father.]

C. JESUS LIVED AN OVERCOMING LIFE.

He was more fruitful than any other Person who ever lived.

IS IT POSSIBLE for you and me to be fruitful, too? Not as He was! But yes, we CAN be fruitful! Our lives can make a difference! Conclusion: We die as we live.

YOU AND I WILL DIE AS WE HAVE LIVED!

Jesus has shown us how to die: because Jesus has shown us how to LIVE! We must, by God's grace, seek to Live like Jesus; or, better said, we must let Jesus live IN and THROUGH us.

And then when that transition time comes which we see as death, we will once again experience the electricity of the miracle of Jesus' Presence! This is what the generations past called "Dying grace!" It is real! Angels bend low, and heaven is very near when God's people come to die! We will dare to say, like Jesus: "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit!"

Prayer

The Declaration

Matthew 26:2 "Ye know that after (TWO) days is the Passover, and the Son of man is betrayed to be crucified.

Introduction:

Jesus said: "In two days is the Passover." I do not think it is exaggerating to read into this all the force of the definite article. This was not to be just "Passover." This was the Passover that would give full and complete significance to the ceremony that had been observed ever since the Passover deliverance from Egypt, and still is observed as Passover among the Jews of the world today. This was to be THE Passover!

How so?

1. The IMPORTANCE of the Passover to Jesus: it was not just an empty ritual, it was something He regularly did as a Jew. But this was to be something new.
2. The PASSOVER was a living reminder that God is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. The covenant was IMPLICIT from the beginning: with our first parents: and in these early years of history God made covenant with devout men, especially with Abraham, on a personal basis, with revelation that satisfied them.

The covenant was made EXPLICIT at Sinai, when Moses brought back from the mountain the Ten Commandments that have never been repealed. The Jewish nation was to be a testimony to all the nations of the world. They were NOT God's favorites, chosen to the exclusion of all others. They were highly favored, and were to be the channels of God's revelation.

The covenant was INTERNALIZED at Pentecost: Jeremiah and others had predicted this (Jer. 31:33 "But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the Lord. "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and will be their God, and they shall

be my people.") Jesus had said as much in his Sermon on the Mount ("But I say unto you . . .")

The covenant will be CONSUMMATED in the Parousia. Sixteen times in the scriptures we read not only of a covenant with God, but of an everlasting covenant. While the Jews of Christ's time focused no doubt on the deliverance from the Egyptian bondage, and their identity as a people because of and in the light of that deliverance, Jesus had all these depths of meanings in view as He established the Christian Passover.

3. The youngest child in the household asks, at the beginning of the meal: (see Exodus 12:26) "What mean ye by this service?"
 - a. The Exodus deliverance/ remembered to all time the very identity of the Jews and , indeed, of Christian faith is bound up in this miracle of God's deliverance.
 - IT WAS A TIME OF JUDGMENT: the judgment of God on people who had been cruel and unjust. God had heard the cries of the sufferers. Through Moses, God gave the Egyptians opportunity to change. I know the scriptures imply that "God hardened Pharaoh's heart." But there is NOT one God of the Old Testament, and another of the New. God hardened Pharaoh's heart because Pharaoh would not respond to God's word. The same sun hardens the clay that softens the wax.

By the same token, God may be said to harden the heart of the unbeliever today: in his sermon before he was martyred Stephen said to the religious leaders: "Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart you are always resisting the Holy Spirit just as your fathers did..."
 - AND IT WAS A TIME OF SEPARATION

Those who obeyed, and prepared, and who sprinkled the blood of the Lamb on their doorposts were saved. And those who hardened their hearts, and ignored the clear

judgment of God were bereft and lost. God had striven with Pharaoh . . . there had been great warning.

NOW THERE WAS DELIVERANCE AND LIFE ON THE ONE HAND AND JUDGMENT AND DEATH ON THE OTHER

- b. Jesus gives notice: the Passover takes place in two days! We need to "get ready" — to "prepare."

Like children, let us ask in faith, in wonder, in expectancy: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? WHY IS THIS NIGHT DIFFERENT FROM ALL OTHER NIGHTS?

We "know" the answer.

But during the next six weeks may the Lord Himself prepare our hearts and attune our lives FOR THE EXODUS! AND, INDEED, FOR THE PAROUSIA! Remember: It will be a time of JUDGMENT! It will be a time of SEPARATION; put the 'leaven' out of our houses!

Practical ways to prepare:

1. A TIME OF WEEKLY FASTING
2. SOME EXTRA EMPHASIS ON OPENNESS BEFORE THE WORD
3. REGULAR PRAYER WITH A LOVED ONE; WITH FAMILY IF POSSIBLE; perhaps just continuing in the prayer group you are already in. 4. Pastor Nielson is starting a second "Spiritual Gifts" course during the month of March. If this appeals to you we will find "room" for you. See him.

DIRECTLY TO COMMUNION

The Fountain of Life

The Cross of Jesus Christ

Jeremiah 9:23-24 Thus says the LORD, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not a mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises loving-kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things, " declares the LORD.

I. 'I LIKE JEREMIAH!'

He was a true prophet . . . and probably true prophets aren't too pleasant to have around. Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet. He somehow shared in the suffering of God for the needs of his people. He was God-called. He didn't ask for the job. He was a lover of king and country— but he was NOT a blind patriot. He had an un-popular message; it went against the tide of his day. Sort of like saying

1. America is not necessarily God's favorite!
or, which might seem more sacrilegious,
2. "Super Bowl is NOT a part of the church calendar!"

The religious leaders of his day had for the most part decided they needed to "go with the flow" and put their trust in what they could do.

[They remind me of Pogo's pigeon. Just doin' their job.]

II. THE SPIRITUAL TRAGEDY OF JEREMIAH'S DAY

- A. The religious leaders were not in tune with God.

Jer. 2:8 "The priests did not say, 'Where is the LORD?' and those who handle the law did not know Me; the rulers (or shepherds) also transgressed against Me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal and walked after things that did not profit."

1. "Priests" speak of the services of worship: Their worship services were man-centered instead of God-centered. This can be more subtle than we may realize! We may want more excitement, more "emotional pay-back", instead of more confrontation with God and with the living Word of God!
 2. "Rulers/Pastors" speak of the spiritual leaders or shepherds: The people who were thought of as leaders were not examples; but they themselves were transgressors.
 3. "Prophets" speak of those who preached! The proclamation of God's word, His will— a special sort of called person, highly regarded: These respected men had taken to prophesying by Baal— the fertility gods of the people by which the Israelites were surrounded.
- B. The people of God, understandably, since their leaders were corrupt, had lost the vital connection with God.

Jeremiah 2:13 "For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water."

Not finding satisfaction in God, even though they were made BY Him and FOR Him, they had turned to other things that could not satisfy them. Perhaps they weren't entirely evil— they were a lot like people today, no doubt— but they wanted "Peace" without knowing the God of peace.

The people to whom Jeremiah preached wanted an end to their problems (whatever THEY were)...but they didn't want a radical cure (Jeremiah 6:14 and Jeremiah 8:11 "They have healed the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying "Peace, peace, when there is no peace!")

III. JEREMIAH'S MESSAGE RINGS TRUE FOR TODAY, RIGHT NOW—

Our day's evils seem overwhelming to us, even as the needs of his day must have to Jeremiah:

A. FIRST-AID TREATMENT CAN NEVER DO

The problems of our society serious. They are complicated. Abortion, AIDs, poverty and hunger, broken homes— [Pastor Leite said yesterday that of 50 weddings of teenage people in Boston last year, 38 ended in divorce before the year was up.]— these ills, and many others are not going to simply "go away."

We believe the "cure" our sick society needs is God, and God's grace. But somehow the "church" is not changing society at large! All the remedies and legislation and sermons haven't saved our cities. Oh, there have been some exciting inroads. And there will be more! But we need to see that the ills of our society are not going to be cured by "lovingkindness and education" nor are they going to be cured by "justice and law and order" nor will they be cured by "righteousness and pious living!" Somehow we need all of these— and MORE!

When we seek to address the our deepest needs, and those of our fellow humans, we tend to come from one extreme viewpoint or another— from one pole or another; we see only spiritual needs, or we emphasize only moral solutions— justice! Or, we try to be tender in the exclusion of knowing how or when to be firm.

THIS IS TRUE IN EVERY HUMAN ENDEAVOR— IT IS TRUE IN PARENTING, IN ANY HUMAN ORGANIZATION FROM LOCAL GOVERNMENT TO THE WHITE HOUSE AND PARLIAMENT TO THE ADMINISTRATION OF A COLLEGE OR A HOSPITAL OR A PRISON OR A FACTORY. We need to listen to God's answer:

B. GOD'S PRESCRIPTION IS SIMPLE: HAVE CONFIDENCE ONLY IN ME! Jeremiah's message is:(txt) have confidence in/know Me!

1. THE 'IN-WARD' TASKS OF THE CHURCH MUST BE GOD-CENTERED:
IN OUR WORSHIP, IN OUR FELLOWSHIP, IN OUR
EDUCATION/PROCLAMATION

- OUR WORSHIP— which we describe as "informal" or "liturgical" or "charismatic" or " " must have the touch of God!

Whatever our cultural background, the Church of Jesus Christ must be constantly in touch with Almighty God! Our call must ever be, in regard to our worship: WHERE IS THE LORD?

- OUR PASTORING— SHEPHERDING— which we think of as done by a pastor— and no doubt it begins there— but this must be shared by every mature believer, and it must be the responsibility of men and women who are in harmony with God's Spirit! There can be no 'do as I say, and not as I do' or our little ones and converts will be turned away!
- OUR PULPIT— God help us!— must declare the whole counsel of God without fear or favor! It is never a light thing to teach a class or disciple a convert or say what the Bible really "means!."

2. THE 'OUT-WARD FUNCTIONS' OF THE CHURCH MUST ALSO REFLECT TOTAL DEPENDENCY ON GOD: OUR EVANGELISM AND OUR SERVICE (2:13)

Forsake the broken cisterns! When we have tasted the living spring water, we don't need to drink out of the mud puddles and gutter water of the world! LOOK TO GOD FOR THE SATISFACTION OF OUR BASIC NEEDS! Establish or re-establish the "Living Water Connection!"

Isaiah 55:1/John 7:37

[Conclusion:]

WE CAN ONLY BEGIN TO 'KNOW GOD' WHEN WE COME TO THE CROSS!

This is a strange sort of message, perhaps, for the evening of Palm Sunday— the message from an Old Testament prophet weeping because so many people had gone far away from God. His message is:

There is only one thing that counts! Knowing God! But this message is echoed in the words of St. Paul:

THERE IS ONLY ONE PLACE WHERE WE DARE PUT OUR FULL CONFIDENCE:

Galatians 6:14 But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

If Christ ever changes this world through His church— if He ever works the miracle of grace through you and me— it will be because we have been to Calvary.

We will not simply "learn a lesson" or "grasp new insights." But there we will come face to face with love both just and compassionate. There we will know the awful holiness of God that hates and destroys sin, and there we will meet the loving-kindness that reaches even where we are. It is in the cross of Jesus Christ, and ONLY in the cross of Jesus Christ these seemingly irreconcilable elements meet: loving-kindness and justice and righteousness on the earth as it is in heaven!

At the cross, Paul says, the world will lose its power over us forever: it will be crucified to us! And there, too, we will be crucified to the world, and the ties that bind us to it. This is the message this turned the world upside down! It is the message that Paul proclaimed. If God's people put their confidence in HIM, then through His people our Lord will execute loving-kindness and justice, and righteousness over all the earth! May it be so! Amen.

#23 (Exalt Him) *Jesus Comes with All His Grace*

The God Who is There

Isaiah 41:10 Fear thou not for I am with thee; be not dismayed, for I am thy God. I will strengthen thee, yea, I will help thee, yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.

Introduction:

This verse is a personal treasure to me. It is powerful! It brings great reassurance. I want to share it with you if you haven't already discovered it (as, I am sure, many of you have!) How can we best appropriate the personal assurance of God's Presence and power?

I. IT IS A PROMISE TO THOSE WHO ARE CALLED OF GOD

If we know the Lord at all, it is because He has called us! So often we think that the initiative was with us. We say, "I found God!" And sometimes it sounds as though we think God ought to be profoundly grateful to us for coming on board His team.

But salvation begins with God! We never "come to God" just because we decide it might be a good idea.

And it is a comfort to know that God has called us! "You have not chosen Me," Jesus said, "But I have chosen you!" (John 15) It is always a privilege to hear God say: "I want YOU!"

Frightening, maybe. Humbling, always! But also a high privilege! Our relationship to God must be clear. "You have not chosen me," God says, "But I have chosen you!"

And if Jesus has called you, He will also see to it that His call will never be frustrated by any outside force. Times can and will get hard. People can and will let us down. Things that we don't deserve will happen to us. But the promise is there: "I have called you— and I won't abandon you!"

[I spoke this morning of going beyond 'getting saved and sanctified' in our goals and dreams and visions. But we must make the foundations certain! We must be saved!

We must be sanctified wholly! And we may be, IF we will listen and respond to God's call.]

II. IT IS A PROMISE TO GOD'S SERVANTS

The idea of being a servant— even to God Himself— is not very high on the totem pole of desirable jobs, at least not naturally. In our society today it is hard to find people who are willing to fill the so-called "service positions." Everyone wants to be a boss, and no one wants to be just a foot soldier or a trench warrior.

But somehow this adversity to serving God and fellow man must be broken down if we are to be followers of Jesus.

IN THE MATTER OF OUR RELATIONSHIP TO GOD: it is a high privilege to carry out His will. It is what the angels delight to do. We are made to be vice-regents to Almighty God! And yet how many people carry this "no serve" attitude even into their relationship with God.

We get the idea that "faith" is a power that makes God do what we want Him to do. We unconsciously think that God "owes us." We may never say so even to ourselves, but we assume deep down that God exists to make us healthy and wealthy and very very comfortable. But when God calls us, He calls us to serve Him! But at the same time, God loves His servants. And God's servants love Him! They have discovered what they are created for! The angels rejoice in carrying out the will of God. And God calls us, and leads us out of bondage into freedom in order that we can have the joy of this privilege the angels already know.

There is great reassurance when our purpose is to please God. Abraham is the 'father of faith' because when he heard God say "Go!" he got up and went!

BUT THIS SERVICE TO GOD MUST FILTER DOWN INTO A PRACTICAL WILLINGNESS TO SERVE ONE ANOTHER, TOO: Jesus gave His example by washing the disciples' feet. He said that when we helped others we were helping Him.

AND IT IS ALONG THIS PATHWAY OF SEEKING TO SERVE THAT WE MEET GOD AND HIS PROMISES! "Well done, good and faithful servant!" Happy is that woman, that

man that knows what God is calling him or her to do! Happy is that person who is engaged in obedience! For theirs are the assurances of God! "I am with you, Jacob My servant!"

III. IT IS A PROMISE BOTH OF GOD'S PRESENCE AND IN GOD'S PRESENCE

Assurance is precious. It comes just when it is needed, often times. But it does not take away the need for faith.

Look at the counsel and instruction that goes along with this great promise:

1. DON'T BE AFRAID
2. DON'T BE DISMAYED (DON'T QUIT)
3. EXPECT TO BE WEAK AND TIRED (I WILL STRENGTHEN YOU)
4. TAKE SOME RISKS!

Assurance is personal. It cannot be received second-hand. Oh, preachers MAY be channels— but the inner assurance is the witness of the Holy Spirit Himself!

There is the "I AM with thee!"

Assurance is HERE! It always comes along the pathway of obedience:

We need courage and we need perseverance and we need strength beyond our own. We need help! We need support! It is not an easy way, this business of following God.

But God has exactly promised to meet our exact needs!

