

Emphasis

A Preaching Journal For The Parish Pastor

CHARTING THE COURSE

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Due to accidents, illnesses, and other unforeseen events, we sometimes need to change our plans. Three of the Charting The Course pieces (December 20, January 10, and February 17) are drawn from our archives of past issues. We hope this will still serve you well.

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Risking it all for Jesus Christ

Life is full of surprises and I am enjoying one at the present time that is close to the top of all of the surprises I have ever had. For a number of years I have put up with a bad lower back that never seemed to heal in spite of having it attended to by many different doctors. A couple of months ago it became almost unbearable and so I decided that it was time to do something. A close friend and fellow pastor recommended a surgeon that had recently worked on him with excellent results. Another friend advised me to go to his chiropractor who gives him great relief from lower back pain, similar to mine. For some reason I decided that I would seek out something that I had only heard about but had never tried. I looked up an Acupuncturist in our area and made an appointment. I was kind of excited about going out on the edge for medical treatment but I had little expectations of healing. I guess I just did not want to repeat what I had been doing for the past ten years.

I could hardly walk into the office of a practitioner because my back hurt so much. This was worse than it had ever been before and the weekend was absolutely miserable. When the receptionist showed me into a room and asked me to sit and wait for the doctor I began to question my decision. I looked at a table that I knew I was going to be asked to lie down on and I could not imagine the pain that it would bring. Within a few minutes a woman appeared and began to interview me with regards to my condition. Eventually we decided that I should give it a try and after more pain than I had ever experienced I finally found myself prone on the table with my face straight down on a padded circle staring at the floor. Within moments I knew that she was putting in the needles that I hardly felt and then under the influence of Asian music I began to feel things working. The relief was unbelievable but for only a couple of hours after the treatment. She told me it would take a number of sessions. But for the first time in weeks I felt good if only for a few hours.

My surprise came on the second visit. I hurt badly but we talked and I found out more about her career. She was educated in China, both in regular medicine and also in the ancient arts of healing. After graduation she came to the United States to pursue her education and a career. She knew that she would not be certified as a physician immediately but she looked forward to the opportunity. She was greeted by a friend from her medical school in China. They were not close friends because her

friend's parents, particularly her father, were leaders in the communist party. My healer's grandfather had been a leader in the underground Christian church in China and they knew to stay away from the communists. The two friends had never talked religion. When the weekend came, the daughter of the communist leader asked my doctor if she wanted to go to church. After a few minutes she replied that she would like to go to church. She was shocked to find out that her friend attended church and called herself a believer. Later she found out that her parents had also immigrated to the United States and were also believers. For many years they had silently believed, not telling anyone nor betraying those they knew were believers.

My doctor eventually saw the possibilities of something bigger than her career as another physician. She moved from the West Coast to Florida and opened a school for the ancient practices of Chinese medicine. For twelve years she built her school and then retired to enter full-time practice. Her main reason was that she wanted to also be part of a growing church that worked with many Chinese people. She teaches a large, weekly Bible study class in her home and on Sunday her day is devoted to serving a growing ministry.

As I listened to her speak of her past and the dangers of being a Christian I began to learn a new perspective. I found someone that risked it all for Jesus Christ and loved every minute of it. She sees the dangers in our own country of turning our backs on Christ and asked me to be vigorous in my preaching and to always preach for a decision. I look forward to many more meetings with her about the church.

By the way, I also feel healed from my chronic back pain. Feeling good is wonderful; finding this kind of faith is awesome.

Wesley Runk, Publisher



Stephen McCutchan

Listening to members of the domestic church

I once heard that Catholic tradition refers to the family as our domestic church. I have often reflected on that phrase. There is a profound truth to that early statement in the Genesis creation story that it is not good for a human to be alone (2:18). For those of us who are married and perhaps have children, this is the intimate community to which we are invited to experience God's love at its most basic level. At its best, we draw deep chords of support from the variety of forms of love that are experienced in a family. Single people have to be more creative but also draw strength from a set of relationships that serve as family for them. We frequently find analogies to God's love for us in the various experiences of family. Even when our family experience is negative, we still retain a yearning for the type of love made possible by family.

Unfortunately the pressures created by the profession of ministry can create tremendous pressures on the family bonds. Churches expect their pastors to maintain a healthy family even while the demands placed on the pastor create strain on the relationship. The needs of a congregation can drain a pastor of energy, interrupt carefully laid family plans, and create undue expectations that test the patience and tolerance of any family. The pressure to present the image of a happy family can, at times, prevent a family from honestly addressing situations that cause family upset.

The Toolbox of the Presbytery Pastoral Care Network (www.pastoralcarenetwork.org) suggests a family evaluation game that I think can help a pastor's family have a healthy conversation about these pressures. The reason for suggesting it as a game is to add some fun to the conversation and a small experience for chance to shape the conversation.

The basic game requires a stack of 3x5 cards and a pair of dice. On each card is typed a question addressing the experience of being in a family in which at least one member is a pastor serving a church. The cards are shuffled and placed on the table between the players. When it comes a person's turn, s/he rolls the dice and the number that shows up determines how far down the deck s/he counts to pull the question that s/he will answer. Once the question is responded to, it is buried in the deck, the deck is reshuffled and the next person rolls the dice. (Shuffling is necessary since there are only twelve spots on a dice and the deck carries 35 or more cards.)

The toolbox I referred to suggests a series of questions for a family with children. You can access it on their website. However

the game is valuable for couples without children as well. I want to suggest a series of questions that could be used by a family of two or more adults. Remember that these questions have no particular order. When a card is drawn, the person is asked to simply answer the question as best they can and let the game continue.

Sample Questions:

1. What is one unexpected pressure of the ministry on our relationship?
2. How does the lack of two and three day weekends affect our relationship with our extended family? How should we respond?
3. How do I perceive our parents' attitude toward the ministry?
4. How well do I think each of us does in finding personal time for ourselves?
5. How well do I think we do in finding couple time apart from others?
6. What are the couple time activities that I most enjoy?
7. What are the couple time activities that I least enjoy?
8. What is a new activity that I think we would enjoy?
9. How am I doing with my own spiritual journey?
10. How do I feel about our financial planning toward retirement?
11. What type of Bible study or spiritual practice would I like to share with you?
12. How do we decide whose career takes precedence in determining a move? How does that make me feel?
13. How do I think we are doing in handling our finances?
14. How adequately and fairly do I think the church acts in determining the pastor's salary and benefits?
15. Do I think the way the congregation is informed and/or acts on the pastor's salary and benefits is appropriate?
16. What do I think are the congregation's expectations of the pastor's spouse?
17. Am I comfortable with the way the congregation relates to the pastor's spouse?
18. What do I think the pastor expects of the pastor's spouse?
19. If I think we are overscheduled, what is one activity each of us might drop?

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Mark Ellingsen

Getting real about ecology

The lessons for the spring are rich in socio-political opportunities for preaching. As usual, you can find occasions for preaching on poverty and hunger (the first lesson for March 3 [Isaiah 55:1-9] and the gospel for March 21 [John 12:1-8]). Several texts proclaiming liberation from slavery offer great opportunities to preach on race (the first lessons for March 14 [Joshua 5:9-12] and May 16 [Acts 16:16-34]). There are opportunities to speak on women's equality and God's female Presence (the first lessons for April 25 [Acts 9:36-43] and May 30 [Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31]). Some Sundays afford you with a chance to address God's will for the unity of all people (the second lessons for April 18 [Revelation 5:11-14], April 25 [Revelation 7:9-17], and May 9 [Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5] as well as the gospels for May 16 [John 17:20-26] and May 30 [John 16:12-15]) and to stand up to the authorities when they block the will of God (first lesson for April 11 [Acts 9:36-43]).

We encourage you to explore all these possibilities, but our job is to find a common theme. What brings many of these themes together? The title tells you — a theme so appropriate for the spring, but one that is largely getting overlooked with all the anxieties about the recession, healthcare, and war. In December, a United Nations meeting on climate change held in Copenhagen forged an international agreement of nations pledging to reduce carbon emissions, but without any teeth. As a result it will not get us out of the wilderness and may well be old news by the time you read this. But that is one of the things The Political Pulpit is for — prophetically to address and call the flock's attention to issues that the world is forgetting. When we get practical about our ecological sensitivities, all of the preceding themes can also be addressed.

We (America and the church) have not been very practical about ecology lately.

Thanks to Al Gore, to some extent Barack Obama, and like-minded politicians, not to mention the millennium generation who has largely been converted to "green" causes, the ecological crisis had not been completely forgotten in the midst of more sensational and pocketbook agendas. The public rhetoric has of late largely been about big-picture generalities.

The war over global warming proceeds. Though you should endorse its reality if you want to be politically correct, a recent Pew Poll indicates that only 57% of the American public thinks there is solid evidence for the

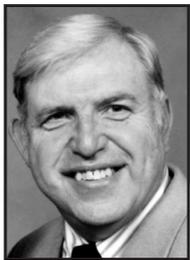
theory of global warming caused by our ecological insensitivity, down nearly 20% in the last three years. Besides, the media and proponents of this gloom scenario do not always advise us that the earth has experienced several periods of global warming, coming out of periodic Ice Ages in the last several million years. Higher carbon dioxide levels were involved in each warming period. I do not want to take sides on this debate at this point, to minimize our ecological wantonness. But can we reasonably expect to straighten out this debate in the pulpit?

There is some hopeful news. The US is pledging to cut carbon emissions by 17% below 2005 levels by 2020, and China began acting on this by setting limits of carbon pollution for factories and automobiles. Meanwhile, our president reminds us that ecological sensitivity will help the economy, by creating "green jobs." True enough, his support of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act included more than \$80 billion in clean energy investments, including \$600 million in green job training and many building projects erecting more ecologically sensitive buildings. Except for our entrepreneurs in the congregation, this is data that will not be of pressing interest to our worshipers. What then can we say of ecology in our present context? From the pulpit, our ministry is to frame these issues in light of the Christian doctrine of creation and to get the word out about some issues that the public and its media overlook.

What do we need to be communicating about ecology that the public is not hearing? These overlooked issues are potentially non-partisan problems around which coalitions in our nation might be built. They can't help but matter for Christians and other people of good will. What follows is a short list that is worthy of your parishioners' attention.

First, it is time Americans stop congratulating themselves on their ecological sensitivity, stop demonizing developing nations as the new culprits. In fact, China is way ahead of us on these issues. It is investing ten times as much on clean power as the US is. It is on track to developing 150,000 jobs through deployment of wind power by 2020, nearly five times the American total. Chinese cars are one third more fuel efficient than US cars. America is not a very good global neighbor. Under lax regulation Americans have churned out more than 370 million units

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Wesley T. Runk

Using the gospel in ecology

Mark is an amazing writer. He is an excellent Bible scholar and he researches all of his facts and backs everything up with great statistics that make me always wonder why I should even think about giving an opinion that seems contrary to his conclusions. Who could oppose the concept of global warming or man's endangerment of the ecological systems that are so important to us and the survival of our planet and our life as Christians and part of God's creation? I have read over and over what Mark writes and I am in agreement with most of the conclusions he comes to after his careful wording of the facts as we understand them. I wonder why so many scientists disagree with global warming? Why do they differ if they have had the same education in the same area as those who predict an impending doom?

Some of my friends suggest that I should make reservations to see the movie about 2012 and how close we are to a great cataclysmic strike. The imagination of the movie writers based upon the facts as they are given by men of great scientific achievement have made me create a wish list of everything I want to do or accomplish before the final days of our existence. My list will not be quite as adventuresome as the "bucket list" of Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson, but it is a pretty good list.

I remember when Saint Paul had to contend with the first group of Adventists who lived on a mountain expecting people in the villages to support them with food and other necessities while they awaited the return of Jesus. Evidently Paul painted to good of a picture of what the new life was going to be and the Greeks, now Christians, decided to be the first ones in line. They climbed as close as they could to heaven and just sat down and waited. It was up to the non-believers to keep them healthy until the day of Christ's coming again.

I am always a little skeptical of the true believers in science. So many times they have had all of the facts to support their claims and then some tiny fact seems to break through like a blade in the crack of my cement patio and I soon have to admit that I did not remove every seed from under the black plastic and tamped gravel before placing the pavers. Somehow there is enough sunlight and rain that penetrates through all of my doing to present me with

a weed of unknown origin.

A couple of months ago I heard an announcement that many wished would not be made. The announcement was that women under fifty should not have to have a breast exam. They could begin at fifty if they wanted to, but it was a known fact that the scientific examinations had cast little light on the saving of lives. They also said that self-examinations of the breasts were of little help in detecting breast cancer. Now how do you justify such a comment after pounding into the heads of women for years the importance of these examinations as specified by the best medical researchers in the world? Some of the commentators said the idea that insurance companies would deny such practices for forty-year-old women would be met with the firmest resistance and that they would have to give in to anyone having breast exams regardless of the findings.

I, too, wonder why we believe that we can do something for the environment that will prevent the melting of the ice and perhaps the extinction of the polar bear in their natural habitat. Did we not have glaciers melting in other times? Isn't the earth a changed earth from what it was thousands of years ago? One day I was sent an email with a link to one of the most exciting things I have ever seen. It was the formation of an island in the Pacific Ocean. It happened there before my very eyes. Planes noticed the emergence of a volcano in the ocean and photographed it as rose from the depths of the ocean and within days formed a new land mass. The reverse is also true that during times of severe weather our lands are eroded and rock and dirt are dragged out to the sea. In Florida we must keep rebuilding our beaches because they are so important to our economy. I lived in Ohio where the great glaciers ended their spread over the land and flattened the earth in such a way that you can see for miles without any evidence of a hill. The soil is as rich as the Mississippi Delta because of the deposits that were left when the ice retreated. Did man have anything to do with these changes in the climate? Are we important enough that we can keep the creation of God from happening? Maybe so, because

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Getting real about ecology

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of electronic junk (keyboards, monitors, cell phones, and the like). And as much as 80% of American e-waste is exported, especially to impoverished nations. Get that? We all knew about the industrial pollution of our cars, trash, and factories, but computer material? And we are dumping it elsewhere! This is clearly not a practice that honors the biblical witness to human unity in the biblical texts noted above. If we are going to mandate reduction in carbon emissions as Obama has pledged, Americans will need to be ready to pay for it, either with higher prices on carbon-burning fuels or with higher taxes to discourage the use of carbon. The Sundays that are assigned are good times for this ecological message. If we all proclaimed that word, maybe we could help create an awareness among Americans that some financial sacrifices will be occasioned for the sake of our environment. Maybe we could also help form coalitions to bring some pressure on the Environmental Protection Agency and US Customs to enforce standards. And then our unity might serve the well-being of everyone on the globe. The Lenten season is a great time for us to proclaim and confess our American sin.

Other pollutants needing attention: As we preach lessening our dependence on oil, many advocate nuclear power, but what of nuclear waste and what it can do to our environment? We already have 60,000 metric tons of the stuff we need to store and keep out of the environment for the next tens of thousands of years and still don't have a solution regarding where to put it. Let's pressure those opting for nuclear power to find a solution before we make more.

Let us also not forget that burned coal (especially when used to coal-fired power plants to meet our energy needs) produces ash. Many have heard of the dangers of coal ash storage spills in Tennessee, creating poisonous sludge that buried a town and contaminated rivers and streams. Only recently has it become known that there are 154 other storage sites, 44 of them hazardous, and most of those are located in or near impoverished communities.

Get this word out to your parishioners. When? Not just on the Sundays when the Word witnesses to human unity. Especially consider again the second lesson for April

18 (Revelation 5:11-14) when the text refers to all creatures (all living things praising God). That is what creation is intended by God to do — the ultimate ecological vision that we regularly pollute. Creation does not sing, as we continue our selfish, polluting ways and let Congress tie the hands of Environmental Protection Agency in response to big-money utility company contributions to their re-elections. We have a lot better chance to gain a unified following if we highlight these issues than preaching on the more ideological, disputed questions of global warming and green jobs. Get real: Our political proclamation is likely to make more of an impact if we attend to these more practical concerns.

My reference to the storage of coal ash near impoverished communities brings us to the issue of environmental racism. The texts noted above in the first paragraph pertaining to racism also provide excellent opportunities

for you and me to call parishioners' attention to the fact people of color make up the majority of those living in neighborhoods located within 1.8 miles of the nation's hazardous waste facilities.

An Associated Press study in 2005 found that African Americans are 79% more likely to live in such neighborhoods than whites are. Hispanics are also more likely to live in such neighborhoods than whites. The latest study by University of Colorado Professor Liam Downey has revealed that this ecological inequality is not necessarily a function of economic inequality, a finding that is even more insidious (see www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/07/070709133240). Let us keep in mind that some of the pollution in predominantly Black and Hispanic neighborhoods is a function of factors not usually on our radar screens — that we build our superhighways and refineries near or through such neighborhoods. Call it zoning, not just the doing of business, that causes such pollution. Can we help mount interest groups to stop that from happening in each of our regions next time, at least sensitize our congregations to these problems? It would be a way of making the ecological concern real. Instead of just preaching values, urging that our congregants become "greener" (and we have a lot to do on that score as the American public polls are lower on the importance of ecology than the citizens of Western European nations as well as their counterparts in China and India), we can only get practical about ecology by pressuring government to do the right thing.

When can we preach these messages? Note again this column's first paragraph and the references to texts pertaining to slavery and poverty. The texts on the unity God wants are also timely for this message. But let's not forget that Easter and the Easter Season also invite a consideration of the ecological theme. For it is a message of the goodness of the physical creation that God cares so much for the things of the physical world that he has worked his Easter miracle through it (earthly bodies) and vowed to give eternal life to the physical. Easter certainly does belong in the spring. Keep these themes in mind when you preach on April 4 and the next five Sundays. When you make ecology practical and real, you can have a lot to say about it in the pulpit in the upcoming months.

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Using the gospel in ecology

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we are hastening a process that we are not ready for and it will cause us much distress. Many religions speak of a flood that was such a disaster that it removed any known sight of other men or animals but the few who were saved because they floated upon the seas after the warnings they received from a revelation.

I would imagine that the people in the Far East who experience the worst: a tsunami, fear that the world is coming to an end. Many believe that their actions have caused their god to be so angry that he desires that they should start over and that those who died, died because they defied the gods.

I am firmly behind the "green" movement to stop the waste of energy and to do things smarter. But what I like best is that it is not just for me. I am pleased that the savings in energy makes things better for us health wise and more economical, but the best part is that we will be finding ways to bring many people in the world without energy resources into the twenty-first century. Just like the computer does the work of many and brings knowledge to the Third World, it also brings freedom and understanding. It is a fantastic benefit. War seems so primitive in the landscape of knowledge that will soon be coming to places that presently live in ways that they had to live hundreds and hundreds of years ago. And I remind myself every day of the fact that it is God's hand in it that is making all of this possible. I think the texts for these Sundays teach us to better understand what amazing ways God reveals himself to us.

Some time ago I visited a visionary that spent his life in Japan and other Far East countries inventing and developing technology. He returned home because he had an idea of how to build houses so ecologically sound that they would produce energy rather than use it. A house would produce enough energy that it would also provide energy for the car, the lawnmower, the outside lighting, and along with other homes, provide energy for the new community. I watched the excitement in the eyes of this man as he showed demonstration after demonstration of God's power working in the community of man. It is an energy that we do not create but rather used because it was already there.

The world can't be moved to be a perfect place. Each generation lives with the expectation that they want to leave the world a better place than they found it but instead the critics begin to harp on each generation and the crimes they are committing. Mark talks about the pollution of all the electronic junk that we are selling off and polluting the poor. Still others are praising the efforts of a few that are making computers available to some of the poorest places on earth and children are learning quickly about the possibilities that exist. Is every discovery a bad discovery? Should we be ashamed of the first people that

discovered fire? Is every other advance in energy like coal, oil, and nuclear something we should put behind us? We don't know what will go wrong with wind. We are not far enough along to see the major problems we will create with solar power. Today we think the possibilities are endless in new forms of energy but what will wind and sun affect in the world of fauna and flora. I don't know and I suppose not many people do know.

Are the poor going away? I don't think so. Will all diseases be conquered? I don't think so. Will greed disappear from the earth? I don't think so. Will there be a time when we will declare world peace as achieved and permanent? I don't think so.

As I said before, I am in favor of a "green" world but let's begin with things we can get our hands on and see the results. People want to invest but they also want a return on their investment. We are still looking for better ways to educate our young and keep them out of prison. We deny that two good parents, a husband and wife, are necessary. We want children to learn love and respect but we do not have the fundamental ingredients in place to teach them. Everyone must have a meaningful vocation and many children do grow up in child care facilities and latch key programs and do not end up in prison. But this is not the best evidence of a family that is rich in spirit and grounded in love.

One Sunday school class decided to try and find something that they could do to help improve the environment. Each week a new suggestion was brought and the class agreed to adopt the subject that was approved on Sunday. First, they all agreed to give up Styrofoam cups and not use them at home, at church, and other places where they had the option. Next, they tackled some of the detergents that were found objectionable. Gardeners agreed to grow organic food and not get rid of pests with pesticides. So far, so good! It is a small part of the lesson plan each Sunday but with a quality presentation and understanding people are willing to cooperate and spread the word. No laws are needed.

Our pulpits are poor places for pointing fingers. I believe we should teach the joy of believing in a God that did things right and how we can follow in the footsteps of a Savior that battled the sin that overwhelmed the world. It is hard to love Jesus and take part in killing others with pollution. So, let's make it a little simpler and begin to work with what we have and learn what we can do with the small things in our life and be led to accepting a more positive world as we plan the future.

Wesley T. Runk is an ordained pastor in the ELCA and the founder of CSS Publishing Company. He is the author of more than thirty books, including "The Giant Book Of Children's Sermons."

CHARTING

THE COURSE

Trivial pursuit

Have you ever played the game Trivial Pursuit? Millions of people have. Nearly 100 million games have been sold, not counting those who have played the online version. At the height of its popularity, thirty million games were purchased in just two years between 1983 and 1985. The point of the game is really quite simple. Participants are asked questions. As they answer the questions correctly they move around the board until someone is finally declared the winner. Of course, the name of the game indicates that the questions asked are not profound at all but rather trivial in nature. There are questions like “What was Hitler’s favorite movie?” or “What weekday do more colds begin on than any other?”

Many people enjoy playing the Parker Brothers’ version of Trivial Pursuit. However, there is another game of trivial pursuit that can be deadly. This game takes place when we pursue happiness in trivial things like sex, fame, power, or money. Many people would argue that these things aren’t trivial. However, God’s word indicates that the material things of this world are indeed trivial compared to God’s kingdom.

Our current lesson from the prophet Isaiah asked, “Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy?” Instead, the prophet suggests, that you “eat what is good, and delight yourself in abundance” (v. 2). Isaiah recognized that many people pursue the trivial things of this material world while missing out on the richness of God’s kingdom.

I’ve been a pastor for almost forty years. I’ve never had an elderly person tell me they wish that they spent more of their time and effort on the job. It’s always, “I wish I had spent more time with my family.” “I wish I had given more energy to serving others.” “I wish I had more diligently pursued the things of God.” I’ve never heard anyone on their deathbed wish they had more money or a bigger house or a fancier car.

In our epistolary text, Paul recalls some of the highlights of the history of ancient Israel. He calls attention to the rebellious nature of the Israelites during the exodus. He reminds the Corinthians how the people fell into idolatry and immorality, even as God was leading them out of slavery into the promised land. Instead of relying upon God and his chosen leader Moses, the people became arrogant and self-assured. Paul recognized this

same attitude in God’s people at Corinth. It should not be hard for any preacher to draw similarities with the self-confidence and arrogance of many who call themselves Christians in America. Nor should it be hard to compare the idolatry of God’s people in biblical times with the materialistic idolatry observed every day in this country.

Our gospel lesson is a clear call for repentance. It is an unambiguous call to virtuous action and an honorable, upright attitude. Jesus offered here a very clear message: Repent or perish. Turn from your wicked ways of idolatry and immorality. Stop spending your money for what is not bread. Pursuing the trivial things of this world can be eternally deadly.

Isaiah 55:1-9

History indicates that Benjamin Franklin may not have always practiced everything he preached, but he told a story about himself that makes a wonderful illustration for our text from Isaiah. When Franklin was just a lad he saw a tin whistle in a Boston store window. It occurred to him that he could make beautiful music upon this simple instrument. He wanted that whistle more than anything. It seemed to young Franklin that life would never be complete without it.

Unfortunately, the whistle cost much more than he had. He was determined to buy the whistle, so he began to save his money. He worked long and hard at earning and finally saving enough to purchase his much-desired musical instrument. He proudly marched into the store, paid the shopkeeper, and paraded out with his prized possession. It took Franklin only a short while to realize that he had paid too much for his whistle. It turned out not to be nearly as exciting as he had thought it would be. When he remembered how long and hard he had worked to save the money, he realized he had paid too much. When he thought about all the other things he could have done with his money, he realized he had paid too much. Many times after, when Franklin saw other people trying to purchase happiness, or putting material things before people, he would say to himself, “He’s paying too much for his whistle.”

Long before Franklin the prophet Isaiah warned his people about the fallacy of misplaced priorities. Apparently the people of ancient Israel, just like modern Americans, tried to find happiness in the purchase of material goods. The really sad part is not that we waste our lives on trivial things. The really sad part is that which we so often miss. God’s rich blessings are avail-

able without money and without price. The everlasting promises made to King David are available to all.

Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness can come to the waters. This is the same idea taught by Jesus in the Beatitudes. Jesus insisted that the poor in spirit who mourn over their sinful situation and who hunger and thirst after righteousness are the ones who inherit the kingdom of heaven and find comfort and rest in God.

Every human being is born with an empty “spiritual hole” or emptiness that can adequately filled only by God. H.G. Wells called this the “God-shaped blank” in men’s hearts. Most of us try to fill this emptiness with other things. In times of prosperity this may actually work for a time. But like an addiction, we find that it takes more and more to fill the hole. The prophet Isaiah had come to understand that we are wasting our time, our talent, and our treasure. He offers to his people eternally satisfying water of life that comes only from God.

The prophet tells us this covenant with God comes at no cost to us. But, as Christians, we understand that it comes at a great cost to God. It cost him his Son on the cross of Calvary. God loved us so much that he “gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16b NRSV).

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

The ancient city of Corinth was situated on the Isthmus of Corinth at a strategic location connecting the east with the west. It was one of the most important cities of ancient Greece and the major commercial rival of Athens. Corinth was a maritime center because of the Corinthian canal, which separates the Peloponnesian peninsula from the mainland of Greece. This gave the city a diverse culture known for its sexual laxity and other decadent behavior.

Our text from chapter 10 is a part of Paul’s discourse regarding liberty that makes up chapters 8-10. He began this section with a discussion of meat sacrificed to idols. The problem with the church at Corinth was their deep cultural desire for individual freedom. They wanted to be free to “do their own thing.” They wanted the unqualified freedom to act without being constrained by unwelcome rules or the needs of others, including those of their Christian brothers and sisters.

In chapter 9 Paul offered his own life as a positive example of self-control. He concludes this section with the example of the runner. “And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things.” In our text from chapter 10 Paul turns to the Old Testament and ancient Israel as a negative example of self-restraint. He draws a comparison between the pleasure-seeking behavior of the Corinthian church with the decadent behavior of the Israelites during the exodus.

Apparently, some of the Corinthians felt that because they had been baptized and had partaken of the sacrament of communion they were safe in Christ and could eat meat offered to idols without harm. Paul insists that participating in the sacraments is no assurance that we cannot stumble into sin. The apostle seems to be concerned that the Christians at Corinth were becoming

over confident in their faith.

We can learn a great deal from history. Unfortunately, too often we fail to learn the lessons and are doomed to repeat the mistakes made by others. The ancient Israelites often fell into the attitude that because they were the chosen people God would always deliver them from the consequences of their evil behavior. The Christians at Corinth seemed to have somewhat the same attitude. In Christ they had found freedom to live a rather libertarian lifestyle. This attitude is also found among many modern Christians.

Paul warns here against four temptations. The first temptation is idolatry. You and I are unlikely to face the temptation of eating meats offered to idols but contemporary Americans face temptation of idolatry every day. The idols may look different from the ones faced by the Christians at Corinth or in ancient Israel but they are more similar in character than we might imagine. Modern idols come in the shape of cars, houses, and big screen televisions.

The second temptation mentioned by Paul in verse 8 is sexual immorality. Recently, I was visiting with one of the men in my congregation. The conversation turned to temptation faced by men. I made the comment that more pastor’s ministries had been destroyed by this than any other thing. His demeanor turned very serious as he reminded me that this had happened to a former pastor of this congregation and the church had never fully recovered.

The third temptation mentioned by Paul was that of tempting God. Too many Christians rely upon the mercy of God to cover a multitude of sins. God is indeed a forgiving God. But when we engage in sinful acts with the attitude “I’ll not worry, God will forgive me,” we enter very dangerous territory. God is a holy God and does not take sin lightly.

The fourth temptation Paul mentions is grumbling. Perhaps we don’t normally think of grumbling as a sin. However, there are several reasons we need to recognize the true nature of this behavior. The greatest of these is the fact that the kind of grumbling that most often takes place among Christians in a church is a result of our lack of faith in God.

Luke 13:1-9

This pericope is a perfect text for Lent since it focuses on the need for repentance. This is a major theme for this gospel as Luke focuses on the need for repentance more than any other New Testament book. At the end of his treatise Luke reports Jesus appearing to his disciples. His last instruction concludes, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:45b-47).

When I was a young adult I went through some difficult economic times. While some of the problems stemmed from my youthful mistakes some things were simply the results of happenstance. One of my rather pious aunts told my mother my problems were obviously an indication that I was outside of God’s will.

While it is true that our sin can lead to serious problems in our life, Jesus rejected the idea that there is always a direct correlation between poverty or disease or other hardships and our sin. Jesus insisted the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices did not suffer this fate because they were greater sinners than those who did not. Nor were the eighteen who were killed by accident when the tower of Siloam fell on them.

The gospel of John addresses this same issue with the same conclusion from Jesus. Jesus and his disciples saw a man who had been born blind. The disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). The question assumes an express correlation between sin and suffering. Jesus rejected this notion replying, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (v. 3).

In John's report Jesus seems to suggest that such thought draws our attention from the real issues. Jesus continued, "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work" (John 9:4). Luke reports Jesus rejecting the necessary connection between sin and suffering and stressing the real issue of repentance. "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

The parable of the barren fig tree makes a similar conclusion. Here Jesus stresses the mercy of God. However, unlike many modern preachers, Jesus did not ignore the issues of God's judgment. While the scriptures teach us about God's amazing grace and everlasting love, it also reveals a righteous God. He may delay justice but he cannot forever ignore justice. The message is clear and profound and urgent. Repent or perish.

Application

Few subjects are more appropriate during Lent than our pursuit of trivial things. Americans, including many Christians, are pursuing material things with a vengeance. We seek happiness in the things that we purchase. Tony Campolo teaches sociology at a Christian college and leads an organization that provides many social ministries in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, area. Once he gave a group of top educators from the Soviet Union a tour of his ministry's work. The group included the rectors of two very prestigious universities and the Russian Deputy Minister of Education. Tony showed them their children's programs, their youth clubs, even their Christian school for disadvantaged children. At the end of the day these communists commented about the radical materialism of these young people.

As society has moved through the different periods of history, we see the interrelatedness of the religious, social, and economic realities. David Riesman was one who wrote as early as 1950 in his book, *The Lonely Crowd*, about the movement to what he called an age of consumption. Princeton social scientist Robert Wuthnow once surveyed 2,000 and found that 89% agreed with the statement "our society is much too materialistic." Seventy percent believed that American society would be "better off" with less emphasis on money. The interesting part of the survey was the fact that 74% also indicated that the statement,

"I wish I had more money than I do" described them "very well" or "fairly well." Seventy-six percent agreed that "having money gives me a good feeling about myself."

A popular Christian song sends the message many of us need to hear during this Lenten season:

Like the woman at the well, I was seeking
For things that would not satisfy;
And then I hear my Savior speaking,
"Draw from my well that never shall run dry."

There are millions in this world who are craving
The pleasure earthly things afford;
But none can match the wondrous treasure
That I find in Jesus Christ my Lord.

Alternative Application

Luke 13:1-9. The parable of the fig tree brings together in clear focus the tension between God's judgment and God's mercy. Jesus rejected the idea that there is always a direct correlation between our suffering and our sin. Bad things happen to good people. Good things happen to bad people. Sometimes it seems that bad people get away scot-free.

In today's lesson we do not get an explanation of why bad things happen to good people but Jesus teaches us that God is a merciful God who is willing to delay justice in order to give people time to repent. However, he also makes clear that God cannot delay justice forever. We must heed the warnings.

Those Jesus mentions in 13:1-5 were not greater sinners than everyone else. But their untimely demise should be a stark reminder that life is tenuous and each day is a gift from God. We do not have forever to repent. We do not have forever to produce fruit.

The pastor preaching for decisions might well ask the congregation what they would do if they knew they had only one more day to live. One more year?



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Preaching The Psalm

Psalm 63:1-8

Across the United States today there is one issue that rises above all the others. Towering above terrorism and crime; casting a long shadow over current economic woes and immigration concerns is the issue of water. From Maine to California and from South Texas to the Dakotas the issue of water is the vast underreported crisis that is on the way to happening. We are using up this most basic commodity at a far quicker rate than nature can supply it. Aquifers are being drained and rivers sucked dry. Wells must be drilled ever deeper and snow packs are measured with wary eyes. While politicians frolic on the fields of health care, whole regions of our nation are on the brink of going dry. California may be the most stark example of this. Ever-shrinking quantities of water must be divvied up between agricultural interests and ever-expanding urban and suburban sprawl. Indeed, if something's not done soon, vast pieces of the United States will experience what much of the world goes through on a daily basis.