The Heart of Hospitality

Luke 10:38-41

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur there was once a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station, so that it became famous. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Some of the members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely, because they used it as a sort of club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in this club's decoration, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where club initiations were held. About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some of them had black skin and some had yellow skin. The beautiful new club was in chaos. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their

primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. They did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that sea coast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

This is a classic parable (by Howard Clinebell in his 1966 book on pastoral counseling) about how focus on vital goals can first grow fuzzy, and then be lost altogether. In recent years institutions of all kinds, not just the church, have discovered they need constant focus on mission. They need to put in words why they exist, and then they need to make every effort to keep first things first.

It can be comical at times when secondary things are cared for and primary things forgotten. Victor Borge told about a couple going on vacation, standing in line waiting to check their bags at the airline counter.

The husband said to the wife, "I wish we had brought the piano."

The wife said, "Why? We've got sixteen bags already!"

The husband said, "Yes, I know— but the tickets are on the piano!"

I asked members of a study group if they knew stories of people who took care of everything but the one most important thing. I got this story from Rev. John S. Korcsmar, C.S.C., a Roman Catholic priest in Austin, Texas.

This is really a true story. At Sacred Heart Parish (Can Street, New Orleans) in the late 1960's they were beginning to do baptisms at Mass. The parents were instructed. The paperwork was done.

Since they were doing baptisms at Mass for the first time and were afraid that the people would be late, the parents were reminded several times to be on time.

Well, the parents were on time, and they hurried and forgot: yes, you guessed it: the baby to be baptized was left at home!

(One of the wits of the group asked if they then had to throw out the baptismal water without the baby.)

Every action, every relationship, every institution has a basic focus, or should have if it hopes to succeed in its reason for existence. It doesn't help to have the sunscreen if you don't have the tickets to the beach. It doesn't help to have the water ready if there is no one to baptize.

Both institutions and individuals need to remember constantly the first reason they exist. A family must have a parent or parents who love and discipline and children who love and grow. A school must have a teacher who can teach and a pupil who wants to learn. A church exists for God, exists to love Him with heart, soul, mind and strength. If all there is to a church are the trappings— the lessons and the potluck dinners and the walks for hunger— then we have blurred the focus. Like Martha in the story we are careful, and troubled about secondary things.

Jesus said, "Martha, Martha— you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needful!" Don't forget the center! It isn't that the other things are not good, or important, or even vital. But they must serve and not dominate the central purpose.

This chapter (Luke 10) tells us that the focus of our lives is to be LOVE; first the love of God, and because of that love, love for our neighbor. The very heart of the meaning of love, revealed here, is hospitality.

Hospitality is a wonderful, powerful word! ["Get him a plate ... pull up a chair ... come to the table!" Inclusive!] It gives a definition to "love," a word which can be vague. It is the mother-word of other important words such as hospital, and hospice. Hospitality means moving over and giving someone else a share of your life. Not just out of the surplus, but right out of what you are using yourself.

This sort of hospitality (toward others) is illustrated in the story of the Good Samaritan. A man is beaten and left helpless alongside the road; a priest came by and had no space in his life to share with anyone; the same with a religious Levite. Then came a social pariah with every excuse for looking the other way— but this man made space in his day, and in his pocketbook, and in his plans. It was with his story Jesus gives definition to the word 'hospitality.'

Today's lesson, which immediately follows the story of the good Samaritan, is also about hospitality. Only this time it is about making space for Jesus. Jesus reminded his kind hostess, Martha, that hospitality has love as its focus. "One thing is all that is necessary," said Jesus. Is it possible to sharpen OUR focus on making Jesus "at home" in our lives?

How can we bring hospitality to Jesus?

1. Think of His needs, even before our own. The Lord's Prayer is our pattern; before we pray "Give us ... forgive us ... lead us..." We are taught to pray "Thy name ... Thy kingdom ... Thy will!" Yes, we cannot exist apart from what Jesus does in/for us. But as our Guest, we seek to put Him first. His NEED is that we love Him more than the gifts He brings.

When I was studying pastoral care many years ago I read about the "McLandress Coefficient;" Herschel McLandress was a professor of psychiatric measurement at Harvard Medical School, and he developed a way to measure a person's degree of self-absorption. In spoken and written material he measured the use of "I," "me," and "my" and the "Coefficient" was the longest span of time a person can remain diverted from himself. Eleanor Roosevelt was supposed to have a McLandress coefficient of two hours; John F. Kennedy's was twenty-nine minutes, and Elizabeth Taylor's was three minutes. The reason I don't make Jesus more at home at times is because I need to talk about me, when maybe he wants to talk about something else. How is your McLandress Coefficient?

2. Make Him truly "at home" in all our work and play. By making Jesus "at home" I mean simply that we take him with us wherever we are, whatever we are doing. Whether it is called "practicing the Presence" or what Thomas Kelly calls "continuously renewed

immediacy," our faith intends for us to be at home in God, and for God to be at home with us. (John 15) This is both reality and every challenging goal.

3. Continually come back to basics with Jesus: in all the many things that we do, make sure we do that "one thing (that) is needful!" If we get elected to the General Board and forget that Jesus is waiting to talk with us out in the living room we may be straining our "hospitality."

Conclusion

Thank God for Martha— for those who give us pots and pans and who put flowers on the table. Thank God for Mary who reminds us that Jesus is what our faith is all about.

Jesus wasn't telling Martha He didn't appreciate her hospitality. But he was telling her "Martha, we don't always have to have a banquet! A hot dog is fine— just come on in and let me see your face! Come in and let me know I'm welcome here!"

If LOVE is defined as HOSPITALITY, then the ultimate hospitality is the fact that God has opened his heart, has made room in his life for you and me.

["Get her a plate ... pull him up a chair .. come up to the table!"] and welcomes us into his home- not as transient guests, but as members of his family.

#193 - Thou didst leave...

The Lamb of God

John 1:29 *Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.*

Introduction:

Here is great good news! The sin of this world is going to be taken away! Can you imagine what this world would be like without any sin? It is going to happen! The Son of God will destroy all the works of the devil.

And here is great good news for every one who will receive the Lamb of God! Not only is the Lamb of God come to take away the sins of the world, but He is come to take away the burden of sin from your life and from mine.

But how was Jesus the Lamb of God? How will He deal with the sin of the world? In what ways does He deal with your and my sin? And what, really, is sin? The word in the text is "hamartia" which is the most common word translated "sin" in the NT, and means "to miss the mark."

Wherever there is sin, there the Lamb will prevail. I cannot tell you the details of how one day the Lamb of God will cleanse this entire world of its murder and cheating and child abuse and war and famine and all that is wrong. But I do know the Book of Revelation (in Rev 6:16) speaks mysteriously of the terrible "Wrath of the Lamb" from which the nations sought to hide in rocks and mountains to avoid; and

in Rev. 17:14 we read of the forces of evil warring against and being defeated by the Lamb. We may not know how, but we may be certain that Jesus, the Lamb of God, will cleanse this whole creation from sin.

And, I cannot fathom the depths of God's love that makes it possible, but the Bible tells us a little more about how the Lamb of God can and does take away the sin of individual men and women, boys and girls who simply ask Him! If you have any kind of a sin problem— the Lamb of God can and will take it from you!

I. JESUS Is The Lamb Of God That TAKES AWAY THE GUILT OF WILLFUL COMMITTED TRANSGRESSIONS

Every last one of us has done things in times past of which we have every right to be ashamed! We have turned to our own way! If sin is "hamartia," and "hamartia" is "missing the mark," this kind of sin is missing the mark of righteousness because of deliberately choosing to shoot at evil. It is wrong-doing because of wrong choice. This is the sin of which Paul writes when he says: "The wages of sin is death!"

This is the sin of living for all purposes just as though there is no God; it is living without regard to God or His law or His good will.

No real Christian lives in this kind of out-broken, habitual, deliberate, willful rebellion against God. And those who do— and at one time this has included us all— those who do are deserving of death. (Romans 6:23.)

But Jesus came to pay the penalty for our willful transgressions: Our iniquity has been laid on Him (Isaiah 53); and If we come to Him for forgiveness he will not cast us out (John 6:37.) The only willful sin which Jesus cannot forgive is the sin which we will not bring to the blood in confession.

[But this is not the only burden the Lamb of God takes from us: for]

II. JESUS Is The Lamb Of God That TAKES AWAY THE POWER OF SIN TO MASTER US

It is one thing to be forgiven and be free of guilt. It is quite another thing to be able to quit habitually sinning.

The reason we shoot at the wrong target, deliberately choose evil, is because sin masters us. In John 8:34 Jesus said: "Whoever commits sin is the SLAVE of sin." We may begin to sin willfully because we choose to sin— but once we are enmeshed in sinning, we cannot extract ourselves from its filthy grasp.

But in the Exodus, when the Passover Lamb was first revealed to the people of faith, God did not simply want His people to be free from Egyptian bondage, toiling as

slaves to make bricks without straw; God wanted His people out of Egypt, and free in their own Promised Land!

And when we come to God for salvation, by the power, the authority of this Lamb of God, we are free NOT to sin willfully any more!

The power of sin is not broken in a second work of grace we call "entire sanctification." The power is broken in the grace of regeneration. We don't stop the life of sinning when we get sanctified! We stop shooting at the wrong mark, deliberately choosing evil, WHEN WE FIND CHRIST AS SAVIOR!

(Indeed, for most people the testimony is that sin begins losing its grip when real "Holy Spirit conviction" comes! You don't even have to be saved to be sick of sinning, and turning away from sinning! When the Holy Spirit begins to press home the rights of a holy God on your allegiance— when He shows you the depths of your need— sin then begins to become "exceeding sinful" (Romans 7:14.) Christians need to re-learn the lesson that it is possible to focus prayers on lost friends and loved ones until this kind of liberating conviction takes powerful hold in their lives.)

[If this were all that the Lamb of God could do for us until He comes in awesome power to cleanse the whole world of sin, it would be wonderful. But it is NOT all, for:]

III. JESUS Is The Lamb Of God That TAKES AWAY THE POLLUTION AND STAIN OF SIN

If the power of sin is broken when we are forgiven, until it is possible NOT to sin— still the pollution and divided aims and goals of life remain. Sin is caused ultimately because of corrupt inner springs of motivation. We miss the mark in our actions, and fall under the mastery of sin because there is within us a twist or a bent to unbelief. We may now be shooting at the right target— but when the air clears we see that there are still at least TWO targets out there for us to aim at. There is God's holy, righteous way— and there is OUR own selfish will and way.

The Lamb of God

The Lamb of God cleanses from indwelling sin, too. The pollution— the double mind, the "bent to sinning" is REMOVED by the INDWELLING FULLNESS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Peter testified (in Acts 15:9) that on the day of Pentecost, the sanctifying Presence of God "PURIFIED OUR HEARTS BY FAITH!"

And Paul, writing to the Thessalonians prayed that "The very God of peace would SANCTIFY THEM THROUGH AND THROUGH, THAT THEIR WHOLE SPIRIT, SOUL AND BODY BE PRESERVED BLAMELESS TO THE COMING OF OUR LORD"

[All this is pretty straightforward doctrine— and it is good, sound, scriptural. Jesus is the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world.]

What a privilege it is to be able to say:

I AM FORGIVEN! I AM WASHED! I AM WALKING IN THE LIGHT! MY HEART IS FOCUSED ON ONE SINGLE PURPOSE!

But can there be anything more? Yes, there is:]

IV. JESUS Is The Lamb Of God That TAKES AWAY THE CONTAMINATION, THE ROAD-STAINS OF SIN

One of the great blessings which Christians can and must learn is that

1. they do not need to live in willful sin; and at the same time
2. it is all right to pray the Lord's Prayer all the way through; i.e., to ask God for forgiveness on our shortcomings.

Looking at this frankly I have to ask: Is there any place for Wesleyans and sanctified people to ask for forgiveness? Can we ever say: "Forgive us our sins?" We are pretty well locked into Wesley's definition of sin as "a willful transgression of a known law of God"— which is a viable and valuable instrument to keep us from being careless with God's known will. But what about the Lord's Prayer as Jesus taught his disciples? We use the Matthew version (opheelima=debts, that owed, error)— but what about Luke's version which uses plain old "hamartia."

I know there is great wisdom in the old Methodist adage that says "If we start calling mistakes (debts, errors) sins, pretty soon we will be calling sins mistakes." But perhaps one of our greatest strengths- genuine freedom from sin— is also misunderstood, and becomes the source of one of our greatest weaknesses: we are afraid to admit we ever come short of the mark of perfection in our Christian walk and our service to God.

I am not trying to make any excuse for willful transgression, or for breaking God's commandments. As Christians we don't willfully transgress God's known laws! But what do we do with our feelings?

What do we do when we're "left out" and the feeling stays on and we hold it just a little longer than we should (even though we know we ought to pray immediately about it)? What do we do when we're under pressure and we are irritable with the ones we love the most? DO WE JUST IGNORE IT? Do we call it weakness of the flesh and assume it is automatically forgiven? Well— perhaps in God's mercy it is. But it is still WRONG! And if we simply ignore these spiritual failures they become cumulatively destructive!

We all do come short of God's glory, and we all live in a world that is unfriendly to God's love, and we all are touched by the filth and grime of sin every day. And so we need the cleansing grace of the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world to keep us clean and pure, day by day.

We don't need to carry ANY of the load of sin. So we need to hear it (even though Jesus has said it:)

IT IS ALL RIGHT TO ASK FOR FORGIVENESS AS A SANCTIFIED CHRISTIAN! No, IT IS NOT JUST 'ALL RIGHT' TO PRAY FOR FORGIVENESS EVERY DAY; IT IS MANDATORY! BUT NEVER PERFUNCTORILY, NEVER JUST RITUALLY.

It is an abomination if we presume to keep ourselves clean and unspotted from the world apart from humble dependence on the Lamb of God.

Conclusion:

The Lamb of God

It is your privilege to live clean and pure and holy in this world that is so dirty and stained with sin. John the Baptist points us to Jesus Christ, and he says: BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD WHICH TAKETH AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD!

The Living Way of Joy

Philippians 3:7-12

Called to JOY! The Book of Philippians is a happy book! It seems to be full of JOY! Again and again Paul says: Rejoice! Know God! Find power!

Don't be anxious! My God shall supply all your needs! I can do all things through Christ! Be full of LIFE! Perhaps the heart of this book is this verse where Paul says that the most important thing is knowing Jesus Christ.

One part of the Wollaston Church of the Nazarene's mission statement centers around this verse: WE EXIST TO KNOW GOD! There is no higher priority than knowing God in Jesus Christ. This knowledge is the source, the well-spring of genuine JOY!

But what IS Christian joy? And how are we called to joy?

I. THE CALL TO JOY IS NOT FOR THE FAINT-HEARTED

The fact is, this is not a very joyful world.

[I recall walking with horror through the Shrine of the Holocaust in Jerusalem and wondering how humans could do such things to other humans. And if I can believe even a small portion of what I read and see, injustice and suffering are widespread over the wide world. How are Christians to have JOY?]

As we speak, a planeload of hostages in the Mediterranean is in its second week of agony beyond our understanding . . .

This week I attended the Eunice Ferreira - E.N.C. production of The Trojan Women, which is a candid attempt to look at some of the agony of injustice, selfishness, sorrow, helplessness in our world. It is an attempt for a long hour and forty minutes to enter into that suffering. I cannot imagine any of the players ever being quite the same again.

And yet, are we Christians still "called to JOY?"

Paul was not looking at his world with rose colored glasses. He was writing this letter from a Roman prison. He was giving his life day by day, and he would ultimately be executed for the JOY that he knew in Jesus. This is NOT heaven on earth where we live!

In the plain sight of all that— Christians are called to JOY! But it is NOT a cheap denial of all that is wrong in the world. It is NOT a cheap trip that blocks out all the pain for a while and then wears off.

II. JOY DOES NOT EXCLUDE LIFE'S CHALLENGES

A. Joy is not dependent on circumstance; we can be channels of joy even when we are not in ideal situation. This is a prison epistle. It was written from a prison cell.

B. WE SUFFER OURSELVES: Suffering is a part of life! Listen to some of these words to early Christians:

Paul: "For I reckon that the SUFFERINGS of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. Romans 8:18"

"For as the SUFFERINGS of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ. And whether we be afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in enduring the same SUFFERINGS which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted it is for your consolation and comfort. And our hope of you is steadfast, knowing that as ye are partaker of the SUFFERINGS, so shall ye be also of the consolation. " 2 Cor. 1:5,6,7

C. WE SHARE IN CHRIST'S/OTHER'S SUFFERING:

I Peter 4:13 "But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's SUFFERINGS; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy."

CHRISTIANS DO NOT JUST FOCUS ON THEIR OWN BURDENS . . . Not only our own pains...but somehow sharing in the pains of others, too! "...the fellowship of His sufferings!"

[Yesterday Barbara Howard (who was dying of cancer, herself) called to tell me about Nancy Detwiler's dad ... request prayer for her!]

- D. Christians have the conviction that even as the sufferings of Christ have made all the difference to us, so when we share in His LOVE, we can make a difference, too!

III. THE WAY OF JOY IS THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE CROSS

- A. The Christian's JOY does not come from IGNORING the dark side of life and living.
- B. The Christian's JOY does not come from human resources. Apart from divine guidance and wisdom our natural reaction to injustice is like Moses, before he met God— we strike out in our own strength; too often we meet huge problems with human analyses, and quick and simplistic judgments. And too often we are overwhelmed and disillusioned.
 - 1. And then We find it easy to rationalize or justify doing nothing on the basis of ignorance.
 - 2. Or we are heavy on accusation: which takes two themes—
 - a. "THEY" are to blame— naming obvious targets; and so we need to DO THIS! Sometimes if the extreme statements were followed through, the very fabric of society would be pulled apart, for we live in a technocratic society that depends for its very life blood on a variety of systems that no one person can fully understand. Or we say,
 - b. "WE all" are to blame! Which sounds pious, but it so generalizes guilt that it is difficult to really accept any possibility of doing anything personally.
- C. Christ's JOY flies in the face of suffering! Never think that we can do nothing! Jesus faced the CROSS with JOY in mind, and the JOY of pleasing the Father, of accomplishing His purpose, of seeing you and me redeemed and set free from sin is real to Jesus today.
The hope of our world is the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ! The people who know Christ in His fullness can make a difference!

[John 15:6 Jesus spoke of JOY— he left His disciples JOY on His way to the CROSS!]

[And yet]

- D. It almost seems as though the major thrust of the Christian message for years has been avoiding all pain at any cost! :

We like the idea of "resurrection" and "power"— but we shrink back from the "fellowship of suffering."

1. We have had a lot of emphasis on 'Personal overcoming';
 - HOW TO... lose weight in Jesus
 - HOW TO . . . be better integrated in life.[and]
2. We have also had a lot of 'Church building':
 - HOW TO ... build a bigger and better Church organization.
 - BUT THESE ARE SECONDARY OBJECTIVES! What counts is KNOWING JESUS!

IV. JOY IS CHRIST'S WORLD-CHANGING GIFT

- A. JOY is what begins to dawn along the Road to Emmaus.

About the time we have come to the end of our own resources, and have seen all we hold precious fail, and are sad and discouraged and unbelieving — JESUS, HIMSELF, COMES ALONGSIDE!

- B. JOY is not "learned" like a lesson. It is (not so much) deliberately appropriated as it is the result of deliberately choosing to invite Jesus IN, and sharing HIS life! The JOY is:
- BEING WHAT CHRIST WANTS US TO BE
 - AND GOING WHERE CHRIST WANTS US TO GO
 - AND DOING WHAT CHRIST WANTS US TO DO!

In that sort of fellowship with Jesus there is real JOY! Not just an abstract idea of JOY somewhere off in heaven... but "Joy in the midst of sorrow, Peace in the midst of pain Jesus will give, Jesus will give, He will uphold and sustain!"

Conclusion

We don't have to go looking for hard times. They come to us all. But I am saying we do not need to be overwhelmed! And even when WE share Christ's sufferings, or perhaps especially when we share His sufferings, we can be a part of God's SOLUTION to the pain of this world!

Our challenge is to really know Jesus Christ! Not just to know about Him, but to meet Him on the Emmaus Road, in our SADNESS, and in our DISCOURAGEMENT, and in our UNBELIEF, and have our hearts set on fire by His revelation.

The Mind of Christ Workout

Philippians 2:12-13 So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Introduction

In this rather obtuse title (Mind of Christ 'Work-Out') I am referring to the interesting use of the word "work" by St. Paul. He says YOU work OUT your salvation— and at the same time GOD is AT WORK IN you!

This is more than a play on words.

It is a matter worthy of our full attention: OUR working and GOD'S working in the matter of our sanctification; how they relate, how they interact.

I don't have a final word on it— but "as I work on it" I believe "God will work in our minds and hearts" to help us grasp how "we are co-laborers with God!" (I Corinthians 3:9)

Return with me to this passage:

I. THE LOFTY MESSAGE OF THE PREVIOUS PASSAGE

- A. The description of the mind of Christ is the focus, the "meat" of this passage: IT IS A LESSON IN AND OF ITSELF.

We have come to look to this passage simply in order to see the love of God manifested in the outpouring of Christ's very life for us. And it is right that we do. It tells us how Jesus left heaven's throne and came to die because He loves us.

- B. But this passage starts "Let THIS mind be IN YOU!" And here in our text the words (v 12) "So then" REFER BACK TO THIS IMPERATIVE: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."

And so the bottom line— THE 'MESSAGE' OF THIS PASSAGE IS: LET THIS MIND BE IN YOU!

II. THIS MESSAGE GETS LOST IN EXCUSE AND HUMAN REASONING

A. WE NEED TO TAKE THIS IMPERATIVE SERIOUSLY:

"Of course we can't have the mind that was in Christ!"

"No one can be like Jesus!"

And we give up the battle without a shot being fired. What does this imperative mean, "Let this mind be in you!"??

B. JUST WHAT IS IT THAT WE ARE TO TAKE SERIOUSLY? The essence of the mind of Christ that we can understand was that Jesus did not insist on HIS rights; that he did not GRASP at His own benefit— but that he gave Himself.

Is it possible for Christians to love like that today?

C. YES! THE LIFE OF FAITH BY DEFINITION MEANS DOING WHAT OTHERWISE WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE!

This is not something new. Way back in Moses' time the people thought it was impossible to stay "in tune" with God.

In Deuteronomy 30 are some words that speak to this challenge. Moses is speaking to the Israelites before he goes up on Pisgah to die. (vv 5,6) "(the Lord will prosper you, and multiply you more than your fathers.) Moreover the Lord will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live."

(vv 11-14) "For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' But

the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it."

(vv 19-20) "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days, that you may live in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them."

Way back in the Old Testament, God wanted it understood that His commandments are also His promises!

THIS WHOLE MATTER OF SANCTIFICATION FROM BEGINNING TO END, AND CERTAINLY INCLUDING WHAT WE CALL "ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION" IS SIMPLY THIS:

III. DELIBERATELY LETTING CHRIST'S MIND BE IN US!

- A. IN LIGHT OF THE MORNING'S MESSAGE IT IS HOLDING THE SEED OF THE 'GOOD NEWS' FAITHFULLY, LETTING GOD WORK HIS LIFE OUT "WORKING OUT" WHAT GOD HAS "WORKED IN" (That is too glib!)

The human way to seek "success" is to focus on HUMAN MODELS. We want to "stick an adult plant into the ground." We look for results, and we look to methods, and to models.

God's way is to let the LIVING WORD sink down into our hearts and do a miracle that is both unique and powerful.

In our PERSONAL lives: Assurance, soul-winning, growth in grace spring from humility, and open-ness before God, from confession and weakness before the Lord.

In our corporate life, CHURCH-WIDE: We look to see how/what others are doing. (And seminars have their rightful place!) But healthy, growing, powerful churches are UNIQUE! They spring from healthy seed (the Gospel) in well-prepared ground!]

- B. But what about these two "works" in our text? What does this mean "YOU work!" and "GOD works!"??

IT DOES NOT SIMPLY OUR PART AND THEN HIS PART — ALTHOUGH THERE IS THAT WAY OF LOOKING AT IT:

OUR confession of NEED — HIS Promise to MEET that need OUR obedience — HIS ENABLING OUR consecration — HIS SANCTIFYING (cleansing/empowering)

- C. WHAT THIS TEXT SAYS IS WE DO AS GOD DOES ! We pray that somehow we may be "labourers together WITH God! (I Corinthians 3:9)

1. The desire to have the mind of Christ comes from God. As we pray we get the hunger after more of God. His will for our holiness comes clear. As we make it our own desire, God answers our prayer.
2. Then, God not only works in us to WILL of His good pleasure, but TO DO IT AS WELL! The realization of the mind of Christ comes from God: God works in us to will and to do of HIS good pleasure.

This is what Wesley called: the circumcision of the heart. The dedication for life of the entire person to God.

3. The LIFE OF FAITH involves OBEDIENCE! It means that we must seek to work out, to express, what God has worked IN! [WHO does the work? Unless it is God it isn't genuine ... and yet, unless it is US it never will be done! God helps us to get in "over our heads" and then he does through us what we alone can never do!]

- D. (Illus: Abraham is called the father of faith. He is one of the giants of faith in all of history. How did Abraham get that way? Who did it? God? or Abraham?

- God CALLED (12:1) ... and Abraham started out.
- God TAUGHT (15:6) ... and Abraham "believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness."
- God COVENANTED (17:1) IN A CHALLENGE TO PERFECT TRUST ...and Abraham COVENANTED WITH GOD!

- God CALLED FOR ABRAHAM'S DEAREST GIFT BACK (22:1) ... Abraham's covenant was tested ... and Abraham withheld NOTHING from God!

THAT is how he became the "father of faith!"

HE WORKED OUT ... WHAT GOD WORKED IN! WHATEVER GOD ASKED/WILLED, ABRAHAM AGREED AND SET TO WORK TO OBEY!)

God calls us ALL to inherit great promises of faith! He wants to be our God, our Friend! Let's take the "long view!"

Text: Philippians 2:12-13 So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

#243 *I'll Live for Him*

The Place of Accountability

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." Luke 11:1

A remarkable scene took place in my living room a few short years ago. A Baptist pastor had driven 200 miles to share in the fellowship of a prayer meeting. It was Friday, lunch time, and he knew the fellowship would be meeting. That particular time it was at the Nazarene parsonage.

This pastor was experiencing one of those difficult times that most pastors know. He knew that in this group, where once he had been a regular participant, he would find acceptance and understanding. He knew that he would be prayed for by men who knew him well and loved him.

Our hearts reached out to him that day. We assured him that he was indeed God's man, and that God would not abandon him. And then as prayer time ended and we rose to leave, this Baptist pastor met an Episcopal priest in the middle of that Nazarene living room. The priest shared how God had helped him in a similar experience. And God did a work of healing and help before the pastor left to drive back to his assignment.

The scene was remarkable, but not unusual. Across the ten years and more that I have been part of this accountability group just about every member has been in some way a healer or a recipient of healing. A fellowship of accountability in love is one of God's very most precious gifts.

Prayer life is a highly personal and private matter. There are secrets and treasures in prayer that must be discovered by each Christian alone. Book and papers on prayer may be helpful to a point. But there is no way to learn to pray effectively except to pray, and without exception that learning process is a lonely business. It is probably possible to be effective in ministry and never share one's personal prayer life with anyone else in a meaningful way.

But it is evident that God intends for the ideal of prayer to be both intensely private and social. There are things that one can say to God alone— things one almost whispers even in private because they are between the heavenly Father and one's own heart. And yet in the Pattern that Jesus gave for prayer the very first word is a word of community. Even the very most private prayers can never escape the responsibility of relationships.

"Accountability" is a popular word in the current language of those who teach 'spiritual formation' and personal spiritual growth. Accountability means a deliberate choosing to pray in community, to be to some extent answerable to other or others.

Accountability in one form or other has always had a large place in the mainstream of the church. John Wesley's many talents and accomplishments perhaps came to full flower in his catholic spirit that sought to reach out and fold people into fellowship. All his converts were required to attend "class meetings," which would be (very) roughly analogous to Wednesday prayer meetings. But it is very significant that his converts also were welcome to join "cells," groups of five. In these cells there was no leader, no lesson, but serious and loving concern and prayer. It is probably significant, too, that two thirds of Wesley's converts opted not to participate in the cells.

In the devotional classic, *A Testament of Devotion*, Thomas R. Kelly lauds the concept of accountability. He says, in part, "Within the wider Fellowship emerges the special circle of a few on whom, for each of us, a particular emphasis of nearness has fallen. These are our special gift and task. These we carry by inward, wordless prayer . . . these bonds of divine love and 'carrying' are the stuff of the kingdom of God . . . we know that these souls are with us, lifting their lives and ours continually to God (85-6.)"

Yet it is not a comfortable or easy thing for many pastors to accept the concept of "accountability" in the matter of prayer. Pastors are used to holding other people accountable. And imposed or arbitrary accountability could only inhibit or restrict, instead of foster liberty and growth and love and joy. This is true of any mature person, and not just pastors.

But the fact remains, people need fellowship in prayer. And this factor of accountability is often the missing ingredient that could have prevented 'infant mortality' among new converts, or could have been a life-saving source of strength to the most seasoned of veterans. And pastors are not exceptions to this need for accountability in prayer. Pastors are people, too. Tragic episodes of "burn-out" and even sadder moral lapses might well be avoided through the grace of accountability.

Some practical suggestions for moving toward a healthy accountability in prayer include:

Honesty. It takes some strength of character to look into the mirror and admit imperfections and weakness. Honesty is more than just telling the truth about facts and figures. Honesty is being willing to admit the possibility of finding help in praying with others. And the blessings of accountability come only to those who are willing to admit that they might need such help.

Humility. Lack of humility is the biggest single impediment to spiritual growth. To accept the fact that others, even in different levels of understanding, or from different "families" in the fellowship of faith can have a genuine and vital relationship with Jesus Christ, and can be channels of God's blessing, can be the open door to new vistas of joy and growth.

Openness. Openness is simply honesty carried into the world of relationships. There aren't many deliberate hypocrites in the ministry. But it is easy to fall into spiritual posturing, to almost unconsciously seek to appear more spiritually effective than one really is.

Openness needs a proper sense of the appropriate, of course. It is not simply "telling all," or washing one's linen in public. But it is the attitude in which accountability can begin to take place.

Adaptability. There are many ways in which spiritual accountability can be used and adapted in the relationships of the pastorate. One could be the 'Paul-Timothy' relationship growing out of the mentor program as fostered by the Pastoral Ministries

leadership. Another is simply the way ministers relate one-on-one with people. Accountability can be shared with staff in scheduled staff prayer meetings.

Two desirable ways for pastors to develop accountability, however, are in deliberately planned cell groups from within their own congregations, and in inter-denominational ministerial prayer groups.

Four or five men (women, if the pastor is a lady) who may have expressed or implied a desire for spiritual growth can agree to meet together once a week, for a limited number of weeks, to read the Bible and pray for each other. The time limit gives an 'out' if the group does not develop.

The main purpose of the group is not to exegete, but to simply accept the authority of scripture and then to seek God's Presence together. Such a group can become a wellspring for personal growth to all involved, as well as a pattern and a nucleus for renewal throughout the entire congregation.