Gone will be lush, green lawns and long, hot showers. Shelved into memory will be neighborhood car washes and the notion of swimming pools showing up in everyone's backyard. Instead, we will be faced with rationing and extremely limited supplies of something we once knew in abundance. Bluntly put, we will come to know thirst. We will come to know the kind of thirst that the psalmist describes here in this psalm.

Here we see a powerful thirst for the experience of God's presence. Just as our nation is accustomed to an abundance of water, so too, is this writer accustomed to the overwhelming sense of God's presence. But now God seems absent. Prayer feels like a voice thrown into the void, and that wonderfully familiar presence has taken a hike. Like the waters from the Sacramento River, God seems to have gone away. And suddenly, the thirst begins.

"O God, you are my God! I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water."

The spirit can faint for lack of God's Spirit in the same way the body collapses when it is dehydrated. One can only wonder about the thirst of the Spirit in our churches today. Are we spiritually dehydrated? Are we fainting of thirst because we do not taste of the ever-flowing spring of God's love? If so, are we thirsting because God is absent or because we have turned away from God? Are we fainting because we have sought after false gods who never nourish or sustain?

Listening to members of the domestic church

(continued on from page 5)

20. If we had a totally unscheduled day, what is one way I would like us to spend it?
21. How do I think we are doing in sharing basic household tasks?
22. Where do you feel guilty about your support of your spouse?
23. How do I feel about how we are responding to the needs of our parents?
24. What good health practice do I think we should consider doing?
25. How supportive do I think the congregation is of the pastor?
26. Do I think the congregation supports the pastor's involvement in mission or service activity outside the congregation?
27. How do I feel about the judicatory's support of the pastor?
28. Do I think the judicatory expects too much of the pastor?
29. In time of crisis, who would I call upon for pastoral support?
30. What is something new I would like us to explore for a vacation?
31. What is one recreational activity that I would like us to do?
32. What is one hobby I could do that would be an escape from the normal stresses of life?
33. In what way can we ease the stress of Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter on the minister's family?
34. If we had children in the future, who do I think should be the guardian of our children, if we should be killed in an accident?
35. How would I describe what you think God expects of us as a partners in this marriage?

You may well think of other questions that could be added to the deck. It would probably contribute to the atmosphere of the game if it were played with good music, pleasurable snack food, and an agreement at what time you would conclude play. During the game only short questions of clarification should be asked by the listener. You might want to have a note pad and make a notation of any subject that you would like to discuss further at a future time. You might include in the deck three or four wild cards in which the player is asked to share one behavior of their spouse that evokes in them strong positive feelings.

Speaking to the full church, Paul says in Ephesians 4:15-16 words that address the domestic church as well. "Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ ... (so that) each part is working properly, (and) promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."

Stephen McCutchan has served Presbyterian (USA) congregations in Washington, D.C., North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. He has authored several books and many articles. He won 2001 Angell Award from the Presbyterian Writers Guild.

Illustrations

Isaiah 55:1-9

Rosemarie struggled with the concept of tithing, giving 10% of her income to the church. It never bothered her to put a little in the offering plate each Sunday. She could list many reasons why she could not possibly give 10% for the work of the church. However, she had no problem spending the same amount on herself.

Then she met Karen, a single mother who began attending Rosemarie's Sunday school class. Even though Karen had financial struggles she was able to tithe. Karen had a joy and a confidence that Rosemarie envied. One day Rosemarie asked Karen how she did it. "I follow God's plan and trust him," she shared. She continued explaining that she did not view the tithe as a legal obligation but rather as a privilege and a way of showing love to God and others. "God has never let me down," Karen told her friend, "even during the hardest of times."

Through the witness of her friend Rosemarie felt challenged. She began tithing believing that God will meet all her needs. "God has faithfully kept the assurances given in the Bible, and blessings flow out to me every day," she claims. "Because of God's faithfulness, I always have enough." Rosemarie continues tithing and has experienced the joy and confidence that her friend had.

The prophet Isaiah challenges us as we journey through Lent to spend our money wisely. He asks us, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"

Tim S.

Isaiah 55:1-9

Just how high are the heavens above the earth? Well, to give a little perspective, Yuri Gagarin, the first human in space, reached an orbit over the earth with its shortest distance from the earth being 105 miles (169 km), a little more than the distance between Chicago and Milwaukee. At its farthest, Gagarin's orbit reached 203 miles (327 km), roughly the same distance between New York and Washington, DC. The International Space Station today orbits the

earth at a distance varying between 173 miles (278 km) and 286 miles (460 km). In other words, if you wanted (and were somehow able) to drive your car straight up to the space station, traveling at 65 miles per hour, it would take you at least two and a half hours to get there.

In Isaiah, God tells us that "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (55:9). If our thoughts can allow our fellow human beings to live a two-and-a-half hour drive straight up from us, imagine how much greater God's thoughts are by comparison!

Craig K.

Isaiah 55:1-9

Todd, a three-year-old boy from Rhode Island went down to the seacoast to fly a kite. Never having flown a kite before, Todd had obvious doubts. His father assured him that all was well, and the kite would go up as planned. As Todd unraveled the string, and watched the kite go up, he was heard to say, "I knew it would fly, daddy. You said it would." Simple statement, profound implications.

Bethany S.

Isaiah 55:1-9

Faith honors God and God honors faith! A story from the life of missionaries Robert and Mary Moffat illustrates this truth. For ten years this couple labored faithfully in Bechuanaland (now called Botswana) without one ray of encouragement to brighten their way. They could not report a single convert. Finally the directors of their mission board began to question the wisdom of continuing the work. The thought of leaving their post, however, brought great grief to this devoted couple, for they felt sure that God was in their labors, and that they would see people turn to Christ in due season.

They stayed; and for a year or two longer, darkness reigned. Then one day a friend in England sent word to the Moffats that he wanted to mail them a gift and asked what they would like. Trusting that in time the Lord would bless their work, Mrs. Moffat replied, "Send us a communion set; I am sure it will soon be needed." God honored that dear woman's faith. The Holy Spirit moved upon the hearts of the villagers, and soon a little group of six converts was united to form the first Christian church in that land. The communion set from Eng-

land was delayed in the mail; but on the very day before the first commemoration of the Lord's supper in Bechuanaland, the set arrived.

Bethany S.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

C.S. Lewis compares our self-love to a man who looks down the road at a line of telephone poles and concludes that the pole closest to him is the largest. Our happiness looms so much larger in our hearts than our neighbor's happiness, even though God created us as equal in our capacity for happiness, just as a row of telephone poles are equal in height.

Bethany S.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

There are certain things which only the rains will produce; and certain experiences which only sorrow can beget. Sorrow can do two things for us. It can show us, as nothing else can, the essential kindness of our fellow-men; and it can show us as nothing else can the comfort and the compassion of God. Many and many a man in the hour of his sorrow has discovered his fellow-men and his God as he never did before. When things go well it is possible to live for years on the surface of things; but when sorrow comes a man is driven to the deep things of life, and, if he accepts it aright, a new strength and beauty enter into his soul.

— William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series, The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1, ch. 1-10 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975)

Bethany S.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Twenty-eight years ago, *ABC Evening News* reported on an unusual work of modern art ... hair with a shotgun affixed to it. The creator of this bizarre piece of art had the gun loaded and set on a timer to fire at an undetermined moment within 100 years. An integral part of the exhibit was the viewer. Each person that viewed the art work was asked to sit in the chair looking directly into the gun-barrel.

Amazingly, people formed long lines waiting for hours to sit and stare into the shell's path! Each one knew the gun could go off at pointblank range at any moment, but they gambled that the fatal blast would not happen during their one minute of sitting.

Foolhardy? Absolutely! Yet, many people who would not dream of sitting in that chair live a lifetime gambling that they can get away with sin. Foolishly, they ignore the risk until the inevitable self-destruction blasts them. That is precisely what happened to the Hebrews during Moses' day that Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 10. They fooled around with sin and lost their lives. Don't make the same mistake.

Derl K.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

A high school history teacher passed out his class syllabus on the first day of sophomore world history. "Look at your syllabus," he said. "Notice the first line." The students looked. In large type across the top of the page, it read: "Those who do not study history are doomed to repeat it." For those students, that saying was true in more ways than one! Just so, the reading from 1 Corinthians calls Christians — we included — to study the history before the New Testament. Our faith does not begin with Jesus' birth in Bethlehem — instead, it begins long before the star appeared in the east. Jesus' birth is the culmination of centuries of history between a people and their God — a God who is now our God, and a people that is now us.

Leah T.

Luke 13:1-9

The FBI has been keeping a record of their Ten Most Wanted criminals since 1950, and it has become synonymous with the worst criminal elements in society. Many of the worst criminals in America have found themselves on this list, including James Earl Ray, the man convicted of murdering Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as well as Osama Bin Laden, the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks.

Many of us can look at the people on this list, or at other notoriously evil people throughout history, such as Hitler or Genghis Khan, and think, "Hey, I'm not perfect, but at least I'm better than they are!" To this attitude, Jesus had one response: "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (v. 5).

Craig K.

Luke 13:1-9

One morning as Phil was getting ready to head out to work when the telephone rang. It was his son-in-law who delivered the

tragic news that Phil's daughter had been killed in an automobile accident. She was on her way home from work when a truck ran a stop sign and struck his daughter's car, killing her instantly.

Phil and his wife immediately made plans to travel to their daughter's home several states away. When they arrived the next day, Phil went to the intersection where the accident happened. He walked around from one side of the street to the other, back and forth. At that moment the thought occurred to him that if his daughter had arrived at that intersection a few seconds earlier or later she would be alive. This terrible tragedy reminded Phil of the fragile nature of our life on this earth.

Phil struggled for years with his daughter's death. He wrestled with questions pertaining to his faith, repeatedly asking that age old question, "Why?" Then he came to the realization that God was present with him through this tragedy. He felt God's presence. "Since our daughter's death," Phil reflects, "I have frequently reminded myself that I live seconds away from facing Christ."

One day someone in the crowd asked Jesus to comment on recent tragedies, raising the question of whether or not the tragedy was God's way of punishing them. Jesus made it clear that God does not cause terrible things to happen to people. Jesus seized the opportunity to challenge his listeners to change their ways, the biblical word is repent. "Unless you repent," Jesus said, "you will all perish just as they did."

Lent provides us with the opportunity to confront our sin and make the necessary changes.

Tim S.

.....

Let us pray together. Thank you, God, for daily bread. Thank you that you love us so much that you provide for our daily needs. Help us to be aware of those who are hungry and to share our bread with them. We love you, Jesus. Amen.

Reprinted from *Bread for the Journey* by Rolf Svanoe [CSS Publishing Co., Inc.: Lima, Ohio, 2008], p. 42)

Luke 13:1-9

Several years ago, a reporter for the BBC named Jeremy Vine conducted a survey. It was a large survey. He and his associates asked over 10,000 people in various parts of the world certain questions about religious faith. One of the questions in the BBC survey was, "Does suffering in the world make it harder for you to believe in God?"

As he began to tabulate the results, Mr. Vine found something that surprised him to no end. When he asked that question in Britain, he discovered that large portions of the population said yes, the reality of human suffering is an obstacle to faith. But when he asked the same question in Lagos, Nigeria, or Delhi, India — chronically poor and overpopulated places where life is short and difficult, and people are literally dying in the streets — a very different answer came back. Comparatively few people in those poverty-stricken places said that suffering in the world made it harder for them to have faith.

— Jeremy Vine, "Beyond Belief," in *The Guardian*, February 23, 2004

Bethany S.

Luke 13:1-9

"I trust in God so completely that I have no doubt that he will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul. Moreover, whatever evil he sends upon me in this troubled life he will turn to my good, for he is able to do it..."

— from the Heidelberg Catechism

Bethany S.



CHARTING

THE COURSE

The gospel frame by frame

Let the movie play at full speed through the first half.

We see the young man looking longingly out the window of his father's mansion. He thinks there is something more exciting and fulfilling out there, beyond the gates of his father's estate. Eventually, his wanderlust gives birth to a plan. Remarkably, his father goes along with the plan, which features the foolish young man collecting his share of his inheritance in advance. Then, with his pockets full, he waves good-bye and heads off into the distance. The camera focuses in on the father's eyes, watching his son disappear over the horizon.

Then it is the father who looks longingly out the window of his home. His eyes search the distant hills for any sign of his son returning home. But there is nothing.

Meanwhile, the son has traveled quite a distance. He is enjoying his freedom at an alarming rate, and his previously bulging wallet begins to grow thin. Soon his party is over, and he needs to find employment. We watch him go from one place to another, seeking work, begging food. Finally, he lands a job that is, for him and his people, about the most undesirable work to be done. Nothing can change the definition of "desirable" quite like desperation, however.

The young man has a job and even some food, of sorts. We should slow down the film in order to trace each subtle movement. The young man's eyes stare off longingly again, though this time from a much gaunter face. He is looking back — back in the direction he had come from originally. The muck in which he sits now does not compare favorably to that room from which he looked out so long ago.

As we watch, we detect a slight movement. He is beginning to stand, to turn. Yes, he is heading home.

The scene cuts back to the family home where the father still sits with his eyes scouring the horizon. Suddenly, the sadness and weariness in those old eyes are brightened. He rises from his chair and presses his face against the window. Could it be?

In a flash, the father is down the stairs and out the door. It is an unseemly sight, this old man running down the path: his

beard bouncing with each step, his robe hiked up above his pale shins, his brow perspiring, his sandals slapping.

Then comes the moment when we pause the film completely: The moment when the weary son meets the suddenly rejuvenated father. The moment is an embrace. Pause the film on that moment and take a good look at that picture. Help your people to see that picture. For it is the gospel.

Joshua 5:9-12

The Israelites' first campsite within the promised land was a spot called Gilgal. After their miraculous crossing of the Jordan, they collected twelve stones from the dry riverbed and erected them as a monument near Gilgal. Then the people undertook a mass circumcision, bringing all the males born in the wilderness into compliance with that ancient sign of the covenant. Then they celebrated the Passover together in that place. The next day, the faithful supply of manna stopped, and the people began to eat the produce of the land. Yet, for all of those eventful distinctions, the place was named Gilgal. We will give further thought to that name below.

The biblical narrator reports that the Israelites celebrated the Passover "in the plains of Jericho." I believe that detail is more than mere geography. After all, consider what Jericho represented. Already an ancient city, Jericho was famously fortified. For this generation of Israelites born in the wilderness, Jericho may well have been the first walled city they had ever seen. Their own homes and place of worship did not even have walls. Now these children of impermanence faced Jericho as their first obstacle to taking the promised land.

So what do you do in the plans of Jericho? What do you do in the shadow of your first, immense battle? Perhaps you plan strategy. Perhaps you consult the stars, the tea leaves, and the entrails of animals to seek encouragement. Perhaps you practice and train for battle. But not these people of God. No, they embark on acts of worship, thanksgiving, and dedication. That's a good policy and practice when you're camped "in the plains of Jericho." And it suits well a God who "prepare(s) a table before me in the presence of my enemies" (Psalm 23:5).

Finally, this brief Old Testament passage gives us a glimpse of the two faces of providence: for the writer reports that "the manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land."

The manna, of course, represented God's sustenance in the wilderness. Manna was the miraculous made routine, for God

sent this improbable provision on a daily basis in the desert for an entire generation. Indeed, the manna became so commonplace that the people took to complaining about it (Numbers 11:4-6). Yet it was the very providence of God. Its very regularity and predictability was testimony to the faithfulness of God.

Just as the famous 5,000 of Jesus' day could not find food to sustain themselves in a remote place apart from Jesus' multiplication of the loaves and fishes, so their 700,000 ancestors would have starved to death in the Sinai Peninsula without the manna. *Now*, on this date in the plains of Jericho, the manna stopped.

Did it stop because God was angry or the people were ungrateful? No, the manna had continued through both of those contingencies before. Did it stop because God's supply was exhausted? Never. No, it stopped because "they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year."

Perhaps we draw too stark a line between the natural and the supernatural, between the ordinary and the miraculous. For here, in this moment where we see the baton handed from the supernatural food supply to the natural food supply, we see that all of it is part of the providence of Israel's God. Whether his provisions seem mysterious and inexplicable, or whether they come by way of the growing season and the grocery store, we give thanks to him for his faithful care.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

When I was a youth minister, I had a young man in my youth group whose standard greeting was, "What's new?" He did not say, "Hello" or "Good morning" or "Hi." No, his salutation was a question, and it wasn't even a conventional "How are you?" Whenever he greeted me, he'd ask, "What's new?"

Frankly, I either saw him too frequently or lived without enough novelty to be able to answer the question well each time I saw him. Most of the time, I would settle for an anemic, "Not much. How about you?"

That was 25 years ago. I don't know if that now nearly middle-aged man is greeting people differently than he did when he was a youth, but I do know that I would like another chance to answer his question. For I have come to realize in recent years that it's an excellent question that deserves some excellent answers.

The Bible is full of new things (e.g., new covenant, new mercies, new wine and wineskins, new heaven and earth, New Jerusalem). The testimony of scripture bears witness to a God who is very fond of new things (cf., Isaiah 43:18-19). Indeed, the entire biblical story concludes with God making all things new (Revelation 21:5).

Against that larger backdrop, then, we see more clearly this exclamation of the gospel by the apostle Paul: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" When someone asks you or me, "What's new?" we ought to respond with an enthusiastic, "Me! I'm new!" For this is part of the very good news that is our salvation in Jesus Christ.

In addition to the pan-biblical theme of newness, this pas-

sage from 2 Corinthians has a prevailing theme of its own: reconciliation. Five times in just three verses the apostle makes reference to reconciliation. The preponderance of the them here is even more striking in that the underlying Greek verb appears in only two other places in the entire New Testament (Romans 5:10; 1 Corinthians 7:11), as does the underlying Greek noun (Romans 5:11; 11:15).

William Barclay observes that the underlying Greek verb evolved from the changing of money to "the change of enmity into friendship." He argues that this reconciliation is central to Paul's understanding of the work of Christ, and he notes that the flow of reconciliation is decidedly one way: that is, God is not reconciled to man, but rather man is reconciled to God. This truth is at the heart of the gospel. Barclay concludes, "The very essence of Christianity is the restoration of a lost relationship."

Because the issue is a lost relationship, it is an intensely personal business, and therefore a matter of great urgency. I have known several individuals along the way whom I have never seen run on account of any tardiness or hurriedness, but I have seen them run when their children are hurt or in danger. (Such parental running is on beautiful display in our gospel lection this week.) Personal love relationships, we discover, inspire their own brand of urgency, and the quality of that urgency is captured in the strong language of God "making his appeal" and the apostles "entreat(ing)" on God's behalf.

That entreating role, meanwhile, introduces us to another layer of the relational element. It is not a simple two-tier system: God and humanity. Rather, there are two layers within humanity: those who have been reconciled, and those who have not. The former, therefore, become "ambassadors for Christ," carrying both "the ministry of reconciliation" and "the message of reconciliation." Surely that is part of our purpose on Sunday, and a part of our parishioners' calling on Monday.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

This familiar and beloved text presents us with two challenges. First, there are so many sermons that could be preached on it. Second, there are so many sermons that have been preached on it. What you and I choose to do with this text on Sunday, therefore, might be quite different. But to assist our thinking, let us at least walk through the marvelous text together and make some observations about it.

"All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to (Jesus)." We must stop to observe that this is the audience Jesus attracted. Does his church continue to attract this crowd?

"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." It's a special sort of endorsement when your critics and your admirers say exactly the same thing about you. The irony of this particular criticism is that it sounds like a testimony. What the Pharisees perceived as a vice, we read as good news.

"So he told them this parable." In fact, he told them three consecutive parables, each featuring the story of something (or someone) that was lost and then found. The relative value of those three items increases throughout the chapter, and the nature of the "lostness" is different in each case. Still, the

persistent truth throughout all three stories is that God is eager to recover what has been lost, and the angels rejoice when a sinner repents.

“There was a man who had two sons.” Many of Jesus’ parables present us with an either-or choice of characters: wise or foolish builder, wise or foolish virgins, sheep or goats.

“(He) traveled to a distant country.” That the son was far from home is surely a metaphor for his spiritual condition, and it also sets the stage for a father who sees and runs to him “while he was still far off” (v. 20).

“Treat me like one of your hired hands.” We are reminded of the wisdom of the Proverbs (15:16-17; 16:8; 17:1) and the expressed preference of the Psalmist (84:10). The son has made a simple, unemotional calculation: He has realized that any position in his father’s house is better than his present condition. The father is motivated by love; the son seems to be motivated by standard of living issues.

“His father ... was filled with compassion.” The Greek word used here for “compassion” appears just eleven other places in the New Testament, and in eight of them it is Jesus who is described as having compassion (Matthew 9:36, 14:14, 15:32, 20:34; Mark 1:41, 6:34, 8:2; Luke 7:13). In one instance, a father is asking Jesus to have compassion (Mark 9:22). The other two instances, like this one, it is used by Jesus in a parable to describe the response of the exemplary character (Matthew 18:27; Luke 10:33).

“He ... asked what was going on.” It is noteworthy that the older brother came late to the party. While the father was aware of the son’s return even “while he was still far off,” this other son wasn’t aware until long after his brother had returned home. That difference may be emblematic of the difference in how the father and the older son felt about the younger son being away in the first place.

“For all these years I have been working like a slave.” The older brother was living like a son and yet feeling like a slave. This is not how the Father means for it to be, and yet it is certainly the unhappy experience of many of those in the Father’s house. Also, we are struck by the contrast with the younger son’s realization (v. 17) that being a servant in his father’s house is quite a desirable thing.

“But when this son of your came back....” Here the older son lodges his complaint about his father’s generosity. It echoes the lament of the workers hired first (see Matthew 20:10-12), and it is no doubt related to the complaint of the scribes and Pharisees at the beginning of this chapter.

Application

When our people hear the story of the prodigal son read this week, most of them will recognize it because they have heard it before. The key for us as preachers, however, is to make sure that our people recognize more than just the plot.

First, we must recognize the son: that weary, dirty son, who lives out the consequences of his departure from home. I recognize him, for I am him. So are you. So are the people who will hear us preach this story on Sunday.

Second, we need also to recognize the father. The agnostic wonders what God might be like, and the atheist has refused to get a clue. Many believers, meanwhile, are also somewhat in the dark, for from the beginning the enemy has sought to misrepresent the nature of our Creator. Here Jesus reveals him to us. Do you want to know what God is like? Then see the big-hearted father: big-hearted enough to let his son go, big-hearted enough to subsidize his son’s misadventure, and big-hearted enough to welcome him back completely.

Third, we need to recognize the message. The Father, who embraces his filthy son and orders clean clothes for him, is the same God who rolls back reproach and disgrace. He powerfully and mercifully pushes aside the intangible grime that sticks to us from our past.

Fourth, we need to recognize the reconciliation. We quoted William Barclay earlier saying that, at its core, Christianity is about restoring a broken relationship, and that is portrayed for us here in Jesus’ marvelous parable. That paused still-shot — the Father catching his miserable son up in his arms and holding him close — that is reconciliation. It is only by the grace of God. And it is available to every prodigal within earshot.

Alternative Application

Joshua 5:9-12. “Gilgal’s Gospel.” “Gilgal” was related to the Hebrew word for “wheel” or “rolling.” In the context of our Old Testament lection, the name was born out of God’s statement that he had “rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.” The naming should surprise us, however, for that spot had so many other options.

Imagine the significance of the monument erected at that place: Israel’s arrival in the land after so many centuries in bondage and wandering, marking the fulfillment of God’s age-old promise to the patriarchs. Yet the location was not named “Arrived,” “Testimony,” or “Promise Fulfilled.” Such names would have been appropriate recognitions of the spot’s significance, and certainly in keeping with the kinds of place-names found in the Bible. But the place was named Gilgal, instead.

Likewise, consider the importance of that mass circumcision. We are squeamish at the prospect of naming some location after the occasion when several thousand men were circumcised. Yet, translated into our terms, imagine how we would cherish the place where several thousand people were baptized all at once. But the place was not named for that event.

Similarly, we can’t help but be impressed by the meaningfulness of the Passover that was celebrated there. The Passover meal found its origins, of course, in the meal that their parents and grandparents had eaten on the night of their deliverance from Egypt, and now the adult children ate that same meal within the borders of the promised land. It was tremendously symbolic, and yet the place was not named for it.

Instead, this place with so many layers of significance was named for what God said there: that he had “rolled away” the disgrace of Egypt. This is the gospel of Gilgal: the testimony to a God who rolls away disgrace.

To get a sense for the underlying Hebrew word, which the

NRSV renders “disgrace,” we observe that it is the same strong word Tamar uses to describe her condition after being raped by her half-brother (2 Samuel 13:13). The King James typically translates it “reproach.”

Perhaps we would be glad for a more theologically precise term for what God does with our disgrace and reproach — something sophisticated like “justification” or “sanctification.” Instead, however, we are presented with this very earthy, Hebrew term. It is more a picture than an explanation of what God does: he rolls it away.

Yet that picture is a beautiful one. It suggests a God who is so powerful that he can roll the thing too immense for us to budge. It portrays a God who is so merciful that he can remove to a great distance the thing that we ourselves cannot shake. Indeed, that picture very much captures the larger work of God in our lives: namely, what he does with our sin, with our guilt, and with our corruptible, mortal flesh. It is the gospel of Gilgal.

Preaching The Psalm

Psalm 32

Receiving real forgiveness is a powerful thing. So many people have the experience of transgressing on others and feeling the shame and remorse of that. We may not have meant it or we may even have been oblivious to the pain we caused, but still we have done it. Likewise, we’re often on the receiving end of such pain. How universal is that painful sting of betrayal? How widely felt is the ache of abandonment? How often have we been wounded by the careless or thoughtless word? It can be like death from a thousand paper cuts. Oh yes, we’ve been on both sides of the fence of pain. But how often have we engaged in forgiveness?

It’s not much on the radar of people these days, but the truth is that receiving and accepting forgiveness is a holy thing. To step into the waters of forgiveness is to swim with God. Forgiveness defies our creaturely nature and calls us to forgo our primal right to revenge. Forgiveness lifts us up from the spiral of emotional and physical violence and sets us squarely down next to God who not only forgives us, but calls to go and do likewise.

Thus the psalm tells us, “Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” Receiving much needed forgiveness is an incredible thing. It is such a feeling of release, a sense of rebirth.

The big part in all this wonderful forgiveness is the unpleasant part about coming clean. That’s right. Keeping silent, the psalmist notes here, results in the body “wasting away,” and worse. The contemporary term for this is “denial.” And “Denial,” as the wise rabbi said, “is not a river in Egypt.” It turns out that forgiveness is a dialogue of sorts; a conversation between grace and repentance. While someone may well be able to let go of a transgression and forward with their lives, true forgiveness only takes root in this interchange.

It’s for this reason that the Justice Commissions in South Africa and El Salvador have proven so transformative. After horrendous civil upheaval, which included unspeakable atrocities, the wrong-doers were brought before their victims to confess their crimes. Here, rather than through punishment and retribution, the people found a new way forward. In this strange and yes, holy mix, forgiveness is planted. Here, in the storm and stress of truth telling, the seeds of new life begin to sprout.

Forgiveness is indeed a marvelous thing. However, it is not easy and like grace, it is not cheap. Yet for us as a people of faith, it is our path. Together we are called into this holy conversation of truth, repentance, and grace. It is not just a good idea. It is God’s way, the way of the cross, the way of new life.

Illustrations

Joshua 5:9-12

If you could do it, I suppose it would be a good idea to live your life in a straight line — starting, say, in the Dark Wood of Error, and proceeding by logical steps through Hell and Purgatory and into Heaven. Or you could take the King’s Highway past appropriately named dangers, toils, and snares, and finally cross the River of Death and enter the Celestial City. But that is not the way I have done it, so far. I am a pilgrim, but my pilgrimage has been wandering and unmarked. Often what has looked like a straight line to me has been a circle or a doubling back. I have been in the Dark Wood of Error any number of times. I have known something of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, but not always in that order. The names of many snares and dangers have been made known to me, but I have seen them only in looking back. Often I have not known where I was going until I was already there. I have had my share of desires and goals, but my life has come to me or I have gone to it mainly by way of mistakes and surprises. Often I have received better than I have deserved. Often my fairest hopes have rested on bad mistakes. I am an ignorant pilgrim, crossing a dark valley. And yet for a long time, looking back, I have been unable to shake off the feeling that I have been led — make of that what you will. — from Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* [New York: Counterpoint, 2000], p. 133

Emphasis Archives

Joshua 5:9-12

Luther Burbank (1849-1926) was an American botanist, horticulturist, and a pioneer in agricultural science. According to Wikipedia, he is credited with developing more than 800 strains and varieties of plants in his 55-year career. He improved several varieties of apples and other fruit, evolved rose bushes and other flowers; and took the spines from the cactus, and made it into food for stock. In a speech at First Congregational Church in San Francisco in 1926, he said, “What a joy life is when you have made a close working partnership with Nature, helping her to produce for the benefit of mankind new forms, colors, and perfumes in flowers which were never

known before; fruits in form, size, and flavor never before seen on this globe; and grains of enormously increased productivity . . . a new food for all the world's untold millions for all time to come."

God does that to our lives. He takes the bitter, thorny, unlovely parts of human life and transforms them by his grace into beauty, fruitfulness, and holiness. Through his hands the hardest criminal can be transformed and made into Christ's own likeness. A new person is produced by the grace of God for eternity!

Derl K.

Joshua 5:9-12

Remember when you learned to ride a bike? Maybe you started with a tiny tricycle, pedaling around the yard or the driveway on your spiffy red wheels. Then you graduated to a big boy or big girl bike; but you couldn't balance as well as the big kids. So your parents gave you something to help you learn: training wheels. You rode that bike all around the block with your training wheels, and one day you didn't need the training wheels at all. Sure, you fell down a few more times, but you were one of the big kids! You could do it on your own. In our Bible story, manna is God's version of training wheels — tiding the Israelites through until they could make it on their own.

Leah T.

Joshua 5:9-12

Pioneers tell similar stories. When they first settled the western plains, they had nothing. They soon exhausted most of their supplies, and many lived on the generosity of their neighbors. It was common for neighbors to share vegetables, meat, and even their homes, with the new settlers.

The new settlers worked hard to clear the land of trees, or cut through the tough prairie grass to prepare it for seeding. At the very least, one growing season would pass before the land produced food to sustain the new settlers.

Imagine the joy, when the first vegetables were dug from the garden, the first crop of wheat taken to the mill and ground into flour. Then, the new settlers could stop relying on others and be self-supporting. It was common, too, that once the new settlers were self-reliant, they offered help to other new pioneers who were just starting out.

Until the first harvest, Israel was reliant

upon the manna that God provided. Then, on Passover, they ate their own food, and the manna from heaven stopped. (Incidentally, God routinely encouraged the Israelites to give aid to others who needed it, especially the widow, orphan, and sojourner, just as God had helped them.)

Emphasis Archives

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

The office of ambassador brings with it a great deal of power and authority. When a nation's ambassador attends a function, that person is serving as the sole representative of an entire country, negotiating on behalf of them and communicating the will and position of that country's head of state. Even the embassy in which an ambassador resides is considered the home soil of that ambassador's country. The ambassador is the face of a nation.

Paul notes that we are "ambassadors for Christ" (v. 20), which means that we are the face of Christ to the rest of the world. We are to represent his will, his interests, and his sovereignty to the rest of the world. The fact that we are Christ's ambassadors also tells us that we are not at home here in the world, just as a nation's ambassador to the United States does not consider Washington his home. We were simply sent here to do the work of our head of state, Jesus. The question is: How well are we representing him to the world?

Craig K.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

London businessman Lindsay Clegg told the story of a warehouse property he was selling. The building had been empty for months and needed repairs.

Vandals had damaged the doors, smashed the windows, and strewn trash around the interior.

As he showed a prospective buyer the property, Clegg took pains to say that he would replace the broken windows, bring in a crew to correct any structural damage, and clean out the garbage.

"Forget about the repairs," the buyer said. "When I buy this place, I'm going to build something completely different. I don't want the building; I want the site."

Compared with the renovation God has in mind, our efforts to improve our own lives are as trivial as sweeping a warehouse slated for the wrecking ball. When we become God's, the old life is over.

He makes all things new. All he wants is the site and the permission to build.

Bethany S.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

It is said that Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire, once had captured a prince and his family. When they came before him, the monarch asked the prisoner, "What will you give me if I release you?"

"The half of my wealth," was his reply.

"And if I release your children?"

"Everything I possess."

"And if I release your wife?"

"Your Majesty, I will give myself."

Cyrus was so moved by his devotion that he freed them all. As they returned home, the prince said to his wife, "Wasn't Cyrus a handsome man!" With a look of deep love for her husband, she said to him, "I didn't notice. I could only keep my eyes on you — the one who was willing to give himself for me."

Bethany S.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

There was a time in Josh's life when he felt completely lost. He was in his senior year of high school and lacked a clear sense of identity and purpose. "More than anything," he explains, "I wanted something that I could give my life to." When he looked at himself in the mirror he was not the person he wanted to be. It was then that Josh felt the presence of God in his life for the first time.

"I can recall the exact moment when I opened up and accepted Christ as my Lord and Savior," he says. With maturity beyond his years, he writes, "The rains I had prayed for brought about winds of change. As the clouds shifted and the skies cleared, my shadow fell upon my futile ways as if to form a line behind me marking the past as a symbol of a new beginning." He continues to describe his experiences as being captivated by God's grace and love.

Through this experience he came to realize that God had been present throughout his life. Soon after this experience Josh met other young Christians who helped him learn and grow in the faith.

The apostle Paul writing to the troubled Corinthians reminded them that in Christ we become new people. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" On this the Fourth Sunday

in Lent may we discover the new thing that God is doing in our lives.