Perhaps the ideal accountability group for a minister is a prayer fellowship composed of ministers from different denominations in a given community, who have come to know and love and trust each other. There is identity, for all participants have a more or less similar task. There is non-threatening acceptance, for any disclosure of personal weakness cannot be leaked to denominational grapevines. Often there is potential for fresh insight in the variety of viewpoints expressed on any given day.

One last factor that may be needed for developing accountability in the minister's prayer life is the determination not to give up until one is regularly participating in one or several accountability fellowships.

A few years ago my wife and I were enjoying some retreat time in Scotland, and on a highlight day we spent a few hours with Dr. and Mrs. Sydney Martin in their cottage in Twechar. This great and kindly man of God makes it easy to talk naturally about spiritual things, and I spoke glowingly of the prayer fellowship among the ministers back home.

And I was surprised and delighted to hear Dr. Martin tell of a similar weekly group right there in the little village of Twechar. Clergy of the Church of Scotland, Baptist

pastors, and others are dear brothers and prayer partners to this sainted Nazarene. The line of accountability are the strong bonds of Christ's church, and they are potentially universal.

Work Cited:

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The Promise of His Presence

John 14:3-7 "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

Also, as a text, verse two: "I go to prepare a place for you."

INTRODUCTION

Jesus spoke these words to prepare His disciples for a radical change. He wanted them to understand that He wouldn't be with them in the same way that He had been for the previous three years.

It wasn't the first time that He had tried to tell them of His mission of salvation. In fact Jesus had said on many occasions that He had come from the Father and was going back to the Father. But did you know that there was a time when Jesus had used almost these same words, "I am going away," in a very different setting?

Here His purpose is clear; He loves these people so very much; and His clear intent is to cushion the shock and to strengthen the faith of people who already knew and loved Him. But this other time John records almost these same words, earlier on in Christ's ministry, in John 8, there is a different setting, a different mood entirely.

I. WHEN TWO WORLDS SEPARATE IN UNBELIEF

In John 8 Jesus had declared "I am the light of the world." (John 8:12) And later in that same setting, as the Pharisees objected and opposed Him, Jesus said these disturbing words:

"I am going away, and you will look for Me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come."

Why do you imagine Jesus would say something like that, and to whom?

It is significant that in both instances where Jesus mentioned going away the conversation came to center around heaven, and knowing God the Father.

In response to His declaration that He was the Light of the World, the Pharisees had asked Him derisively, "Where is your father?"

There could have been an intentional double meaning here, with the intention being a cutting reference to what we know as His virgin birth. But Jesus answered them that they knew neither Him or His Father.

"If you knew Me you would know my Father also," He said. These are the exact same words Jesus spoke in comfort and assurance to the disciples perhaps two years later in the Upper Room. "If you knew Me, you would know My Father as well!" This is some of what had preceded these strong words, "I am going away and you will seek me and you will die in your sin!"

Their response was, "Will He kill Himself? Is that why He says, 'Where I go you cannot come'?" They were totally insensitive to the truth Jesus was speaking.

Jesus went on to say "We are on different paths, different patterns of thought, different world-schemes entirely. You are thinking only of this world, I am not of this world. If you do not believe that I AM what I claim to be, there is no hope that you will ever change and see the futility of the way you are now going.

It wasn't that Jesus took delight in damning these people. He merely stated the fact— this world ends. This world is dead ended. The values and goals and things of this world are not worth living and dying for.

And as a matter of fact even as Jesus spoke these words the scripture says that many there found the grace and faith to trust that He indeed is who He says He IS.

II. WHEN TWO WORLDS COME TOGETHER IN FAITH

It was different that night in the Upper Room the night before Jesus died on the Cross. Tomorrow the world would begin again. Tomorrow the powers of death and

darkness would be defeated forever. Tomorrow all the sins of the world would be met with the Infinite Love of the Savior.

And the Savior was thinking of His own. He was concerned about their frailty. He wanted to assure them. "I am going away for a while, " He told them. "But I am coming back to get you— and you know where I am going, and you know the way there." He made it plain that He was going to the Father. Which brought about the questions and the assurance.

Thank the Lord for Thomas. You can criticize him if you want. I am thankful for a man who expressed his honest doubts. Notice that Jesus did not write him out of the kingdom.

III. TWO WORLDS MEET HERE TONIGHT

In the sacrament of Communion we sit at table with the Lord once again. He has gone to prepare us a place. But we know that He is HERE. And we know, too, that He is THERE, with the Father, making intercession for us. And, mystery appreciated, we also know that Jesus is COMING AGAIN to receive us to Himself, even as He told the disciples at the first Communion that He would. The assurance that He gave them is our assurance as well.

CONCLUSION

How we know Jesus is a mystery. None of us has ever seen Him, yet we do know Him. He is our Friend. And because we know Him, we know the Father, and we know the WAY to God and Life and heaven.

The sacrament is one way that Jesus assures us. By faith we are at the Table with Him this evening, and hear Him say:

Don't worry! I have gone away, but I'll be back to get you. And I won't ever leave you. And you will know the way to me, and you DO know the way.

The Promise of Peace

Romans 5:1; Philippians 4:7,9; Colossians 3:15-17

Here in these three brief "texts" are some words about "peace." Peace is part of the legacy left us by Jesus; it is the Christian's right: Jesus said: "My peace I leave you!"

Peace is part of the definition of the kingdom of God extended to us: (Romans 14:17) "The kingdom of God is NOT meat and drink, but righteousness and PEACE and JOY in the Holy Ghost."

"Peace" is one of the most attractive ideas in the world. But talking about peace and experiencing peace are two different things. It is good to know that I am supposed to have peace. It is good to understand that peace is in the definition of the Kingdom: But how does that help ME when the storms of life are raging?

Jesus said: "Blessed are the peace-makers!" But am I supposed to be an agent for peace in this world when I don't have real peace in my own heart? [The prophets warned about those who would cry, "Peace, peace" when there was no peace.]

HOW may I start to be a peace-maker? HOW may I experience God's peace?

I. To BEGIN With Peace: We Can And Must Find Peace With God

(Romans 5:1,2). Not "telling God" what HE needs to do, but confessing sin, and pleading the saving, cleansing blood of Jesus!

What IS "Peace WITH God?" An end of hostility; a sense of acceptance; access by faith into all God's grace. not a bad thing! A wonderful thing, actually!

But peace with God is NOT the end! It is only a good beginning!

II. Then, We Can CONTINUE Toward Peace: The Peace OF God

(Phil. 4:7) We find this peace by learning to think like God!

(Well, actually we cannot "think LIKE God thinks...His ways are far, far above ours. But) This is a beginning of a new perspective, believing that God sees, God knows,

and God is in control! This is FAITH as a total way of life. A deliberate choice of attitude. NOT an automatic or simple thing. NOT accomplished without determination and struggle. NOT a guarantee that there will not be emotional turbulence. But there is a clear formula here:

1. Do not be anxious (fret not)
2. Make God a partner in all of life! (In everything with thanksgiving—let God know where you stand!)
3. Deliberately dwell on the good and holy

Only God knows the damage and danger of grumbling/complaining/whining: an entire generation of Israelites died in the desert because they GRUMBLED!

III. But The END Or GOAL Of All This Is GOD!

Our goal in life is—the God of peace! (4:9)

"Peace" is not just a technique we learn, or a wonderful emotion— the best thing about it is being near to God Himself!

"When we look back on what the masters of the spiritual life have written and said, its hard to escape the conclusion that we have been the victim of a confidence trick in our century. Over the past few decades, the evangelical church has been gripped by a series of issues and concerns that have primarily been marginal, or at best of secondary importance. Conferences, seminars, and books on a whole series of "vital concerns" have dominated center stage and determined the agenda in many churches and for many individual Christians. But strikingly absent has been concentration on God Himself. Indeed, on the rare occasions when this absence has not been the case, we have sat up to take notice as though something out of the ordinary were being said!"—Sinclair B. Ferguson, in *A Heart for God*, quoted from CT, January 15, 1988.

The peace of God is not a lesson to learn; the peace of God is a "spin-off" from friendship with God Himself! Here's the essential connection!

Yes, until we die we must "walk by faith!" Yes, there will be times when our emotions and our human judgment will fail to give us the assurance that we need. But if we have PEACE WITH GOD, and if we are actively pursuing THE PEACE OF GOD, then the GOD OF PEACE WILL BE WITH YOU!

But remember, the pathway of peace does NOT lie along the line of asking questions, assigning blame, finding fault with God! NO, the pathway of peace is PUSHING UP CLOSE TO THIS GOD WHO WANTS TO BE NEAR US!

Conclusion:

Our faith grows, develops! We learn new questions to ask as we grow older. We are staggered at times by the failures of others we trust.

YOU CAN TRUST JESUS! He is the same person you prayed to as a child! He is the same person you gave yourself to when you first heard about heaven and hell and sin and salvation. He really did die for you—and rose again for you—and is seated at the right hand of the Father just now praying for you! This Jesus wants you to have HIS peace!

In the other passage about "peace", Colossians 3, is one of those convenient "lists" that will help you "keep the peace." It is a three-fold or three-part "handle" on living in God's peace, and it all related to JESUS: Paul says:

1. LET THE PEACE OF CHRIST RULE! (Col. 3:15) In the everyday living out of your life, let your PEACE be the referee!

Whatever disturbs your peace, immediately stop and find a place to pray about it. God isn't troubling you to damn you; He is trying to strengthen His peace:

- when you are tempted to "cut corners" in honesty
- when the TV becomes blatantly VIOLENT or LUSTFUL (What business do God's people have watching people shoot other people for fun?)

The Promise of Peace

- when you are using your body, or your relation with the opposite sex, for thrills! That is NOT love—it is SIN! The THRILL isn't wrong—it is SEX OUT OF COVENANT!

When we find our peace disturbed—we need to quickly heed! LET GOD'S PEACE RULE!

2. AND LET THE WORD OF GOD DWELL RICHLY! (Col. 3:16) DWELL!

Nobody— no one in the world! can find God's peace apart from God's WORD! The WORD is the Source and Resource of our strength...it is our FOOD! The Word is our living supply!

That is why Bible PREACHING is important! That is why BIBLE STUDY is important! That is why we need to read by ourselves, and together—and this includes SOCIAL WORSHIP: (Col. 3:16) - teaching and admonishing one another—with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness to the Lord.

LET GOD'S WORD DWELL!

3. AND LET CHRIST'S NAME AUTHORIZE ALL YOU DO! (Col. 3:17)

The authority must come from HIM! This doesn't mean you can simply "write a check" for anything you might think you want.

But it does mean that whatever God commands, He makes possible!

It does mean that where He sends, He opens the doors!

It does mean that if you want PEACE, His authority says that you can have it!

#416- *Hidden Peace*

The Revelation Moment

SUNRISE MEDITATION

2 Corinthians 5:17 Therefore if any person be in Christ they are a NEW creation; old things have passed away, behold all things are become new!

We revere the Christ of Calvary, for there He poured out His life in order that we might forever live in Him. But Calvary is not the end of the story! The empty Tomb, the Risen Savior manifested, is the necessary climax of the drama of eternal life.

And did you ever ask yourself how YOU know Jesus is really alive?

I. DRAMA AT THE EMPTY TOMB

All our salvation can be epitomized in a sunrise moment: Mary, empty, sad, weeping, even worshiping, comes to do homage to a dead Hope, a dead Lord. She has heard the words of life. She has known the Savior so very well that no one could ever deceive her. Still- Mary did NOT know Jesus when He met her that first Easter morning. Why, do you suppose? Tears in her eyes? Marred, mutilated face? Darkness?

"Mary!" When Jesus spoke her name something happened!

"Rabboni!" Joy! Faith! Understanding! LIFE!

WAS THIS 'RECOGNITION MOMENT' UNIQUE TO MARY?

When we speak about the Risen Lord we are speaking about the mysterious, wonderful LIFE that is the place where heaven touches the earth! It is true what is written in this Book we call the Bible. But just knowing it and even believing it intellectually does not mean that we know the risen Lord!

II. PAUL AND THE CORINTHIANS

Some of them had heard Jesus preach. They had seen Him; they said to Paul, WE knew Jesus— YOU did not!

The Revelation Moment

But Paul said, (II Corinthians 5:16) Even though we have known Jesus after the flesh, yet from now on we do not know Him that way any more!

WE must know Jesus in an even more intimate way than the disciples who walked with Him and ate with Him and heard Him speak knew Him! Can you believe it?

Jesus must be personally revealed!

III. DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN THE HOLY SPIRIT SPOKE TO YOU ABOUT YOUR NEED OF A SAVIOR?

Jesus calls YOUR name! He says, YOU have sinned! YOU need a Savior! I love YOU! And He calls YOU by name!

And YOU say, with Mary: RABBONI! MASTER!!

That is what 2 Corinthians 5:17 is all about: IF ANY MAN, IF ANY WOMAN, IF ANY BOY, IF ANY GIRL BE IN CHRIST, THEY ARE A NEW CREATURE!

All because Jesus, by the power of His Holy Spirit, the Risen Jesus, comes near and makes Himself known! That is the "recognition moment!"

Prayer: O Jesus, Be Thyself to Me— a living, bright Reality!

Amen!

The Righteousness of Faith

Romans 4:13-25; (Text) Romans 4:25 *Jesus was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.*

Introduction

The "Faith Connections:" There is a clear connection between faith and obedience, (Romans 1:5; 1:25-27) ; Paul speaks of "the obedience of faith." But there is also another powerful connection to this mysterious gift of God we call "faith." And that is the connection of faith to righteousness.

Over and over again, in Romans and all the New Testament, there is this connection of "faith" and "righteousness." We know that God is holy and righteous altogether. We know that we must in some way be counted as holy and righteous if we are ever to approach God, and have to do with Him.

What is "the righteousness of faith" as applied to you and me?

I. IT IS REAL RIGHTEOUSNESS.

A. (Yes, I know that) GOD ALONE IS ABSOLUTELY HOLY; (and I believe with all my heart that) all righteousness is His. No one can be absolutely holy except God; and by the same token, no one can be perfectly righteous in all actions and attitude except God. Our righteousness must be at least in some great measure be IMPUTED to us: "credited!" "Abraham BELIEVED...it was counted/imputed/credited!"

B. But here are the facts. When people come to faith in Jesus Christ, and that faith is genuine, GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS CHANGES OUR VERY BEING AND OUR ACTION: People's lives change.

If "faith" is something merely "mental" or an acceptance of "truth," then there is a shallow, mental, passing "conversion." But if faith responds to Christ's invitation to "Come in!" and the living God enters the life, ALL HEAVEN IS LET LOOSE IN CHANGING LIFE'S DIRECTIONS!

Directions are radically altered.

If a person continues in the same life goals and directions after coming to "faith," it is a pretty certain sign that this is not the saving faith Paul is writing about. Sometimes these "directions" may be entirely internal. Some people don't have any OUTWARD life to "clean up." But goals, and purposes and loves and values change when faith brings the righteousness of God into the center of our being. C. The POWER of sin to control the life is broken!

Perhaps this is the most incontrovertible proof. There may be struggle at times with habits and physical addictions. [Illus. Mr. Nichols, of Pittsburgh, saved in Kuhlman crusade, spent several days resisting hellish temptation before he was finally delivered from alcoholism.]

This doesn't mean Christians cannot sin; it does not mean that they live lives of perfection in action. But Christians are set free from the ENSLAVEMENT of sin! "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? GOD FORBID!" [And yet ... this freedom, power, liberty is not self-generated! It is not merely a matter of "reform;" it is the RELEASED RIGHTEOUSNESS OF CHRIST WITHIN!]

II. IT IS CHRIST'S RIGHTEOUSNESS.

- A. Credit. "Reckon" yourselves as dead to sin! "Standing before God!" We (Arminians) don't usually like to hear about "standing." We believe in "state." And there are both standing and state.

Paul talks a lot about "IMPUTED RIGHTEOUSNESS", or "credit." He says that Abraham BELIEVED and (immediately) he got credit for being righteous. (see Genesis 15:6)

- B. 'Standing' changes 'state': If we say "credit" and live the same old way it is false faith. Standing immediately begins to affect change in state! Sanctification begins when we are justified! And that is good Wesleyan-Arminian truth!
- C. We Become Like What We Worship! It is a "law"! (For example, in Psalm 115, verses 1-7 describe the absolute impotence of "idols." Then (verse 8) it says: "Those who make them will become like them, Everyone who trusts in them!" [Yuppies beware!])

III. RIGHTEOUSNESS BY FAITH IS MANIFESTED BY PEACE, AND BY JOY.

A. Two great "HIGHS!" It seems to me there are two "peaks" that Paul hits as he tells us of this great salvation, by faith, unto obedience, and bringing God's righteousness. The highest peak is Romans 8, where we read of LIFE IN THE SPIRIT.

But a genuine rejoicing point is Romans 5, where we read of the peace and joy of being JUSTIFIED! Enjoying this righteousness which is by faith! [5:1-11 — as far as I dare to go here:]

B. LOOK AT THESE GREAT "SOURCES OF JOY:" (How "standing" changes "state!")

1. PEACE WITH GOD
2. ACCESS BY FAITH TO GRACE WHEREIN WE STAND
3. INCREASING CONFIDENCE (ALWAYS BY FAITH, HOWEVER)
4. WONDER IN THE CROSS (verse 8!)
5. (verse 11) THE JOY OF PRESENCE, GOD HIMSELF!

Conclusion

We are "saved by FAITH!" That certainly is true!

But remember, FAITH is always connected with OBEDIENCE! If you want to know God and be saved, you must be willing to follow Jesus as LORD! And, too, FAITH is connected to RIGHTEOUSNESS!

Christ's righteousness imputed to your account; but also a very real righteousness imparted into your LIFE!

Faith is connected with obedience! And faith is connected to righteousness!

You can have Christ's righteousness imputed to your account! And as you trust in His death on the Cross as your death to sin; and as you trust in His resurrection and life as your life in the Spirit, "Old things pass away!" Old loves become hatreds! Old hatreds become loves! There is a hunger and thirst after the things of God! And best of all, we have fellowship with God, Himself!

PRAYER

The Righteousness of Faith

#81 (EH) *My Faith Has Found a Resting Place*

— #68 (WS) *O to Be Like Thee!]]]*

The Shepherd and the Door

John 10:9 Jesus: *"I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture."*

Isn't it strange and wonderful that in this suave and civilized society the most cherished concepts of our faith have to do with sheep and shepherd? We are hardly a pastoral group, here, and yet we call our preachers 'pastor,' and we take great comfort in knowing and reciting: "The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want!" "We are His people, and the sheep of His pasture," says the Psalmist (Psalm 100) and there is great comfort in that assurance.

And Jesus declares that as our Good Shepherd he will

1. (1) give His life for us, and that His intention is that
2. (2) we might share the very quality of His life: "I have come that they might have LIFE," He says, "And that they might have it more abundantly." John 10:9

I. WHERE THE SHEPHERD HAS LED US:

Most of my message today has to do with vision, or of what our church here can be under God's leadership. But a so-called 'State of the Church' message needs to also deal with the church as it is, and what the past year has brought forth.

The kind of church year we have had must be reflected on a personal level by each of us; if we have been saved, or sanctified, or brought closer to the Lord this year, then the church year has been, in one very important way, a success. And no matter what the statistics show, if you or I have not grown in God's grace and love this year, then to that extent the church has failed.

But the composite picture of the church year is generally good. In addition to the facts and figures in our Annual Report booklet, which show involvement in several areas of ministry and financial increase as we meet the challenge of physical expansion, we have added 28 new members this year, twelve (12) by profession of faith. We have also lost 23 members by transfer and death, thus showing a net

increase of five. This is a good indicator, but I will be surprised and disappointed if we do not show an increase in this vital statistic next year at this time.

II. WHERE THE GOOD SHEPHERD WANTS TO LEAD US:

I have no other way of presenting this than my own vision of what the Good Shepherd is saying here about what He wants to do with His "sheep." In this passage Jesus combines two figures in Himself; He says both I AM the Good Shepherd, and I AM the Door! "By ME," Jesus says, "You enter and are saved, and then, you go in and out and find pasture."

- A. I see the Church as a place of sanctuary, of healing, of salvation: THE CHURCH AS A HAVEN OR SANCTUARY "By ME ye shall be saved..."

The church is a place of salvation. Maybe you think it is weak or cowardly of me to want a place, to even crave a place, where I can go and not get pressed and beaten with the "wisdom" of our civilization. But I think one great function of the church is to be a retreat, a different place, a holy place, often a quiet place where the Shepherd can lead me beside the still waters and restore my soul. God wants our church to be a place of healing and salvation and receiving love and life, a place where life begins! But we "COME IN" for more than just salvation and succor. I also see:

- B. I get the "picture of" the Church as a "Come" Place: "By Me ye shall go 'IN!':

The Presence of the Good Shepherd makes a church an attractive place to COME IN: THE CHURCH AS A HOME

"By ME ye shall go IN..." Maybe in many respects that is the same thing as seeing the church as sanctuary or haven. Certainly both of these concepts—"sanctuary" and "home" are "IN" functions of the church. They see the church as a "COME" place— and that is all right. It is a COME place! "By Me ye shall go IN!"

And if Jesus is the Shepherd, the Door, there will be a lot to go in for! A home is much more than just a nursery where children are born. And while a home

is, or should be, a sanctuary, it is much, much more. A home is NOT always a quiet place. A home bustles with activity. There are times around the table— both the banquet table (like Thanksgiving Dinner) and the picnic table.

Can we talk about receiving spiritual food for just a moment? People say: 'I want to go to a church where I can be fed.' And certainly a church is a place where people should receive spiritual nourishment. But there is a difference between a home and a filling station, between filling up your car's gas tank with unleaded, and sitting down at the dinner table with people you love. We can think of the table as a place where we get refueled to go "out" and do the important things like make a living and play tennis and go to school and go fishing. But every happy family knows that what happens around the table, and how it happens, and the spirit in which it happens is as important as the "going out."

Perhaps the attitude of each one of us can help determine whether our church will be a filling station or a dinner table.

Worship is the central purpose of any Christian church. What is essential is that we come in contact with the Good Shepherd regularly.

Worship is not just a matter of what and how we do, but worship must always involve being before the Lord, and a deliberate seeking of God, and God's will, and subjection to God's Word. There is a lot more I would like to share about what we do in the "COME" or "IN" functions of our church, and why we do, and how we do, but our time is limited.

I would like to talk about the difference, in Sunday School class, between teaching and learning a "lesson" as opposed to teaching and learning how to help each other, and how to find the resources necessary for growing in grace.

I'd like to talk about the difference between a passive, inner welcome for strangers, and that little extra that breaks over natural shyness and

actually smiles and says hello!! Do you know that actually hundreds of visitors go through here each year?

I'd like to talk about my concern for qualified, caring altar workers. During the past year we have seen more than 200 people kneel at these altars seeking God for spiritual help, beside those who kneel each Sunday morning. These seekers have "COME."

And we all "care," but how many of us care enough to spend a few minutes praying with those we know, or for those we don't know? And all these not because I want to find fault with you; but because I see this natural shyness in myself. We're doing "pretty well," but there is room for improvement.

- C. But the vision I see of the Church is that it is not only a "COME" place, a place where we go IN; the church is a "GO" place.

III. THE CHURCH AS A LAUNCHING PAD

"By ME ye shall go OUT!"

The church Jesus would have us visualize and strive for is not complete unless and until we leave the sanctuary, and use the Door which is our Savior to go IN and OUT!

- A. We can go OUT in sending missionaries and money to the wide world: the giving is NOT unimportant! The level of our giving is indicative of seriousness of mission.

Money is "condensed life." It is NOT insignificant.

Far away, and in cities at home the 'people called Nazarenes' are still sending— and we are a vital part of that going out.

- B. We can also go OUT in challenging the BEST of our young people to lives of under-shepherding. I used to say "full-time Christian service." But is there any other kind? And besides, one hope of the future of the Church of Jesus Christ is in dedicated "tent-makers" who have a definite call to see the church of Jesus Christ GO OUT into the highways and the inner cities and the Saudi Arabias where ordained clergy are not welcome.

But still, there is a need for some of our very best young people to hear and answer God's call for the necessary training to be full-time ministers, missionaries, college professors, and church workers.

- C. But perhaps the absolutely most vital way the church must learn to go OUT is by every one of our members taking Jesus "out" with them wherever they go . . . in witness, yes! But it doesn't have to be (always) dramatic and for a "decision." That should be in mind, perhaps, all the time.

But more clearly, positively in mind can be: BY ME YE SHALL GO OUT!—taking Jesus with us to care about others and be part of the world's healing instead of its wounding.

Conclusion:

The way we must move toward God's will for us, and for our church is by consciously using 'the Door'! The abundant LIFE Jesus speaks of requires all our ransomed powers. Jesus also said, in this same Gospel, that He IS the light, and the bread, and the victory over death, and the way, and the truth, and the life, and the true Vine. But He, Himself, is the DOOR through which those who want to know all these other facets of what God is to us must enter. He is the Good Shepherd that will help us enter in.

A door is the exclusive way into life. Jesus makes it plain we cannot enter any other way except through Him. A door means an exit as well as an entering. We cannot go in and out with Jesus and be relying on our own wisdom or influence or knowledge or goodness.

And somehow, in this all there must be the consciousness of an higher purpose and loyalty. Our ultimate goal goes beyond the Wollaston Church of the Nazarene, and beyond our own personal growth and development.

I believe there can be a holy rest and in one sense even a holy indifference as to the visible result of our labors. For the ultimate success and score-keeping is beyond the measure of man's mind.

The Shepherd and the Door

Our first consideration must be to be people of integrity before God. To seek to be open with Him, obedient to Him, available to Him, IN OUR COMING IN FOR ATTENTION AND FOOD AND CARE, and IN OUR GOING FORTH TO TAKE HIS CARE AND CONCERN AND LOVE TO OTHERS wherever we range in our daily assignments.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. It is His Church. He is the Door. He is open to us today.

The Spirit-Filled Community

Today's "sermon" is an annual meeting address to the church in which the Church (at Wollaston)

Romans 8:21 " ... *the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*"

Romans 12:5 " ... *we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.* "

INTRODUCTION

Last Sunday's message would have been a good and logical place to end this series on "defining sanctification" from Romans 8— "Being filled with the Spirit." But on this Annual Meeting Sunday I wanted to pursue the truth that being sanctified is not just an individual matter.

Frankly, there is not a major emphasis on social holiness in this one chapter. But this great chapter is not isolated, and we do not need to leave the epistle to find clear statements about the community of Christian faith (Romans 12:5) In this very chapter (8:21) we have this one marvelous phrase: "the freedom of the glory of the children of God." This phrase suggests a good deal about sanctification as it is lived in community. It speaks of the freedom of the Spirit in community.

I. FREEDOM IN THE SPIRIT

- A. One important end result of salvation will be freedom, as contrasted here with the slavery of corruption. When evil is finally exposed for the falseness and hollowness and cruelty which it is, then all creation will be set free from corruption. This freedom is what God's children experience.
- B. Freedom does have an element of the negative: FREEDOM FROM
 - 1. Usually when "freedom" is discussed in our society, tainted as it is by the worship of the individual, we think of "freedom" as mostly freedom FROM— "...so that I can do anything I want to do!"

2. This ['freedom FROM' idea] even carries over into Christian setting, until "freedom" or "liberty" means (a.) genuine-ness, the ability to express delight in God; and (b.) the absence of bondage: sin does not control me any longer. [Both of which are GOOD.]

But we often carry this further and say (c.) NOBODY has the right to tell me what to do! I am free! Even GOD can only SUGGEST to me! I'LL decide!

3. This sort of freedom [tainted with the worship of the individual] does not exist - for ultimately it means freedom from responsibility, and freedom from binding relationships, and freedom from choice and from the results of choice. And there simply is no such freedom in or out of God's kingdom! We all face the consequences of our relationships and our choices! (Galatians 6:7)

- C. Freedom is more than 'not being bound;' it is FREEDOM TO: Freedom is ever something more than the NEGATIVE, what we DON'T HAVE TO DO any more; freedom is THE ABILITY TO DO WHAT WE ARE CREATED TO DO!

1. To be free from the hindrances to holiness means that we now have freedom to belong to God without reservation; freedom to become more and more like Jesus as a life's goal; freedom to be filled with the Spirit and bear His fruit.
2. This positive side of freedom means we can find God's will and pursue it. We have freedom to "be all that you can be!" the only way we can be "all" is in this freedom

[But freedom is not merely an individual matter, believe it or not. Our text opens the idea of "the relationships of freedom:"]

II. THE RELATIONSHIPS OF FREEDOM: "THE GLORIOUS FREEDOM OF THE CHILDREN OF GOD"

- A. Sanctification is always social. Freedom is linked to a relationship with God, but it is also clearly linked with God's children. We are each of us "one among many brethren and sisters" (v 29) Christ is "the first-born among many brethren."

Romans 12:5 says it even more succinctly: "*... we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.*"

1. Every child of God has a place in the Body and relates to the entire community of faith
 2. Every child of God is a servant to other individual's needs.
- B. The closing chapters of Romans are pure practical social sanctification. When Paul gets through with the necessary and deep and profound foundational statements about God and sin and grace and salvation, he proceeds without apology into the practical application of all the deep things he has written. Perhaps the "Therefore" at the beginning of Chapter Twelve is the demarcation.

"Present your bodies as living sacrifices— and get with the program!"

[But let me make a particularly sharp application on this Annual Meeting Sunday:]

III. WOLLASTON: THE CHALLENGE TO BE A SPIRIT-FILLED COMMUNITY

- A. Our unique position as a church:

When E.N.C. moved here from Rhode Island in 1918 the community simply gathered for worship each Sunday— and when summer came they dispersed and went their several ways. It was not until 1922, nearly 4 years after the college was here in Wollaston that the Wollaston Church of the Nazarene was officially organized. As a church we are definitely the "child of the college."

But in 1949-50 a new concept took shape. The college had sold the church this corner of the campus (for \$1) and the relatively small congregation built what was then a mammoth basement structure here— and set out to have its own facility and to reach out into the community in a new way.

To a certain degree we have accomplished, or are accomplishing, this visionary goal. We have three distinct and vital streams that, combining, compose the church as it is today: a community, non-college church; a

permanent college-related constituency; a transient college population. Each of these are themselves complex tributaries, and each is indispensable to the character of our fellowship.

B. Our challenges:

1. DIVERSITY: Our strength is also our greatest challenge. "Profound diversity." One of the most gratifying things that has happened to me in a long time was receiving (of all things) a request for transfer out. But in that letter this woman took the time to tell me what she felt about the Wollaston experience, and share her own vision for a community of diversity. (Listen, also, for the note of positive FREEDOM in her letter:)]

Dear Pastor Metcalfe,

Please pardon the "stationery," but I wanted to jump on this opportunity to communicate with you. As you can see, I am, at last, transferring my membership to another local congregation. This isn't an easy step to take. Wollaston will always feel like my "home" church. ... I was on staff at L.A. First Church of the Nazarene and got a wonderful hands-on education in urban ministry doing intake, needs assessment, and crisis counseling as well as the real work of urban ministry- networking ministries and services and compiling demographic information.

I've learned that God isn't looking for any "Lone Rangers" to go do glamorous work in the city, but computer skills and a heart for paperwork are pretty helpful ... It's hard, when so many dramatic portrayals of urban ministry are floating around, to recruit someone to do some "light typing for Jesus ..."