Tim S.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

In his book *Written in Blood*, Robert Coleman tells the story of a little boy whose sister needed a blood transfusion. The doctor explained that she had the same disease the boy had recovered from two years earlier. Her only chance for recovery was a transfusion from someone who had previously conquered the disease. Since the two children had the same rare blood type, the boy was the ideal donor.

“Would you give your blood to Mary?” the doctor asked.

Johnny hesitated. His lower lip started to tremble. Then he smiled and said, “Sure, for my sister.”

Soon the two children were wheeled into the hospital room — Mary, pale and thin; Johnny, robust and healthy. Neither spoke, but when their eyes met, Johnny grinned.

As the nurse inserted the needle into his arm, Johnny’s smile faded. He watched the blood flow through the tube. With the ordeal almost over, his voice, slightly shaky, broke the silence.

“Doctor, when do I die?”

Only then did the doctor realize why Johnny had hesitated, why his lip had trembled when he’d agreed to donate his blood. He’s thought giving his blood to his sister meant giving up his life. In that brief moment, he’d made his great decision.

Johnny, fortunately, didn’t have to die to save his sister. Each of us, however, has a condition more serious than Mary’s, and it required Jesus to give not just his blood but his life.

Bethany S.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

G.K. Chesterton once wrote, “It is not always wrong even to go, like Dante, to the brink of the lowest promontory and look down at hell. It is when you look *up* at hell that a serious miscalculation has probably been made.” The prodigal son, in his pigsty, is in the unenviable position of looking up at hell.

Bethany S.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

It was a hot summer’s evening in Ocean City, New Jersey, when a minister was tweaking his sermon for a church where

he was a speaker. His window was open so he could hear the mumbled voices at an amusement park below his room. As the night progressed a sharp distinctive voice pierced the air announcing that a little five-year-old girl named Wendy had wandered away from her parents. The voice stated that little Wendy was wearing a yellow dress and carrying a teddy bear. She had auburn hair and dark brown eyes. If anyone found her they were asked to take her to the music pier where two anxious parents waited for her.

As the clergyman paused at his window, it seemed, he said, as though none of the thousands who strolled up and down the famous boardwalk, heard, responded, or even cared that Wendy was lost. Their interests were elsewhere.

Imagine the fear that five-year-old Wendy was experiencing on that hot, summer night. She was probably clutching that soft teddy bear tightly, tear drops falling from her eyes, heart pounding with fright ... and empty feeling.

What about her parents? Horrifying thoughts, sickening feelings, nerves on edge ... mom softly crying and dad silently wringing his hands.

Two hours later over the loud speaker the announcer states that Wendy had been found in good condition! The preacher looked down the pier from his window at the mass of humanity wandering aimlessly up and down the boardwalk. He asked himself ...

- How many of those people were spiritually lost and did not know it?
- How many felt a deep lostness inside wishing that someone would make an announcement asking for help?
- Did anyone care about them?
- Did anybody know how they felt?
- How many of them needed a heavenly Father to hold their hand like Wendy’s dad?

The Lord is sending us out into a world that is lost. There may not be many of us, but the harvest is plentiful. The lost are waiting? Are we going?

Derl K.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

How many of you know what the word “prodigal” actually means? We hear this word — and use this word — often; the parable of the prodigal son is one of the better-known stories in the Bible. But what is a “prodigal son”? Most people assume it means “wandering” — the prodigal son, the wandering son, returns home! Have you ever called someone “prodigal” after they return from a long absence? But actually, prodigal does not mean “wandering” at all. Instead, the title “prodigal son” focuses not on the son’s absence, but on his behavior. “Prodigal” means “wasteful.” The man in the story is the prodigal son because he spent his money and had to live with the pigs. We usually think that the name of this story is focusing on his return; actually, the name is focusing on his wastefulness — and his father’s willingness to forgive him and welcome him home in spite of it.

Leah T.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

In a dream, Martin Luther found himself being attacked by Satan. The devil unrolled a long scroll containing a list of Luther’s sins, and held it before him. On reaching the end of the scroll Luther asked the devil, “Is that all?” “No,” came the reply, and a second scroll was thrust in front of him. Then, after a second came a third. But now the devil had no more. “You’ve forgotten something,” Luther exclaimed triumphantly. “Quickly write on each of them, ‘The blood of Jesus Christ God’s Son cleanses us from all sins.’”

Bethany S.

CHARTING

THE COURSE

New

In 1954, Marcelle Maurette penned his play *Anastasia*. It was based on the true story of a woman named Anna Anderson who claimed to be the long-lost daughter of the last emperor of Russia, Tsar Nicholas II, and his wife, Aleksandra.

The Russian tsars believed their kingdom was imperishable. They knew they would rule forever. But at the turn of the last century, a groundswell of social and political revolution tossed them aside. The emperor and his family were held hostage in the palace and then executed as the Bolsheviks bathed the countryside with blood.

Rumors persisted that little Anastasia, the youngest of the Romanovs, somehow survived the slaughter. Over the years, a number of women claimed to be her. Some were easily spotted as frauds; others convinced enough supporters to make a serious claim to fame.

Then there was Anna — a nameless, homeless, memory-less wanderer, prone to suicidal fits at the “insane asylum” where she was brought. Nobody knew where she came from. They gave her the name Anna because she had none of her own.

But one day, Anna’s doctor came across a picture of the last Russian royal family. Anna bore a striking resemblance to little Anastasia. She seemed to know more about the Russian noble house than one would expect. Anna was hypnotized, revealing that she knew even more in her subconscious.

There was a real possibility that she could be the only surviving heir of the Romanov family fortune. But who would know for sure? Was there any way to prove it?

Newspapers picked up the story. Was this really Anastasia? By some miracle was her life spared, only to be thrown into this new and dismal tragedy? Or was she only a hoax, a scoundrel, a publicity-seeker? The controversy sold papers, and the press hyped it to the limit.

Enter the old empress. She was not in Russia at the time of the murder of her son and his family, and now she lived in exile. If anyone could know if Anna was truly her granddaughter, this woman would be that person. So one day she came to see Anna.

The two women talk together for a long time. When she left, the elderly woman was accosted by reporters, and told the world: “Anna is my granddaughter — Anastasia!”

Suddenly Anna began to change. She blossomed as a person. She took hold of her life. The suicide threats were gone. She washed herself and combed her hair. She looked after herself and dressed in style. She stood up straight in a crowd, and she carried herself with dignity when she walked.

One line in the play carries the heart of the story. How did Anna climb from the pit of her insane asylum and walk again in the land of the living? What transformed Anna the nobody into Anastasia the princess? This is her secret: “You must understand that it never mattered whether or not I was a princess. It only matters that ... someone, if it be only one, has held out their arms to welcome me back from death!”

This is the tale told in brief three times over in our lectionary passages for today. By the Word of the Lord, Isaiah declares that Israel shall be reborn anew after exile. By the regenerating Spirit of God, Paul became a new man. By the touch of kindness and the look of love, Mary found a new lease on life. This is the gospel for today, amid the darkening clouds of Lent.

Isaiah 43:16-21

Chapters 42-53 of Isaiah are comprised mainly of the famous four “Servant Songs.” These speak of Israel’s impending demise because of international political threats, and eventual revival under the direction of an enigmatic figure who will lead not from a position of strength but out of a shared journey of pain and suffering. Jewish theologians have come to identify this “Suffering Servant” with the entire Jewish people because of its often-persecuted place within the global mosaic. Christians find uncanny parallels with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, as New Testament writers were quick to draw.

Certainly every Christian preacher ought to draw on those connections and find in Isaiah’s reports the fresh promises of the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, it is important to listen to the prophecies in their own context first and to understand the power of transformation that God promises in a very unlike time. The world of Isaiah’s day was controlled by superpowers of incredible strength and unbridled expansionist intentions. Assyria had already amassed a kingdom larger than any previously recorded in history, taking out troublesome Israel (the Northern Kingdom) like a cow might swat a pesky fly with its tail. Meanwhile, Assyria’s own gadfly, the cultured province of Babylon on its eastern flank, was beginning a run of its own at the scepter. Eventually the clash between these two would rake

nearly every other nation into the wake of armed destruction, in a climactic World War that bided no neutral parties.

No people of the minimal significance of little Judah could possibly endure. Big Brother Israel had been wiped out in Assyria's early smashing successes, and Jerusalem had only survived by a fluke that was interpreted by the prophets as a divine miracle. But even then the pollsters all knew loss of independence was inevitable. Whoever won the Assyria/Babylon clash of the Titans would sweep the rag-tag mini-states into its eddying orb.

More importantly, according to the prophets (including Isaiah), this was the only reasonable expectation of God's imminent judgment. For too long the chosen nation had abdicated its responsibilities of witness and worship, so that a divine chastisement was about to take place. According to the Curses (Exodus 23) of the Sinai Covenant, if God's people failed in their marriage commitments with Yahweh, foreign powers would enter and destroy their marriage home in Canaan. God's long-suffering patience had been tested again and again through the years, but all the prophets now sang in chorus that this time the marriage counseling was over; an eviction was around the corner.

What remains so powerful in the Word of God spoken through Isaiah is the unflagging hope and expectation and promise that God will not allow the marriage to fail. Enemy armies would sweep in, and a separation would take place for a time, but God would fight for his bride and rebuild their honeymoon home. The road ahead may be dark, and inner resources might be small and failing, but God's pledges remain a surety of constant faithfulness and abiding love. As Don Francisco gave voice to the divine oath in one of his songs, "No matter what may happen, child, I'll never let go of your hand."

Martin Luther King Jr. used to tell the story of an event that changed his life. On a Monday evening in 1956, he spoke at church. Although he tried to appear strong and brave, in his heart he was afraid. The week before he had been arrested and thrown in jail for speaking the message of the gospel at a public gathering. Not only that, but he kept receiving telephone calls at home from people who called him a "dirty n****r" and threatened the lives of his wife and children.

When he spoke to the crowd that night, he wished he didn't have to be there; the fear in his soul made him tremble. He thought he could hide his fear from the people, and when he finished speaking, he thought he had done quite well.

At the end of the service, though, an elderly woman called Mother Pollard came up to him. She said, "Something is wrong with you. You didn't talk strong tonight!"

King laughed a bit, nervous inside, and told her, "Oh, no, Mother Pollard. There's nothing wrong. I'm as fine as ever."

But she insisted. "Now, you can't fool me. I know something's wrong."

Before he could protest again, she said, "Dr. King, I done told you we is with you all the way." Then, said King, her face got bright, her voice grew quiet, and she said, "And even if we ain't with you, God's gonna' take care of you."

"In that instant," King recalled, "I realized what was happening in my life. I was looking at the fears. I was looking at

the doubts. I was looking at the terrors and the troubles that surrounded me.

"But old Mother Pollard made me see the most important thing in life. 'God's gonna' take care of you' she said." And for the rest of King's life, the voice of faith kept him going. Fear couldn't defeat faith.

Philippians 3:4b-14

Paul's letter to the Philippians is the most joyful and uplifting note of the entire New Testament. Even in Paul's confinement, he is filled with delight in his relationships and amazed at what God is doing (Philippians 1). Almost without needing to do so, Paul reminds the congregation of the great example of Jesus, who gave up everything in order to express the love of God to us (Philippians 2:1-18). Another example of this selfless care is found in Timothy and Epaphroditus, each of whom had given up much in order to serve others, especially the faith community in Philippi (Philippians 2:19-30). More encouragement to serve follows, with Paul reflecting on his own changes of behavior and value systems, once he was gripped by the love of God in Jesus (Philippians 3). A few personal instructions and notes of appreciation round out the letter (Philippians 4).

Our text for today is that marvelous personal testimony Paul makes in chapter 3. It is not a "before" and "after" dieting commercial, complete with fat and skinny pictures of "what I did!" but rather a sober and somber reflection on a road to successful destruction that turned into a winning failure by the grace of God.

Someone has written what could be the testimony of the apostle Paul in a short story called "The Happy Hypocrite." It is about a man who lived a worthless life. He used everything for his pleasure and treated women like toys to break and throw away. One day he met a young woman whose life intrigued him. She was a Christian and her actions supported her testimony of faith.

In order to have his way with her, the man put on a mask of piety. He went to church with her and pretended to be as sincere as the mask he wore. Soon, he thought, when she trusts me, I'll use her and toss her on the heap of my conquests.

Then something happened that he hadn't counted on — he fell in love. He began to truly appreciate and adore this woman. Always he kept his mask in place. Always he played the part of her righteous friend. And gradually she fell in love with him, too. Incredible as it seemed to him, they got married, and he found himself enjoying the role of godly husband.

But one day one of his former consorts found out who he was. She was livid. He had used her and tossed her aside, and she wanted revenge. She met with him privately, telling him she would reveal the hideous truth to his wonderful wife. She'd crush him just the way he had crushed her so many years before.

She rushed at him to snatch the mask from his face and reveal the ugly man beneath. But when the mask fell away, the face behind it looked just like the pious mask. Love had changed the cruel man's heart; the habits of his life had molded his face to fit the mask of righteousness.

Such happened in Paul's life the day he met Jesus. One can tell the tale of Paul's years in many ways, but one can never tell it without Jesus. When love has its way with us, our face and our life will find its shape in him.

John 12:1-8

In his short story *The Capital of the World*, Ernest Hemingway reported an event they tell of in Madrid. A young man named Francisco, lovingly called Paco by his parents, grew to be a teen at odds with his father. No matter how a day began, it was sure to end with angry words and heated arguments. Paco and his father became enemies living under the same roof.

Finally the young man ran away, drifting eventually to the large metropolis of Madrid, where anyone could get lost and create a new identity. However, relief from antagonism does not necessarily bring peace. Although free to find his own way, Paco was suddenly adrift in a world where many others tried to set his agenda and missed the stability and resources of home. Meanwhile, back at home, his father and mother found themselves also in miserable silence. Paco's absence was more destructive than his petulant presence. They missed him terribly.

With passions only parents can know, Paco's father climbed the well-trodden roads to Madrid, asking all along the way if they had encountered his son. In the great city itself, the stranger wandered markets and main streets, seeking news of Paco. But not even in dimly lit dens and narrow alleys did anyone know about the missing teen.

So Paco's father went to the office of *El Liberal*, the largest newspaper in Madrid. He placed a personal ad that made this poignant promise: "Paco, meet me at Hotel Montana at noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa."

The father could hardly sleep Monday night. Restless and hoping against hope, he arrived at the newspaper office already at mid-morning. By then, strange things were already beginning to happen on the street outside. Traffic was much heavier than anyone could remember, with an unusual percentage of young men milling about. By 11:00 a.m. the area was nearly clogged with pedestrians. Half an hour later, as the father scanned the roiling mass in hopes of spying his son, the Guardia had to be called out to control the mob. One observer from a second-story window reported that over 800 homeless Paco's had shown up, all hoping to find a loving father who would take them home.

This is the story of our gospel reading today. We are Mary and Mary is us. Something had happened in her life that caused her to lose faith and hope until Jesus came along. Only through him was her soul restored, her psyche mended, and her trust nurtured back to life. There are many stories and legends that surround this passage, including thoughts that Mary had been a prostitute (drawing on parallels with other accounts and similar tales). We don't know. What we are told with unbroken earnestness by John is that Mary's action in anointing Jesus startled all around her, including Jesus' own disciples. The act was too bold, too lavish, too emotional, too over-the-top. Even Judas,

who would not go down in history as the most careful of all men, was ready to shove Mary away as outlandish.

Jesus would have none of it. He alone understood how close he was to his own death and welcomed the anticipated nod toward funereal honor. More than that, however, he honored Mary because of her passionate affirmation that Jesus meant everything to her. After the brokenness of life had washed her up and spit her out and thrown her into the milling masses of Madrid or Jerusalem or Moscow or Rio de Janeiro, Jesus was the Word of the loving Father broadcast in mass media promising, "All is forgiven. Come home!"

This is why Jesus said we would remember her. Wherever the gospel is proclaimed, she is us, and we are her.

Application

When Geoffrey Wainwright wrote a summary of his theology, he called the resulting work *Doxology*, a song of praise to God. However, he found all his words inadequate to convey what his theology meant for living. He pulled his doctrinal treatises together with this concluding story.

Many years ago, Turkish soldiers raided an Armenian home. The officer in charge ordered the parents killed and gave the daughters to his soldiers to be raped and brought home as slaves. He kept the oldest daughter for himself, using her again and again in despicable ways.

One day, the oldest daughter escaped. After she found her life again, she trained to be a nurse. When she was finally assigned to a hospital, she discovered that her ward was filled with Turkish officers.

Late one night, her old enemy was brought in. By the light of the lantern, she could see he was near death. She wouldn't have to try to kill him — with a little neglect, he'd be gone.

But the man didn't die. As the days passed, he recovered strength. One morning the doctor told him how fortunate he was. The doctor pointed to the young nurse and said, "But for her devotion to you, you would be dead."

Recognizing her, the officer asked, "Why didn't you kill me?" She simply replied, "I am a follower of him who said, 'Love your enemies.'"

The Russian writer Tolstoy said he truly lived only at those times when he believed in God. "To know God and to live are one and the same thing," he said. Deep down, we know how true that is. Paul put it this way: "For to me, to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:21).

Alternative Application

John 12:1-8. In these weeks of Lent, it is important to keep Jesus front and center. As noted above, Mary's tale is our story. There are many ways to retell it and make it personal for those who gather. The emphasis needs to be on Jesus and how he speaks love even as he moves to the cross.

Psalm 126

As the fingers hover over the keyboard to begin reflecting on this psalm, the horrific news is seeping out of Haiti. As images of haunted faces and pulverized buildings flicker across our televisions, the full impact of this disaster begins to register in our minds. The immensity of the suffering pries our self-absorbed minds away from economic recession and forces our myopic worldview to look where we would otherwise not think about turning our attention.

It is not so much the shaking of the ground as it is the cumulative effects of centuries of oppression and poverty that have led to non-existent building codes and over-crowded urban centers. In a country that already groans in a prolonged agony, disaster strikes like a kick in the head to someone who is lying unconscious on the pavement.

The fields have been sown, not only in tears, but in blood. A seemingly endless line of brutal dictatorships has seen to this planting with repression and systematic violence. Moreover, these regimes have been supported and propped up by those who now respond with promises of aid and support.

The rubble has not yet begun to be cleared and there are thousands of corpses left to bury still. But even with so much to do, it's not a big stretch to suggest that it's time to reap a harvest of joy in Haiti. Indeed, it is long past time.

While everyone lauds the massive movement to supply aid, few are thinking beyond the disaster. Few are considering the harvest that lies ahead. Will the clean up come as it did in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, where years later half the city still lays in ruin? Or will there truly be shouts of joy as a nation is rebuilt? Will schools and hospitals rise from the rubble? Will the centuries-long exploitation of this people finally come to a halt? Will a truly representative government emerge that will protect the rights of the people?

Will the coming harvest be accompanied by shouts of joy? These are questions that each one of us can help to answer. We ourselves can help with this harvest. We ourselves can be part of the new crop of justice and hope. We ourselves can be part of the solution.

Isaiah 43:16-21

When modern-day Israel first became a nation, most of its land was dry, arid desert. Thanks to the innovation and resourcefulness of its people, Israel has been able to construct desalination plants along their coastlines, plants which can remove the salt from sea water, providing the country with drinking water as well as water for agriculture. The Ashkelon plant alone, located at Israel's southern Mediterranean coast, can purify as much as 330,000 cubic meters of water per day, according to their website.

While modern technology can provide "rivers in the desert" (v. 19) as it were, the Holy Spirit is still the only one who can bring living water to a dry and thirsty soul.
Craig K.

Isaiah 43:16-21

Ransom is an action-packed drama thriller that came out in 1996, starring Mel Gibson and Rene Russo and directed by Ron Howard. The movie focuses on Mel Gibson's character, Tom Mullen, a rich airline owner, who is shocked when his son is kidnapped. He is willing to pay the two million dollar ransom, but the drop goes wrong. So Tom turns the ransom money into a bounty on the head of the kidnapper. The movie has a line in it that probably gave them the title: "Someone is going to pay."

That is exactly what the word "ransom" means. The word means that someone is going to pay. A ransom is the price paid to free someone from captivity or punishment. When we think of ransom in a religious sense, especially in Christianity, we think of ransom as a deliverance from sin or its penalty. And yet, someone has to pay for the sin, do they not?

Emphasis Archives

Isaiah 43:16-21

"Life is full of ends," wrote Phillips Brooks, "but every end is a new beginning, and we are continually coming to the point where we close one chapter, but we always can turn and open a new and better and a diviner chapter."

After the daughter got out of bed in a bad mood, her mother told her, "You sure

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climbed out of the wrong side of your bed today.” Moments later she was back in bed. When asked, “Why?” she said, “I’m getting out of the right side of bed this time.”

New beginnings with God take more effort, but God says in many ways, “I would like to do new things with you.”

Emphasis Archives

Isaiah 43:16-21

Kallie had made a mess of her personal life. She is the first to admit that she had made some poor choices in the past. As a result of her bad choices she lost close friends and alienated family members as well. Her life gone from bad to worse; for a period of time nothing seemed to go right for her.

She was arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol and because it was a repeat offense she lost her driver’s license for six months. Her mother urged her to get help before she kills herself or someone else with her reckless lifestyle.

Kallie thought long and hard about her life. She sought out former friends, seeking forgiveness. Her friends would tell her how much they wanted to be friends with her but could not stand to be around her when she was drinking. Kallie promised to change her ways.

One Sunday Kallie attended a church near her apartment. She had not been in church since she was in elementary school. She knew where the church was but did not know anything about it. That day she sat near the back next to an elderly woman. The woman made her feel welcomed and accepted. Following the worship service the two women continued talking. Kallie would later claim that it was as if God had brought them together. For the first time in a long time Kallie felt the love of God in her life. She continued attending each week, sitting next to her new friend.

At her court hearing members of the church came to offer support. While she would serve a sentence members of the church told her that they would be praying for her daily and would send her notes of encouragement. She was not alone.

While it is never easy to make radical changes in your life, it is possible. The prophet Isaiah proclaims, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing.” Here we are late in Lent, it is not too late for any of us to change the direction of our

lives. Maybe there is someone you know who is struggling with problems who need to hear that change is possible. God is in the business of changing lives — one life at a time.

Tim S.

Philippians 3:4b-14

Remember Charles Dickens’ famous story, *A Christmas Carol*? Remember how the ghost of Scrooge’s business partner, Jacob Marley, appears to him one night? Listen to it again, as Dickens describes it:

The chain he drew was clasped about his middle. It was long, and wound about him like a tail; and it was made (for Scrooge observed it closely) of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel ...

“You are fettered,” said Scrooge, trembling. “Tell me why.”

“I wear the chain I forged in life,” replied the Ghost. “I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it. Is its pattern strange to you?”

Scrooge trembled more and more.

“Or would you know,” pursued the Ghost, “the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself? It was full as heavy and as long as this, seven Christmas Eves ago. You have laboured on it, since. It is a ponderous chain!”

The ponderous chain of religious respectability, that Saul of Tarsus had spent half his life forging, he had the good sense to unwind from around himself and abandon, once he met Jesus Christ. Saul gave up his identity and with it even his name. He became someone completely new: Paul, child of God and disciple of Jesus. What he had once been no longer mattered.

Emphasis Archives

Philippians 3:4b-14

Hungry, penniless, and cold, she pushed everything she owned in a shopping cart. She arrived at one of our church’s midweek services. Her clothes looked as if they’d gone through a paper shredder. Layered grime colored her skin. Weariness circled her eyes. “Would you help me?” she asked.

She downed the food offered her. The church women helped her freshen herself. Then came clean clothes. We arranged for lodging and a ride in a warm car. She took

the food and the clothes, but she declined the free lodging. Why? She didn’t want to give up her possessions in the shopping cart she had left near the back door of the building.

A few of us went out to see what she treasured. We weren’t invading her privacy; everything in the cart was visible: shrubby branches, dead leaves, a few empty glass bottles, and two soft drink cans. The value couldn’t have exceeded twenty cents. She refused warm, safe lodging and ample food in order to retain ownership of some decaying plants and items worth less than a quarter.

It seemed illogical and stupid to us. Then we thought about the things we cherish. They, too, will decay and become worthless — having the same ultimate value as a shopping cart full of decayed leaves. It’s tragic to trade heaven for them, isn’t it?

Paul didn’t make that mistake: “I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ.”

Emphasis Archives

Philippians 3:4b-14

Dr. Roger Hahn, Dean of Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri, several years ago wrote for a clergy magazine concerning the value of knowing Christ. He wrote that personal testimonies are relatively rare in Paul’s letters. “Boasting, travel plans, and exhortation are common enough, but he seldom opens the windows of his soul and shares the heart of his relationship with Christ.” The Philippians passage is an exception. Hahn writes that this scripture offers the reader an unparalleled glimpse into Paul’s basic spiritual values. It revealed his heart and gave a definite power to his testimony.

We need to reveal to our families, friends, and acquaintances the powerful message of our heartfelt relationship with Christ as well. We are called to give a poignant testimony of God’s saving and sanctifying grace in our lives. Paul understood that it was not through osmosis that Christ enters the heart, but through a personal invitation that calls for a transforming experience through the blood of Christ. With that experience we walk with other believers in the journey. Together we make an impact on our culture, unbelievers, and the world. Our ultimate desire is to share in the resurrection and to help others experience their own personal resurrection in life and death.

The Amplified Bible translates Philippians 3:10, “For my determined purpose

is that I may progressively become more deeply and intimately acquainted with him, perceiving and recognizing and understanding the wonders of his person more strongly and clearly. And that I may in that same way come to know the power outflowing from his resurrection (which it exerts on believers) and that I may so share his sufferings as to be continually transformed into his likeness even to his death.”

That IS our ultimate desire ... just like Paul's!

Derl K.

Philippians 3:4b-14

When you are running in a race, you reach a certain point. At this point, it doesn't matter who is near you, who is pulling ahead, who is falling behind; it doesn't matter what trees or people or landmarks you pass; you have no eyes for the sky above or the grass by the path. It takes so much effort to just lift one foot and put it in front of the other.... You have eyes for only the road or the path. The only way to advance toward the goal — the finish line — is to lift one heavy, leaden foot and place it in front of the other, to reach deep into the core of your strength and find the will to do it again, and again, and again. One foot at a time. No eyes for anything but your path to the goal.

Leah T.

John 12:1-8

When I was a kid, one of my favorite movies was *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. I'll never forget one of the climax moments of the movie. Indiana Jones had just found the Holy Grail, but it was about to fall into a chasm. Indiana was hanging over the edge, desperately trying to reach it, with only his father holding him up. If Indiana kept reaching for it, his father would lose his grip and Indy would fall to his death. Finally, his father, who had searched for the grail his whole life, said, "Let it go."

In our Christian walk, sometimes we have to give things up, things that mean a great deal to us. In today's reading, Mary took a pound of nard, probably the most priceless thing she had, and gave it to Jesus, despite Judas' protests. If we were ever called to give up what we love the most for Jesus, would we be able to do it?

Craig K.

John 12:1-8

Theologian Paul Tillich dubbed such extravagance as Mary shows "Holy Waste." Christians should exercise reasonableness and ethical efficiency when using our physical resources. Yet, Christian faith must also express itself in an extravagance that seems wasteful.

A coworker told a young man who considered entering the ministry, "What a waste." The world calls for realism and restraint in religion. What drives faith isn't irrational, but it's far stronger than reason. It's gratitude, the most ethical of all emotions.

Our "wasteful" response to God is because of God's wasteful gift of grace toward us, pressed down, shaken together, and spilling over onto our laps. God seeks the lost, who are as valuable as the one coin in ten, the one sheep in 100, or the one son of two.

God's gracious concern for us results in our life of grateful service that can appear wasteful to those yet untouched by God's costly love.

Emphasis Archives

John 12:1-8

One day a young man went to a photography studio carrying a framed picture of his girlfriend. He wanted the photographer to make him a copy of the photograph. The photographer agreed to the request and set about the work to complete the request.

Upon removing the picture from the frame, he noticed an inscription on the back of the picture: "My dearest John, I love you with all of my heart. I love you and the man you are becoming in Jesus. I am yours forever. Love, Maria." Below there was a P.S. — "If we ever break up, I want this photo returned!"

Maria was not completely committed to John. She was committed only for as long as they both loved each other. It was not a commitment made on the basis of Jesus' love, but a love based in the world.

Emphasis Archives

John 12:1-8

Tony and Gretchen enjoy going out to eat once a month. They decided to try a new restaurant in town, one that won popular acclaim in a recent survey. The setting was cozy, providing for conversation. However, Gretchen became increasingly displeased with the service. It took too long for the server to bring the menus and then return to take their order. Then they waited for their meals. What they thought would be a nice evening out was quickly turning into an unpleasant experience.

It even took too long to receive the bill. By this time Gretchen thought that she would show her displeasure by not leaving any tip for the server. That would show her how displeased they were with the service and how their evening was ruined. She was not afraid to tell the server exactly how she felt. Just then she heard the voice of God or the whisper of the Holy Spirit telling her she should show love and mercy to the server. It was true, Gretchen did not know the circumstances for the delay in their service. She smiled when the server came for their payment. She thanked her for being their server. The server smiled back at them. Gretchen left a larger than usual tip that night.

Nearing the end of Jesus' earthly ministry he shared an evening with his closest friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. It must have been a pleasant meal — between good friends. Before the night was over, out of her great love for Jesus, Mary took her most valued possession, a bottle of expensive perfume and anointed Jesus' feet. It was an act of extravagance that caused some raised eyebrows among the disciples. Jesus affirmed Mary's action, as doing the right thing, "You do not always have me." Here we are late in Lent, the cross stands before Jesus, how might we show our love for him?

Tim S.

CHARTING

Experience Jesus and know God

In this age of computers and the internet, there is so much information “out there” to access. Knowledge is literally at our fingertips. So much so, that some dare to speak of the disappearance of the public library as we have come to know it. Knowledge, however, is not to be confused with wisdom. There is a big difference. Knowledge has to do with facts and figures and even how they are related to other facts and figures. Knowledge has to do with identifiable pieces of information that can be located, remembered, accessed, and manipulated. Knowledge is a good and necessary thing; but, knowledge is not wisdom.

Wisdom has to do with discerning what to do with the knowledge. Wisdom has to do with making prudent judgments regarding the value and place of any given piece of knowledge. It is not difficult to find many knowledgeable people in the world today. With the advent of the computer and internet, more and more people are able to gather knowledge without straying too far from the comfort of their own home. What is difficult to find today are people of wisdom, who can weigh the balance of things in the world today and not come up lacking too much.

The Bible tells us that wisdom is primarily about God and God’s activities/ways in the world. One is wise when one can discern and even articulate the presence of God in human affairs. Moreover, the Bible tells us that wisdom, this insight concerning God, is actually a gift from God in the first place. Ultimately, this wisdom regarding God is revealed by God himself in Jesus Christ. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:23-24, “But we preach Christ crucified ... the wisdom of God.”

The gospel is not some esoteric knowledge that can be gleaned and passed down by storytelling, reading, and memorization. The gospel is the personal encounter with Jesus, crucified and risen, Lord of life and Savior from sin and death.

In the events of Holy Week, we have the opportunity to encounter the Lord Jesus as he comes striding into our lives through his Word. Wisdom will lay hold of him, not with the

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fury of those who sought to arrest and crucify him, but with the passion of those who found that in following him they had discovered “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Words are powerful and can shape reality. Carefully chosen and timely shared, words add a depth to experience that the painter’s brush and the sculptor’s chisel envy.

Isaiah has choice words for the people of God, given at a time when they needed to hear God’s great plans for them. That is the role of a prophet. “The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him that is weary” (50:4). The weariness comes from seventy years in exile. The judgment of God has been clear. In metaphors of divorce and creditors (Isaiah 50:1), Isaiah describes how God has dealt with Israel. She has been put away from God, symbolized by separating the people from the land given to Abraham and his descendants. Sin drives distance between the creature and the Creator. Not only is paradise lost, but also the promised land. The lover and the beloved can no longer share the same sky. There is a darkness that covers the land, like sackcloth covers the head of those who mourn. In the Hebrew poetic tradition of saying the same thing twice, this time with the image of creditors settling a debt, Isaiah describes the plight of the people being sold to cover what they owe to the Lord. There are consequences to disobedience.

This having been said, the people duly reminded, Isaiah says that his purpose is primarily pastoral. His words are intended to sustain the weary, not drive them deeper into a hole in the ground. In words that are beyond the boundaries of this particular pericope, Isaiah will go on to articulate the hope that Israel can have. The Suffering Servant will embody it and the people will live it out in the time ahead as God restores his people to the covenant (marriage) and forgives their debt. “Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem?” God asks of the people as a hint of what is yet to come.

The words with which Isaiah speaks are not his own, in the sense that he made up the message that he thought the people needed to hear. He spoke words that were given by God. Isaiah admits to being taught. Unlike Israel’s rebellion when the Lord sought to teach her his ways (for example, at Mount Sinai), Isaiah exemplifies how to respond appropriately to the Lord: “I was not rebellious” (50:5).

This is the first and most important response to make when God calls his people to do his bidding. Obedience! Even if there are negative consequences to that response, which there apparently were for Isaiah! He describes how he was whipped, tormented, and spit upon. This certainly is no way for one of God's messengers to be treated, but it is reality nonetheless. Isaiah's comfort is that God will indeed help him — and in such a way that not only is he strengthened to face his adversary, but also equipped to “sustain with a word him that is weary” (50:1).

In what appears to be autobiographical references, it is rather stunning to notice the similarities between Isaiah's personal experience and the experience of Jesus. Jesus' mistreatment at the hands of the Romans (Luke 22:63-65) is tailor-made from Isaiah. Despite knowing that this would be his fate if he held to the Father's purposes for him, Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51), much like Isaiah “set [his] face like a flint” (50:7) to endure his hardships, both confident in the final vindication from God. Isaiah will go on in chapter 53 to express rather graphically what the “suffering servant,” who is God's elect, will be like. For now, Isaiah himself exemplifies some of the suffering that is inevitable for the person who will be awakened and taught by the Lord.