I've been seeing God's vision for a church of profound diversity where the powerful and powerless, rich and poor, those of a variety of cultures and sub-cultures, minister to one another and their community out of their individual gifts, where- like the Church at Antioch- people in different polarities bring their tensions of our urbanized world together in commonality under the anticipation of the kingdom of God. In three months here I've already been challenged, discouraged, humbled and made witness to the profound power in the love of Jesus Christ. So often in these times I recall the way you've [AT WOLLASTON, MY WORDS] communicated His love.

And so, at the core, I remain encouraged that this world remains the domain of my God. The freedom I find in that knowledge is such a relief. In a frequently constraining and stressful lifestyle, Jesus has come to mean Choice- what a beautiful word! ...

I feel very fortunate to have a life touched by this diversity and placed "on call" to pick up and move on to new challenges and chances as the days unfold. While my membership is moving to Chicago as I join this staff, my roots in this journey remain in that patriot-blue sanctuary and very much with you and your work in the Wollaston community. It was under your pastoring that I came to conversion and became convinced of the grace of Jesus Christ.

I couldn't tell you how many times in a day I think or speak the words: "Justified by faith ... just-as-if-I'd never sinned." I didn't learn everything there is to know

of God at Wollaston, but I was given a solid foundational education where I learned to worship, confess, and experience Christian community. I sit back and think of the Wednesday night meetings, the hymns of Luther and Wesley, the prayers of my teachers and peers surrounding me at the altar, and I am warmed with gratitude and love for you all.

Warmest regards, (signed)

[By the way, did you get that one phrase: "I learned to worship, confess, and experience Christian community."?]

Remember: We have a unique opportunity to worship with people who are different from ourselves— and consider them God's GIFTS to the Body! (Romans 12:5) " ... we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. "

2. PARKING: Believe it or not, our greatest challenge to numerical growth is parking! Visitors really have to find us— and to walk a block sometimes after they park their cars!
3. BUSY PEOPLE: Like "Diversity" this is also both strength and weakness. Other churches "envy" our "talent." Tonight we will have more than 50 people in a wonderful chorus choir. Other times it is hard to get 25 who are free to practice. We have some of the most interesting and challenging Sunday School classes imaginable. But at the same time it has been very difficult to find candidates for Sunday School superintendent.

Recently I preached a sermon on the fact that, under God's direction, it is all right to say "No!" to demands on your time, which is really God's time. I stand by that statement. But at the same time, our church is the product of our sacrificial love.

C. Our resources:

Love. We are a loving community! Understanding. The fellowship works!

Redundancy: Thank God we are a college church! It is a privilege to know our own gifted scholars and teachers as well as hear the outstanding speakers that visit here each year.

But we are NOT JUST a "college church" ... we have Community people ... one of our strongest segments is our Young Adult Fellowship (Y.A.F.) ... "Pie Monday" concept

Conclusion: ["What about:"]

GOALS:

They should be consistent with our mission statement:

"To know God, and to provide a climate in which each person may come to his or her full spiritual potential in Jesus Christ."

They should implement the joy implicit in the text:

"... the freedom of the glory of the children of God."

By God's grace we want to be, or continue to be:

A WORSHIP CENTER A SOUL-SAVING COMMUNITY A SPIRITUAL RESOURCE FOR
E.N.C. A RESOURCE FOR THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST A CONCERN FOR RADICAL
OBEDIENCE TO THE REVEALED WILL OF GOD

And I return to Romans for a scriptural "how to" closing for this message:

1. SANCTIFICATION IS SOCIAL: [Accept] 12:5 "So we who are many are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."
2. SANCTIFICATION IS LOVING: [Be aware of] 14:1-3 "Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him."

The Spirit-Filled Community

We are strong and weak. We can and must live together and promote spiritual health. We must recognize our temptation to judgment and/or to contempt.

3. SANCTIFICATION IS CHERISHING ONE ANOTHER: [Live by] 15:1-2 "Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves."

We can learn to think of each other as God's gifts to the community. Each of us has something important and vital to give, if it is not crushed out of us before its time. Each of us has share in the responsibility to cherish all the rest. Together we can discover what it means to live in a Spirit-filled community.

Prayer EH #47 *God of Grace and God of Glory*

The Substance and the Shadow

Luke 20:41-47 (46) *Beware of the scribes...*

also 17-18 *But He looked at them and said, "What then is this that is written (in Psalm 118): 'The stone which the builders rejected, This became the chief cornerstone'? Every one who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust."*

All my life I've been torn between wanting to be real and wanting people to like me. There is something in each of us that wants to put the best foot forward; that is only natural. But in the realm of relationships, and especially in the realm of religion, it is very dangerous to deliberately strive to appear to be what we are not.

[There is a difference between putting your best foot forward and deliberately deceiving. I don't think there are very many outright, deliberate hypocrites!]

This entire chapter is a warning against appearing to be religious but missing the heart of what religion strives for: GOD HIMSELF!

It is possible to appear religious, and be empty and dead inside. Jesus warns here against trying to appear devout and holy, while at the same time totally neglecting the qualities of character that walking with God should produce in a life.

Here are some of the negative qualities we might seek to avoid: Religion (primarily) concerned with appearance is:

I. INSINCERE

(7)

(v 1,2) The chief priests, scribes and elders- religious professionals- asked Jesus for His credentials. It would seem on the surface a legitimate request. ["TELL US BY WHAT AUTHORITY YOU ARE DOING THESE THINGS? (Cleansing the Temple)"]

But God never merely satisfies curiosity, and certainly never panders to human selfish guile.

So here Jesus asked for a return answer: ["WHAT DO YOU THINK OF JOHN?"] AND THEY HEDGED. They weighed what they would say rather than be honest before Jesus.

Real faith is withheld from insincerity.

Jesus immediately keyed in on this insincerity by telling a story of Stewards who refused their owner his just dues. He climaxed the story with the (mixed) metaphor of the Cornerstone. Jesus is either a Rock upon which to build . . . or He becomes an obstacle that must be rejected and that ultimately comes back to crush and grind in judgment.

A second observation. Religion (primarily) concerned with appearance is often:

II. CRITICAL, CARPING, FAULT FINDING

(22)

There is not a simplistic answer for everything. Some questions almost defy answering. At the same time, when we want to avoid the really painful questions of personal accountability to God, we can hide behind the smoke screen of nitty-gritty details. Almost without exception, when someone is slipping away from God he will seek to justify his backsliding by comparison. Well, what I am doing isn't nearly as bad as ...

"Can we pay taxes to such a corrupt government as Rome?" This was really a sneaky question. It would undercut Jesus either way He answered, either "Yes!" and look like a Rome-lover, or "No" and look like a revolutionary they could report.

Coming back to the 17th verse: Jesus threw the religious people into a panic when He asked them what an OT scripture meant and they didn't know:

Religion primarily concerned with appearance has to be:

III. "IN CONTROL"

(17 +) The people were flustered when Jesus asked them what the meaning of a certain scripture was:

It is disaster when you ask someone who isn't sure of his/her relationship with God a question they aren't sure about!

A genuine Christian is never afraid of saying "I don't know THAT! But I know WHOM!"

Conclusion

A. SUMMARIZE THIS PICTURE JESUS PAINTS OF DEAD RELIGION:

1. Worried MORE about appearance than reality
2. Seeking CREDIT or HONORS rather than seeking to SERVE
3. GREED for CONTROL

B. HOW MAY WE END ON A POSITIVE NOTE?

C. [LOOK INTO THE NEXT CHAPTER:]

1. Jesus SEES the widow's mites. He sees your desire and mine to be REAL!
2. Jesus SAYS (14,15) "IF YOU KNOW ME, I WILL BE WITH YOU IN THE HARD PLACES! I WILL HELP YOUR TIMING! I WON'T LET YOU DOWN!"

[But this is sort of a 'scary prophetic chapter' like Matthew 24 and 25. He does warn that "appearance religion" will then fail; ungrounded hearts will fail them for fear (21:26). And yet His final word is more encouragement than warning:

3. (28) When you think these things are taking place, "STRAIGHTEN UP AND LIFT UP YOUR HEADS! YOUR REDEMPTION IS DRAWING NEAR!" But He also says:

21:34 Be on guard, that your hearts may not be weighted down with (1) dissipation and drunkenness, and (2) the worries of life, and so THAT DAY come on you like a trap ... (3) praying that you may have strength to escape ... and to stand before the Son of Man."

[LOOK AGAIN AT THE QUESTION JESUS ASKED THE RELIGIOUS PEOPLE!:] "What does it mean, 'THE STONE THE BUILDERS REJECTED BECAME THE CHIEF CORNERSTONE ?'"

The Substance and the Shadow

Even while they were being insincere with Jesus, HE WAS SHOWING THEM A PROMISE, THE SECRET TO BEING REAL! THE SECRET IS OUR RELATIONSHIP TO HIM!

If we are REAL with Jesus NOW — He will help us to be more and more real with each other. And when it really counts, JESUS WILL BE THERE FOR US!

203 Ho! Everyone that is Thirsty

The Word is Hope

Matthew 2:21 *"And (Joseph) arose and took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel."*

THE STORY IN MATTHEW

For a very brief time in the beginning of the Gospels' story of Jesus, the focus of attention falls on Joseph. It is easy to pass over the importance of the part Joseph had in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. For Joseph was the guardian of hope.

Everything that we know about Joseph is good. But in his lifetime, so far as we know, Joseph never saw the full fruition of his faith and obedience. Still, his obedience kept HOPE alive for us all, and is still bearing fruit to this day.

Joseph is the guardian of hope. Before he ever SAW any of God's promises fulfilled Joseph was willing to obey and believe. First Joseph was confronted with misunderstanding and shame. He chose to take Mary into his home. Then Joseph had the privilege of naming the Holy Child "JESUS" in accordance with what the angel had told him.

His faith was rewarded, and there were visitors who came and confirmed what he already knew; there were shepherds that very first day; there were devout people in the Temple in Jerusalem, Anna and Simeon, who confirmed and assured his heart that the Child truly was Messiah.

Then came even greater surprises; kings, strange Gentile wise men from distant lands came paying homage to the Child, and bearing costly gifts, but at the same time speaking, perhaps in surprise, that the local authorities were unaware and probably hostile to this great HOPE of all the earth. Then that very evening Joseph had a vision of the angel again warning him: "Take the young child and his mother and go to Egypt. He is in danger!"

We see this story from the perspective of centuries; we read it like a drama. How could anything ever harm the Lord's Anointed One, even as a Baby? Would not the

angels keep watch over Him? If Jesus was truly God and the Son of God, why shouldn't he, Joseph, simply take the Baby to Jerusalem and proclaim Him before all the world?

But Joseph was living out his relationship with Jesus in the harsh reality of life. God's TIMING is impossible for us to figure. All Joseph knew was that precious LIFE must be protected at every and any cost! Whatever it took to keep the Baby alive and well Joseph would do! That very night, before dawn, Joseph was on the way to Egypt.

Where he stayed, what he saw— so pleasant for our speculation— the pyramids were already nearly 3,000 years old— did Joseph and Mary see them? What happened— the Bible is silent. Joseph stayed in Egypt until the angel sounded the "all clear." And then, with human fear and trembling, the Holy Family made its way back to the home town of Mary, to Nazareth, where Jesus spent the rest of his life until He began His ministry.

Joseph had the discernment of humility and obedience. He kept HOPE alive!

THE PRAYER IN EPHESIANS

What comes to us in a story in the Gospels Paul often packs into a lesson in the Letters. The connection between Joseph's obedience and this prayer in Ephesians 1 is not immediately apparent, but in both there is underscored the importance of keeping HOPE alive and well. Paul prays first of all for discernment, for enlightenment, so that believers can see what the essence of HOPE really IS.

Paul's world was dark and gullible; it was impressed with soothsayers and Caesars. Even believers were turned on by visible gifts more than they were by love and integrity; they were challenged by the show biz and glitz of their age, as we are by our own. And so Paul prayed: Lord, help my people to be able to see what is the HOPE of their calling, where the true POWER is to be found!

- HOPE is not self centered! There is an element of risk involved. Hope is the confidence that God will carry through— in God's own good time.
- Hope must be nurtured in obedience and faith.

- Hope is related to what God can and will do.
- Hope on our part has to do more with BEING than it does with DOING!

It is interesting just here how a best-selling book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, by Stephen R. Covey, interacts with the Christian concept of the importance of discernment and keeping genuine HOPE alive. In his book Covey says that:

For the first 150 years of our existence as a nation we were challenged along the lines of CHARACTER: the qualities that make for quality of life and relationships: integrity, honesty, fairness, congruence between profession and life-style.

For the last 50+ years the literature of practical life has swung to the emphasis on PERSONALITY: those attributes of human nature that make for success and the appearance of completeness. Techniques and short-cuts and seminars that bring about desired results without the outlay of personal development. He says that we have been taught that if we maintain (1) good public relations, and (2) keep a positive mental attitude we can accomplish "success," whatever that is. "Success" can be had by shortcuts, including cheating in school, being insincere in business relationships, and selfish in our own families.

Interestingly, Covey says this is NOT SO. He calls his readers back to the basics of CHARACTER FOUNDATIONS.

And really, that is what Paul is praying for: that we will discern how important it is to keep HOPE alive!

THE PROMISE IN JEREMIAH 31

The third seemingly unrelated passage in this morning's message comes from "the weeping prophet," Jeremiah; a man so burdened with the hardness of his generation and the shallowness of worship that he earned that pseudonym. "Weeping prophet!" But some of the most beautiful and sensitive passages in the Bible come from Jeremiah's heart! For all ages Jeremiah caught something of the extent of HOPE which shall be, through Jesus, for all people.

The Word is Hope

How important to "nurture the Babe" and let Him grow and become Lord on His terms! How important to seek the noble way, the way of integrity and honesty before God, and leave the timing up to Him! For, according to the promises of God through Jeremiah, HOPE opens up these realities of faith:

- I will gather my people
- I will lead them
- I will turn their mourning into joy [My people will be satisfied with My goodness]
- I will be their God; they will be My people [I will write My law in their hearts and they will KNOW Me!]

CONCLUSION

Hope is what makes life worth the living. All these great stories and promises are nothing if they are cut off from where we live and where we are just now.

But HOPE must be sustained by obedience. HOPE does not follow our agenda, nor does it follow a timetable which we set. We, like Joseph, may have to move to Egypt for a while, whatever that means. We WILL have to listen carefully for God's voice. If we think we hear Him saying exactly what we want Him to say we had better be very, very careful!

For God NEVER asks us to take short, cross-lot, cheap methods into "success." God never compromises His demand that we serve Him with excellence, with the best that we have. God never sacrifices CHARACTER on the altar of PERSONALITY!

If we have the precious LIFE of Jesus within, then that LIFE must be preserved at ALL costs!

CHARACTER OVER PERSONALITY INTEGRITY OVER IMAGE JESUS OVER ALL KINGS
AND GIFTS

Thoughts on the Second Coming

Matthew 24:1-11; Matthew 24:38-51 (Text 24:44 *For this reason ["You do not know which day your Lord is coming"] you be ready too: for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.*

Preaching on prophecy, and any words about how this world is going to 'wind down' are all too often left to the self-proclaimed "experts." [How long has it been since someone explained the Book of Revelation to you?] There is a reluctance on the part of journeyman pastors to rush into the prediction business.

Honest scholars have to admit both that (1) there is a great deal of the Bible devoted to telling what shall happen, and at the same time, that (2) there is no way to be authoritative in saying "First this, then that..."

But with armies gathered this very moment in the general area in which many prophecies center, and with express hatred of the entire region for people now occupying Jerusalem, and, incidentally, Armageddon, there is renewed interest, if not anxiety, regarding what is going to happen. What does the Bible say?

Bookstores are having greatly increased sales on prophetic themes since the Arabian gulf crisis. Late Great Planet Earth in demand, other new books rushing to print. What does the word say?

I. THERE IS GREAT MYSTERY

- A. We like to have control, to think that we know and understand. Preachers and authors who are graphic, and certain of themselves get strong followings— for a short while at least. It is great when you "know" something!
- B. No one has control of the Second Coming. But it is an event in history exactly as sure and certain as Christmas! God's mysteries remain mysteries until HE reveals them. There are no special deals for special sects or groups. God will speak to His entire church.

II. THERE IS GREAT DEMAND ON FAITH

- A. End times will be a time of sifting. I used to think that the sifting would be overt violence. I recall hearing preaching as a small boy, just before WWII, and thinking of where I might hide if the Germans came...

But the sifting of our day is to decide to believe that God is BOTH Transcendent AND Immanent; to believe that GOD MATTERS IN EVERY DAY LIFE AND LIVING! The sifting is a willingness to be considered a fool, perhaps, and to be a man or woman of faith. Many intellectuals reject the idea of an imminent God, a God who is both great and majestic and concerned with large-scale things like Creation and planets and continents and concerned with you and with me in the details of our lives, down to our attitudes and motivations.

To believe that this God is coming back to earth— that He did come as one of us, and that He communicates with us by His own Spirit— but that He is coming back to set up His own government— is too fantastic to be given any credence.

But this is exactly what every orthodox Christian believes! "That He shall come again to judge the quick and the dead..." is part of the Apostles' Creed, distilled from the Scriptures, and given allegiance to by Protestant and Catholic Christian alike!

- B. Several grand theories have emerged across the years, and have all been "proved" by sincere experts out of the same pages:
- POST-MILLENNIAL RETURN OF CHRIST— the CHURCH brings in the age of Gold, and then Jesus returns— this pretty much died with Queen Victoria, and was buried with two World Wars and several genocides.
 - The PRE-MILLENNIAL RETURN, now accepted by evangelicals, has been split several ways:

- PRE-TRIB RAPTURE when Christ returns secretly before all hell breaks loose on Planet Earth...
- And POST-TRIB RETURN, when the Church wades through dark times before Christ returns at Armageddon..
- Then there are MID-TRIB RAPTURE THEORIES, when the world experiences SEVEN years of hell, but in the MIDDLE Jesus returns...

All these have had their ardent supporters... but the Bible is strangely silent. It says: BE READY!

- C. One conflict, or at least paradox— is the seeming conflict between "faith" and "works;" or between "grace" and "merit." If we are saved by faith, not of works, then once we have believed, have been saved, we are "in forever."

And, so it would seem, we are. But to "believe" may mean much, much more than many have been giving it credit for— that's the rub! To "believe" may mean a total alignment of the life, of the will in accordance with the Word of God! And to make a profession of faith when there has been no change of heart and no change of the way of living is to deny the reality of "faith" and "believing."

We will NOT be saved by our works. No matter how well we serve, we cannot earn our salvation. We will not be saved by hitting the bulls eye of perfection every time we act. But if we are not even shooting at the target, how can we say that we are persuaded that Jesus is Lord? How can we say we are HIS?

III. THE SUPREME CALL FOR THE CHRISTIAN IS FAITHFULNESS

One can never "get ready" for Christ's second coming; one must BE ready.

And that meeting is to be one of great JOY! Text 24:44 For this reason ["You do not know which day your Lord is coming"] you be ready too: for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.

#78 (EH) *When He Shall Come*

Walk to Emmaus

Luke 24:13-35; 2 Corinthians 5:16-17

Why this text on Easter? Even if we had known Jesus in the flesh— we would have to come to know Him the way we do now— by spiritual revelation and spiritual discernment. I'm not sure we ever understand this lesson!]

The loss of a loved one is never easy. Getting used to a world that will never quite be the same ever again is a bitter reality that breaks in with pangs of pain over and over. The disciples were GETTING USED TO THE IDEA OF A WORLD WITHOUT JESUS. Something wants to deny the reality of pain and suffering. But these people had seen Jesus die. They knew that THINGS WOULD NEVER BE THE SAME, EVER AGAIN.

I. THE DISCIPLES WERE:

- A. SAD (17) Life without Jesus is hard for Christians to imagine. What would this world be without Him?
- B. DISCOURAGED (21) "We trusted!" Their faith was in the past only.
Of course faith is ALWAYS rooted in what has happened— in the integrity of what we think we can trust. This loss of faith is always serious; when it happens in a divorce; it is tragic— when it happens between parents and children/children parents— it is tragic. But now their faith has let them down. JESUS has let them down! (They think!) We "trusted" ... but we don't trust any more!
- C. UNBELIEVING! - SINFUL (25) Forgetting is no excuse, really! Jesus had told them! And they were not only NON-believing— they were UN-believing! THEIR SINFUL NATURE COULD NOT GRASP SPIRITUAL TRUTH UNAIDED! And Jesus preached from their Bible:

II. THE SAVIOR WAS:

- A. A COMPANION IN THEIR DARKNESS (15) (even before they knew it. v 15) [[Did you ever have Jesus 'slip up beside you' when you were not really expecting Him, but when

you needed Him very much? Is it possible that Jesus is near at hand and ready to break into our consciousness more often than we realize?!?

B. REVEALED IN, A REVEALER OF THE SCRIPTURES (27) Jesus always brings us knowledge of Himself and of salvation along the avenue of the Scriptures.

1. Not until the Bible is opened do we see our sin and unbelief as the root of the problem of isolation and loneliness and separation and sin.
2. Not until we see the truth from Him do we see that the ultimate sin is just that—unbelief.
3. Jesus revealed Himself, finally, as a friend! The dominant thing, and the thing that had continuity with the Jesus they remembered was love. (And what pastor would not give all the books in his library to have heard that exposition from Moses and all the prophets that day, as Jesus taught the things concerning himself!)

But something took place immediately as they recognized their risen Lord:

III. THEIR EXPERIENCE BROUGHT:

- A. A GENUINE FAITH (31) "And they knew him." They saw that this world's seeming defeats are not final, not real— that Jesus can be depended upon.
- B. REAL HOPE AND JOY (32) "Did not our hearts burn within us?" They saw that they had a share in Christ's triumph. They could not then know all the implications— but it began to dawn then of the great scope of Jesus' victory over death!
- C. A DESIRE TO SHARE (33) "They rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem." Seven miles on foot after dark— they just couldn't wait until morning!

Conclusion: Jesus breaks the power of bereavement with the promise: life never will be the same, ever again! But it will be all right! "I will never die again! And neither will you!"

The joy of Christ's victory becomes contagious! It cannot be contained! Suffering is redeemed! Faith takes on new meaning.

(It doesn't mean that NOW we start to live by sight— not yet— and faith will always be stretched to the next level of obedience.) But the Word of our Lord is to be trusted! What He says, He does!

Have YOU ever been like those two disciples on the Emmaus Road— sad, discouraaged— even perhaps without faith and hope? It could be that someone has a faith that is in the past tense. "I trusted, but my heart has been broken; I have been failed!"

Where, do you suppose, is Jesus right now? He is nearer than you think! And in just the same way that He revealed Himself to Mary, and to the Eleven, and to these two on the way— He will reveal Himself to you.

Will you respond to the thing that you know in your heart that He would have you to do?

#459 Just When I Need Him Most

WHERE ARE YOU IN YOUR JOURNEY? HAVE YOU EVER BEEN WHERE THESE MEN WERE?

What is Salvation?

Psalm 27 "The LORD is my light and my salvation . . . the LORD is the strength of my LIFE"

Mark 1:14-18 "...Jesus came. PREACHING THE GOSPEL of the kingdom of God, and saying (NOW!), The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: REPENT YE, and BELIEVE THE GOSPEL. Now as He walked by the sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. And Jesus said to unto them, COME YE AFTER ME, and I WILL MAKE YOU to become fishers of men. And straightway they forsook their nets, AND FOLLOWED HIM."

We have been considering the profound questions of our faith: "Is there a God?" "What is God like?" "What is man?" "What is sin" And we have been looking, in each question, to the Lord Jesus Christ, not only FOR an answer, but as Himself the Answer to the questions of life.

Today we ask the question, "What is Salvation?" And I would ask you to think with me for a few minutes as we look at a theological, scriptural answer to the question, for it is good and necessary that we understand in a systematic way what the Bible clearly teaches about being saved. Each person is (finally) his or her own theologian; but it is also very true that there is a great deal of conflicting misinformation passed off second-hand as God's truth of salvation. I would challenge you to think soberly about the scriptural concepts of God's Sovereignty and man's free will.

And then in closing, I would look at what we could term the irreducible minimum of salvation.

First, then,

I. A THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION, WHAT IS SALVATION?

The Bible teaches that salvation is ALL of grace, initiated by God Himself.

(Ephesians 2:8,9 For by grace are ye saved...etc.)

What is Salvation?

A. PRE-SALVATION GRACE (What theologians call "Preliminary States of Grace")

1. Election & Predestination,

("Salvation begins in the loving heart of a holy God." Ephesians 1:4 "God hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love." (and many more!) (And this opens up an age-old Calvinistic / Arminian controversy: Often we have either glossed over it, or have spoken pejoratively of those on the "other" side of the dilemma: How can God be Sovereign and at the same time our wills be free?)

J. Calvin: "Predestination we call the eternal decree of God by which He has determined in Himself what He would have of every individual of mankind, for they are not all created with a similar destiny; but eternal life is foreordained for some, and eternal damnation for others. Every man, therefore, being created for one or the other of these ends, we say he is predestinated to life or to death. . . .In conformity, therefore, to the clear doctrine of scripture, we assert that, by an eternal and immutable counsel, God has once for all determined both whom He would admit to salvation and whom He would condemn to destruction." (Institutes of the Christian Religion)

Arminian view of predestination is (Wiley) "...that gracious purpose of God to save all mankind from utter ruin." In other words the atonement is not limited by God's decree: PROVISIONALLY all men are saved.

2. The Call to the Gospel

- a. Universal in scope; to all mankind
- b. Awakening (Becoming aware of "lostness.")
- c. Conviction (A proper sense of guilt for sin; but of HOPE and not of DESPAIR!)

3. Prevenient Grace (Grace: "The unmerited favor of God")

- a. Both Arminians and Calvinists agree on the depravity of human nature; that man, unassisted, cannot save himself. Both magnify God's grace in salvation.
- b. But Calvinists say that "grace is irresistible." Wesleyans say God's prevenient grace makes it possible to respond to God's call. We believe that every movement toward God is a movement of His grace, and yet at the same time man is a free agent; free to choose good or evil.

[I have no pleasure or selfish purpose in escalating this division, but I do need to point out that (1) I know of NO major evangelical denomination which emphasizes man's total helplessness in receiving salvation. Appeal is made: "Hear God's call! Come forward! Pray!" And that sounds to me like free choice, a response, by grace, to grace. Fine! But (2) then once man has responded, modern Calvinism, or neo-Calvinism, says that he cannot lose that salvation. It is like a ticket to heaven which cannot be lost. Nothing can pluck the believer out of God's hand. One cannot be un-born. Arminianism is seen as a heresy of maintaining salvation by works, instead of by God's sovereign decree. But it cannot be BOTH ways! If we are saved simply by God's sovereign decree, and not by responding to God's call, then we are in no way responsible for our relationship to God, and can neither resist or lose our salvation, IF indeed we are among the "elect". But if we are saved by God's graciously enabling us to RESPOND to God's call and conviction, then why should we be KEPT without regard to our on-going RESPONSE AND FAITH toward God?] I do not state this antagonistically, and many great and good and holy men disagree here.

Summary regarding the "sticky" subject of predestination:

- Calvinism: All ELECTED are BELIEVERS
- Arminianism: All BELIEVERS are ELECTED

4. Repentance

"A godly sorrow for sins..." A turning away from . . . Repentance is THE RESULT of the Holy Spirit working in the souls of sinners. Wiley says, in part: " ...true repentance is marked by an abhorrence for all sin as against a holy God. Repentance is characterized by a feeling of utter helplessness before the law of God, and an acceptance of the just judgments imposed as a result of the violation of that law." Repentance does not save us. But true repentance is the "ground" out of which saving faith can spring. There is never genuine saving faith without repentance for known sins.

- B. THE FAITH THAT SAVES! - Entering Into God's Life Faith is at once the condition and the instrument of salvation.

Saving faith has both a divine and a human side.

Adam Clarke says: "God never believes for any man, no more than He repents for him; the penitent, through this grace enabling him, believes for himself: nor does he believe necessarily or impulsively when he has that power; the power to believe may be present long before it is exercised, else, why the solemn warnings which we meet everywhere in the Word of God, and threatening against those who do not believe?"

- C. Justification, Regeneration, Adoption, Sanctification [What God does for us, and in us, and to us, and through us in bringing us into fellowship with Himself; I spoke at some length about these concomitant elements of salvation just last Sunday evening. Suffice it just now to say by way of reminder that...]

1. our sins are forgiven;
2. we have a new quality and reality of spiritual LIFE in Christ Jesus; and

3. we are made sons and daughters of God, and are brought into His family when we are enabled to exercise saving faith and believe unto salvation.

D. THE WITNESS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

We all need assurance— but we also almost always mean "feeling." But the witness of the Spirit is a persuasion; an inner assurance that is deeper than feeling! Do we dare let our eternal salvation be a matter for anything less than certitude?

(TRANSITION: We have talked about salvation in terms that have been somewhat 'theological.' But what, in a practical, down-to-earth language does it mean TO BE SAVED? WHO is "saved?" WHAT is a Christian?)

II. A BOTTOM-LINE ANSWER TO THE QUESTION: WHAT IS SALVATION?

Look at the passage from Mark 1: (a practical description)

- A. Saving faith IS doctrine, belief. But it is MORE! It is pursuit of truth, and is expressed in doctrine; but it is more than simply intellectual trust in what we know. Orthodox Christianity can be extremely ugly.

We must always remember that being truly Christian is more than knowing and even than believing with all our hearts the truth of the Bible. There must be submission to Jesus, and life-changing involvement with HIM.

- B. Saving faith IS life-changing encounter with God, and means there WILL be feeling! It is an experience; but experience can never be either the center or goal of our faith. It may sound heretical, but it IS possible to be a 'born again' Marxist.

- C. Saving faith IS giving, serving, loving in Jesus' Name: It is service and ministry to need (and here we're getting close to Jesus! Mother Teresa is much more appealing to a needy world than any great theologian, say, J.I. Packer or John Stott— they want to see compassion, not simply know truth.

Yet it is possible to SERVE and still not be saved! I Corinthians 13 "though I give my body..."

What is Salvation?

D. Salvation is LIFE IN GOD BY JESUS CHRIST.

It is being inextricably linked with Jesus Christ; HE is the VINE, our LIFE is abiding in HIM! And then you may or may not agree with Wesley or Calvin in every dot of the "i" or cross of the "t", but if there is LIFE IN YOU BECAUSE YOU HAVE MET JESUS CHRIST AT THE CROSS . . . THEN YOU ARE A CHRISTIAN!!

Conclusion:

Jesus Christ, by His Spirit, and by His Word, is able to make Himself known to you. He comes by where you are, and He says, "Follow Me!" You say, "I don't understand all the doctrines, Lord."

He says, "I will teach you. Follow me!"

You say, "I don't feel any thrills or any profound inner moving of emotions."

He says, "I will change you, inside and out. Follow Me!"

You say, "I see a lot of things that need to be done in this world, Lord!"

He says, "I see them more clearly and feel them more keenly than you do. And I will use you. But first you have to submit to Me. Follow Me!"