Philippians 2:5-11

In appreciation for the Philippian congregation (viz. the discordant Corinthian congregation about which we have been hearing so much in past weeks), Paul encourages their life together “by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord” (Philippians 2:2). He describes essential Christian characters of humility and service and then launches into a parenthetical thought that has become a platform from which to understand Christological aspects of the mystery of the Trinity.

There are two key verbs Paul uses that describe the activity of Christ in heaven and on earth. They are *kenaw* (to make empty) and *tapeinaw* (to make low, humble). In heaven, Christ emptied himself of divine privilege. He set aside whatever claims were rightfully his for the sake of his beloved. This was an act of self-giving and self-denying. He gave himself fully to the beloved out of an unparalleled love. This was a unilateral movement within the very heart of God, unsolicited and unmerited by humanity. In this self-giving, he denied himself the advantage of divinity in terms of splendor and power. He emptied himself of this advantage to identify truly with the beloved. Soren Kierkegaard's profound analogy in *Philosophical Fragments* about a king who loved a maiden illustrates this well for the imagination of faith.

On earth, Christ humbled himself. This was demonstrated most pointedly in his obedience unto death. Not just any death! There was no observable nobility in his suffering and death at the hands of a Roman prefect. No glory as in battle, defending the mother land or the poor against the ravages of a despot. No honor after living a long and productive life, with crowds adulating him and waiting on his last words of wisdom by which to live. His was a death on a cross — crucifixion — the most painful and humbling demise, surrounded by thieves and murderers and a jeering mob.

The most significant noun in this passage, *doulov* (slave), is

the word that connects heaven and earth in Jesus. He is a slave, a servant — not having the advantage of rank (emptying) but having the status of those poor, old pensioners and potato diggers (humbling), who were often the subjects of nineteenth-century impressionist artists. As the architect of servanthood, Jesus models the life in which Christians “do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3). The servant really has nothing with which to commend himself or herself to someone other than the service being provided. The service that Jesus provides us is his battle with sin and death on our behalf. When the service is actually “unto death” (2:8), then the aspect of self-sacrifice adds a vital dynamic to the nature of the *doulov*, who is Jesus. Isaiah 53 describes all this under the image of the Suffering Servant, whom Jesus embodies with striking fulfillment of detail.

In return for his self-giving, self-denying, and self-sacrificing, he is “highly exalted” (2:9). The words of Mary's Magnificat come to mind, where God exalts those of low degree (Luke 1:52). Jesus' name reigns supreme, every knee bowing to him for what he has accomplished in the way in which he accomplished it, every tongue confessing that he is indeed Lord. The Father is glorified through him. The angels, humanity, and the dead (and demons?) will all have to acknowledge the truth that has been made known through Jesus.

In this “kenosis hymn,” Christmas and Holy Week come together. The incarnation and the passion are one in the same story of God's great love for the world. Through this Christ-event, God has revealed himself in a most particular way at a specific time in the course of human history. As we experience Jesus, we discover the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit. The mystery of the Trinity touches our lives with a revealing light.

Luke 22:14—23:56

If a picture is worth a thousand words, a story is worth a thousand truths. In the passion narrative, we have pictured before us the truth of God's extensive love — self-initiating and self-fulfilling — for all the world. It is a love to be experienced; it is a love worth knowing. It is a love to be lived in for a thousand lifetimes.

The passion narrative for this day begins with the Passover meal, which is rooted in animal sacrifice and climaxes in human sacrifice. This may prick our sensitivities; too bad! This is the way it is. Israel gained its freedom from Egyptian bondage with the death of a lamb in a Hebrew house and the death of the firstborn child in an Egyptian house. Blood was poured out so that new life may emerge.

When Jesus announces at the meal that he will “not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes” (22:18), he is in effect saying that everything from now on is to be understood as the coming of the kingdom. He transforms the meal into the symbol and sacrament of his passion that will soon reach its climactic moment on the coming weekend. The disciples do not fully realize it yet, but the kingdom is about to be revealed before their very eyes on Friday afternoon and Sunday morning!

Because of their lack of understanding, they quarrel among themselves about greatness. Jesus intervenes with instruction on

servant leadership. He then authorizes their apostolic authority over the new Israel, the church. He even gives Peter an encouraging word with which to deal with his forthcoming denial; Jesus hands to Peter the responsibility to “strengthen your brethren” (22:32) when all these passion events have come to pass.

In an exchange reminiscent of his comment about tying a millstone around the neck of anyone who causes another to sin (Mark 9:42), Jesus warns about the changing times in which it will become more difficult for the disciples to survive: “You’re going to need money and luggage and probably a sword to get by now; the going is only going to get tougher!” Of course, Jesus is not advocating literally that the disciples begin to accumulate material goods for themselves and arm themselves for what is about to happen. When two swords are presented to Jesus, he in effect says, “I’ve said enough. I didn’t mean it that way. Listen to what I am meaning, not what I am saying.”

In Gethsemane, Jesus simply prays once for only the Father’s will to be done in contrast to Mark’s and Matthew’s accounts, which include three exchanges. He is willing to set aside his own needs and desires, again emptying himself from all claim to privilege or special consideration. He is obedient to the Father’s command, like Isaiah was in times before. At the moment of betrayal, when it seems appropriate for one of the disciples to take Jesus literally about the issue of swords, Jesus excoriates the disciples and heals the lopped off ear, illustrating what he meant to be saying moments before. Perhaps doubly armed with two swords meant to be doubly prepared and strengthened to deal with the adversity that would surely befall those who followed him. Isaiah had a sense of this, and he held his course. “I turned not backward” (Isaiah 50:5).

Jesus himself would now enter into the long, dark night of denial, abuse, and mocking. The failure of religious and political leadership would become evident, as those in power and “in the know” lacked the wisdom to perceive the very coming of the kingdom of God before their eyes. Exhausted now, Jesus would be led out to crucifixion with not enough strength to carry his own cross (the custom of the day); a stranger was pulled from the crowd to do that for him. On the way to Calvary, Jesus provides a pastoral word to the women who were weeping due to his suffering; he forewarns them of the suffering they will be facing and that they should prepare themselves.

From the cross in the agony of dying, Jesus yet speaks words that cut through the tragedy of the day to reveal the triumph of what was really happening. He offers forgiveness to those who were executing him. He then offers a merciful word of hope to the penitent thief. How ironic, that from among his own disciples, namely Peter, he received a statement of denial, while from a nameless convicted thief he received acknowledgment as to who he was.

Luke’s account of the death of Jesus accents his surrender into the hands of God. He speaks one word earthward — expressing his servant leadership by welcoming the thief into the kingdom. He speaks the other word heavenward — committing himself obediently to the will of God. He had let the Father’s hands mold him in life; he will let the Father’s hands have him in death. Paul’s characterization of Jesus in Philippians is ac-

curate, reflecting these emptying and humbling aspects of Jesus’ passion, which so persuasively convince us of a God who is not only with us, but also for us with power actually to deliver us from evil in his own wonderful way.

Application

It would not be hard to make the case that the world is weary with sin and beaten down with the burdens of life. The incidence of teen suicide is perhaps the most striking corroborative witness. Pastors and parishioners have the joy and responsibility to “sustain... with a word [the] weary” (Isaiah 50:4). The word is not a humanly contrived one, like “Don’t worry, be happy!” or “Buck up!” or “It’s not as bad as it could be.” The word is one that is given to us from God himself. In a name, the word is Jesus. He was acquainted with the smiters and the spitters. From the depths of human suffering, where we often feel alone, he shows us how to handle any situation by entrusting ourselves into the hands of God. There can be confidence in any circumstance, “for the Lord God helps me” (Isaiah 50:7).

Regarding the issue of sin specifically, we hear a resounding word from God that addresses our guilt. A new covenant is announced, given in the shedding of blood by which the judgment of God passes over us and sets us free. Jesus’ blood poured out for us cleanses us from our sin and allows us to stand before God as forgiven. This is so because he was the spotless lamb (Exodus 12:5) whose blood was shed to set us free from the consequences of sin (death, Romans 6:23). He was truly innocent despite the charges raised against him, so that he could declare us innocent in spite of the true charges that are raised against us.

Jesus has given us a new paradigm by which to live out our lives in faithful response to his life for us. As God was revealed in terms of self-giving, self-denying, self-sacrificing, so too are we to model our lives in these ways worthy of this gospel. Discipleship is measured by emptying and humbling, as each Christian in turn becomes a *doulov* of God. This is a more dynamic way in which to conceive not only of God (viz. the omnis of God: omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent), but also of the nature of the Christian life. It certainly helps us to redefine what is honorable and authoritative for the world today. Our experience with Jesus helps us not only to know God, but also ourselves and who God is calling us to be.

Until Easter comes — and it is surely coming — we are left under the power of darkness in this pericope. Three times Peter denied his Lord under the power of fear. Three times the crowd cried for Barabbas rather than Jesus under the power of misguided passion. Three times the authorities (Jewish religious, Jewish political, Roman political) succumbed to the ignorance of human knowledge rather than yielding to spiritual wisdom from above. Yet, the temple curtain was torn in two: Is God breaking out of the confines of what we have come to expect? Yet, a pagan centurion affirms the innocence of Jesus: What new certainties will be discerned after this? Yet, the crowds show signs of repentance and the followers of Jesus obey the commandment: How will God respond to all that is happening on this dark, bad Friday?

Preaching The Psalm

Psalm 31:9-16

The old preacher throw away line goes like this. “If you want to make God laugh, make a plan.” It is a sentiment that is old and well worn. It lifts up the foibles and the truth of our human insistence on trying to control everything. Think, for just a moment, about the human enterprise. We are all about control. From the economy to the government to the farms and factories and back again, we try to control everyone and everything. We build dams across the rivers to control the water. We develop pesticides to control the bugs. We create countless laws to control people, and we build machines to try to control the weather.

Our history as a people is one long story of striving for control over this world. In our constant reaching for control we lose sight of a fundamental theological truth. God is the one who is in control. Human beings can kick and scream; they can invent and struggle, but at the end of the day it’s the Lord God who’s in charge of it all. It’s not just our times, but all time that is in God’s hands. Indeed, much if not all human suffering can be traced to our unwillingness to cease the struggle and

acknowledge that the times are “in God’s hands.”

Instead of trying to conquer and control nature, one has to wonder what might happen if humans simply sat back and acknowledged God’s sovereignty in all this? Rather than constantly trying to control other people and their destinies, what would our world look like if we simply let go and embraced the biblical truth that God is in charge of it all?

This isn’t to say that human beings should do nothing. Of course, people need to work and build and grow. But to engage in life’s processes without the drive to control would be a new thing indeed.

If, with the psalmist, we could trust in God and acknowledge that our times are “in God’s hands,” imagine how things might be different. If we chose not to be stubborn like a “horse or a mule without understanding” (v. 9), we just might be able to see other ways of doing things. Without our own narrow agenda governing our actions, we might be able to see things from a larger perspective. Without the blinders of perceived self-interest, we might embrace the interests of others.

If we simply stepped back and placed our trust in God rather than in our own limited abilities; if we could only acknowledge the times are truly in God’s hands, then world would be a much, much better place.

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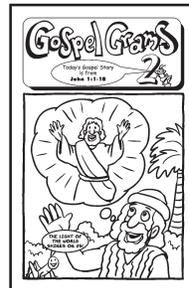
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Illustrations

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Dr. Tom Barnard writes that in the spiritual life, there are things that belong together, like perfectly-matched oars. Two of the more important ones are *surrender* and *service*. They go together. Surrender without service is hollow piety. Service without surrender is sterile duty. Try activating one without the other, and the spiritual cruise will result in circle making. No significant gain will result from such foolish exercise.

Isaiah 50 is the prophetic foreshadowing of the trial of Jesus Christ and his response to his accusers. Jesus demonstrates the two oars of surrender and service through his personal surrender to God and yielding to the action of the mob. As someone said, “Wherever the Spirit of the Lord controls the heart there is a passion to serve.”

Derl K.

Isaiah 50:4-9a

It was during the Stone Age that humans first began using flint to make tools. Flint was used because it was easier to shape (*knapp*) than other stone, and once it was shaped, it held its sharp edge longer. To knapp a piece of flint, one takes a larger stone or a piece of antler, and repeatedly strikes the flint. Flakes of flint will fall off. When the desired shape begins to appear, the antler is used to pry off smaller pieces of the flint until the final product emerges. Where flint was scarcer, the larger flakes of flint that were initially knocked off, were also used to make tools. Thus, one piece of flint could produce several different tools.

Flint has other uses as well. When struck against steel, flint produces a spark that can start fires. (Scout troops still practice this.) As human weaponry advanced, flintlock guns were developed (in about 1630), in which a spring-loaded hammer was released to strike a piece of flint. The resulting spark ignited the gunpowder. Flintlock guns were used until the 1840s, when they were replaced with percussion cap mechanisms.

From the thirteenth century, flint was used in the construction of walls, houses, and churches. It was especially true in England.

When the prophet says that he has set his face like flint, does that mean he will be chipped into shape, cause a fire or explo-

sion, or that he will be built up?

Emphasis Archives

Isaiah 50:4-9a

What is striking every Holy Week is Jesus’ determination. He began his ministry knowing what would happen to him. There were times when he must have been frustrated or at least disappointed with his disciples. He recognized positive qualities in them, but there were times when they just did not understand. Jesus did not give up on them, or find new ones, but continued to love and work with them.

Jesus’ confrontation with the religious officials might have caught him off guard. He might have thought that they would immediately recognize that he was God’s own Son and work with him, but they did not. They not only rejected him but plotted against him orchestrating his death.

Nothing would stop Jesus or derail his mission, not his sometimes-confused disciples and certainly not the misguided religious officials. As we begin Holy Week we realize that nothing could stop Jesus. He had come too far to quit. He would offer his life as a sacrifice so that we can experience eternal life.

God stops at nothing in order to win our salvation, even if it means sacrificing God’s own Son on the cross. When disappointments, hardships, and setbacks seem to get the best of us, we would do well to remember Jesus and his sense of determination.

Emphasis Archives

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Emily Dickinson was a poet who lived at the end of the 1800s. Her poems often use metaphors and analogies that seem unusual. One of her poems talks about the passing of time: “If I could see you in a year/ I’d wind the months in balls/ And put them each in separate drawers/ Until their time befalls.” Dickinson’s female-centric metaphors like this one — wrapping time into a ball, like one might wrap yarn in a ball — is one of the things that makes her poetry unique. Our reading from Isaiah uses similar unusual images — “all of them (his enemies) will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.” Isaiah, like Emily Dickinson, likes to make comparisons to everyday occurrences that his audience can relate to.

Leah T.

Philippians 2:5-11

I’ve started seeing commercials for a new reality TV series on CBS called “Undercover Boss.” The premise of this show is that a CEO of a company goes “undercover” and works as a new employee for their company. I guess the idea of it is to show these executives what life is like for those under them. I would imagine that it would have to be a rather humbling experience.

In Philippians, Paul talks of Jesus “humb[ing] himself” and becoming one of us. The Creator became part of the creation. And unlike these undercover bosses, Jesus didn’t just come to see what our existence was like. He came to suffer death on a cross in obedience to the Father that we might have life with him.

Craig K.

Philippians 2:5-11

Mark clearly recalls a summer night at church camp when he was in his early teens. Tensions were running high all week between the campers. One day Mark and his friend dabbled on clown makeup to perform a skit for other campers. Their only prop was a pair of 2 x 4s. The spectators began chuckling as the two clowns were arguing, and then began using the 2 x 4s as swords. The boards clacked at one point in the mock scuffle. The staged conflict melted away as the boys took the wood and intersecting the beams slowly raised a makeshift cross for all to see.

Silence descended upon the group. Clearly this was a holy moment unlike no other. The campers understood the cross. Mark claims that after this skit everyone at camp seemed to get along better — there was no longer any tension in the air. “Suddenly it seemed less hot as the cool breath of the Spirit melded all the campers into one.”

Mark learned that the cross, the emblem of suffering and shame, can also be a symbol of peace and reconciliation.

Jesus died upon the cross for all people. Jesus humbled himself. The apostle Paul wrote, “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that 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.”

Tim S.

Philippians 2:5-11

Talk of having “the same mind” can excite science fiction fans to speculate about a “super mind” descending upon earth from space to defeat humanity and then to dominate us. That’s the spatial opposite of some modern opinions of the Christian faith. Skeptics speculate that Christian belief in God is merely our projecting earthly, human needs and desires onto the universe, which we then perceive and name “god.”

Our risen Lord Jesus was originally the earthly and humble Galilean teacher who spoke of common life and nature, performed miracles of compassion, hung around with working people, and, finally, submitted to a horrible death.

The process Paul envisions isn’t a malignant force dominating us nor is it our projecting our wishes skyward. Paul has experienced our gracious Lord Jesus injecting his very life into everything that we think and do upon this earth.

Emphasis Archives

Philippians 2:5-11

I learned a lesson about humility early in my ministry as a church organist. I had been asked not to play the state trumpet at this one church because the senior pastor did not like it used. It was the loudest stop in the organ. Like any college student who thought, “I’ll show you who’s the boss,” I used that state trumpet the first Sunday of my playing there as a fill-in for the month of August. Dr. Carter was quite upset with me following worship. I laughed at him and said, “You’re the pastor and I’m the organist. You do your job and I’ll do mine.” I was lucky he didn’t fire me on the spot. He saw something in me that needed to be humbled.

He placed this on the sign board out front of the church: Sermon: “Have You Ever Been In Hell?” and in smaller letters below, it said, “*Come In and Hear Our Guest Organist.*” I didn’t use the state trumpet during my interim position again.

Emphasis Archives

Luke 22:14—23:56

Many years ago a pastor told the story that in one of the earliest pictures of the Nativity, Jesus is represented as lying in the manger, while just above him, on the wall of the stable, is the shadow of the cross. In his

painting, “The Light of the World” Holman Hunt pictures Jesus in the carpenter’s shop at Nazareth. The day’s work is finished. The tired carpenter lifts his arms in an attitude of utter weariness and the level rays of the setting sun cast upon the wall the shadow of a cross. Both artists were right. Jesus was born under and lived under the shadow of the cross. He was born to die. The penalty had been passed upon the race, “The soul that sins, it shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4). Jesus would take the sin of the world and taste death for every person. The cross that he bore for us compels us to know him and calls to us to follow him.

Derl K.

Luke 22:14—23:56

Bruce Wayne, Gotham city billionaire, is by day the first among his fellow citizens. Rich, famous, and good-looking, Bruce is unquestionably the best of the best. But by night, Bruce Wayne becomes Batman: a superhero who is not so much loved as feared, not so much celebrated as considered a vigilante menace. Meanwhile, Superman is celebrated as the best of the best — but his alter ego, Clark Kent, is a lowly newspaper reporter. Whichever way you spin it, many comic book superheroes live out the idea that the first must become last and the last must become first. But comic book superstars were not the first to show this message. Two thousand years earlier, Jesus showed the world what it really means to put the first last.

Leah T.

Luke 22:14—23:56

Fred Craddock tells of how, when he was in graduate school at Vanderbilt, he used to take late-night study breaks at an all-night diner. One night, while worrying about his New Testament oral exams, he happened to overhear an exchange between the counter man and a ragged, down-on-his luck customer:

Then I noticed a man who was there when I went in, but had not yet been waited on. I had been waited on, had a refill, and so had the others. Then finally the man behind the counter went to the man at the end of the counter and said, “What do you want?” He was an old, gray-haired, black man. Whatever the man said, the fellow went

to the grill, scooped up a little dark patty off the back of the grill, and put it on a piece of bread without condiment, without napkin. The cook handed it to the man, who gave him some money, and then went out the side door by the garbage can and out on the street. He sat on the curb with the eighteen-wheelers of the night with the salt and pepper from the street to season his sandwich.

I didn’t say anything. I did not reprimand, protest, or witness to the cook. I did not go out and sit beside the man on the curb, on the edge. I didn’t do anything. I was thinking about the questions coming up on the New Testament. And I left the little place, went up the hill back to my room to resume my studies, and off in the distance I heard a cock crow.

— from Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories* [Saint Louis: Chalice Press, 2001], pp. 48-49

Emphasis Archives

Luke 22:14—23:56

For the past twenty years, a community observes Good Friday with its annual Cross Walk. People from all of the churches gather at one end of the town to begin the walk. For this occasion, all the denominational differences are forgotten as Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, Catholics, Brethren in Christ, as well as a couple of independent churches, participate. People from each church take turns carrying the cross. At each church, a portion of the passion story is read.

Young and old participate in the walk; some are pushed in strollers, while others walk slowly with a cane. The solemn procession through town is a witness. By the time the walk is over there are usually more people in the procession, having joined at various points. Some may not have intended to walk but were so moved that they joined in. Two hours after the start, the cross is carried into one of the churches where the community gathers for Good Friday service.

Jesus’ Good Friday walk through Jerusalem is actually our walk — to death and new life. Each year people join in that walk, remembering and giving thanks knowing that Jesus’ trek is also our walk.

Emphasis Archives

CHARTING

THE COURSE

Long table

Perhaps you've been part of a large group going out to eat together. You arrive at the restaurant, and they don't have a single table that can accommodate the whole group. The hostess asks you to wait for a moment, and she combines efforts with several of the servers to rearrange some of the vacant tables and chairs, pushing tables together to create one long table for your oversized party.

I recall several occasions when I have been part of such a group. I've even seen restaurants assign more than one server to our "table" because it has been so long and populated.

Such occasions are usually very jovial — lots of conversation and laughter. If, by chance, you have a moment when you aren't part of a conversation, then you have the leisure to look down the long table and see the all the faces of these cherished friends and family members, gathered together in fellowship.

Of course, a very long table is somewhat impractical for conversation. You can't easily converse with someone who is clear at the other end. Still, there is something more satisfying about sitting all together — a feeling of connectedness that is missing when your group is scattered over several different tables and booths.

Conjure up the images of such a long and loving table for your congregation this night, for that is where we sit. We gather this evening at a very long table, indeed — and getting longer every day. For this is a table that does not merely stretch across part of a room: it spans generations and centuries. We cannot even calculate the number of people seated there.

Yet our scripture passages for this holy day will help us to pause our conversation, to look up and down the table, and to see the faces of the cherished family and friends who are gathered for fellowship with our host.

Exodus 12:1-4 (5-10) 11-14

The far end of our very long table stretches back over 3,000 years. Our first task is to squint our eyes to try to see the folks all the way at that other end. There they are: Moses and the Hebrew slaves in Egypt.

People who pay some attention to the liturgical or church calendar will appreciate the Lord's instruction in verse 2. Speak-

ing of the current month — that is, the month that the Israelites celebrated the Passover and left Egypt — the Lord said, "It shall be the first month of the year for you." One senses that, perhaps prior to this time, that particular month was not regarded as the first month on the Hebrew calendar. So the Israelites made an adjustment that is reminiscent of what we do in the church: namely, while the calendar says that the new year begins in January, and while the schools say that the new year begins in late August or early September, in the church we affirm that the new year begins with Advent. For the Hebrews, the new year began in the month of the Passover.

Next, God gave the people instructions for preparing and eating the Passover meal. We are accustomed to instructions for preparing food: We call them recipes. When it comes to eating the food, however, the only sort of instructions we get in most cases is the training in manners that our parents provided. "Elbows off the table." "Napkin in your lap." "Feet on the floor." "Chew with your mouth closed." And such.

Against such standard fare, God's instructions seem quite strange. For, if anything, the instructions from God seem to us rather unmannerly. We picture people wolfing down their food while wearing their overcoats and holding their car keys. It seems to us both an impolite and an unhealthy way to eat.

Over the millennia, the Jewish celebration of the Passover meal has become so rich with symbolic acts and liturgical elements that it is anything but "fast food." In that original context in Egypt, however, the key element was speed. "You shall eat it hurriedly," God told the people, for after centuries of waiting, now their deliverance was going to come quickly.

God's statement that "on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments" is a fascinating insight into the Passover event, if not the meal itself. At a purely human level, of course, we don't see the gods of Egypt in the picture, at all. It is the human element we see: the massive, national grief, as nearly every household suffers some sudden death by supernatural cause. Yet the Lord does not cast it as a punishment on the people of Egypt, but rather on the gods of Egypt. It suggests a larger principle: that to align oneself with the enemy of God is to be defeated along with that enemy.

Finally, we observe God's intention that "this day shall be a day of remembrance for you" and his instruction that "throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance." These Old Testament themes of "remembrance" and future observances of the meal are surely recalled by Jesus' Last

Supper words: “Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me” (1 Corinthians 11:25).

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

The long table began back in Egypt in the days of Moses. As we fast forward through the generations — past Joshua (Joshua 5:10), past Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 30:1-26), past Josiah (2 Kings 23:21-23; 2 Chronicles 35:1-19), and past Jerusalem of the Persian era (Ezra 6:19-22) — we come eventually to Jesus and his disciples. That spot on our table is the focus of our next lection.

Move your eyes just a little further down the table, however, and you come to the Corinthians of Paul’s day.

Those first-century Greeks may seem far removed from us in terms of time and space, but the fact is that we may think of ourselves sitting right next to them at this table. In broad strokes, you see, their context is identical to ours.

Paul was writing to a congregation of Christians about their celebration of the Lord’s Supper. That’s what this table had become, even just a few decades after Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples on that Thursday night of Holy Week. Paul wanted to help that Christian congregation understand what they were doing.

As we read the larger context, we discover that not everything is copasetic in the Corinthian church. They are struggling with a variety of issues — divisions, infighting, immorality, to name a few — and unsurprisingly their worship and fellowship had been compromised. An unhappy family is not likely to have a cheerful dinner table just because they all agreed to sit down to eat together. Likewise, a troubled church will bring its troubles, one way or another, to this table of the Lord, as well. Accordingly, Paul wrote to help correct the problems in Corinth, including their mishandling of this meal.

In the course of his instructions, he includes these verses, which read to us more like a gospel than an epistle. And, indeed, he is functioning very much like a gospel writer, as he reports and records a piece of the narrative from Jesus’ life.

The detail about Jesus giving thanks gives rise to the traditional term “Eucharist” for this meal. Meanwhile, for all of the elements that were likely a part of the disciples’ Passover meal, it is just these two elements — the bread and the cup — that Jesus singled out as representative of him. The reference to a “new covenant” echoes Luke’s account (22:20) and forms part of an important thread throughout scripture (Jeremiah 31:31; 2 Corinthians 3:5-6; Hebrews 8:8-13, 9:15, 12:22-24).

Jesus’ instructions to “do this in remembrance of me” anticipate a continuing practice on the part of his followers. It is that practice in which Paul’s congregation was participating. And it is at that table that we sit next to them tonight.

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

This is the part of the table to which our eyes naturally turn on this holy day. Indeed, some of our people may not even know how much further back in time this particular table extends. But the narrator alludes to that history as he sets the stage with

the reference to “the festival of the Passover.” Still, Maundy Thursday is primarily about this moment in time, this part of the table: Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples.

John’s gospel gives us a different view of this scene than Matthew, Mark, and Luke. That’s not surprising, of course, because John gives us a very different view of most everything about Jesus’ life and ministry than the synoptic gospels do. For starters, John’s account of the Last Supper is several times longer than any of the other gospel records. We observe that two of the elements that are unique to John’s Last Supper scene are found here in our selected verses: the foot washing and the new commandment.

Most of our congregations are unaccustomed to the practice of foot washing. While many folks who have tried it in various church settings have found it deeply meaningful, the fact is that the whole experience is a new and self-conscious one for most Americans. Consequently, we do not begin at the same starting place as Peter and the other disciples.

For those men around that table, foot washing was not a novel experience. Rather, in that world of dusty roads and sandaled feet, it was common practice. The mere experience of having another person wash one’s feet, therefore, was not as awkward and uncomfortable for them as it is for us.

The experience of having Jesus wash their feet, however, was quite a different matter. That culture had a strong sense of hierarchy, and washing feet was servant’s work. Jesus, however, was one whom they identified with titles like “master” and “lord.” For them, he was at the other end of the spectrum from “servant.” This is like having your boss come over for dinner only to roll up his sleeves and start cleaning your bathroom. This is the governor shining your shoes. This is the president washing and folding your laundry.

It was understandable, therefore, as well as personally typical, that Peter would object. First, it seemed to him too backward that his lord should wash his feet. Then it seemed too little that only his feet should be washed. But Jesus walked his most mercurial follower through the logic and significance of the act. Then, when it was completed, he told his followers that the very inappropriateness of what he had done was precisely the point: “If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example.”

This symbolic act resonates with other teachings of Jesus (such as Matthew 20:20-28; 23:1-11; Mark 9:33-37). And whether or not our particular congregations are comfortable with the practice of washing one another’s feet, the larger principle remains and must be applied: namely, that we are to live with the humble attitude of a servant. This is a high calling in the kingdom of God, and it is the posture we adopt before him and before one another.

Meanwhile, the “new commandment,” which is another feature unique to John’s Last Supper account, follows a similar trajectory. He commands his disciples to “love one another,” which at first blush does not seem like a new commandment, at all (cf. Matthew 22:37-40; Leviticus 19:18). But we discover that it is the standard for love that is new. No longer are we called to love “as you love yourself,” but rather “just as I have loved you.”

So the love commandment matches the message of the foot-washing. That is to say, in both our serving and our loving, we are following Jesus' lead. As he has set an example for us, so we adopt an attitude of servitude with one another. And as he has loved us, so we love one another.

Imagine the church where these simple principles prevailed and became reality! Imagine the congregation where each one sought to serve the other and to selflessly love one another! By this, indeed, everyone surely would recognize that we really are his disciples!

Application

We come to a table on Maundy Thursday. Your table might look quite different from mine, of course. Most of us will not literally have tables, at all. Still, as we kneel at the altar rail, or file up and down the aisles, or even just remain in our seats with the elements of bread and cup brought to us, there's a table. And it's a very long table.

In order for our people to understand what we are doing together this evening, they need to see the whole table. So we begin with our ancestors who sat at the far end: Moses and his generation, hurriedly celebrating the first Passover meal together in Egypt. The meal marked God's saving act. Central to that saving act was the blood of a lamb. The meal was to be reenacted as a remembrance on that date throughout their generations.

After a good many generations had passed, Jesus and his companions sat down at that same table to eat, to celebrate, and to remember. Only now, suddenly, there was talk of different blood, and the anticipation of a different saving act. Again, there was the expectation that the meal would be reenacted as a remembrance throughout the generations.

So it was that, some few years later, the Christians in Corinth gathered at that table to eat, to celebrate, and to remember. And tonight we sidle up next to them, hearing again the story of "the night when he was betrayed."

There's something sweet about the faces we see as we look up and down this table. From the weathered skin of those Hebrew slaves in Egypt to that beloved collection of fishermen and more that gathered in that upper room; plus every imaginable look, size, complexion, and language that has appeared at this table in the generations since.

Then there is the sweetest face of all. He sits at the center of the table, and he is the host. As Charles Wesley sang, "Let every soul be Jesus' guest." He is the one who really brings us together, for it is because of his love and by his saving act that we are gathered here. He is the one we remember tonight. He is the greatest common factor among that widely disparate group represented across the generations and continents at this table. This meal is all about him.

Our host is the Paschal Lamb anticipated by Moses, the rabbi followed by Peter, the Savior proclaimed by Paul, and the Lord worshiped by us. We gather in his name, and we partake of his body and blood. We remember his saving act, and we celebrate our salvation. And we proclaim his death until he comes.

Alternative Applications

Exodus 12:1-4 (5-10) 11-14; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. "The Act of Remembering." Some of the remembering we do is deliberate. Some of it is inspired. Some of it is accidental. Of course, sometimes we don't remember, at all: we just plain forget.

Accidental remembering is that sort of experience in which some experience has the unintended effect of triggering a memory. I drive by a car with a Connecticut license plate, and I suddenly remember that my brother-in-law who lives in Connecticut has a birthday coming up. There is no design involved — except for the occasions when the design may be God's providence. It is just how the human brain works.

Inspired remembering is more like nostalgia. It is prompted by some site, smell, song, picture, group of friends, or what have you. You are inspired to indulge your memory in the fond exercise of reminiscing. It is like a floral centerpiece on the kitchen table: it has no real practical purpose; it's just a bit of loveliness.

Deliberate remembering is what we do most often. Specifically, it is what we do with the things we cannot afford to forget. With our alarms and alerts, our lists and notes to ourselves, our calendars and address books, we take deliberate steps to remind ourselves about those things that we must not forget.

Deliberate remembering is what God had in mind for his people. There are certain things — big things — that we must not forget. So he built into his people's calendar the holy days and festivals that would prompt them to remember the truly important stuff.

We may think of "remembering" as a passive thing, and the phrase "in remembrance," which graces so many of our altars and Communion tables, sounds almost funereal to us. Yet biblical remembering is alive and active.

Whenever the scripture tells us that God remembered someone or something, it is followed immediately by action (Genesis 8:1, 19:29, 30:22; Exodus 2:24; 1 Samuel 1:19; Revelation 16:19). Naturally, therefore, when God commands his people to remember something (e.g., Exodus 20:8), appropriate corresponding action is expected.

Even the remembering itself is an action in God's design. The Old Testament Israelites were not merely instructed to pause once a year and recall God's saving action for their ancestors. No, they were to eat a meal and observe a festival, for participating in those actions would be full of remembering for them.

So, as we gather this evening to share the Lord's Supper together, we do so "in remembrance." It is to be "a day of remembrance for you," just as the Passover was for Israel. Our remembering will be active, not passive. And once we have remembered his atoning sacrifice, some corresponding action on our part would be appropriate.

T.O. Chisholm had a sense for what our corresponding action ought to be. "O Jesus, Lord and Savior," he sang, "I give myself to thee; for thou, in thy atonement, didst give thyself for me."

Preaching The Psalm

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

Human relationships exist in a transactional kind of sphere. In other words, we interact with our sisters and brothers based almost entirely on how they deal with us. If someone, for example, treats us with derision or anger, we tend to hand the same thing back to them. On the other hand, kindness and love tend also to be responded too in kind. Without delving into deep philosophical mud, it seems safe to say that this is how the human animal acts. It is the simple reality of our being. We love those who love us, and we dislike those who dislike us. Exceptions can always be found, but it's difficult to deny that this is the human way of interaction. The truth is that we not only deal with one another this way, we also respond to God in terms of what we perceive to be God's treatment of us.

In this psalm why does the writer shout out love of the Lord? It's not because the writer is impressed with God or because God is powerful. It's not because God is beautiful or attractive in some way. Love for the Lord is declared here because God has heard his voice and listened. The relationship is transactional.

So, God has heard. God has acted. The question for the human follows quite quickly on the heels of God's action. "What

shall I return to the Lord?" How does this transactional relationship continue? Well, as might be expected, the writer offers a thanksgiving sacrifice. In his day this may have been a dove or a goat. But today with the SPCA frowning on animal sacrifice, what shall we return to the Lord for the many things God has done for us? Looking, as we must, through the lens of contemporary Christian understanding, what is it that we shall offer to God as we carry on the commerce of sacred relationship?

Saint Paul would have us offer ourselves as a "living sacrifice" (Romans 12:1), "holy and acceptable to God" (Romans 12:1-2). Holy and acceptable here means: refraining from following after the false gods of culture and avarice. It means not going along with our social norms but setting our sights instead on God's love as we receive it through Jesus Christ. And finally it means paying careful attention to what God wants for us as we step into this new life of faith.

Paul's suggestion may well be a good start for us. Having received God's great gift of God's self in Christ Jesus, how possibly can we continue this tit for tat transactional thing? After all, the great thing has been done. There's no more trading in affection or giving homage to God because God does what we want God to do. So perhaps we can begin by simply offering ourselves, by giving our lives over to love and compassion. It may not be what the psalmist had in mind, but it sounds good from where this pastor sits.

Maundy Thursday Worship

Gospel: John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Theme: Christian as servant

Call to Worship

Leader: Let us gather together and worship, all who would serve the risen Lord.

People: No greater love can we share than to reach out and care for others.

Leader: Christ, the Lord, chose to be our servant in all He did.

People: In obedience to God Christ died for us on the cross.

Leader: No one is greater than the Master, so let us be servants unto the world.

All: Blessed be the name of the Lord!

Collect

O God, the gospel is such a paradox to us, that to be great we must be willing to serve. Yet Christ set a living example in washing the feet of the disciples. Make us servants, O Lord. In Christ we pray. Amen.

Prayer of Confession

Lord, so often we would hear a call to greatness, but we would not hear your call to become the servants of all. Too often we desire to be important, yet we would not choose to wash the feet of the disciples as you did. Forgive us, Lord, for our pride, and do whatever it takes to lead us to humbly love and desire to serve others for you. In Christ we pray. Amen.

Hymns

In The Garden

What Wondrous Love Is This

Open My Eyes

Excerpted from *Lectionary Worship Aids* by James R. Wilson, [CSS Publishing Co., Inc.: Lima, Ohio]

Illustrations

Exodus 12:1-4 (5-10) 11-14

During the height of the Cold War, many families took it upon themselves to build fallout shelters in the event that the Soviet Union would attack the United States with nuclear weapons. Many fallout shelters were underground or in basements with thick layers of dirt to protect occupants from radiation. Interest in fallout shelters has lessened since the end of the Cold War, but many of them are still in place today.

During the Passover, God offered the Israelites another kind of fallout shelter, this time protecting them from his wrath being visited on the Egyptians. Just as the blood of the Passover lamb kept the Israelites from death, the blood of Jesus keeps us from God's wrath and offers humanity the way to salvation.

Craig K.

Exodus 12:1-4 (5-10) 11-14

A small country church in Wisconsin has a special tradition that they have used at the close of their communion services for a number of years. It is adapted from an ancient Jewish closing of the Passover meal. Since it is the hope of every devout Jew to celebrate the Passover at least once in David's city, the Jewish custom is to end the meal with a toast. Passover participants raise the cup and say, "Next year, in Jerusalem!"

The cup in the Lord's Supper serves as two reminders: We are to look back to the shed blood of Christ and forward to the Lord's second coming. In other words, for all Christians, there will be a last sharing of the bread and the cup on this side of eternity: When they meet once again, they will be in Christ's presence. At the close of communion, the members of this church raise their cups in anticipation and say, "Next time, with Christ!"

Emphasis Archives

Exodus 12:1-4 (5-10) 11-14

Several years ago Ellen visited her husband while he was serving a military tour in Turkey. She viewed her trip as an opportunity to visit another country and become immersed in a different culture. They traveled for a few days and spent the night before Easter in a mountain village

with quaint cobble streets.

Early on Easter morning Ellen and her husband walked through the village. They heard the metal wheels of horse-drawn wagons on the cobble stones. They saw people walking to the center of the village to draw water from a common well.

As they walked Ellen reflected on the day. There were no choral hallelujahs, no sunrise service, no lilies, no churches filled with people. She thought the first Easter might have been like this — life as usual. Only a few people were privileged to know that what happened on the first Easter.

Ellen prayed for God to show her why she was drawn to this village far from home on Easter. "God blessed me with a simple truth," she explains. "The greatest miracle of Easter was that Jesus died and rose again, bringing hope to all people." In that setting God removed all the Easter "trappings," which strengthened her faith and drew her closer.

Our lesson from Exodus tells of the first Passover when God would save his people. Years later God would save the people again by sending Jesus who would suffer and die on our behalf. As we reflect on this night may we be drawn closer to our Lord Jesus.

Tim S.

Exodus 12:1-4 (5-10) 11-14

One of the most famous paintings in the world is Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the Lord's Supper. When he was 43 years old, he was asked by the Duke of Milan to paint it. Giving meticulous care to details, he spent three years painting. He painted the disciples in groups of three, six on each side of Jesus. When it was completed, he invited a respected friend to give his opinion of the painting. Something like the following conversation took place: "It's wonderful," exclaimed the friend. "I cannot divert my eyes from the splendid chalice."

Immediately, Leonardo took a brush and blotted out the chalice and exclaimed, "Nothing shall distract from the figure of Christ!" And so today in this painting the chalice is missing completely.

Emphasis Archives

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

How many of you have heard something so many times that you forget what the words mean? Maybe it's a song or an old cliché phrase. To those who are a part of a

congregation that uses the words of institution as part of the communion liturgy, today's reading from 1 Corinthians falls into that category of repetitive sayings. "On the night in which he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took the bread, and when he had given thanks...." Many Bible verses, especially those used in songs or liturgy, become old hat after a few dozen times hearing them. We need to take a step back and listen again. Sometimes these "old hat" verses have plenty of new life still inside — if we will just take the time to listen.

Leah T.

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

The communion cup and the bread of life are given to us as a sacrament of the miracle of life. God wants to invest meaning into our lives and the elements are a reminder to us.

Archbishop Trent said that in 1690, an agave plant was planted in the gardens of Hampton Court Palace by Queen Mary. The last decade of the seventeenth century passed, but the plant gave no sign of flowering. The whole of the eighteenth century passed and still there were no buds appeared. Eighty-eight years of the nineteenth century passed, and that plant never bloomed; but, in 1889, the venerable plant finally burst forth into full blossom.

Generations of people might have watched that plant and written books describing the agave as a never-blooming plant. Trench writes, "They would have been wrong. The blossoming potency was there, latent, slumbering, deeply hidden in its core. It was not a miracle, but a long delayed fulfillment of the law of its being, when it burst into blossom." The agave is today called, "The Century Plant" and is now widely cultivated for its beauty.

The Archbishop noted that the miracle of life is that God offers salvation to all. God offers his very self to us! Christ's death on the cross is to give us life. We need to blossom ... we need to open and burst forth into spiritual blossom! The communion experience is a reminder of that beautiful miracle.

Derl K.

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Between April 3, 1860, and November 21, 1861, the Pony Express delivered mail between Saint Joseph, Missouri, and San Francisco. The Express was established in order to deliver mail faster and more

securely than the stagecoach system.

Pony Express stations were placed approximately ten miles apart, or the maximum distance that a horse could run at full speed. At each station, riders would get a fresh horse, water, and food. Riders were not allowed to weigh more than 125 pounds. Riders were changed every seventy to 100 miles.

The mail was carried in pouches called mochilas, which had pockets on each corner. The pockets were called cantinas. The mail was put into the cantinas and padlocked for security. The mochila was then thrown over the saddle and was held in place by the weight of the rider. The mochila could carry as much as 20 pounds of mail.

The first rider left Saint Joseph on April 3 and the mail was delivered in San Francisco on April 13, a trek of some 2,000 miles in just ten days!

Paul received an important message about Holy Communion from the Lord. He, too, took great pains to faithfully deliver it to the congregation at Corinth and through them to all Christianity.

Emphasis Archives

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

We live in a society that's obsessively concerned with rights. Our nation is founded on a "Bill of Rights." Our Declaration of Independence talks of "inalienable rights ... to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." We have a proud tradition of democracy in our country, but it's not without its dark side.

It's often said that we Americans are the most "litigious" people in the world. That means we love to litigate — to take one another to court, to claim our rights. Because of this love of litigation, two thirds of all the lawyers in the world practice in the United States of America.

At the Last Supper, Jesus completely renounces his rights. He takes the lowliest role in the place, as he takes up the basin.

Bethany S.

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

"For I received what I passed on to you." Thus reads the apostle Paul's familiar Last Supper introduction. Paul reviewed bread and cup symbolism not simply to bring to the Corinthians' minds that the bread represented Jesus' body and the cup his blood. Those details were elementary (ABCs) of

faith. All first-century Christians knew about that Passover meal Jesus shared with the twelve. All the gospels related those facts, and disciples probably retold them weekly, if not daily.

The fact that Paul began the section with the word "For" makes us take notice. Also key: Paul's reminder that it was on the "night he was betrayed" Jesus instituted the Supper.

Recall that Paul began chapter 11 by excoriating the Corinthians for their divisions at Communion services, namely their lack of concern for hungry brothers and sisters. I think he used Jesus' selfless example to teach the Corinthians this: If Jesus could think of others on the night he was betrayed — the day before he knew he would die — his followers should be thinking of others and not just themselves at communion time.

The Lord meant us to share in a love feast. If we despise the woman across the aisle from us and disdain the brother two pews ahead of us, the Lord might not be communing with us regardless of whether we can envision Jesus' body and blood.

Emphasis Archives

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

One Sunday morning as Mel and his family were on their way to church he spotted someone lying facedown on the side of the road. The man had no shirt or shoes and obviously was injured. Mel slowed down, but since they were already running late, they decided not to stop but continue on their way to church. As Mel drove he tried to convince himself that he did the right thing by not stopping, that he had to be concerned for his family's safety, that he was late. Surely, he thought, another car would stop and assist this man on the side of the road.

He kept looking in his rearview mirror and noticed that no one had stopped. In his mind he kept going over all of his excuses for why he should not stop. Finally, he realized that they were just excuses, turned the car around, and drove back to help the man. "I was concerned, anxious, and afraid," Mel reflects, however, he also knew that stopping was the right thing to do. Certainly, Jesus would stop to help someone in need.

On what we call Maundy Thursday Jesus shared a meal with his disciples. He longed to spend quality time with his friends know-

ing what would happen to him in the next hours. Before the night was over Jesus gave his followers and us a new commandment to love one another. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples," Jesus taught, "if you have love for one another." May each of us have that love for all people and may that love motivate us into action.

Tim S.

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

A policy recently implemented in my home state requires people convicted of driving under the influence of alcohol to put special license plates on their vehicles. These ugly yellow and red license plates let everyone on the road know, "I made the mistake of driving drunk." For a certain period of time, these people are labeled.

Jesus said that "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (v. 35). Our love for others should label us just as much as that license plate would. The question is, Do our actions show that we are Jesus' disciples?

Craig K.

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Elton Trueblood used to tell the story that a pastor once preached on the subject of service. It was a powerful sermon and at the end of his words he invited all those who were willing to commit themselves to serving the cause of Christ in some particular way to come forward and stand with him at the altar. To his amazement, 100 people came forward to the front of the church. The pastor's face went pale and a man standing near heard him whisper, "Oh, God, how can I possibly use 100 ushers?" Jesus' deeds and words in that upper room was not a call to church work but the work of the church. The church needs few ushers. The church does need someone with a basin and a towel. We are still to wash one another's feet — that's quite a difference from handing out a bulletin. What would it mean for you to take a towel and a basin where you are?

Once I asked my son what he wanted to be when he grew up. He said, "I want to be a garbage man!" I was caught off guard. "A garbage man?" I said. "Yes, I want to clean up the world." Maundy Thursday calls us all to be garbage men. We have been called to clean up the world. That's what the basin, the water, and the towel were all about.

Emphasis Archives

CHARTING

THE COURSE

Why did Jesus have to die?

While Don Richardson was a student at Prairie Bible Institute in the 1950s his heart burned in anticipation of bringing the good news about Jesus to an unreached tribe. He and Carol found their prayers answered in 1962 as they sailed out of Vancouver harbor toward Netherlands New Guinea. Before long they were deposited by missionary plane among the Sawi people, a group of tribes living in the trees of the interior rain forest.

The jungle floor was too damp for permanent dwellings, so the Sawi helped Don and Carol, and their infant son, Stephen, build a tree house in their neighborhood. Carol learned the ways of the Sawi women while Don spent time with the men, attempting to understand their language and reduce it to writing. Afternoons would find the Sawi males in one of their treetop workrooms, buzzing in conversation while they mended nets and hunting equipment, and swapped stories of fish and boars.

It was in this setting that Don took his first furtive steps toward speaking the Sawi language and reciting stories from the gospels. Most of the time the others ignored him, caught up in their own manly concerns. So the months progressed, with little Stephen becoming a Sawi child, Carol adapting meals to local produce, and Don attempting to get the message of the Bible into a form the Sawi could understand.

One day everything changed. Don was moving along in the gospel story to the last weeks of Jesus' life. As he related the tales about Jesus heading toward Jerusalem and the conspiracies that were swirling about him, the Sawi men began to listen. At first it was only that their conversations with one another died down, while their hands continued in busywork with their hunting and fishing tools. But then even this work ceased, and every eye was fixed on Don. He happened to be talking about Judas' secret meetings with the religious leaders, and the betrayal that ensued.

Suddenly there was a murmur of approval and the delighted smiles of those who seemed to know this story. Don asked his translating helper what was going on. The reply chilled him to the bone, even in the heat of the tropics.

The Sawi, he was told, prided themselves for their hunting and fishing prowess. There was an even greater expression of manhood. They called it "Fattening the Pig for the Slaughter." It happened when one young man chose to target another young man in this or a neighboring clan, and built a strong web of friendship. The two would hunt together and fish together and roam the forests together and eat together and laugh and talk together. They became best buddies. Then, when the relationship was secure, the initiator of the friendship would invite his comrade over to his mother's home for a grand meal. During the middle of the feast, when laughter was the language of the hour, and back-slapping good humor seasoned the supper, the first young man would suddenly pull out a long knife, brandish it with delight before the other's face, and when looks of dawning horror increasingly webbed out from the betrayed's eyes, plunge it through his "friend's" chest, piercing his heart.

The mother would come quickly with freshly baked bread that the traitor touched to his dead comrade's genitals before eating it. Then mother and son would open the skull of the victim, scoop out his brains, and consume these as well.

The deadly project was complete: one brave young Sawi warrior had displayed his cunning prowess and then had ingested all the power of his target. He became a greater man by taking into himself the strength and energy of his betrayed friend.

Don was dumbstruck! How could he communicate the story of Jesus and the love of God to these people if they viewed Judas, the betrayer, as the hero of the tale?! Just as important, what was on the tribal menu for supper tonight? Were the Richardsons the next victims of "Fattening the Pig for the Slaughter"? Don slipped out of the men's lodge a wary and troubled man.

The story has a wonderful ending, that will come at the conclusion of this article. But the central issue for Don and Carol Richardson is one that is key to all that Christians talk about and "celebrate" this week and this day: Why did Jesus have to die? Is his demise at a young age a symbol of weakness rather than strength? Is Christianity a religion of wimps who pride themselves in following the loser rather than the winner? How do you preach Christ on another Good Friday in a world that thrives on war, one-up-manship, devious politics, profits at all costs, and survival of the fittest in a cosmic game where the rules are heralded every Thursday evening: "Outwit, Outlast, Outplay!"?

Isaiah 52:13—53:12

Three major families of atonement theory have been proposed, over the centuries, to answer such questions. The first is linked to Isaiah's prophetic impressions in today's passage. God has been wronged. God's people have gone the way of wickedness and wastrels. The world is imbalanced, and the Creator isolated from the people who are to him like loved but wayward children.

How will things be made right? Who will bring restoration and renewal and reconciliation? According to the Word of the Lord through Isaiah, it will happen when "my servant" enters the picture and rewrites history. It is not clear exactly what the Suffering Servant will do, but the outcome is certain. After what appears to be a lackluster residential sojourn, those around the servant will attack him and cause him pain and kill him cruelly. But when all of that has happened, there will be a new peace between God and humanity, and the former times of alienation will be gone.

Anselm interpreted this as Jesus' mission into our world to defend the honor of the Father. Because of the arrogance of spreading sin and the hubris of human communities that took the image of God, which they possessed for rebellious license, the creator had been shuttered away from the creation, and Yahweh was forgotten except as a curse word.

But along came Jesus. Like one who still remembers the true nature of reality, and appearing in the guise of a humble but faithful servant, Jesus takes up the thankless chivalric duty to restore the honor of the king of the castle, the lord of the estate. The Father might have been ready to wipe out the whole of humanity, just as Yahweh had threatened to Moses in Exodus 33, but then he saw the face of the Suffering Servant, and realized that one still held him in honor. The faithful obedience of the one mitigated the divine wrath of God for the many, and life on planet earth was restored and balanced.

Calvin took Anselm ideas a step further, paying close attention to the forensic language of Paul in Romans and Galatians. It was not merely God's honor that had been violated, he said, but the righteousness of God's justice. We humans were not just rebellious clods; we had become downright guilty lawbreakers. Before the court of heaven none could stand with either pride or dignity. The eternal codes of propriety accused every person of failure, transgression, and fault.

Enter Jesus. Jesus comes as the lawyer for the accused. He does not pretend we are innocent, but openly marks our guilt. Yet when the holy sentence is passed, and capital punishment is ascribed against us, Jesus shows the extent to which he will advocate on our behalf. He himself steps into the penalty box, he himself climbs up to the gallows, he himself is strapped into the electric chair, he himself receives our toxic chemical cocktail, and dies our death for us. There is good news about resurrection to come on Easter morning, of course, just as Isaiah hints at in the closing notes of his lament. But on Good Friday, the good news is that of escape and substitution.

Hebrews 10:16-25

A second family of atonement theories connects well with the book of Hebrews. It is not the Creator/Father who needs to take note of Jesus in his sufferings, but we humans. We have forgotten who we are. It may well be that we have offended God, but God is big enough to be able to handle it. What is more important is that we have offended ourselves. We have lost touch with our place in the house of God. We need a high priest who can help us find our way back home.

Jesus does this in a variety of ways. Irenaeus thought that Jesus had to be at least fifty years old when he died, because the point of Jesus' coming to earth was to go through all the stages of human life (fifty was certainly old age at the time!) in order to show us how to live and die correctly. We had lost our way. Only when we saw Jesus living our lives out of grace and love and courage, and even dying well, would we be able to do the same. He called Jesus' work "recapitulation," a replaying of human identity done right. What we observe most of Jesus on this Good Friday is his ability to die with courage and dignity, just as he had lived. When we see Jesus we buck up, get our acts together, and recover the best of our humanity.

Later theologians would further emphasize that exemplary character of Jesus' life and death. Abelard saw in Jesus' death the power of moral influence. We have grown complacent in our degradation, according to Abelard. Jesus comes among us and all we can see is his goody-goody character, and we despise him for it. We taunt him, trying to make him become a normal sinner like the rest of us. We tease him as if he were sub-human. When he refuses to play our dirty games we get angry with him, and plot to get rid of him, and ultimately throw him up on a cross in despicable shame. Only when the dastardly deed is done, it is not he but we who are suddenly cut to the heart. We hear his words from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!" and we are embarrassed beyond loss of face. We see in his reflection what we have become, and come to know the ugliness of ourselves for the first time. His morality pierces our immorality and we must turn away. Like the dirty, old man in one of O. Henry's stories, the one who sees by lamplight the beautiful woman he once called friend, but lost because of the blackness of his own rotten character, and suddenly remembers what he could have been if he had stayed with her instead of becoming his awful self, we turn with him down a dark alley and bang our heads against a wall and cry out, "Oh God, what have I become?!" Still, in Jesus' love we find ourselves anew for the first time.

Schleiermacher and Ritchl would take up the same sermon generations later, preaching a morality in Jesus that becomes an example for us. Jesus' death was not a failure, but the ultimate testimony of love. Did not Jesus himself declare it? "Greater love has no one than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends!" Here is Jesus on the cross, condemned by the political powers of the day for combating power with love. While all of his troupe could have been sentenced and killed, Jesus was willing to stand alone, allowing the others to scurry off to save their skins. When they later realized what Jesus had done,

they gained new courage to be like Jesus as well, and formed a socially transforming movement that has since spanned the globe. “Be like Jesus!” they declare.

This is the kind of courage that comes in the final paragraph of our New Testament passage today. See what Jesus did, and then live and die in similar fashion, for the good of the world.

John 18:1—19:42

There is also a third approach to atonement theory, and our gospel reading connects with it. For John, God’s good world has been plunged into darkness by the viral effects of sin. Creation’s brightness has been swallowed up by the shades of evil. Those who were made in the image of God have become ruined, warped, and distorted. It is the scene of Mordred in Tolkien’s Middle Earth, where everything once righteous and holy has become twisted, perverted, distressed, and rotten.

All power appears to be in the hands of the Evil One, the “Father of Lies” as Jesus terms him in John 8:42-47. No relief from the shadows seems possible (note the place from which Nicodemus emerges in chapter 3 and the arena to which Judas exits in chapter 13) until Jesus calmly steps into the chasm manufactured by iniquity and it closes around him.

Origen called it a ransom to the devil. Satan, he said, was the greatest fisherman of all times, snagging every flippin’ creature from the waters of this world. When his boat was filled to the limit, he headed for shore and a ravenous meal of consumption that would send us to his infernal bowels forever. Like any good fisherman, the devil snaked a troll line into the boat’s wake on the journey back to harbor. Suddenly the reel whizzed out in a furious tug. A giant fish had gone for the devil’s spinning lure!

Satan stopped rowing and fought the line. The fish at the other end was huge beyond belief. After playing it with practiced dexterity, the devil finally saw the fish near the gunwales. It was enormous! More than that, it was the creator’s own first creation! It was the Son of God!

Now the devil was in a dilemma. He did not have room for the big fish in his boat. He could keep either his current catch or toss it aside and claim the prize of the day, but he couldn’t do both. Like any great fisherman, he chose the record breaker. Shoveling the little fish out of the boat, he managed to tease, taunt, and gaff the big one over the edge, and get it to flop heavily onto the deck. His catch would be the news of heaven and earth!

As he wrestled his over-committed craft toward the docks, the trophy fish he prized gave a sudden wallop of its mighty tail, capsizing the boat and escaping into the water. In an instant the devil was left with nothing.

So, said Origen, is the story of Good Friday, when Satan, the prince of the powers of this age, played his biggest hand, trading all of wicked humankind for the big prize of God’s own Son, and lost everything in the bargain. Why did Jesus have to die? Because it was the only way to get the rest of us free.

There is much of this in John’s telling of Jesus’ death. Everyone evil wants a piece of the action. Still, Jesus himself is

in charge of his own existence. On Easter morning, as we shall soon see, the big fish gets away, as do all of us who swim after him in the waters of baptism.

Application

The story of Jesus’ horrible death is as familiar as it is enigmatic. We know that Jesus died, and did so in a cruelly painful way, but the why of it still remains fuzzy. Did Jesus have to satisfy God’s honor or justice? Yes, that is indeed a message of the New Testament. Was his death an example to us, and an act of moral persuasion? Certainly, for Jesus’ own words testified to that. Were the evil powers that have locked their claws into this good creation of God weakened and perhaps ultimately destroyed in Jesus’ infamous demise? That, too, is an element of the tale. But all are mixed together in ways that refute easy dissection or quick categorization.

Don and Carol Richardson survived their Sawi sojourn and even succeeded in bringing the gospel to these people. The story begun above took a later strange turn. Due to increasing scarcity, the Sawi people needed to range further in hunting and fishing. This, in turn, caused them to run into conflict with other area tribes and peoples. Soon there were skirmishes and fights and all-out wars. People returned to Sawi homes bloodied, battered, or missing limbs. Sometimes they failed to return at all, claimed by assassins’ wounds and swallowed up by the putrefying womb of the jungle.

It was then that the men began to talk openly about the possible need for a “Peace Child.” Intrigued, Don asked what they meant by that term.

Sometimes, they said, when war got too pronounced and murderous, when tribes were in danger of killing one another off, when brutality bested their will to live, one of the chiefs might grab the youngest newborn male baby from its mother’s arms, and run swiftly, despite the woman’s wailing, across the no-man’s-land between the tribes. Reaching the first enemy village, he would thrust the baby into the arms of a young woman.

All knew what this meant. A son from one child was now the possession of the other tribe. Both tribes had a stake in the child’s future, and all warfare would cease for as long as that child lives. The “Peace Child” reconciled the foes.

Interest mounting, Don asked a further question. What would happen, he queried, if someone should kill the “Peace Child”? Horrified, the group shook their heads aghast. No one would ever think to do such a dastardly deed. It was beyond belief!

Hmmmm... thought Don. Then he proceeded. “Let me tell you a story...” he said. He related a tale of a time when the tribes of heaven and earth were at war with one another. He told of the chief of heaven bringing his own Son across the no-man’s-land into our tribe as a “Peace Child.” He explained how one day someone had instigated the murder of that “Peace Child.” When the horrified Sawi warriors begged him about what could be done to erase this monumental human blunder, Don preached Christ and grace and the forgiving love of God.

Alternative Application

John 18:1—19:42. The gospel story needs to be read today, even if it is not preached. But if it is preached, and the approach above is taken, one of the greatest endings to the message would be a powerful recital of the dark night in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* in which Aslan is slain in the place of Edmund, but the magic from before time prevents the White Witch and her evil brood from winning the day. Declare the victory of Aslan with all the splendor of great drama.

Preaching The Psalm

Psalm 22

This psalm is loaded. It's freighted with pathos and power. It sets the teeth on edge and opens wide the eyes of those who are at ease with their faith. These are the words that Jesus cries from the cross. They are the words, if not the sentiment of many down the centuries who have faced the torturers rack or the scourge of war. They are the utterance of thousands who have felt abandoned by God in their deepest hour of need. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

It's no secret to anyone that God's presence can sometimes feel elusive. If Jesus can feel abandoned by God, then we're in good company when we look around in our pain and see no evidence of God's help on the horizon.

The question seems to ask itself. What do we do when it

seems God has taken a powder? Where are we to turn when it seems like God has blown us off like some faithless date at a frat party? We could follow the example set here in this psalm and blame ourselves. "But I am a worm, and not human..." (v. 6). Of course God won't be there for me because I am so woefully inadequate, so below average, so completely below God's standards. This is predictable and perhaps even part of our process as it is for this psalmist.

Once the drama has eased and the self-doubt and recrimination fade away, faith emerges. From the ashes of our own misery comes the sterling power of a faith that will not quit. Even though we may "lay in the dust of death" (v. 15), a beautiful stubbornness wells up from within. Though biting dogs and evil-doers encircle (v. 16) the beleaguered psalmist, a powerful persistence stands out in the fray.

This is the core of who we are in faith. It's easy to stand by God when the going is good. Singing praises and heading to church on Sundays is no big thing when we have a job and our family is healthy. But when we get laid off and lose our health insurance; when we learn in that a child is seriously ill and we have no money to pay for the doctor; when the bank is about to take our home; then praising God is a little tougher.

Yet in all of this, we discover that it is into our suffering that God comes! Even as we wonder where God has gone, we look up to see a shower of grace pouring down upon us. God has not forsaken us after all. Indeed, God is evermore presence in the midst of suffering and need. And each one will yet be able to rise up and proclaim God's deliverance to a generation yet unborn (v. 31).

Good Friday Worship

Gospel: John 18:1--19:42

Theme: Woman, Here Is Your Son

Call to Worship

(words taken from the cross, John 19:26-28, 30)

Woman, here is your son. (*Silence*)

Here is your mother. (*Silence*)

I am thirsty. (*Silence*)

It is finished. (*Silence*)

Hymns

When I Survey The Wondrous Cross
Alas, And Did My Savior Bleed
O Sacred Head, Now Wounded

Collect

Lord Jesus in your name we seek to finish your work from the cross. Our cup of cold water is reserved for the suffering. We take into our family those who face abandonment. We accept those you have sent into our midst as next of kin. We will do for others what we cannot, what we did not, what we chose not, to do for you. Is it too late? We pray it is not. Amen.

Prayer of Confession

All: Now it was the day of preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. Pilate said to God's people, "Here is your King!"

All: And God's people cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!"

One: Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your king?"

All: Our religious leaders answered, "We have no king but the emperor."

One: Then we handed Jesus over to be crucified.

All: (*Silence*)

Excerpted from *Lectionary Worship Aids* by Frank Ramirez, [CSS Publishing Co., Inc.: Lima, Ohio]

Illustrations

Isaiah 52:13—53:12

“Only the willingness to suffer conquerors suffering,” wrote David J. Bosch. Several centuries before Jesus’ entrance into the world, Isaiah foretold his suffering and the glory of the servant as he would come and take away the sins of the world.

John Stott said that few men of the past century have understood the inevitability of suffering than clergyman Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Standing in defiance of the Nazi regime, he preached the Christian faith. He was threatened on many occasions until finally the Nazis put him into the Flossenburg concentration camp where he was separated from his family, interrogated endlessly, and tortured. Still he kept his faith and would not waver. Finally on direct order of Heinrich Himmler in April 1945, only a few days before Flossenburg was liberated, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed. Stott writes, “Suffering, then, is the badge of true discipleship. The disciple is not above his master. Following Christ means *passio passive* suffering because we have to suffer ... Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering of Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer.” We do not invite suffering, but if suffering comes, we must be willing to accept it like those who have gone before us and like our ultimate example ... Jesus.

Derl K.

Isaiah 52:13—53:12

Many, many years ago, the Welsh practiced a ritual called sin-eating. When someone died, a “sin-eater” was called to the place of death. Food and drink were passed over the body of the deceased, and the food and drink were then consumed by the sin eater. With this food and drink, the sin eater supposedly took on the sins of the deceased, allowing the deceased to rest peacefully in death. The sin eater, on the other hand, was paid six pence for his services. The sin eater was usually a social outcast. In our reading today, Isaiah gives us a view of Jesus as a sin eater: a broken, beaten, burdened, hardened traveler, carrier of the sins of all.

Leah T.

Isaiah 52:13—53:12

Dorothee Soelle has remarked that “people can be dead for forty years even though they bring home a salary, look stylish, and can manage nice vacation trips.” These are the people who love their lives so much they have already lost them.

Jesus teaches that the beginning of our resurrection is the day we die to that kind of life. When he calls us to the journey of faith, he bids us, in the oft-quoted words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to “come and die.” This is not as morbid as it might sound. Again, listen to the words of Dorothee Soelle:

I used to understand the story of Jesus’ crucifixion as the terrible, tragic end of a great idealistic person.... Today I think a bit differently, because I have learned much from the martyrs of our century. Martin Luther King Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ita Ford, Oscar Romero, Maximilian Kolbe, Steve Biko ... to name only a few. When I read of their deaths, I find pieces of life, of ongoing, indestructible life. I see in the dead ones and in their dying something that transcends the tragedy.

Emphasis Archives

Isaiah 52:13—53:12

Jim Caviezel describes his part in the popular and controversial movie, *The Passion of the Christ* as the role of a lifetime. The movie proved to be difficult to film in less than ideal shooting situations. Jim also struggled with learning Aramaic, Latin, and Old Hebrew. There was also the physical anguish of dealing with wind and freezing temperatures. He injured his shoulder, the crown of thorns did not quite fit right, so the crew tightened it, which caused headaches.

At times, Jim claims, the pain was unbearable. “I don’t know how I made it but it forced me to go into the arms of God and forced me to pray in the deepest places from my heart.”

Playing the part of Jesus changed Jim in a positive way strengthening his faith. “I had to carry this cross that was killing me and by the end of the day it felt like 600 pounds,” he says. To help prepare for each day, Jim would worship, as he explains, “We went to the mass every day. I took Eucharist every day I got into my role, so during the Last Supper scenes that were

happening, we were going through that every day in the mass.”

On this Good Friday we remember all that our Lord and Savior Jesus endured; the pain he experienced as he walked through the streets of Jerusalem carrying the cross. We remember the rejection he suffered from his closest associates and the evil intention of the religious officials. Jesus did all this and more for each and every one of us.

Emphasis Archives

Hebrews 10:16-25

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Hugh Latimer (1485-1555), wrote this about good deeds: “We must first be made good before we can do good; we must first be made just, before our works can please God.” When we are justified by faith in Christ, then come good works.

Emphasis Archives

Hebrews 10:16-25

Duane was living out his dream — working for a large company earning a good salary. His parents were proud of his accomplishments. He only worked a couple of months before he discovered that his company was involved in an illegal activity. Duane was not in any way involved in the crime. He debated what he should do — should he report the illegal activity to the authorities or remain silent continuing to earn a good salary? What would you do?

Duane decided that the best thing would be to speak with the authorities, risking his job. He could not remain silent any longer. As a result he lost his job. The company he worked for was brought to justice with widespread reform taking place. Duane did the right thing, yet there was a cost involved.

On Good Friday we realize the cost that Jesus paid on our behalf. Jesus did not remain silent at the many injustices he saw. Jesus was not afraid to confront the religious authorities either. Over and over he did the right thing — and he was killed. As we know that was not the end of the story. God would raise Jesus to new life on Easter Sunday.

The author of Hebrews claims, “since we have a great priest over the house of God” we are able to live out our faith, “in full assurance of faith.”

Tim S.

Hebrews 10:16-25

Security is a major issue for everyone, from government institutions to major corporations to homeowners. Gone are the days of simple locks and keys; security is now rising from complicated computer algorithms to biometrics, where even your iris and voice pattern can be part of your security system.

The author of Hebrews reminds us today that we now have access to the holy places of God, the Holy of Holies, and we now have access to what was once inaccessible through the shed blood of Jesus on the cross.

Craig K.

Hebrews 10:16-25

We cannot escape the power of the cross on this special day. The old hymn has it right, “In the cross of Christ I glory, Tow’ring o’er the wrecks of time....” The cross of Jesus endures. But today’s text reminds us of the implications of the veil of the temple rent from top to bottom and the accessibility that God’s love opens to all. There is a practical side to Good Friday. If the cross is the power of God unto salvation, from that central truth flows many realistic alternatives. The writer of Hebrews enumerates some of these: We are to hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering; we are to help one another with love and good deeds, we are to meet together in worship, and we are to encourage one another.

Someone has left us with a poem-question:

*A dark sky
Two beams of wood
Why do they call?
This Friday good?*

Not only do we find salvation in that cross but are driven from that hillside out into the world Christ loved and Christ died for. If we understand this cross at all, the old hymn is more than a hymn. “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

Emphasis Archives

John 18:1—19:42

An effective novelist or screenwriter knows that pacing is important in a story. To increase the pace, a writer will write a series of short scenes, switching between

characters frequently to ratchet up the tension and energy of the story. The technique of contrasting two story lines is called juxtaposition. We see juxtaposition all the time, especially in movies. Think of the movie *Titanic*, which juxtaposes the subdued elegance of first-class passengers with the rowdy parties in the dirty steerage class. This technique not only increases the pace by switching scenes, but can also create suspense by leaving the audience hanging until the scene switches back.

Leah T.

John 18:1—19:42

Christ died that he might occupy the hearts of people. I heard a minister tell about a Sunday morning in Baltimore as people were driving into the church parking lot that they heard a snapping, groaning, popping, tearing, grinding sound. Without warning a telephone pole snapped and the upper portion fell to the street leaving about half of it standing. A crowd gathered, wondering what could have caused that pole to snap. Someone began to climb the stump to investigate. When he reached the top he found that right where the pole had broken was a scooped-out place where a pair of woodpeckers had cut out their nest, and there in the nest was a poor little woodpecker frightened half to death.

Unobserved from the world outside, the woodpeckers had dug their way into the heart of the great, strong telephone pole stroke after stroke. Finally their constant pecking sapped the pole’s strength and it snapped.

Sometimes people come crashing down. Their outer lives have seemed strong and round and respectable. The whole world admires them; but after a while their “secret” sin has eaten into their very heart of strength and sapped their spiritual energy causing them to fall.

Christ came to reside in our hearts and to keep us completely holy, but only if we don’t allow the birds to hollow out our hearts!

Derl K.

John 18:1—19:42

It can be hard for us, today, to wrap our minds around the theological idea known as “the atonement.” When Saint Patrick sought to explain it in fifth-century Ireland, however, he discovered that his preaching fell on fertile ground.

That was because, in Ireland at that time, everyone had an “honor price.” It was the price you had to pay if you insulted or dishonored someone. A chieftain had an honor price of thirty cows, while an ordinary citizen might be worth just one. Slaves — being not really people, in the eyes of that culture — had no honor price at all.

When Patrick introduced the thought that God’s honor had been besmirched by centuries of human sin, the Irish readily understood. If a chieftain’s honor is worth thirty cows, then how much more vast and great must be the honor price of God!

Who could pay it? No one. God, in infinite mercy, had to arrange that the honor price be paid, by sending God’s own Son, Jesus, to die on the cross.

Emphasis Archives

John 18:1—19:42

While crawling into bed one night, I got bashed with a right hook. Stars twinkled. My head spun. My left ear felt as though chomped by Mike Tyson.

Was my wife upset with me? No, we’ve never traded punches. I’d probably lose if we did. This happened before I met my wife. I was twelve that summer, and staying with a family in a rotting shanty while we picked hops to earn school money near Donald, Oregon. The mother cooked meals on a wood stove. In those crude quarters, I bunked with the family’s thirteen-year-old son, Mark.

Why did Mark (not his real name) slug me? As a prank, I had hidden Mark’s shoes in the stove’s oven, forgetting about them until the pungent smells of burning leather and rubber drove us from the cabin.

Mark’s mother reacted good-naturedly. Mark said little. He evidently decided his revenge then went to bed early. Later, crawling to my pillow, I took that round-house punch. Mark quickly asked what happened, and said he’d been asleep. I doubted him. I haven’t seen him or heard from the family in decades. Did that sulking fury complicate his life? To paraphrase what Jesus said to the sword-bearing Peter: “All who live by head-bashing will die by head-bashing” (Matthew 26:52). That principle’s as sure as gravity. I pray that Mark found calmness and peace. As for me I’ve hidden no more shoes in ovens, but I still owe Mark a new pair. Put your sword away.

Emphasis Archives

CHARTING

THE COURSE

Love conquers death

My mentor in the ministry used to say, “If you can’t preach on Easter, you just can’t preach!” The gospel accounts of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ is the central focus of the Christian faith. This is not just the story of Easter; it is the essence of Christianity. The resurrection and ascension narrative is what sets Christianity apart from all other religions. Only the grave of Jesus was empty. Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, no other religion makes such a claim for their founder. Herein lies our hope.

I heard a story once about a cemetery in Georgia for African Americans. There was one white person buried here. This man’s mother had died when he was still a baby. His father hired a black woman named Mandy to take care of his son. This woman was a fine Christian lady who loved the child like her own. Through the years this loving surrogate mother would come into the child’s room and wake him with the same words, “Wake up. God’s mornin’ is come.” Even when he would come home from college for brief visits she would still wake him in the same way.

Years later, after he had become a successful statesman, word came that Mandy had died. He set out immediately to attend her funeral. Standing by her grave in this cemetery he indicated to a friend that he wanted to be buried beside this kind, loving woman who behaved in every way like his real mother. “I’d like to think,” he said, “that on that Resurrection Day she would say to me again, ‘Wakeup, my boy, God’s mornin’ is come!’ ”

Acts 10:34-43

We find in this pericope a brief summation of the essential elements of the gospel. Luke records a speech Peter made to Cornelius and his friends after having experienced a vision in which God showed him “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:15). Through his vision and his visit with Cornelius Peter had come to understand that God intended the gospel to be proclaimed to the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

This passage is an important part of Luke’s major theme: Salvation through Jesus Christ is intended for *all* the world.

Peter begins his speech by indicating that he now comprehends this important truth. “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” God’s love is limitless, his mercy is immeasurable, his grace is unending, and his gift of salvation is offered to all who will serve him as Lord and “does what is right.” There is nothing here to support the idea that certain people are chosen by God to be saved. Christ died for all: he is Lord of all (v. 36). Luke repeatedly uses the word “all.” “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (v. 43). Certain individuals or groups of people consider themselves God’s “elect” and regard those outside their chosen group to be outside God’s grace. But Peter insists that only God has the right to be the judge of the “living and the dead” (v. 42).

Peter’s brief summation of the gospel includes the reminder that Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit to preach and teach throughout Judea. He “went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil.” Jesus’ healing ministry was evidence that “God was with him” (v. 38). Paul insists in 2 Corinthians 5:19 that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” For Luke the healing ministry of Jesus could not be divorced from the preaching ministry of Jesus. Nor could either be disengaged from the saving work of Christ. As we have already seen Luke focused on the needs of all people, especially the sick and the poor. Luke recorded here only a brief outline of Peter’s actual speech. No doubt he offered numerous examples of Jesus work of healing and preaching.

Peter reminded Cornelius that Jesus had been put to death on the cross of Calvary but God “raised him on the third day.” Few truths are more central to the gospel message of Christianity than the death of Jesus. Perhaps the best known scripture verse is John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

The only thing more central to the Christian faith than the death of Jesus is his resurrection. The fact that God raised him from the dead was confirmed by his appearances to certain chosen witnesses. Jesus’ disciples, including you and me, are called to be witnesses of the resurrection. We were not there when Peter and the others met and encountered the resurrected

Jesus. But Jesus still comes to us. We should always be willing to testify to what God is doing in our lives. First Peter 3:15b states, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” Our hope comes from our knowledge of the resurrection.

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

The ancient city of Corinth was a bustling cosmopolitan metropolis made up of a very diverse population. It was a strategic city for Paul who saw its location and its role in international maritime trade as an opportunity to spread the gospel throughout the world. This made it imperative that the church at Corinth pass on an untarnished gospel free from major moral failures and doctrinal heresies.

Given its Greek culture and its international composition it is perhaps no surprise that some in the church at Corinth had difficulty accepting the concept of bodily resurrection. Today’s epistolary text responds to this issue introduced at the beginning of the chapter. This immediate question being addressed is offered in verse twelve. “Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?” Apparently, some of the Corinthians believed Jesus was raised from the dead but had difficulty believing that this meant all Christians would be raised from the dead.

Paul argues that if there is no resurrection for us there is no resurrection for Jesus. And if there was no resurrection for Jesus our faith is in vain (v. 14). Paul insists that we must believe in the resurrection for Jesus and for ourselves or the Christian faith is useless and “we are of all people most to be pitied” (v. 19).

The resurrection is a reminder that in Jesus Christ God overcame evil. Paul reminds us here that our hope of resurrection also means that good still ultimately overcomes evil and love conquers hate and indifference.

Paul also used an interesting Old Testament concept, that of *firstfruits*. Moses was to instruct the people of Israel to bring the first harvested to God as an offering (Leviticus 23:10). These gifts to God were an offering of thanksgiving in expectation of the full harvest which was to come. Paul seems to be suggesting that the resurrection of Jesus was the “first harvest,” which symbolized the many resurrections to come. The resurrection of God’s people is the “full harvest.”

John 20:1-18

As with numerous other stories John’s version of the crucifixion and resurrection narrative is similar to those of the synoptic gospels but also differs in several respects. The shorter ending of the gospel of Mark includes only the crucifixion of Christ. The longer ending, believed by most biblical scholars to have been penned later, adds brief accounts of Jesus’ appearances. Unlike Matthew, Luke, and John and the longer ending of Mark report that Jesus appeared to only one woman, Mary of Magdala.

Matthew, Luke, and John include the same primary elements of the story. Each agrees it was the first day of the week when

Mary (the women in Luke and Matthew) came to the tomb and found the stone rolled away. The tomb was empty. Matthew reports that there was an earthquake and a single angel rolled back the stone. This angel told Mary and Mary of Magdala that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Luke tells us that “two men in dazzling clothes” stood beside a group of women and informed them of Jesus’ resurrection. John records that Mary of Magdala discovered that the stone had been removed. She went and got Simon Peter and the “other” disciple. They came and entered the empty tomb. After the disciples left two angels appeared to Mary followed by an appearance of Jesus.

John described the scene in such a way as to suggest that the clothes had not been removed from the body. It was more as if the body had melted away leaving the clothes intact. The “other” disciple, who we assume was John, looks at the scene and “believed.”

John believed because of what he had personally seen and experienced. Some people today maintain that faith is primarily a result of rational thought and the testimony of scripture. However, most of us believe what we experience and see with our own eyes. Our experience with God often comes through other people.

Dr. Win Arn was the founder and president of the Institute for American Church Growth. He was also publisher of *Church Growth: America* magazine. He shared with me once about a study his organization had done with 720 people. Of this group 240 were new Christians who continued to be actively involved in their churches. Another group was made up of 240 new converts who had already “dropped out.” The third group of 240 had had the gospel presented to them but had chosen not to respond positively.

Each person was asked to classify the person who had introduced them to Jesus Christ and the church into one of these categories: TEACHER (one who had used an information transmission approach), SALESMAN (one who had used “manipulative monologue” to convince them), or FRIEND (one who had used non-manipulative dialogue).

The results of the study were very revealing. The vast majority of people who perceived the presenter of the gospel as a TEACHER did not respond positively to the invitation. Those who saw the presenter as a SALESMAN tended to respond but those most often became the “dropouts” (only 29% had, in fact, remained active). Those who perceived the presenter of the gospel as a FRIEND had responded positively to the gospel message and had remained committed to their new-found faith and active in their church.

Easter should be a reminder to every Christian that we have a responsibility to tell our friends, relatives, associates, and neighbors about our experience with the resurrected Jesus.

Application

Easter is the greatest witness to God’s involvement in the world. It is the central message of the Christian faith. The cross is the most profound symbol of God’s love for the world. The empty grave is the greatest symbol of God’s power to overcome. The message of Easter is the greatest story ever told.

In 2005, I was living in Biloxi, Mississippi, when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. This terrible storm is often referred to as “an act of God.” Many insurance policies refer to “acts of God.” These include such things as flood, storms, and other events outside of human control. Of course, these are not actually acts of God; these are acts of nature.

We understand how hurricanes form. They begin as tropical storms over the warm, moist waters of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans near the equator. As the moisture evaporates it rises until enormous amounts of heated, moist air form in the atmosphere. The winds begin to circle counterclockwise north of the equator or clockwise south of the equator. As long as the hurricane remains over waters of 79 degrees Fahrenheit or warmer, it continues to pull moisture from the surface and grow in size and force. In 1995, circumstances were perfect to form the perfect storm. Hurricane Katrina was an act of nature. Easter was an act of God!

Easter is the definitive reminder that life has ultimate meaning. Paul insisted that our hope for resurrection lies in the resurrection of Jesus. It is in Easter that we gain hope for eternity. It is in Easter we find the evidence that what we see is not what we get. God promises much more than what can be perceived by our own eyes. We celebrate annually the birth of Jesus. His incarnation is an essential element of the Christian faith. The cross has become a universal symbol of Christianity. Good Friday is recognized annually as a vital part of the salvation story. But every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus.

Easter is the decisive act of God to defeat death. I read once about a young man who joined the Cryonics Society. He had a terrible intestinal infection from which doctors indicated he would not likely survive. He made arrangements with this society to have his body frozen when he died. They drained his body of its fluids and replaced them with antifreeze to help preserve the body tissues. He was then packed with dry ice and placed in “Cryonics suspension.”

It’s not hard to understand why a young man facing premature death would want to have some chance that he could survive death. But Easter gives each of this hope. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Corinthians, “so as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.”

Alternative Application

John 20:1-18. Mary of Magdala was standing outside the tomb weeping and as she wept she stooped and looked into the tomb. Two angels in white were sitting where the body of Jesus had been placed. They asked Mary, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She responded, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Mary’s grief is unbearable. Her dreams have been destroyed. Her hope has been shattered. The man who had loved her, not her body, was gone forever.

“Woman, why are you weeping?” Because the economy has tanked and I’ve lost my job. “Woman, why are you weeping?” Because my pay check is too small and my bills are too large. “Woman, why are you weeping?” Because I have two years to

retirement and I’ve lost half of the pension in the stock market. “Woman, why are you weeping?” Because the doctor called me and the test came back positive. “Woman, why are you weeping?” Because my secret addiction to prescription drugs is destroying my life.

Preaching The Psalm

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

It’s popular to say that people have no manners today. Store clerks are surly. Telephone operators are dismissive. Youngsters chortle and snort their way through church services. The list is virtually endless, and it is usually capped off with widened eyes and a shake of the head as some comment is tossed off about the way things used to be in the good old days. Ah, the good old days.

It’s this writers considered opinion that when people mention the so-called good old days, they are displaying a failure of memory.

The so-called good old days are seldom all that good. Our memories are mercifully selective on this score and we retain only those memories that can be sweetened by desire and shaped by delusion. So, any notion that people are more or less polite now than once they were is completely debatable.

Apart from good manners, however, is what one pastor insists on calling an “attitude of gratitude.” This attitude is something deliberately adopted. It’s not subject to the vagaries of fortune or mood. It can’t be altered by bad news of the stock market or yet another set of vacuous remarks by government officials. An attitude of gratitude is a matter of choice.

So often we live our lives as though we are governed by the tides of the moment. If we are treated badly, then our mood is ugly. If we are cheated or dealt a bitter blow then we ourselves reflect this bitterness. However, we need not be victims of circumstances. We have the ability, and perhaps even the responsibility to choose an “attitude of gratitude.”

The opening verses of this psalm display such a choice. “O give thanks to the Lord for God is good!” The gratefulness to God that this verse exhibits ought not be subject to the spiral dancing of our fortunes. God is good. Evidence of this is everywhere, no matter what may be going on in our lives. So, why waste our time and our energy on wailing and moaning? Why slide head first into the cesspool of complaining when we can choose to be grateful?

In every day and in every way, let our voices praise God! No matter what’s going on for us, God is still good. No matter how rotten things may seem, God still loves us. We can choose to be victims of life’s circumstances, or we can choose to have an attitude of gratitude. What’s the choice today? What’s the choice tomorrow? No matter what day it is, let our voices ring out with this psalm, “O Give thanks to the Lord, for God is good; God’s steadfast love endures forever!”

Illustrations

Acts 10:34-43

Jeff Japinga recalls a trip to a South African church. He was told that in that church in an impoverished township of South Africa, hundreds of church members had spent nights lying beneath their church pews. They were literally in the dark with no lights or food. They were frightened. In South Africa in the 1990s it was considered a crime to have black skin, too often punished with beatings.

The members of that church survived those terrifying nights and through their witness helped their country overcome apartheid. Jeff asked someone from the church how they had changed a brutal and oppressive system. The answer surprised him, “We talked!”

“We do not have to let go of what we believe,” someone told him, “but we do need to be curious about what others believe — that indeed, their way of seeing the world might be essential to our survival.”

Years later Jeff remembers those words, “We talked,” that continues to inspire him in his life.

In the days and weeks following Easter the apostles talked and told everyone they encountered about Jesus. In fact, filled with the Holy Spirit, they could not keep silent. They were so passionate about their faith that they could not keep quiet. In our lesson from Acts, we find Peter, telling the people how, “God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.”

Tim S.

Acts 10:34-43

I always have to laugh at these “ghost hunter” shows. These investigators with their cameras come in and investigate unexplained shadows or odd noises or whatever. Now I know there are many out there who believe in ghosts and such, but it would not surprise me in the least if 90% of the cases these people investigate are just the products of overactive imaginations.

I’m sure at the time of the resurrection, there were many people who heard the story of Jesus’ coming back from the dead and also shrugged it off as another ghost story.

But as Paul testified, Jesus wasn’t some vague shadow or noise. He came back in flesh and blood to many witnesses, “who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead” (v. 42).

Craig K.

Acts 10:34-43

In modern America, new religions pop up and old religions are modified about as fast as gasoline prices change. In the ancient world, however, religions were traditional and changed very slowly if at all, and they served their own group. Thus, to those who heard Peter proclaim that all people are acceptable to God, such a new situation would seem like a miracle as overwhelming as Jesus’ resurrection.

Today many people say they believe in Jesus’ resurrection but also claim one “racial” or national group as superior to others. Peter realized that Jesus’ resurrection meant that Jesus is Lord of all, which means he is Lord of every person and group. Especially on Resurrection Sunday, Christians need to grasp the fuller significance and the deeper consequences of Jesus’ resurrection for how we view people who are “different than we are.”

Emphasis Archives

Acts 10:34-43

Without the resurrection there would be no New Testament or early church. In Luke’s history of the early church he quoted one of Peter’s wonderful sermons. This God showed no partiality. His followers would come from every nation. The message that primarily came to Israel had been let loose in the world. What Jesus did in Jerusalem and Judea could not be kept local. The wonder of Easter forces us to point toward the great inclusive word: All. This unhindered gospel was a scandal for the early church (Acts 28:31). Today we still give lip service to inclusivity. Yet, we know the most segregated hour of the week may just be eleven o’clock on Sunday morning. Race is only one barrier of many. Perhaps class might be the largest barrier of them all. The list of our segregations is still long and heartbreaking. Easter settles the issue with this question: “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people...?” Alongside the lilies and the hallelujahs of this day you might ask your congregation who it is that is left out of your church as it celebrates this day of days.

Emphasis Archives

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

“The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” The Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling tells the story of a boy who works to defeat death — or, at least, a “Death Eater.” In Rowling’s books, young Harry and his friends battle a variety of evil villains, all of whom are minions of the Dark Lord. Harry and his friends risk everything to stop the spread of evil in their world. In the series’ final book, the ultimate enemy is the Dark Lord himself. Harry cannot defeat the Dark Lord until he has defeated all his other opponents — both within himself and outside himself. It is from these previous victories that Harry can draw strength and through which Harry has gained experience.

Leah T.

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

Kenneth Chafin relates that when he was a teenager someone gave him a pamphlet written by a famous man who was an agnostic. The pamphlet said it wasn’t really necessary to believe in Christ’s divinity nor in his resurrection in order to admire him for his exemplarily life and moral teaching.

Chafin writes, “I was young and inexperienced and lacked the ability to properly weigh his argument, but I was impressed that this great man had some nice things to say about Jesus.” At the time he was living with his Uncle Walter and Aunt Bertie, who were both Christians. Chafin decided to try out some of the thought process on his Aunt Bertie, “who, though lacked formal training, had an excellent knowledge of the Bible and a profound faith in God.” While she was cooking supper on an old wood-burning stove the young Kenneth took the pamphlet into the kitchen to ask her what she thought of the ideas in the pamphlet as he read aloud to her. She was stirring gravy in a large cast-iron skillet with a wooden spoon so that it would not stick. Without even looking up or interrupting her stirring of the gravy she responded, “Jesus was either the Son of God or one big liar. If he didn’t rise from the dead the whole thing’s a hoax.” Chafin said that his aunt had not met Christ on a Damascus-like road, but she had met him and she knew how much was riding on the fact the he was alive.

When Christ comes into a person’s heart, there is no guessing about the resurrection!

Derl K.

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

There's a term in the art world known as *chiaroscuro*. It's an Italian word: the Italians invented the technique. Before *chiaroscuro*, paintings were uniformly bright, often enclosed in gilt frames and matting.

But with the advent of this technique, things changed in the world of painting. Artists discovered the dramatic power of shadow — of painting a person whose face was illuminated by a single candle, surrounded on every side by darkness. This technique somehow captured the ambiguity and uncertainty of life. Against the background of darkness, light seems all the more brilliant.

Easter is a glorious celebration, whether or not we have paid Lent, or Maundy Thursday, or Good Friday any mind. Yet the sunlight of Easter morn never seems so bright, unless we come to the empty tomb by way of the upper room, and unless we have stood for a time at the foot of the cross.

Bethany S.

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

It was a standing-room-only crowd where I preached a few years ago in Hollywood. A well-dressed young man strode forward making an extraordinary claim. We first met him the evening before as he chatted and drank coffee at a church social.

None of us knew that this man had petitioned a court of law to change his name. The judge denied his request. Nonetheless, this man now stood before our group saying that he was Jesus Christ, the Second. Later we wondered whether he hoped to achieve fame in Hollywood by capitalizing on a celebrated religious name. Who's to say it wouldn't work? Madonna had succeeded.

Consider what Jesus said about himself: "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me." Put that assertion in the mouth of anyone, and it leaves you with three options.

First, you might think him an escapee from a mental institution. Second, as we did with our Hollywood visitor, you might suppose that he was trying to attain fame. Your third choice: investigate to see if the person is genuine.

Jesus legitimized his claim. His death for others and resurrection added powerful affirmation. Rarely does a person profess that he is God's only Son. Mohammed didn't. Confucius never said he was. Buddha

sought the truth. But Jesus is the truth, and he will raise believers to life. As in Adam all die, so in Christ, all will be made alive.

Emphasis Archives

John 20:1-18

Dianne recalls the difficulty growing up in lean circumstances in a single parent home. By the time she went to school she noticed that her friends had nicer clothing and participated in fun family activities. Dianne and her sister had thrift shop clothing, used dolls, and other toys. Dianne says that her mom did an all right job stretching out the money they had to make ends meet.

On Easter Sunday they visited a friend from church. The woman made Dianne and her sister colorful hard-boiled eggs and candy. This was a new experience for Dianne. Never had anyone lavished such extravagances on her before.

As Dianne reflects on her life, she views that Easter as a turning point, the start of her faith journey. A simple act of kindness pointed her to Jesus, who suffered and died that she might have life. But it was more than that — it was a deep sense of joy knowing that Jesus willingly went to the cross on her behalf.

Easter was a life-changing experience for Mary Magdalene. It was out of her love for Jesus that she went to the tomb early that Sunday morning. In her grief she encountered the living Lord Jesus. Mary left that place of death proclaiming, "I have seen the Lord." Her life would never be the same.

Tim S.

John 20:1-18

I'm not yet a parent, so I can't speak from personal experience, but I've often noticed that parents sometimes have a hard time getting their children's attention. Inevitably, the key to opening up those kids' ears is their name, especially their full name. I've heard many parents have to say something like this: "Jake, stop that. Jake ... Jake ... JACOB MICHAEL!" If there's two names there, that usually means that kid had better come running!

There's something in saying someone's name that gets their attention. When Mary was crying her eyes out, worried about where the body of Jesus could be, all Jesus had to say was "Mary," and it brought her back to reality, a reality where her Lord had conquered death and was alive again.

Craig K.

John 20:1-18

On March 10, 1876, Alexander Graham Bell called to his assistant, Thomas Watson, "Mr. Watson, come here. I want to see you." That message was heard by Watson through what we call the telephone. The results of that message reverberate through all advances in electronic communication.

Bell, whose mother and wife were both deaf, was committed to helping deaf people "hear." His father also helped deaf people communicate, having invented "Visible Speech," an alphabet that used symbols for human sounds. A.G. Bell's invention fulfilled his father's work and enriched our world beyond description.

On a Sunday morning during the Feast of Unleavened Bread in Jerusalem in the year 30 our Lord Jesus, having completed his Father's work, sent an earthshaking message to his students. He had risen and was returning to his heavenly Father. The good news Mary Magdalene delivered will reverberate and intensify into eternity.

Emphasis Archives

John 20:1-18

It happened at the Passion Play in Oberammergau. After that long winding journey from Palm Sunday to Good Friday, Easter finally arrives in the drama. The stage is dark. Weeping women stand near a huge door that is shut tight. They try as best they can to open that door. It does not budge. So they stand there weeping in their frustration. An angel comes on stage and takes a white aisle cloth from under the closed door and rolls it out and down the steps. The women stand off to the side just looking. Suddenly, the door slowly opens. Through that cracked door light streams forth until the whole stage and the amphitheatre is filled with blinding light. Through the open door there walks a figure in white. The light is so brilliant it is hard to see. But the women know who it is. And the audience knows who it is. The women come forward to kneel at his feet. And from every exit on the stage little children of all ages come running, surrounding Jesus laughing and holding his legs. While it was still dark, John writes, Easter came. The light truly shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot put it out. The promise of Easter, like the light of the sun, touches one and all. The women need not weep anymore for they had seen the risen Lord.

Emphasis Archives

CHARTING

THE COURSE

A week after

The gospels devote a great deal of attention to the week before Easter. Beginning with Palm Sunday and continuing through Jesus' burial on Friday evening, a full quarter of Matthew's entire book is devoted to that one week. Similarly that week dominates nearly a third of Mark's gospel and nearly 40% of John's! Luke is the writer who devotes the smallest portion to that week, but 18% is still a remarkable share of a book that begins all the way back with a prediction of the birth of John the Baptist.

That eventful week — Holy Week — is central to the story of Jesus' passion and death. But what about the next week? We know all about the week before Jesus' death; but what do we know about the week after his resurrection?

A writer can't be blamed for not doing something he wasn't trying to do in the first place. The relatively sparse coverage given to the week after Easter is not a fault of the gospels. Their purpose was to report the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and they do it with beauty and power.

You and I may have a particular interest in that less-heralded week. After all, this is where we live. Not only is this particular Sunday the week after Easter, but every day of our lives is lived during a week after Easter. This week is our week, and so we are eager to have Luke and John explore it with us.

Acts 5:27-32

At the beginning of chapter 3, Peter and John healed a crippled beggar in the temple precincts. Remarkably, here in the middle of chapter 5, that's still the story — or at least the back story.

A great commotion had followed in the wake of that miracle, and it caught the attention of the Sanhedrin. Peter and John were apprehended and brought before the Jewish leaders there in Jerusalem.

Many of these leaders, of course, were the very same men who, not many weeks before, had conspired against Jesus. They were the ones who had arranged for Judas' betrayal, Jesus' surreptitious arrest, his manipulated trials, and ultimately his execution. How noxious it must have been to them, therefore, to have Jesus' followers as an ongoing nuisance there in Jerusalem. So they scolded Peter and John, punished them, threatened them, and strictly ordered them not to do anything more "in the name

of Jesus" (Acts 4:18).

The apostles were undeterred, however. They and their fellow believers prayed for even greater boldness in the face of this persecution, and their ministries continued to be marked by great power and effectiveness. Fed up, the Jewish leaders arranged to have the apostles arrested, only to discover the next morning that their prisoners had been miraculously set free and were back in the temple again, preaching and teaching.

The same jealousy that animated their opposition to Jesus now motivated their opposition to the apostles. Indeed, we see in their characterization of the apostles' work — "You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching" — the same level of paranoia that marked their reaction to Jesus' presence and popularity (John 12:19 cf.).

The image of these men "stand(ing) before the council" is an incongruous one. Given their comparatively limited training, you would think that the apostles would be no contest for — and no threat to — the entrenched religious leadership there in Jerusalem. Also, rewind the tape of their lives four or five years, and it would have been impossible to project these Galilean nobodies onto this prominent stage in Jerusalem. Such is the work of the Holy Spirit.

As we juxtapose the words of the leadership with the words of the apostles, we observe that it is the Jewish leaders who adopt a defensive position ("you are determined to bring this man's blood on us"), even though it is the apostles who are presumably on trial. That they try to distance themselves from Jesus' death is tragically laughable. They were the key players in plotting and orchestrating his death, including bringing pressure to bear on Pilate to pass the death sentence. Yet, just as he had tried to wash his hands of the bloodguilt, so here do the Jewish leaders, as well.

Finally, we note that it is the apostles, not the religious paragons interrogating them, who are fixed on the things of God. "We must obey God," they insist. They speak of what "the God of our ancestors" did in raising Jesus, and that "God exalted him." They conclude by bearing witness to "the Holy Spirit whom God has given." Their entire focus is on God, while the religious leaders are embarrassingly preoccupied with themselves.

Revelation 1:4-8

For generations, people have turned to the book of Revelation and endeavored to find symbols of the nations and leaders of their day. In these introductory verses to the book, however,

we are reminded about the most important thing being revealed in Revelation: Jesus. These few verses profoundly explore the person and work of Christ, and he is rightly understood as the focus of our explication.

Verses 5 and 6 are rich with terminology to inform our understanding of Christ. Three statements offer us titles for Jesus — “the faithful witness,” “the firstborn of the dead,” and “the ruler of the kings of the earth” — and three statements provide verbs to describe his work — “loves us,” “freed us from our sins by his blood,” and “made us to be a kingdom of priests.”

The titles used for Jesus may be understood chronologically. During his earthly ministry, he functioned as “the faithful witness” (see, for example, John 3:11, 32; 18:37). In his resurrection, he became “the firstborn of the dead.” And in his victorious return, he will become “the ruler of the kings of the earth.”

Likewise, the three verbs describing Christ’s work seem to be arranged chronologically. His love, of course, comes first: everything that he does flows from that love. Then there is the saving act of freeing us from sin. And it is after he has saved us that he can, in turn, make us into the “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6 cf.; 1 Peter 2:9) that is God’s will and purpose for us.

The prospect of Christ “coming with the clouds” is found in the synoptic gospels (such as Matthew 24:30), though surprisingly not in John. Some commentators trace this imagery back to the Old Testament book of Daniel (7:14), and we recognize that a number of other themes and images in Revelation resonate with Daniel. Meanwhile, the dramatic picture of “those who pierced him” seeing the exalted Christ return and wailing has its origins in the Old Testament prophet Zechariah (12:10).

The “Alpha and Omega” title recurs twice in Revelation (21:6; 22:13). It is not always altogether clear whether it is being spoken by God the Father or by Jesus, and we observe “red letter” translations going both ways. In the NRSV, for example, the first and third instances are printed in red, while the second one is not. While we might welcome more clarity, the confusion might not be troublesome to the author. C. Anderson Scott notes the “complete and unhesitating acknowledgement of the Divine Nature of our Lord Jesus Christ” in Revelation, observing that “John sets Jesus side by side with the Almighty.”

Finally, the passage is book ended by this descriptive phrase for God: “Who is and who was and who is to come.” It appears twice here in chapter 1, as well as in a later glimpse of heavenly worship (4:8). In that latter appearance, it is part of the song that is sung before the throne: “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.” The scene — and the recurring phrase — is captured in Reginald Heber’s familiar hymn: “Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore thee, casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea; cherubim and seraphim falling down before thee, which wert, and art, and evermore shalt be.”

In the first instance, it seems to be a reference to the first person of the trinity, while in the second instance it is linked with “the Alpha and the Omega.” Both phrases poetically bear witness to the eternal nature of God. While the book chronicles all the vicissitudes of life in this world, with its power struggles, temporal thrones, and cosmic battles, the enduring and un-

changing reality is God. He is, he always was, and he always will be — first and last — and therein lies our confidence, our security, and our hope.

John 20:19-31

The disciples were an ignominious lot on this particular weekend. One of their group was operative in handing Jesus over to his opponents, and then committed suicide. The rest seemed to be scattered by fear when events turned against their leader. And the most vocal among them was caught denying his Lord three times.

Now, on Easter evening, “the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.” What an unpromising group! These are the men who were to take the gospel to the whole world? That seems unlikely, for all we see here when the scene opens is a cowering bunch, fearful and bewildered.

Then, quite suddenly, “Jesus came and stood among them.” This in spite of the doors being so deliberately locked. It is a miracle he repeats a week later (John 20:26). In the wake of the empty tomb, therefore, we observe both that nothing can keep him out and that nothing can keep him in.

Jesus’ first words — “Peace be with you” — seem to be more than just an ordinary greeting, a rote salutation. Rather, they are precisely the words needed at that moment, and precisely the reality needed by that group. The essentiality of his words is indicated by the fact that he repeated them after showing them “his hands and his side.”

We do well to observe that Jesus showed his hands and side to those gathered, for Thomas, who was missing on this occasion, is sometimes disparaged for his expressed desire. “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands,” Thomas declares, “and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” We will discuss Thomas’ infamous doubting more below, but suffice it to say here that he only sought what the others had already experienced.

Jesus’ pronouncement — “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” — is thematically significant in John. That Jesus was “sent” by God is a recurring and important theme in the fourth gospel (as in 5:24-38; 6:37-57; 12:44-49). Meanwhile, the symmetry of missions — the Father sending the Son, and the Son in turn sending the disciples — is also characteristic of John’s pattern and theology (4:34, 38 cf.).

The words and actions of verses 22 and 23 are widely debated. What is the relation of this impartation of the Holy Spirit to the Pentecost recorded in Acts? How do we square this event with Jesus’ own words earlier in the gospel, which suggests that the Spirit would be sent by the Father (14:26) and that the Spirit’s coming was predicated on the Son’s leaving (16:7)? What is the connection between the teaching of verse 23 and the similar but not identical teaching found in Matthew 18:18?

If our purpose were strictly Bible study, I might entertain those debates in the pulpit. Because I believe that the preaching task has a different purpose, however, I hesitate to introduce such theological and hermeneutical problems into a sermon. I prefer, therefore, to stay with positive proclamation. To that end, I would

make these two affirmations based on verses 22-23. First, the Holy Spirit is uniquely given through Jesus to his followers. Second, those followers bear a heavy responsibility in the dissemination of the forgiveness that God offers and that the world needs.

The scene of Thomas being briefly left out is a touching one. He “was not with (the other disciples) when Jesus came,” and so they had to report to him what they had seen and experienced but which he had not. He wanted to experience it, too. We have seen smaller versions of this same phenomenon among believers, and we take comfort in seeing that Jesus makes a point of including Thomas down the road.

Finally, in his penultimate chapter, John offers the rationale for his entire gospel: “These are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” That statement by itself would be sufficient for a post-Easter sermon. Ask what the reason is for all the fuss — all the services and songs, the sermons and anthems. What’s the rationale for all our gatherings, our buildings, and our budgets? Why all the staff, the classes, the events, and the programs? Then proclaim, piece by piece, the profound answer: These are all so that you may come to believe. Specifically, to believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And then that belief will lead you to life.

Application

The gospels devote most of their pages to the years before Easter and, especially, the week before Easter. We direct our attention today, however, to the week after Easter. That is the setting of the gospel lection. Meanwhile, the passage from Acts occurred probably not many weeks after Easter. The vision from Revelation, while not on the heels of the other two passages, is decidedly *after* Easter.

The point is that our several passages for this Sunday meet us where we live. For not only does this Sunday represent on our calendars the week after Easter, but our entire life experience and faith come “after Easter.”

You and I and our congregations live in the week after Easter. So what do our passages tell us about that setting in which we live?

First, it is a setting of joy and surprise. When the scene opens in the gospel lection, the disciples are bewildered and frightened. What unfolds during the next few verses, however, is a marvelous recognition of the risen Lord. And even though he was raised long ago, the experience continues for us today. We do not begin with joy. Rather, we, too, are surprised when confronted with the reality of the risen Lord, and we experience with Peter, et al., the joy of that epochal surprise.

Second, it is a setting of opposition, and therefore a context for boldness. The episode from the book of Acts shows that the opposition Jesus experienced during his earthly ministry did not end, either with his death or with his resurrection. His antagonists were neither placated by the former nor persuaded by the latter. And so his disciples inherit from him the hostility and persecution that he himself experienced. That first generation of followers understood that as a privilege (Acts 5:41) and joy

(Colossians 1:24; 1 Peter 4:13). We see in their example the need for us to be similarly bold in our day. As Charles Wesley had it: “Bold to confess thy glorious name before a world of foes.”

Finally, it is a setting of expectation and glory. This is the scene that we glimpse in the passage from Revelation. The victory of Easter was a beginning, not an end. And the opposition of the present age is a temporary fact of life, but not an eternal truth. There is a new day coming, and it is rooted in the exalted Lord. The followers of Christ, therefore, do not merely look back on the time line; we also look forward. We look behind us and celebrate the one who rose from the grave, and then we look ahead and anticipate the one who “is coming with the clouds.”

It is the week after Easter, and this is where you and I live. Here we follow the one who was opposed, who was crucified, who rose, and who will reign. And so here you and I are surprised by joy, surrounded by opposition, and filled with expectation.

Alternative Application

John 20:19-31. “The Disciple with a Nickname.” It is a rather poignant detail to read that John includes a kind of nickname for Thomas. Evidently he was called “the Twin.” We don’t know the exact reason for it, but it doesn’t matter anymore. On the occasion recorded in our gospel lection, Thomas earned himself a new and different nickname. We know him as “doubting Thomas,” and his nickname has become an idiom, a byword, like “Nervous Nellie,” “Skinny Minnie,” or “Chatty Cathy.”

Thomas’ reputation is ironic, given the larger context of how his peers behaved. The disciples in general hardly distinguished themselves by their faith. They didn’t believe the initial reports of Jesus’ resurrection (Mark 16:11-14). The two who were on the road to Emmaus were conspicuously obtuse in his presence (Luke 24:13-31). Later, having seen the same evidence that we hear Thomas requesting for himself, the disciples had doubts (Luke 24:36-41). And even as the risen Christ was about to ascend, some of his disciples still doubted (Matthew 28:17)!

In light of the whole group’s initial response to the resurrection, therefore, it’s hard to see why Thomas alone has been saddled with the “doubting” label.

Furthermore, Thomas’ reputation is also an unfair one since, within the course of just a few verses, he changed so dramatically from being doubting Thomas to being believing Thomas. It’s a shame for any person to be stuck with a nickname that reflects what they were before but does not reflect what they became.

A myth has persisted for years that Albert Einstein flunked a math class as a young student. The story is apocryphal, but it still serves to prove a point. For as widespread as the impression is that Einstein flunked a class, no one has nicknamed him “Dunce” or “Dope.”

Yet Thomas has been permanently branded. He is forever “doubting Thomas” in our minds.

He did not stay “doubting Thomas.” He changed. His faith turned 180 degrees, as he exclaimed, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28). No other disciple’s Christology reaches a higher apex than Thomas. When it comes to a profession of Christ, Thomas has no twin.

Psalm 118:14-29

“Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!” This line is heard throughout Lent and the Easter season. We read it, we sing it, we wave palm branches and even dance a bit if our particular church leans that way. Blessed indeed is the name of the one who comes in the name of the Lord. How else, you might ask, would anyone arrive? We don’t think about it much, but people show up in the name of all sorts of masters. The police show up in the name of the law. Soldiers from too many armies show up in the name of peace. Famous Motown singers call us to “stop in the name of love.” Some people even show up using the name of the Lord himself. But we know they are posing when they spout hatred and judgment rather than compassion and grace.

Showing up in the name of the Lord is serious business. Showing up and saying that you have arrived in God’s name means some pretty intense things. For one thing, it means that you drop your agenda and take up God’s priorities. For another thing, it means that you are worthy of trust. These two things alone are difficult enough. But there’s still more. Showing up in the name of God also means that you might just be crucified.

They don’t use crosses much anymore, but the result is the same. Proclaiming God’s name and insisting on God’s ways can result in the same amount of trouble whether it’s two millennia ago or today. Still, it is a blessing. To give up one’s precious point of view to adopt God’s perspective is a blessing. To live your life in such a way that you engender trust and love is a blessing. And to follow unwaveringly in the ways of peace and new life no matter where it may lead is a blessing indeed.

So in this season of blessing and new beginnings, it might be a good idea to step back and take stock of just whose name we wear when we show up every day. Do we show up in the name of the Lord? Or do we arrive in the name of a paycheck or in the name of getting the job done? It’s worth a moment of prayer and consideration. And as we pray, let’s pray the words from this psalm, “Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!”

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Acts 5:27-32

An English officer by the name of Payne Best, captured by the Nazis during World War II, was a fellow prisoner of Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer had been imprisoned because, as Acts 5:29 puts it, he had decided to “obey God rather than any human authority.” Best described Bonhoeffer in this way:

Bonhoeffer ... was all humility and sweetness; he always seemed to me to diffuse an atmosphere of happiness, of joy in every smallest event in life, and of deep gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive.... He was one of the very few men I ever met for whom God was real and close.

That same British officer was with Bonhoeffer on the day, in the last, desperate weeks of the German retreat, when the final “knock on the door” came for him at last:

The following day, on Sunday 8th April, 1945, Pastor Bonhoeffer held a little service and spoke to us in a manner which reached the hearts of all, finding just the right words to express the spirit of our imprisonment and the thoughts and resolutions which it brought. He had hardly finished his last prayer when the door opened and two evil-looking men in civilian clothes came in and said, “Pastor Bonhoeffer, get ready to come with us.” Those words “come with us” — for all prisoners they had come to mean one thing only — the scaffold. We bade him good-bye — he drew me aside “This is the end,” he said. “For me the beginning of life”.... Next day, at Flossenbürg, he was hanged.

Emphasis Archives

Acts 5:27-32

A high school in Nevada scheduled its theatre department to perform *The Laramie Project* and *Rent* during the 2009-2010 school year. Both plays discuss homosexuality in relationship to society. *The Laramie Project* is based on the story of Matthew Shepherd, a college student who was killed for being gay. *Rent* is a musical about a group of people of various sexual orientations who have to deal with social stigma and the presence of AIDS in people

they care about it. When the students' parents found out what these plays dealt with, the parents wanted to cancel the shows. The students would have none of it. They brought a lawsuit against their parents, stating firmly that they wanted to perform these plays. The students were advocates on behalf of those — like Matthew Shepherd — who no longer had a voice, but who deserved, nonetheless, to be heard speaking out for a better world.

Leah T.

Acts 5:27-32

Dr. Charles Swindoll writes about a night he and Lucy spent with former astronaut, General Charles Duke. General Duke was on the *Apollo 16* mission to the moon. During the conversation he told about driving "Rover," the lunar vehicle and walking on the moon.

Swindoll asked the general, "Once you were there, weren't you free to make your own decisions and carry out some of your own experiments? ... maybe stay a little longer if you liked" Duke's reply was, "Sure, Chuck, if we didn't want to return to earth."

General Duke described for the Swindolls the intricate plans and precise instructions, the essential discipline, and the instant obedience that it took in order to return to earth. It was so precise that they had sixty seconds of fuel remaining. Swindoll noted, "I got the distinct impression that a rebel doesn't fit inside a spacesuit."

Peter and the other disciples understood full well that obedience to Christ was paramount to spiritual success. There was and remains no room for disobedience or rebellion. "We must obey God" is still the Christian's motto.

Derl K.

Acts 5:27-32

Few Christians seem to realize they have a constant companion. He arrives at our baptism and remains with us unless we seriously grieve him and reject him. Otherwise, he never abandons — never leaves us. He helps us when we pray by making sure the Father hears the appropriate requests from us and assists us in finding truth.

Some Christians know the companion is around but rarely consult him. What a waste. If we let him guide us, we could live confidently and avoid so many difficulties that plague ordinary people. This friend revitalizes us and helps us live productive lives. We overcome the fears that terrorize

so many folks, and on the last day he will testify to God that we belong to him and are the Lord's true heirs.

The primary thing God wants us to do is to tell doubters and unbelievers that Jesus died for our sins and that God raised Jesus from the dead. When we boldly do that, we'll really feel our friend's presence. We'll be constantly thankful for the comforter, "the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

Emphasis Archives

Revelation 1:4-8

One of the most embarrassing situations someone can find him or herself in is a case of mistaken identity. You start to talk to someone you thought was an old friend, and they turn out to be a total stranger! Cases of mistaken identity can even be dangerous, like if you're mistaken for a wanted criminal and thrown in jail!

Jesus has suffered from the ultimate case of mistaken identity in the eyes of those who don't know him as the Christ. When he comes in the clouds, with everyone seeing him for who he is (v. 7), will those who denied him merely suffer from an extreme case of embarrassment? Something tells me, probably not.

Craig K.

Revelation 1:4-8

John begins, as was the custom of ancient letter writing, by placing the return address in the beginning of the document. The letter, transcribed by John, brings grace and peace from God, the spirits in front of God's throne, and Jesus Christ. The letter's introduction isn't merely a greeting and salutation, but a clear statement of who sends this communiqué.

John is careful to put this gigantic return address in a prominent place because he promises Jesus will return soon. For modern Americans who concentrate upon election returns or mailing their tax returns, Jesus' promised return affects every matter of our lives. God's concerns and Jesus' grace stretch across all time to all places and activities. Jesus will return and he is Lord of all, even of election returns and our tax returns.

Emphasis Archives

Revelation 1:4-8

The titles we give people are very important. They communicate power, authority,

respect, integrity, honor, and trust. Titles are symbols of status and position. We give people titles like doctor, professor, reverend, honorable, senator, congressman, president, general, admiral, prince, king, magistrate, and the list of titles could go on. You know, the interesting thing about titles is that their meaning and importance is negated if the behavior of the one bearing the title proves to be unbecoming the title.

Titles only have power because people voluntarily agree to submit to the power and authority the title represents. If the trust of those who empower someone with the inherent authority of a particular title is broken, the title is absolutely meaningless. Sure, a person may still hold a title based on their vocation or position, but their actions may have proven them unworthy of the distinction, privilege, and responsibility held by the title. Respect and trust must be earned. Any good leader knows their authority is won on the basis of strong relationships and reliable decision making. Titles increase in power and authority when the one holding the title proves themselves trustworthy.

Emphasis Archives

Revelation 1:4-8

Irvin credits his father for teaching him through his example about faith. He saw firsthand the power of the Christian faith and a belief in Jesus. Over the years Irvin has experienced sorrow and tragedy, but those experiences led him to the sufficiency of God's grace.

He recalls a frightening experience when he was a young man living in Africa. One hundred miles from home his motorcycle broke down. As darkness descended, he began walking. His mind raced with thoughts of ferocious beasts in the jungle.

As he continued walking he heard the sound of a roar and rush that filled him with a sense of terror. At that moment he remembered a statement he heard, "Fear is a form of unbelief." He knelt and prayed trying to close off the sounds of the jungles. Additional Bible verses also came to mind. He found the strength to get up and continue walking, knowing that he still had a long way to go but he did so with his heart aglow with peace and reassurance that Jesus was with him. After several hours he came to a safe place. Irvin remembers that experience whenever he is in the midst of sorrow, or fear — that Jesus is with him.

The apostle John found himself exiled,

living on the island of Patmos. John might very well have felt defeated when he experienced a powerful vision, a vision that would sustain him for the rest of his life and inspire other believers. It is a vision of triumph, no matter how bad things would get Jesus was still in control. “Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him....”

Tim S.

John 20:19-31

No doubt, the resurrection was a spectacular miracle. But who says all miracles have to be spectacular? Garrison Keillor has some wonderful words to say on the subject of miracles and where to find them:

What else will do except faith in such a cynical, corrupt time? When the country goes temporarily to the dogs, cats must learn to be circumspect, walk on fences, sleep in trees, and have faith that all this woofing is not the last word.

What is the last word, then?

Gentleness is everywhere in daily life, a sign that faith rules through ordinary things: through cooking and small talk, through storytelling, making love, fishing, tending animals and sweet corn and flowers, through sports, music and books, raising kids — all the places where the gravy soaks in and grace shines through.

— from Garrison Keillor, “The Meaning of Life,” in *We Are Still Married* [New York: Viking, 1989]

Emphasis Archives

John 20:19-31

“The purpose of this book...” Books may be written for a number of reasons. Step into a library or bookstore: Books are often grouped by their purpose. Textbooks are written in order to present a coherent overview of a particular topic. Novels are written to provide entertainment, whether it is in the form of a romance, an adventure, or a mystery. Self-help books are written to give the reader tools to improve something about themselves or their lives. Inspirational volumes provide insight and encouragement to find joy in life. The purpose of instructional manuals is to give step-by-step directions to help build or create something. The one thing that all books have in common is that they are all seeking to do something for the reader

and leave them changed — maybe change their lifestyle or their skill level or maybe just their mood — when they finish the last page and put the book away.

Leah T.

John 20:19-31

How often have we said to someone, “Oh, don’t be a doubting Thomas”? That saying reflects the passage of scripture from John 20:24-30. Jesus first appeared to his disciples after the resurrection in the upper room and talked with them, but Thomas wasn’t present. He was told that Jesus had come to them and shared with them in conversation. Thomas said, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it” (John 2:25b NIV). A week later Jesus once again appeared and this time he challenged Thomas to take his fingers and feel the nail holes that were left as permanent scars on the body of Jesus ... even after the resurrection.

Thomas almost missed some important opportunities when he was absent the first time, but he recouped them when he was present the next time. Those opportunities included being a part of the joyful group of disciples to see and talk with the risen Lord. He received the opportunity to strengthen his faith, receive the power of the Holy Spirit, and be commissioned to serve.

“If Christianity is to be understood not as a retreat from life in the world but as an

effort to transfigure life itself, it follows that the church needs the service of men and women at the point where they are most exposed to the problems of *others*.”

— Elton Trueblood, *The Company of the Committed* (italicized words are added for emphasis)

Derl K.

John 20:19-31

When Greg MacAleese, a police officer in Albuquerque, came up with his idea of having anonymous tipsters call in to the police station with information about a crime, there were doubters. When the idea of a cash reward was attached to the idea, many believed the idea unworkable. But MacAleese, with the help of several others, was persistent. He worked to set up a program, got help fund-raising to build up a reward fund, and launched the program. On September 8, 1976, the first tip came into the hotlines that had been set up and Crime Stoppers was up and running. Those who doubted such a program could work, were quickly turned into believers. They saw what could be done when citizens were brought into the process of crime solving.

Today, most police departments have a Crime Stoppers’ program. No one can give a number to the crimes that have been solved because of Crime Stoppers, but it is safe to say, that most doubting Thomases have seen enough solved cases to firmly believe.

Emphasis Archives

CHARTING

Visions

Giuseppe Tartini's *Devil's Trill Sonata* is a spectacular piece of music. Few violin compositions work the fingers and bow as quickly. One night, said Tartini, he had a vision so vivid that he wasn't sure whether it had been a trance or something more tangible. He dreamed that while he was practicing his violin, the devil appeared. After a time, Tartini handed his violin to the devil, asking him to play. The devil played a solo so powerful, so magnificent, that Tartini was overwhelmed.

Just as the devil finished, the sleeping Tartini awoke. While the dream still echoed in his mind, he grabbed his violin, in hopes of remembering what he had heard. He named the resulting piece of music for the one who had inspired it.

Some dreams are like that — so real and gripping that we are left wondering whether the dream world is actually reality. The ancient Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu once dreamed he was a butterfly. When he awoke to see his human form, he was curious: Was he perhaps truly a butterfly dreaming he was a man, or was he a man who sometimes dreamed he was a butterfly? Could one reality be proved over against the other?

The poet Stephen Vincent Benet wrote that "dreaming men are haunted men." So it would seem throughout the scriptures: Jacob was so haunted by his dream at Bethel that his whole outlook on life was changed.

Nebuchadnezzar may have been able to conquer the world, but the dreams that robbed him of sleep in Babylon's palace also robbed him of his kingdom. Or think of Paul in the New Testament. His dreamlike vision of the Macedonian man launched the mission of the early church into the far reaches of Europe.

Some dreams — like the one Tartini had, like Jacob had, like Paul had, like John had on the island of Patmos — can change our lives. They can give us new perspectives and help us better understand our purpose on earth. Our dream world may be our closest link with the spiritual world. If we listen closely at night we might hear, with Tartini, the devil's trill; but we might also find, with Jacob, that we're tenting on holy ground.

Today we step into the visions of Paul and John, and grow mesmerized with the dreamy encounter between the disciples and Jesus. If these moments of translucent transcendence do anything for us, they ought to stimulate our own desires to see Jesus anew in this Easter season.

THE COURSE

Acts 9:1-6 (7-20)

Often we refer to Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus as a dramatic turnaround, a complete conversion from one identity to another. While it is true that there was a decided shift in his actions toward Christians from this point forward, Paul himself would be the first to say that he had not significantly changed his religious outlook. It was precisely because he was sold out to God that he had cringed at the thought of someone like Jesus stepping into the limelight that only the creator deserved. But once he gained an appreciation for Jesus' divinity, the pieces fell into place, and his strength of religious character was merely enlightened rather than completely retooled.

In a sense, Paul's conversion was like waking up from a dream and realizing for the first time what his life, beliefs, and value systems really meant. He had held them as a culture prior to encountering Jesus, but now he owned them as loving friends. "Conversion," for him, was not so much a revolution or a renewal as it was a remembrance. He remembered who he was, for the first time.

Frederick Buechner once dreamed that he was staying at a hotel with hundreds of rooms. When he checked in, the desk clerk gave him the key to a delightful room. It made him feel warm, comfortable, and cared for. Although later Buechner couldn't remember exactly what the room looked like, he shivered with pleasure whenever he thought about it.

In his dream, he stayed in the room for a short time before setting off on a number of adventures. Later, however, his dream brought him back to the same hotel.

This time the clerk gave Buechner the key to a different room. When he opened the door, he immediately sensed the difference: it felt cold and clammy; it was cramped and dark; it made him shudder with fear.

In his dream, he went to the front desk and asked the clerk to move him to his first room — the bright and cozy one. But Buechner couldn't remember where it was.

The clerk smiled and said he knew exactly which room it was. He told Buechner he could have the room any time he wanted it — if he asked for it by name. The name of the room, said the clerk, was "Remember." A room called "Remember."

That's when Buechner woke up, and he has been haunted by it ever since. A room called "Remember!" A room of peace. A room that made him feel loved and at home.

What was it all about? Buechner knew. We all have memo-

ries, he said — bits and pieces of things that have happened to us in the past; scraps of stories and songs we've learned; photo albums of our younger years. We all remember.

But, said Buechner, we don't always use our memories. Sometimes we let them go to waste. Sometimes we shut them out of our consciousness. Sometimes we're too busy to visit with them. And when we stop using our memories, we lose an important part of our lives.

Throughout the scriptures we hear God calling us to remember. Remember what life is about. Remember who I am. Remember what you've gone through. Remember who you are.

One of the most powerful scenes in the Bible pictures Jesus calling us to remember. On the night of his death, Jesus sits quietly with the twelve, raises the cup in blessing, and says, "Whenever you come together, do this and remember me."

A father watched proudly as his radiant daughter stood waiting to go on her first date. She was excited and nervous, and so was he. What advice could he give her without being overprotective? He put his arm around her shoulder and looked her lovingly in the eye. "Remember who you are," he said. And that was enough.

Paul's vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus might well be summed up in that way. Rather than leaving himself behind, Paul was instead encouraged to truly remember who he was. That's what changed his life.

Revelation 5:11-14

This passage from the book of Revelation comes at the close of one of the most spectacular scenes of worship ever recorded in any literature on earth. It draws us up into a world of meaning and purpose, passion and delight, and allows us to hear songs we know but don't yet have the voice to sing.

But remember this: One of the reasons we are so captivated by this vision of glory is that most of us have never had it ourselves! We live in a humdrum world, where gray is the natural color, and noise is more prevalent than music. We see through eyes dimmed by religious cataracts, and need pacemakers installed by others to keep some lease on meaningful life. In other words, the only way we can own worship like these scenes is vicariously, through the transcendent visions of others, such as John.

Those who see further and hear higher and emote deeper become our heroes. They teach us something of a world we haven't been able to experience ourselves, and become the mentors of our lives as we stretch for a horizon that seems too far away.

When Abraham Kuyper served as prime minister of the Netherlands, he brought Christianity into the full spectrum of the social and political realms in a powerful and transforming way. Faith wasn't always so important to him. At the start of his career, Kuyper was a young preacher in a rural village. He had been schooled in the best of modern theology, and his sermons were well-polished masterpieces.

Not all in his congregation were impressed, though. Pietronella Baltus didn't care for his preaching, and she spoke her mind to him more than once. Certainly his sermons were

intelligent and well delivered, she said, but they did not declare the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Kuyper was intrigued. Who was this woman to serve as his critic? He began to visit her, and, over tea, she explained Jesus to him. She told him about faith and God and things outside of his experience. With her simple wisdom and vision, Pietronella Baltus silenced the knowledge of the great preacher. He knew his theology, but he didn't know her God. He knew his dogmatics, but he didn't know her Christ. He knew his church's history, but he didn't know her Lord.

After sitting at her feet, Kuyper rose up a different man. For the rest of his life, he spoke of the woman who had changed his heart, opened his eyes, and swept the cobwebs out of his soul. She was his teacher, his friend, his miracle of faith. She had been to heaven while he was stuck on earth. She taught him the language of eternity when he was still stumbling over the vocabulary of time. She saw John's vision and communicated it to him until he sat spellbound by her siren song. For the rest of his years, she lived on in his heart and mind, ever bracketed by quotation marks.

If we were to rewrite Revelation 5:11-14 based on our own experiences, what names would we give to the "many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand" who circle God's throne with their praise? What faces and personalities pop up when we note how "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea" had picked up the chorus? How rich is your heritage of heroes who sustained you along the way? Which mentors, teachers, and friends are bracketed between the quotation marks of your soul?

John 21:1-19

The gospel of John is actually quite complete at the end of chapter 20. Although no manuscripts exist of the book without chapter 21, it is often viewed as a later appendage. Still, even if it was written later by the evangelist or one of his disciples, the story told in today's lectionary passage brings further completeness to the rest of the gospel.

For one thing, it sets the story of the church in motion. John 20 tells of Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit (like the divine creative story in Genesis 2) into this new body of his that will recreate the human race, but they do not set out on the campaign of *life* before the chapter closes. Also, Thomas' great testimony is seen as a prelude to all the other testimonies of faith that will be given, but it does not lead naturally directly into them. Here in John 21 the story of the church begins to roll forward. The disciples need to make choices about their futures, Jesus restores Peter to his leadership role in the enterprise, and Jesus gives them a vision about the future that will lead them on.

Second, the failures of Peter, so pronounced in the Passion story, are rectified. Peter is resurrected by the resurrected Jesus, and re-empowered to take initiative again, rather than just tossing nets into a dubious sea.

Third, the missionary character of John's gospel is re-energized. The Prologue to the gospel makes the whole story of Jesus a divine missionary enterprise. But that urgency is veiled for a time as those around Jesus wrestle with his identity. Then

the miracle of Easter happened, and the disciples wrestled with Jesus' identity. Now, finally, questions of Jesus' identity can be set aside, and the return to mission is recovered.

Fourth, the future of the agents of renewal are commissioned and sent into an unknown future. John's gospel is all about "light" and "darkness." Here they are enlightened (after the darkness of night, around a glowing campfire, in the presence of the risen and glorious Jesus) and sent back into the darkness (Who knows what will become of them? We are not enabled to see that far into the shadows!) to become beacons of the light as creation is reborn around Jesus.

In this context Jesus casts a vision, and also becomes their vision. Many centuries ago, the great theologian Cyprian said that a person who has God as his father, has the church as his mother. Why? Because the church is the means by which God strengthens and deepens and restores our faith. We learn of God from the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs of the church. We see God in the testimonies of the saints. When we've lost our way, the church whispers to us of the one who lives within her and draws us back to him. Of course, at the heart of the church is Jesus, head of the body.

Syndicated columnist Robert Fulghum says that long ago he gave up any significant relationship with God. He didn't really want God, the church, or religion to cramp his style.

Then he met someone who prevented him from banishing God from his life. He was so amazed that he put her picture on the mirror above the sink where he washed each morning. Every time he cleaned his hands, she was there to cleanse his heart. Whenever he scrubbed his face, she was there to wash his soul.

He met her a few years ago in Oslo, Norway, during the Nobel prize ceremonies. He was standing among the crowd of guests that filled the doors and hallways of the auditorium. Then she passed by. She stopped for a moment and smiled at him. For a brief moment, it seemed as if she reached into his heart and understood him. There was no condemnation in her look, only genuine care. Then she went to the front of the auditorium to receive the Nobel Peace Prize from the hand of the king of Norway. It was Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Somehow, said Fulghum, she reminded him of the things that were missing in his life. "We can do no great things," she said, "only small things with great love." With that, says Fulghum, "she upsets me, disturbs me, shames me. What does she have that I do not?"

But deep inside, he knows. That's why he keeps her picture on his mirror, and looks into her eyes again and again. That's why he writes about her. He knows that she has God. That's the source of her strength, her energy, her inner beauty.

Mother Teresa was herself only a reflection of the one who first gave her a vision as well. Like the disciples at the seashore, in the initial encounter, we all need to see Jesus.

Application

Dreams are a common and mostly forgettable experience. Visions, on the other hand, are more rare and more meaningful. Sometimes we are led by visions that God implants in us as

signposts and enigmatic directions. More often we gain insight, perspective, and transcendence from the visions of others whom we call prophets, modern or ancient. In this season of Easter we need at least to be captured by the visions of those in our religious heritage who have helped us see God and God's ways more clearly. Then we might begin dreaming great dreams of our own, once again.

Alternative Application

Revelation 5:11-14. The songs and worship scenes in the book of Revelation are wonderfully engaging. This may be a Sunday just to tell stories of depth and transformation and insight and encouragement, and then to sing a bunch of great hymns of faith. Think of Horatio Spafford, a lawyer in Chicago in the latter half of the nineteenth century. When Mrs. O'Leary's cow overturned the lantern the night of October 8, 1871, the great fire that resulted destroyed Spafford's home and business. Worse yet, the Spaffords' only son, a six-year-old, was killed.

These disasters put a heavy strain on the family. Mrs. Spafford became so nervous and run-down that her doctor recommended a vacation, so the family laid plans to sail for Europe in November of 1873.

As the date approached, Horatio realized he was too busy to leave with his family. He sent his wife and four daughters on ahead, planning to catch up with them later.

On November 22, the ship carrying the five Spafford women sank beneath the waves of the north Atlantic. Nearly everyone on board died. On December 1, Mrs. Spafford sent a telegram to Horatio from Cardiff, Wales. It said, "Saved alone!"

How much more would one couple have to suffer? Where was God in all of this?

Horatio left immediately to join his wife. As he crossed the Atlantic, he asked the captain to show him where the other ship had gone down. When they came to the spot, Horatio stood at the rail, looking out at the cruel gray sea. Did he cry out to God in pain? Probably so. Did he feel cheated by life? Undoubtedly. Did he turn away from God, saying God had let him down?

He could have. But he didn't, because in those moments he wrote these words:

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
when sorrows like sea billows roll;
whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say,
"It is well, it is well with my soul."

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
let this blest assurance control;
that Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
and has shed his own blood for my soul.

O Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
the clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
the trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend;
even so, it is well with my soul.

Psalm 30

Perspective is everything. The young child who has been sent to sit in the corner really has no idea how long he or she will be in that chair facing the wall. It seems like forever. It feels like forever. In fact, for the youngster in question, it may as well be forever. But the parent knows that a few moments apart from the action can often take a child out of a cycle of behavior or out of a bad mood. The parent has perspective.

It's a relatively easy thing to do this kind of thinking when it comes to children, but how do we maintain perspective as adults? How do we step back to see that "weeping may linger for a night, but joy comes with the morning"? Too often we are so close, so engaged that perspective is difficult, if not impossible. Caught in the passion of an argument or the power of an idea, it's not always easy to stop and think about the larger ramifications. Invested, as many of us are, in the way things go in a church or a school, it's seldom if ever easy to step back and gain some critical distance that my let us invite needed change.

Weeping may last for a night, but joy comes in the morning. The difficulty of change may cramp our style. The inconvenience of changing the way we do things might be uncomfortable. But joy, as the psalmist says, comes in the morning. The benefit of perspective can allow us to walk through a lot of difficulties because with that perspective comes the vision of what is over the horizon.

Where, in the life of our church communities, do we need perspective? In what ways can we step back to see what needs to take place so that we might build God's kingdom? Can we discern that there may be weeping as we push forward, but that indeed joy will come in the morning? Is it feasible to endure the tears as we wait for morning's light? How does this call to perspective touch us? What does it call us to do? How does it call us forth into ministry and discipleship?

Tough questions, perhaps. Yet if we know that joy comes in the morning, maybe they aren't so difficult after all.

Prayers for Easter 3

Gospel: John 21:1-19

Theme: "Do You Love Me?"

Prayer of Confession

Lord, we have not always been clear about our priorities. Often we have hesitated in our response to your call because we had other business to attend to. Grant us the enthusiasm of Peter, that when we become aware of your presence and your will for us we may without hesitation follow you. Amen.

Offertory Prayer

O Christ, you gave your life for us, and now we bring these offerings as symbols of our lives that we present unto you. Use us and our gifts, we pray, that your love may be received by those who turn a cold and defiant heart to you. Amen.

Excerpted from *Lectionary Worship Aids, Series VI, Cycle C*
by H. Burnham Kirkland, [CSS Publishing Co., Inc.: Lima, Ohio]

Acts 9:1-6 (7-20)

We Christians in the West really have been spoiled. We haven't faced the kind of dangers and persecutions that our brothers and sisters have had to endure at the hand of oppressive governments or religious extremists who are bound and determined to wipe Christianity off the face of the earth.

What keeps them going? Well, their love for Jesus is an obvious answer, but I would wager that another reason why Christians can stand in the face of persecution is the knowledge that our Savior has shared in our sufferings, and indeed, he continues to suffer with those who suffer on account of him. As Jesus said to Saul, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (v. 4).

Craig K.

Acts 9:1-6 (7-20)

The Buddhist approached a hotdog vendor and said, "Make me one with everything." The Buddhist gave the vendor a \$20 bill and waited. Finally he said, "Where's my change?" The vendor replied, "All change must come from within."

That is the Buddhist philosophy — that change comes from within, and at first glance, we might agree with that. But, as Christians, we have discovered that an individualistic attitude toward our ability to change is full of inadequacies.

We are not an independent people. We are dependent. It is a lie when we are told we can do anything we put our mind to. It sounds nice, but it leaves out someone. Do you know who it is? It is God.

Emphasis Archives

Acts 9:1-6 (7-20)

Alice did not attend church much while growing up. She occasionally attended with her parents while in elementary school. Once her parents separated she would sometimes go with her mother when she was in middle school. In high school she says she attended youth fellowship because her boyfriend did. Her college years found her making "a few stabs" at going to church but nothing stuck.

One weekend a group of her friends decided to go to New York City, without her mother or any of the parents knowing about it. They drove all night. The next day they

were taking in the sights of the city. One of her friends made the suggestion of visiting one of the large churches. The church was very different from the ones Alice attended through the years. She describes this as one of the greatest experiences of her life. "I loved all the ritual and ceremony of carrying in the cross and banners," she remembers. It was at that moment that for the first time she felt the presence of God in her life. When she returned home she began attending church again, this time not out of a sense of duty or wanting to please anyone else but because she wanted to. She enrolled in a new member's class and joined the church.

The apostle Paul experienced the presence of the risen Lord in his life. At the time he was an enemy of the church, "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." Then suddenly and unexpectedly "a light from heaven flashed around him." Saul the number one enemy of the church would become Paul, the first missionary. Paul would live the rest of his life serving the risen Lord, taking the gospel to new locations.

Tim S.

Acts 9:1-6 (7-20)

The most dramatic conversion told about in the Bible is the conversion of Saul, from a persecutor of the church to loyal disciple. He that had been in charge of persecuting the church was reduced to having to be led around by his hand, and taking orders from a little Jewish prophet. From now on the Holy Spirit and Christ would be guiding him.

The stage play, *Shenandoah*, is set at the time of the Civil War in a community close to the Mason Dixon line. The play starts in a small church worship service, and the song "I am ready you can pass the cross to me!" is used.

It turns out that individuals from the same church, even from the same families, fight on both sides of the war. At the conclusion of the play again they gather in the church. Their numbers depleted by death and by the wounded, they again sing, "I am ready...."

Saul didn't know how heavy the cross would be but he also was to embark on a cross-carrying journey. Acts 9:16 puts it this way: "I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

Emphasis Archives

Revelation 5:11-14

Here is a popular riddle: "What is greater than God, worse than the devil, the poor have it, and the rich want it?" The answer is "nothing." Nothing — zero. As this riddle shows, "nothing," or zero, is at once the most desirable and least desirable of amounts. After all, zero is nothing. Having zero dollars is not a good thing. Having zero friends, zero food, zero articles of clothing — not positive assets. But at the same time, zero is our most prized possession. We want to want nothing. The number zero is what allows us to have giant numbers: one thousand, one million, one billion. Without zeros, our one billion becomes just one. Without zeros, we could not have the myriads and thousands of worshipers found in our reading. Like zero, Jesus is at once the greatest and least: the alpha and omega. The beginning ... and the end.

Leah T.

Revelation 5:11-14

Sitting in church one Sunday morning a young boy was drawing a picture while the pastor was preaching. Suddenly, out of the blue, a man in one of the pews shouted out, "Well, Praise the Lord!" It frightened the boy! Why would the man say such a thing and what did he mean? Years passed and many, "Praise the Lords" have been shouted out in that old church. The youngster has since understood that "praise" primarily signifies an opinion and in the religious sense, a good opinion, about God ... his nature and acts ... his character and exhibition through Jesus Christ ... his holy splendor.

You may not shout out "Praise the Lord" in the middle of a church service, but how do you shout "Praise the Lord" in the midst of your life? I believe that you do it by sharing the good news of Jesus with another or by reflecting patience and understanding in the middle of an upsetting or perplexing situation at home, in school, or at church. "Praise the Lord" is voiced each time you smile or offer encouragement to someone who is struggling. As people observe your holiness ... Godlike character demonstrated in your actions and reactions ... they understand the word "Praise."

So go ahead and just praise the Lord!

Derl K.

Revelation 5:11-14

Kevin was a conservative white student from small town America. In college, his

first roommate was a young black man from Chicago named Raymond. They concluded that they had been put together because they both loved sports and were Christians. Kevin and Raymond hit it off right from the start. Raymond invited Kevin home with him for Thanksgiving. It was there that Kevin got a clue to what the throne room of heaven was like.

Kevin attended church with Raymond. At Kevin's home church, parishioners sat primly in their pews, sang reverently along with hymns, smiled politely at the pastor's jokes, and filed solemnly to Holy Communion, as all good German Lutherans do. At Raymond's church, Kevin was surprised to hear parishioners shouting their agreement with the pastor with words of, "Amen," and "Tell it." Singing was with raised arms, clapped hands, and great shouts of enthusiasm. The choir swayed in time to the music and were loudly applauded when they finished their song.

As Kevin told his uncle, "When John says the living creatures said, 'Amen,' and the elders fell on their faces in praise, I know what he means. I have seen it. And it was great."

Emphasis Archives

Revelation 5:11-14

The adult Sunday school classes spent a month discussing worship. There were many questions surrounding worship. Someone asked when worship began. Did worship begin at the top of the hour or when the organist began playing the prelude? As this was debated another person stated that for him worship began the moment he walked into church. Another disagreed, suggesting that worship actually began the moment you woke up on Sunday morning. She went on to explain that having the right frame of mind shapes her experience of worship.

The next week, someone asked if it was possible to worship in places other than church. While the class was trying to deal with the subject of worship in a serious manner, that question brought a smile to many faces. Someone in jest commented about finding God on a golf course on Sunday morning. One person told of a camping trip out west and attending an outdoor worship service in that setting and how meaningful and memorable that experience was for her faith.

The four-week class concluded that

worship is important. There are those moments in life when our only response to God's glory is to bow in worship. That was John's experience as he heard the voices of angels. "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" Our lesson concludes with this description, "And the elders fell down and worshiped."

Emphasis Archives

John 21:1-19

One of the secrets to a healthy marriage is to always look for little things, little ways to show your spouse that you care. Make your wife her favorite meal for dinner, or rent your husband's favorite movie and make the popcorn. It's always good to demonstrate your love because just saying "I love you" doesn't always get the message across.

Jesus asked Peter three times in this passage if he loved him. Every time, Peter answers in the affirmative. But Jesus isn't satisfied with lip service. Jesus challenges Peter after each question to "feed my lambs." Jesus wants Peter (and us) to show our love in our actions, not just our words.

Craig K.

John 21:1-19

D'Arcy McNickle, in his novel, *The Surrounded*, described a person for whom silence was agony. We've all been cornered by people who end their sentences with "and" in order to continue talking, although they don't always know what they'll say next.

Other people continue to speak because they have something important to say. John ended his gospel in chapter 20; now he includes information that simply must be stated. Even though he'll never get everything important recorded, John is compelled to include Jesus' last earthly meeting with his disciples. Through John's second ending with his three questions to Peter, Jesus grants him (and us) a second chance, confirms him (and us) as his servant, and prepares him (and us) to serve Jesus no matter what.

Emphasis Archives

John 21:1-19

After much prayer and discussion it was decided to allow people from the congregation to share their testimonies during the worship service. The first several Sundays people stood to tell how Jesus made a difference in their daily lives. Others shared favorite Bible passages. Several recalled formidable experiences as children attending Sunday school. For others it was a week of summer camp when they were teenagers. A couple of people told of marrying a believer who encouraged them to attend church and in the process discovered Jesus. The idea was a success, people looked forward each week to hearing someone from the congregation share their faith.

What happened next no one expected. Someone shared personal struggles, another week a person asked for wisdom from the congregation in dealing with a personal problem. It was truly amazing that people could stand before their church family and share their personal struggles. People in the congregation began praying for specific people and

concerns during the week. This led to more people sharing their personal struggles.

In the midst of this open sharing people meet Jesus. Someone new to the church said that she knew Jesus was real and alive from listening to so many sharing within the congregation.

It is difficult to imagine what the disciples were feeling the weeks following Easter. Were they feeling disappointment, or relief? What about guilt for not standing next to Jesus? The disciples were fishing early one morning when the risen Lord appeared to them. It took them awhile to realize that it was actually Jesus. The work of the disciples was not finished but just beginning. The disciples were given a second chance as Jesus challenged Peter and the others and us as well to, "follow me."

Tim S.

John 21:1-19

The poem, *Abou Ben Adhem*, by Leigh Hunt tells of a man awakening and seeing an angel writing in a golden book. He asks what is being written and is told, "The names of those who love the Lord." The poem continues:

*"And is mine one?" said Abou, "Nay, not so,"
replied the angel. — Abou spoke more low,
but cheerily still; and said, "I pray thee, then,
Write me as one that loved his fellow men."
The angel wrote and vanished. The next night,
It came again, with a great wakening light,
And showed the names whom love of God
had blessed:*

And, Lo! Ben Adem's name led all the rest.

Emphasis Archives

CHARTING

THE COURSE

How can the dead testify?

We have an affair with death that ranges from fascination to revulsion. Consider the telling analysis of Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death Revisited* (which first came out in 1963 and has been updated in 1998 to remain a classic on American culture), the psychological plumbing of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' *On Death and Dying*, the emergent attentiveness in the West to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Perhaps Woody Allen captured the pop cultural attitude best when he said, "I do not want to attain immortality through my work; I want to attain it by not dying."

The season of Easter gives us pause to reflect upon the universal destiny of life as we know it — death — juxtaposed to the proffered reality of new life in Jesus Christ not only for earthly time but also for eternal existence. Tabitha, Peter, John, white-robed martyrs, and angels give us something to ponder as we hear Jesus say about the sheep who hear the good shepherd's voice and follow, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish" (John 10:28).

Acts 9:36-43

Tabitha was a good Christian woman, "full of good works and acts of charity" (9:36). Yet, she got sick and died. In a religious worldview that saw things in a balance, there must have been many questions raised. Evil is to be punished and good is to be rewarded. This is the balance that makes sense with a moral God at the helm of the universe. Psalm 1 testifies to it. Job's friends argue for it. We can only speculate as to the kinds of questions that may have raced through the minds of her Christian friends, as to why such a good Christian woman would be afflicted so and the Christian community hurt by her loss.

One thing we know for sure is that they sent for Peter, presumably for his pastoral presence and comfort in their time of grief. Or, could they have been looking for something else, something more dynamic, something explosive? After all, Peter had been in neighboring Lydda where he had healed Aeneas, a man bedridden for eight years with paralysis (vv. 32-35). Perhaps

he could do something miraculous on behalf of Tabitha. Had not his master — and hers — raised Lazarus from the dead? Did not the master say that they would do signs even more wonderful than that (John 5:12-14)? Death is an unwelcome guest — or should one say intruder? What lengths will one go to repel the thief that steals the precious gift of life from God?

When Peter comes, he finds no fleet-footed gazelle, but a death-bagged trophy ready for mounting on the wall of the slain. This does not deter him. In prayer, he faces death itself, like Ursula LeGuin's Festin in *The Word of Unbinding*, and counters its powers with a command from a new day: "Rise!" Unable to withstand, death cowers and releases its prey. The gazelle is afoot again.

Earlier in Acts Peter proclaims the name in which he performs such a sign of God's powerful presence in the world: "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth" (Acts 3:6). This invocation was pronounced over a lame man, who responds by walking. It may be that to avoid any appearance of magical incantations the disciples, like Peter, are not always cited with a formula response to people in need. Each situation of God's signature seems to have its own character and depends on the act itself to testify to the living presence of Jesus, rather than a preset order of chosen words or even ritual actions.

Worthy of note is the role the miracles play in the narrative. They serve as vehicles to convey people from the spectator curb into the flow of traffic that turns to the Lord, believes in the Lord, and moves to the destination of faith. The residents of Lydda were transported in this way; so, too, were the residents of Joppa (vv. 35, 42). Notice also that their belief was not "in Peter," but "in the Lord." Peter was but the instrument the risen Lord used to extend his will into the life of Tabitha and the witnesses of such deeds.

Revelation 7:9-17

Just before the seventh seal becomes the seven trumpets, breaking an interlude of heavenly silence, there is a brief conversation between the seer of Revelation and one of the elders. The topic of conversation is a great multitude, "standing before the throne of God and before the Lamb" (v. 9). They are the witnesses from "the great tribulation" (v. 14), which was most likely the persecution of Christians under the reign of Domitian in the later part of the first century.

Domitian was big into emperor worship, referring to

himself as “Savior,” “Lord,” and “God.” Despite the egomania involved in such claims, the practice of emperor worship served a political function of unifying the empire under the symbol of Caesar, while allowing the worship of any other number of regional gods in addition. Yet, the Christians owed their primary allegiance to God, before whom there could be no other in heart or in stone. For refusing to take the oath of allegiance to Caesar and rendering the required offering at his image, the Christians were persecuted even unto death. Whether this persecution was throughout the entire empire or regionally focused in Asia Minor is not entirely clear. What seems to be evident is that the book of Revelation is addressed specifically to the churches in southwest Asia Minor for whom the persecution was real.

The multitude gathered is an innumerable, inclusive lot. There are no human boundaries that can exclude one from belonging to the faithful (v. 9). This band of believers stands, palms in hand, with ready praise to God, like the crowd on Palm Sunday greeted Jesus as he entered Jerusalem. They acclaim, despite their tribulation, that salvation (not just in a psychological “wholeness” sense or a physical “well-being” sense, but in the eschatological sense of God’s ultimate, inevitable, effective, and final victory over evil and death itself) belongs to God, the one who indeed reigns above and over and beyond anything Caesar can imagine. To this the angels agree with a resounding “Amen,” which, while affirming the multitude’s acclaim, launches them into a refrain of their own, ascribing wondrous attributes to God “for ever and ever” (literally, “into the ages of ages”). In this brief sound-bite, we hear those from heaven and those from earth join together in antiphonal chorus. The multitude has passed through death to life to join in celestial hymnody. Their witness cannot be silenced by any act of Caesar; from on high their testimony will resound to encourage those still below to be faithful.

As is true with so much of the book of Revelation, there is reliance on Old Testament texts for the substance of message as well as the imagery of expression. For example, the hymn “Salvation belongs to our God” (v. 10) can be seen as a direct quote of Psalm 3:8. Isaiah 4:5-6 provides vivid imagery of God’s sheltering presence, which Revelation 7:15 evokes. Who could read Revelation 7:16-17 and not hear an echo of Isaiah 25:8 and 49:10? What the Old Testament expressed in timely yet timeless words, the New Testament sets forth as fulfilled in the revelation of Jesus Christ, who has come and will come — the Lamb, whose blood has been shed in time and for all time.

John 10:22-30

How can the dead testify? Taking the gospel of John as a sermon on faith in Jesus, crucified and risen, we can hear Jesus tell the Jews who were questioning him, that indeed he will testify to his identity even from the grave. “The works that I do in my Father’s name, they bear witness to me” (v. 25). His greatest work was to die for the sins of the people and effect atonement with God. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:15). From the grave, he would

cry out to the world (through the preached word!), “See how much I love you? See to what length I will go to have you back where you belong? I will go into your darkest corner, death itself, to assure you that there is nowhere that my hand cannot hold you fast.”

It was during the Feast of Dedication that this encounter is set. That is telling, when one remembers the Abomination of Desolation inflicted upon the people during the wretched reign of Antioches Epiphanes in the second century BC. The nature of the work that Jesus would do for the people would be an act of deliverance. As the Maccabees delivered the people from the foreign overlords, God would deliver his people from their fiercest enemies: sin and death. As Judas Maccabeus recaptured the Holy City and cleansed the temple from the defilement of Antioches (sacrificing a pig on the altar), Jesus would reclaim the hearts of God’s people and wash them pure from sin through the power of forgiveness, so that death could not snatch (“take away forcefully”) them away from God’s intentions. One could read this reference in a predestinarian way; or, one could read it with the heart of a pastoral counselor, assuring the believer that in faith one can have the confidence that whatever happens, one is ultimately in the care of God. There is a realism here that can admit, “We know not what the future holds,” while at the same time adhere to the certainty, “But we know who holds the future.”

When Jesus said, “I and the Father are one” (v. 30), a line was drawn in the sand. On the one side, there would be those who heard blasphemy. No human can claim oneness with the almighty! Such an assertion must be silenced, by death if necessary. On the other side, there would be those with ears to hear who would discern the very voice of God trumpeting a remarkable development in the self-revelation of the almighty. Jesus talks about how the love of God is like that of a good shepherd who is willing to lay down his life for the sheep (vv. 11-15). In that act of self-giving, self-sacrificing love, a quality of life is transferred to the believer. This quality of life can only be described as, life eternal. It is a quality of life that has dimensions beyond the three we experience spatially in the flesh. Jesus begins to define what this “beyond” means by describing its non-perishing attribute. It is not that one will not die in the sense of all living organisms who come to the end of their life’s energy either through accident or natural decline. It is that one will not be lost to God. The image of not being snatched from God’s hand contains within it the sense of safety and protection, of endurance and valuation due to the simple fact that God holds that life in a fourth and fifth dimension beyond our current comprehension. The raising of Lazarus, described in the next chapter (John 11), itself is but a foreshadowing of what the resurrection of the dead will be; for Lazarus will surely die again and like the rest of us will have to wait until the final day when the dead will be raised imperishable. We will have to look to Jesus’ resurrection to begin to get a glimpse of what that may mean for us. Here we need to return to the Easter and post-Easter narratives along with Paul’s insights in 1 Corinthians 15.

One of the verities of the Christian faith is that as we follow the good shepherd in life and in death, we shall be safe. This is

the essential message of the two visual images in this text: The first being one of the sheep who follow Jesus and the second being in the Father's hand from which no one will snatch the believer.

Application

Prayer can work miracles. When Peter prayed, he accessed the very power of the risen Lord Jesus and was able to apply that power for the benefit of Tabitha. This is a strong witness to the effectiveness of prayer. We do not know of how many other situations there may have been for Peter and the disciples when they prayed and gained no specific response as dramatic as the raising of Tabitha or the healing of Aeneas. We would certainly be able to identify with them in *this* regard, for all the apparently unanswered prayers we offer over our sick and dying and dead.

How do we understand this? Do we have to extrapolate a theory of dispensation? Or do we chastise the potential recipient or benefactor for lack of faith to receive or convey the miracle? Or do we look for other ways in which God is actively bringing life to the "dying and dead," allegorizing our experience into wisdom or truth propositions? In light of the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, we remain uneasy with the status quo of life as it seems to be lived. After all, God is able to work wonders. Whether God will do so in some demonstrative way in our lives or in the lives of those for whom we care remains to be seen. In faith, we pray and wait and hope. Perhaps that in itself is the miracle and the sign to the world that God is indeed to be taken seriously. This praying and waiting and hoping is also the posture that prepares us to receive our living Lord rightly when he does show his mercies and when he will come again.

Until he comes again, our world will continue to be a bloody place. A movie recently in which a group of young people are placed on an island was released recently in Japan. Only one will be able to come off the island — the one left alive, the survivor. The game plan in everyone's mind is simply to kill before being killed. It is *Lord of the Flies* revisited with a vengeance! Will Freddie Kruger become an "also ran" in the hall of flame into which such incendiary movies, depicting the baseness and depravity of human spirit, will be relegated? Blood, whether splashed across the big screen or onto the streets, makes quite a mess. It is a sign of the tragedy of human existence where there is so much suffering and death.

What the world needs is less hurt and more hope! That is precisely what God gives the world in Jesus. He takes our human hurts upon himself — the wounded, bloodied Lamb — and offers us a vision of God and ourselves that transcends the reality

we have come to think as normal. It transcends it by allowing us to see the majesty of God (a la the seer of Revelation) expressed best through the Lamb. Because of what the Lamb has done for us, it is true that all "blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might" (Revelation 7:12) properly belong to God. We can lay no claim on these attributes, try as we may to create a *new world order*. It is only when we finally learn to live beyond our self, beyond our community, beyond our world, serving God (Revelation 7:15) and his purposes in the world, that we will ultimately find shelter in the maddening pace from day to day until that final day, when we will ultimately find our eternal rest by those "springs of living water" (Revelation 7:17).

Reflect on that question that was asked of Jesus: "How long will you keep us in suspense?" (John 10:24). We love suspense. It will lure us to pay big bucks to go to the theater. It will keep us watching the serial soaps in the afternoon or evening hour after hour, week after week, to see what will develop. Yet, we do not like too much suspense, especially when it comes to important matters, like who will be president of the United States. Recall how long those weeks of late November and early December were last fall. Suspense is really only enjoyable when we have resolve. Until then, it can feel like we are bursting (sometimes painfully), wanting to know how it will all turn out. Jesus' questioners wanted a resolution to the suspense. However, the Word (God's answer) works slowly and mysteriously. The "plainly" that they wanted for the communication was complex and cumbersome; the Word was wrapped up in humanity and in one-on-one caring and in words tumbling down a mountainside in parables and hard sayings reinterpreting the law of Moses and in gasps of a dying master alone on a cross.

Part of the mystery in the working of the Word is that any questioner needs to hear in order to believe, but also needs to belong in order to hear. How important it is to belong to a Christian congregation in order to be in a position to be exposed regularly to the word through worship, Bible study, fellowship, and service! *And* how important for every congregation to be alert to the questions and problems of daily life that drive people to seek the deep and abiding answers that God's Word provides. Yet, in the end, faith itself, knowing oneself to be a sheep of the Good Shepherd, is a gift. It is not a "logical conclusion" at the end of a set of questions and answers. It is more like the experience of being *held*, which an infant knows to the marrow when cradled by the loving parent. This is a foretaste of that quality of eternal life in which believers will know themselves to be secure in the embrace of God for temporal life and through momentary death and into an imperishable eternity.

Psalm 23

There are few things more frustrating than walking through a shopping mall with ten-year-old twins. They are full of the “gimmies.” Over the pleasant din of the crowd can be heard the wailing choruses of “I want this” and “I want that.” And if the kids are at all precocious, one can hear, “I NEED this!” It’s about then that the words of this ubiquitous psalm enter my mind.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

In our culture this is a tall order. It’s not just the kids who are full of wanting. It’s also adults who are caught up in the frenzy of wanting things they don’t need. In the consumer culture we’ve created, it’s easy to see why everyone is chasing after tons of useless stuff. Not wanting things is akin to being unpatriotic. It’s the pursuit of fulfill-ing wants that drives the economy after all. This is why we hear so much about the much vaunted “consumer confidence.”

Imagine, though, if the words and spirit of this psalm were born anew in our lives. Conjure just for a moment, the shape of a life ungoverned by want. The Lord is our shepherd, not our paycheck or the Mercedes or the new house and its accompanying mortgage, but God. God is our guide and our master, and this God will liberate us from the slavery of wanting.

For some, the notion of enslavement in this context may be off-putting, if not downright offensive. Nonetheless it is enslavement. If our pursuit of material gain takes precedence over relationships, we are enslaved. If our work becomes our only focus and we withdraw from family and community in single-minded concentration, we are enslaved. More than that, such dogged following of one piece of our lives comes dangerously close to idolatry.

This is why the discipline of praying this familiar psalm can be helpful. It reminds us of choices made, directions taken. “The Lord,” and no other, “is my shepherd.” This means that other shepherds have been rejected. “I shall not want....” This part is deep.

When we claim the Lordship of God in our lives, it’s not simply a hand-waving sentimental thing done with contemporary praise music. This means that God and God’s ways are the driving force for us. Indeed we shall no longer want, because we’ve given over our desires and our egos, our neediness and our inadequacies to God’s incredible grace.

Here’s a challenge. Pray this psalm daily for six months. With each prayer, remember the choices made. It’s God who is your shepherd. It’s God who leads you beside still waters, and no other. Then after the six months is up, see what’s happened with your wants and desires. You just might be surprised.

Acts 9:36-43

The City Temple Church in London was packed with worshipers on Easter Sunday morning in 1941. None of the congregants knew this would be their last Sunday worship service in their historic church. Four days later the Nazi aircraft buzzed overhead like flies around something dying. Wave after wave of Nazi planes unloaded their payload of bombs destroying much of London including City Temple. The following Sunday morning the congregation met in a rented hall. In spite of total decimation of their property ... insecurity rampant in the streets ... facing fear and insurmountable odds, the church sang their morning call to worship “Lead us, Heavenly Father, Lead Us.”

Author Randal Denny commented, “A building belonging to the church can be destroyed, but the CHURCH cannot. It is God’s possession.”

Tabitha was a member of the church who was possessed by God. Though she was dead, God was not done with her. Through Peter she was raised to life. Many of our churches seem dead or dying, but they are God’s possession and he is willing to bring them back to life if we will allow him to do so!

Derl K.

Acts 9:36-43

When Peter raised Dorcas from the dead, he presented her to saints and widows, people who would be credible witnesses to the event. It was important to have witnesses who, when they related the events of Peter’s actions, would be believed. A credible witness, in modern jurisprudence, is one who is competent to give evidence, and is worthy of belief. The saints fit this qualification. Secondly, a credible witness is one who was actually present at the event. Although turned outside the room, the widows could testify to Dorcas’ death. Thirdly, a credible witness is one will honestly relate the affair fully, without any purpose or desire to deceive, suppress, or add to the truth.

The witnesses Peter selected, the saints and widows, must have been credible because many people who heard their story came to believe in the Lord.

Emphasis Archives

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Bountiful Host, what a profusion of good things you have created for us to enjoy. Your provisions for the sustenance of the body and the spirit are beyond measure, our cup overflows. Your promises are sure and we expect your goodness and mercy to nurture us all our days and bring us to the time and place where we know your presence even more intimately than today. Today and every day, may we remember to express our thanksgiving. Amen.

Excerpted from *Lectionary Worship Aids* by B. David Hostetter,
[CSS Publishing Co., Inc.: Lima, Ohio]

Acts 9:36-43

In a 1970s Batman comic, the caped crusader takes a trip to a place called Crime Alley. There is an air of mystery about his purpose there; he seems to be moving aimlessly, though stealthily, through the run-down area. He asks around for a woman named Leslie Thompkins. A little old lady is nearly robbed while taking a deposit to a charity foundation and Batman saves her, and she remarks that it is good to see him again, although she doesn't understand why Batman comes to watch over her one night out of every year. Batman thanks her for her good heart and leaves, his night in Crime Alley drawn to a close. As he flies away, he thinks back to the night his parents were killed — in Crime Alley. The audience learns that the little old lady is the mysterious Leslie Thompkins, and that she was the person who found a young Bruce Wayne crying over his parents' bodies, and the woman who helped him get through his grief. Like Tabitha, Leslie Thompkins' love for others gave her a protector greater than she could have expected.

Leah T.

Acts 9:36-43

Many years ago, a group of women began sewing small bags and then collecting personal items to donate to one of the downtown churches that housed homeless people. The women enjoyed each other's company as they met in each other's homes. They felt they were making a difference in the lives of those down and out because of difficult situations.

The pastor, as well as the congregation, thanked these women for all that they did. Martha even has a letter from the governor recognizing and thanking the group for their years of service to the homeless.

Over the years, other women volunteered to help sew or fill the bags with toothbrushes, toothpaste, combs, razors, and shaving cream for men. As the years progressed the women got older and sadly were no longer able to continue. It was hard to find other people to take over this ministry.

It was at Martha's funeral during the sharing time when someone stood to speak. No one recognized this well-dressed gentleman. He told of the time when he was down on his luck and lived in the basement of the downtown church for several months. He remembered receiving one of the bags the women sewed and filled.

Inside his bag was a hand-written note of encouragement, along with a Bible verse. Tears were streaming down his cheeks as he shared how that act of kindness made all the difference to him. He was thankful for the women's ministry and all the lives they must have touched over the years.

The next Sunday, several people came forward to continue the work Martha began because they realized the difference it made in the lives of those they wanted to help.

Emphasis Archives

Revelation 7:9-17

By the time this is published, the Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver will already have been played. While I greatly enjoy watching the various events, one of my favorite parts of any Olympic Games is the opening ceremony. It always amazes me seeing all these athletes from every part of the globe coming together, putting their differences aside, and uniting for two weeks for a common purpose: to celebrate athletic excellence.

Imagine how much more thrilling this scene in Revelation would be, seeing people of every language, every ethnic background, and every culture imaginable joined together, not to celebrate athletics, but coming together to worship the one true God!

Craig K.

Revelation 7:9-17

It was a difficult year for Heather, although she will tell you that she made it through. She had moved too many times during the past five years and sensed that another move was coming. She felt uneasy at the thought of yet another move and the fear of the unknown. She experienced a death in her family. She was facing financial problems. The many concerns that she faced were beginning to take a toll on her health. She knew that she should have found comfort in God's promises, yet she says, "It's too easy to panic when life seems out of control."

When we face struggles our first thought might be that we did something wrong. Heather learned through her struggles that God does not guarantee a trouble free life. Instead, truly living for God can mean that there will be tough times every now and then. Yet, Heather claims, "God will be with us every step of the way." She affirms the belief that God has a plan for her life that

fills her with a fresh sense of hope as she faces an unknown future.

The apostle John had a powerful vision while living through some difficult days. The vision gave him and the other believers hope. Hope can be found in the belief that no matter how bad things become God is still in control. On the day of vindication John claims that, "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Tim S.

Revelation 7:9-17

The story is told of a despairing philosopher in London in the late nineteenth century. One night he walked through the fog. He was asking himself about the meaning of life and wasn't finding any answers. A bobby saw him wandering and thought him suspicious. He ran up to the philosopher, "All right, fellow. Who are you? Where did you come from and where are you going?"

The philosopher looked at him through sad eyes, "I don't know. I wish with all my life that I did."

Humans need to know that we're God's beloved creatures. Especially when we're suffering, as were the Christians to whom Revelation is addressed, we need confirmation that our goal is to be with God and our purpose is to worship and serve God. Our weekly worship is a reminder, practice, and foretaste of our eternal destiny of worshipping and glorifying God.

Emphasis Archives

Revelation 7:9-17

How do you get into the party that ends all parties? Getting ready for a party, the husband slaps on some old jeans and a sweater, throws on some shoes, and he's ready to go. He turns around to see ten different coordinated outfits carefully displayed on the bed. His wife begs him with strain in her voice, "Which one should I wear?" He is not sure if this is another one of those trick questions like "Do you think these jeans make me look fat?" But she knows that if you are going to a party, you've got to have the right clothes.

How much more true that is when it comes to the party of heaven. You must have the right clothes to be admitted into heaven. The Holy Ma'tre D' of heaven will not accept our shirts stained with sin and shame. He rejects our jeans splattered with the sticky jam of selfishness and

lovelessness. He turns away the filthy ties of our tantrums, our lustful thoughts, and our apathy. But you will notice that all the people in heaven weren't wearing filthy clothes. They were wearing white robes, stately, flowing robes of purity. It's not that they never sinned, but their sins have been covered by Jesus.

Emphasis Archives

John 10:22-30

I was talking to somebody not long ago who said, "You know, I used to believe in God; but then, as I grew up, I found it harder and harder to think of this old man up there in the sky, so far removed from all the pain and suffering down here in the world."

And I said to him, "I don't believe in that god either! The God I believe in is the god I see in the middle of the pain and the suffering down here in the world. Without Jesus, the crucified Jesus, sharing and bearing the pain and sin and suffering of the world, I don't actually know who on earth or in heaven God might be at all."

You see, if you envisage a god up there in the sky, detached from the reality of the world, any worship you offer will simply be a distant acknowledgement of majesty, like the ploughboy doffing his cap as the great nobleman rides by ignoring him. And if you go the other route, as my friend was inclined to, and say that therefore the word "god" can only refer to the impulse of goodness inside ourselves, then you'll find it pretty hard to sustain any real sense of worship at all. All you're left with is the ploughboy imagining himself to be a nobleman. But if Jesus is to be the lens through which you glimpse the beauty of God, you will discover what it means to worship, because you will discover what it means to be loved.

— from N.T. Wright, *For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], pp. 9-10

Emphasis Archives

John 10:22-30

Many people have trouble with poetry because it does not tell things plainly. The goal of the poet, it seems to many, is to twist words into unintelligible units of sound and spread them around with funny spaces on a piece of paper. Someone reading a poem needs to know what the poet is referencing with certain symbols and word choices — and often those symbols and word choices

are very difficult to interpret! A good poem has many layers of meaning, and a reader must be able to sort through the symbolism and images in order to arrive at the greater truth held within the words of the work. Poems are valuable because they tell us important things about our lives and ourselves; but they are most valuable because they do not tell us plainly. Their true