[#81(EH) *My Faith Has Found a Resting Place*]

What is the Church

Part 1 of 2

(Titus 2:11-14) For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope- the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

(1 Peter 2:9) But ye [are] a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light:*

*(as in Titus, "a people that are his very own")

Introduction:

[We have been looking at basic questions of our faith. We have tried to start with the big ones— the simple ones— the ones we think it is almost heresy to ask, such as "Is there a God?" "What is God like?" "What is sin?" "What is salvation?"]

Any list of basic questions Christians must answer is not complete without this question, "What is the CHURCH?", and we address this question today and also, perhaps, next Sunday morning.

In the history of the Exodus we have a valid paradigm of how our God calls a people to Himself. And it is not "spiritualizing history" to look to that story for an outline of what Christ intends for His church.

The children of Israel cried out to the God of their fathers in misery from their bondage in Egypt. In 400 years the descendants of the seventy-two souls of Jacob's family that had been invited as guests of Pharaoh to Egypt had become an ethnic

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group of hundreds of thousands. They were no longer guests, but despised slaves and tools of a pagan culture.

And God heard their cry from their bondage. He came to them in power in the ministry of His servant Moses. God parted the Red Sea, and delivered them from slavery. Those who tried to keep them in chains were drowned in those same waters of deliverance which set God's people free.

As soon as they were free, and even before, a new thing was beginning. They were becoming **a people**; they were together for better or for worse. In the pressure and sifting they experienced in the wilderness, God gave them holy laws to live by, standards that reflected His own nature, His holiness and His love. These Ten Commandments set the emerging community apart, and gave them identity.

God watched over this band of travellers in the wilderness. He shaded them by day, and illuminated them by night. He rained food from heaven on them, and kept them from dying of thirst in the bleak desert. God defeated their enemies— sometimes as they watched, and sometimes when they didn't know anything about it. God brought them into a land flowing with milk and honey, and helped them become a real nation. He gave them a king when they cried for one. God took care of His own.

But all along, God's highest and best for the people He called His own was that they would be His sons and daughters; that they would love Him with all their hearts, and love each other as brothers and sisters as well. God wanted His people to be "family." For this great God loved the whole world, and it was through His people God wanted all nations of the earth to be blessed!

God's purpose then for people of faith is still the same today. And God's purpose for you and me helps answer the question, "What is the CHURCH?"

I. In One Vital Aspect, The Church Is Always **A Movement**

It has a vital interest in our LIBERATION!

True "liberation theology" is not interested in guns and bullets and violence, but in God's power stooping to set people free who cry out to him in despair.

(Just this week I interviewed a student (Kevin Coleman) who, as a pagan in New Jersey, cried in despair to a God he wasn't even sure existed— and God heard him! He will be joining the Church of the Nazarene next Sunday!)

The symbol of deliverance is not the sword or spear, and God's deliverance does not come by insistence on rights and by human hatred.

What God would have us remember is... the Red Sea! God wants the church to be a fellowship where men and women can be set free from sin and from enslaving bondage to things. The church is a place where people can get saved! When God speaks, sinners can get up and walk away from a life of bondage to sin!

II. The Church Is Also To Be *A Coming Together*

Because of a common faith, and a common way of life, the church becomes a place of IDENTITY!

Mount Sinai is more than just a place where the Law was given; it is also the symbol of a birth of a holy nation. God was teaching His people Who He IS and what He is like, and inviting them to identify with Him: Be Ye HOLY, for I AM HOLY!

And that is one of the things that happened on the day of Pentecost. God wrote the Law again— but this time on human hearts, instead of cold tablets of stone. And the church was born as men and women began to learn what Who God IS, and what God is like. And as a church, together we come to acknowledge why God put us here on this earth, and how we can become what God intends that we shall be.

In seeking to learn these lessons the church affirms its identity...

III. God's Church Is Also Intended To Be *A Fortress*

Some of the proud and the strong among us may not like to admit they need this; and some of the weaker among us think it is all the church is for. But God intends that His church shall be a place of SAFETY! We call this room in which we are worshipping "the sanctuary." We talk glibly about "a fortress mentality" and the negative implications of withdrawing into a shell to hold off the insidious and

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pervading evils of a dominant culture. And yes, God does expect us to do most of the work of the church outside these four walls.

But remember, too, that Jesus said (Matthew 6:33) "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness...and God will care for your needs of security!" That deep conviction that if we follow our Shepherd, our Shepherd will take care of us, is basic truth in our faith.

The symbol of God's care in the story of Exodus might well be the 'Pillar of Fire.' Or, it might be the manna, or water from the rock, or any other of the many times God kept and provided and defended His people. I hope you read and know and love those stories.

The church is to be a sanctuary from the storm of evil; a place of refreshing and renewal. It is the only source of true security in a world of change.

There is danger, of course, that security and sanctuary can become an end in and of itself. The legitimate need for God's protection can degenerate into a cry for comfort at any price. We don't merely want God to help us through problems, we don't want to experience any pain. But life isn't like that!

There came a time that the holy nation cried out for a king, so they could become a secular nation as well. They wanted for a king to defend and deliver them, and soon any love and caring and family spirit was gone. David may have been a man after God's own heart, but he soon became absorbed with keeping the machinery of government working. And by the time Solomon's reign had ended the nation that was to be God's own people had traded their liberty for the safety of keeping the status quo.

Here is a point of caution: we must exist for reasons beyond maintaining organization and status quo.

IV. But Remember, The Highest Form The Church Takes Is *A Family*

Our God is a God who loves FELLOWSHIP! He created us to love Him— there is no no higher reason for life than that! All the laws of community, and all the

commandments; all the teachings of Jesus, including the Great Commandment, have to do with LOVE! And do you know where "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself!" is found? In the story of the Exodus, Leviticus 19:18! (and eight other times, quoted in the New Testament.) The church as family is not an idea that is new.

The acid test of the reality of the Christian faith, as John wrote, was to be, "Behold how they love one another!" One great purpose of the church, from our human perspective, is to restore the fellowship of the Garden of Eden. The high point in life for Adam and Eve, was walking with God in the cool of the day. They walked with God and loved each other with pure love, not because they had to, but because it was what made them happiest! The church is to be a family! It is to know a love beyond legislation!

And that is just what we are striving for here— what every true fellowship within the church wants. WE ARE FAMILY! And more and more we need to see that reality grow!

V. But Remember, Too, God Has Another Great Purpose For The Church. God Intends That The Church Shall Be *A Witness*

When the word got out [about 1492 B.C.] that a renegade son of Pharaoh named Moses had led a motley throng of Hebrew slaves into the wilderness, loaded with gold and silver jewelry, and with no visible means of defense, what do you think the kings of the established nations in the Sinai peninsula and the rest of the western Oriental world thought?

One of these pagan rulers, Sihon, king of the Amorites, decided he was not going to let this mass of people go through his territory, even though they asked him politely. He probably thought Pharaoh's loss was his gain— he would make a huge profit of these defenseless shepherds. But God told Moses not to be afraid, and Sihon was killed and his armies routed. And after that incident Sihon's name is mentioned more than twenty times in the rest of the Bible, usually in a Song of Praise to God, as the "church" looked back on how God blessed them when they were defenseless.

What do you think this did as a witness to God's power and love for His people? Everybody— EVERYBODY!!— knew that the Hebrews' strange God— a God no one

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could see- stood by them! The watching kingdoms saw the manna— they saw God's care. They witnessed the defeat of evil enemies. God stood by the Jews, not because He loved them better than the rest of mankind, but because He chose them to witness to His great love! I believe this truth would be acknowledged by the great Jewish scholars, even though it is easy for both Jews and non-Jews to think that God simply had His favorites and didn't care about the rest of the world.

The Golden Verse of the Bible does not say, "God so loved the Jews that He gave His only begotten Son!" But listen carefully, John 3:16 does not say, "God so loved THE CHURCH! that He gave His Son", either! God does love the church, and intends that we shall love Him and love each other, God also loves the world, ALL the world, and intends that His people shall be witnesses to that love.

God loves all people everywhere. The primary witness to God's love for the world is the church. A very important part of that witness will be a deliberate evangelism, or taking the gospel to the ends of the earth in obedience to Christ's Great Commission. But all of the life of the church can be a witness! From the Red Sea to the Promised Land God spoke to the world by His people.

In every facet of its existence, in worship, and education, and in service, as well as in fellowship, as well as evangelism, a living Church is a living witness! If we are simply reacting against our culture, or worse, if we are simply a non-critical part of our culture, then no wonder we are a poor witness or no witness at all.

But if we are on our way to God's Promised Land, and are walking by His vision for us, across cultural pressures where need be, then we shall be the witness God wants us to be!

WHAT IS THE CHURCH? (text) We are God's people! God help us to live like God's people! Amen.

#8(EH) *Christ is Made the Sure Foundation*

What is the Church Part 2

Part 2 of 2

Ephesians 4:4-16

[Last week we asked the question, "What is the Church?", and looking at the story of the Exodus as an example of how God deals with His people we said that the church is:

1. a **movement** concerned with setting people free; and
2. a **coming together** that gives believers identity with God; and
3. a **refuge** so that those who trust God do not need to be overwhelmed by evil; and
4. a **family** that knows God as Father; and, finally,
5. a **witness** to watching worlds that God is just and holy and merciful.]

READ TEXT PASSAGE

I. THE CHURCH IS THE HABITATION OF GOD ON EARTH

It is 'where God dwells with His people.' The New Testament gives two great representations of the CHURCH. In I Peter 2:5 "...you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

"The one great representation of the Church is as the TEMPLE of God— the place where God is worshiped, where He is high and lifted up. Not the physical building of brick and mortar— but the people of God, individually AND together are an habitation of God for worship.

The other great New Testament figure of the Church is as the BODY of Christ. Throughout this passage the message is "The Church is the BODY of Christ— a mystical continuation of the Incarnation."

And so the Bible teaches that every believer is a "living stone" in the Temple that is THE CHURCH; and every believer has a vital part in the Body of Christ that is THE CHURCH!

But there are many voices and many faces claiming to be "the one true Church," OR, claiming to be a part of the "one true church." How may we know, and be sure? (The CHURCH may be (much) broader than we think in some respects; and it may be (much) narrower. We all are concerned, or ought to be— about knowing the TRUE church!)

II. THE ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC, APOSTOLIC CHURCH JESUS INHABITS

A "thumbnail definition" (necessary but not sufficient) is to ask: is the church "creedal?"

Four creedal "Notes:" One - Holy - Catholic - Apostolic.

A. "One" - Eph 4:4-9 Unity

One day, possibly sooner than any of us thinks, a trumpet blast will sound and the church will be called to meet the Lord of the church. (Matthew 24:) Jesus said that He would send His angels with the great sound of the trumpet and gather his elect from the four corners of the earth.

At that time the unity of the church will be most apparent. The CHURCH will rise to meet Her Lord not as Nazarenes or Baptists or Catholics; not as Calvinists or Lutherans or Wesleyans. These labels and denominations may serve important, even vital functions here and now. But there is an even deeper, more vital, underlying unity that pervades the Church of Jesus Christ.

THAT UNITY IS THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS CHRIST!

It is confessing that Jesus Christ is VERY God and VERY man, and that He is Lord of all, Lord of the church!

And every believer is a living part of this one true church. And there will be a gathering!

B. **"Holy"** [The church is ONE, the church is HOLY.] (Ephesians 5:27)

The more we understand of the word "holy," the more we respect it and even stand back from it in awe.

"Holy" belongs to God! Only God is holy in an underived and pure sense. All holiness is HIS.

And we see the church as human. WE are a part of the church, so how can the church be HOLY? If WE belong to the church— and if we have such a high view of what "holy" is to be— then how can the church be holy? But in Ephesians 5 we read that Christ loved the church, and gave Himself for it, that He might present it to Himself glorious, without blemish, a HOLY CHURCH!

1. "HOLY" does pertain only to God— one definition of "HOLY" is just that: belonging to God! What is HIS is HOLY! And the church is HIS!
2. In order to make the church HOLY, Christ not only LOVED the church, Christ DIED FOR THE CHURCH. "That He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate." The church is made up of those who have been washed in the precious blood of Jesus. They are not faultless, because they are human. They are blameless, because they have been washed in the sanctifying blood.
3. To be more specific, this HOLY church is made up of all whose sins are washed away, and who are partakers in the blood and body of the Lord.

I am not a liturgist, and I do not ascribe saving power to the God-ordained sacraments of the church. But the holy Church of Jesus Christ is made up of all truly baptized and communicating members; those who have made themselves subject to the Lord of the Church.

In baptism our sins are washed away and we die to an old way of living. The sacrament is an outward sign of the inward reality.

In communion we are partakers of the divine nature, and once again, the sacrament humbles us before God as we realize our total dependency on the blood and body of our Lord.

- C. **"Catholic"** - Eph 4:12-13 Unity in Diversity The church is WORLD-WIDE! We get the idea that where WE are is the center of God's love and attention— everything else is peripheral. But Christ's church is BIGGER THAN WE THINK! There is not only a diversity of GIFTS (we're used to THAT!) There is A diversity of PEOPLES:

(Zechariah 2:11 "And many nations shall be joined to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people: "

Revelation 7:9 After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands.")

The church of Jesus Christ is world-wide; there is a place for individual, provincial churches, of course. But each of us needs to remember that we are connected to a greater whole; that we are part of Christ's great Body world-wide.

- D. **"Apostolic"** - Eph 4:15-16

Eph 2:20 says that the church is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief Corner Stone."

The church of Christ is diverse in gifts and cultures, but it is ONE in its essential faith and creed. But we also believe the church is confessional. It is not enough to say: "We believe what the apostles taught and believed!" Or even to say, "Our church has a direct line of succession from Peter!" But we must say, "I confess the same LORD the apostles preached and knew!"

Romans 10:10 says: "With the heart we believe unto righteousness, and with the MOUTH we confess unto salvation!"

(Eph 4:15-16) Holding to the truth in love we are to grow up into the Head of the Church, even in Christ. (Note: We are not simply to grow in grace as individuals, so that WE can do OUR thing. But we are to HOLD TO THE TRUTH ONCE DELIVERED TO THE SAINTS (Jude 1:3) and grow up into Christ as Christ is the Head of the church!

(Conclusion:)

Perhaps this has been more like a lesson than a sermon; take heart, the sermon is almost over. But if the answer to the question, "What is the Church?" is: "The CHURCH is a continuation of the incarnation, the Life of Jesus!", then, What does that have to do with you and me? The New Testament gives two representations of the church, as the Temple of God, and as the Body of Christ.

SO, how does that make any difference in my everyday life and living? That is a fair question. Most of us are not very interested in abstractions or unrelated theological ideas.

1. But a call to follow Jesus Christ is a call to be an active and vital part of Christ's Church! Every believer is to be a part both of the TEMPLE OF GOD, that is the Church; and of THE BODY OF CHRIST, that is also the Church.
2. Being a part of the Temple has to do with what we ARE IN CHRIST. Every believer is to be a living stone in the Temple. Perhaps this speaks of a certain passiveness a being inhabited, being set apart for God's glory, for His worship. Just as a cathedral speaks volumes, so the inhabited Church,ÜjÜ the Temple, points to God and glorifies Him, and exists for His glory. Everything we say or do ultimately springs out of what we ARE. And if we exist to glorify God, and to be inhabited by Him, we will be to His glory.
3. But being a part of Christ's Body speaks of what we may DO IN CHRIST. There is not only a passive role to fill, but an active and exciting part to play in the dynamic life of the Church. Not every member of Christ's church is an evangelist or preacher. But every member is called to be a WITNESS! We all contribute our energy to the LIFE of the Body.

What is the Church Part 2

We are all concerned with what Jesus is DOING in this need world. YOU have a contribution to make (to Christ's BODY) that will make an eternal difference! WHAT IS THE CHURCH? The Church is Jesus Christ living in US!

The CHURCH is JESUS living in YOU!

#306 In Christ There Is No East or West

#311 I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord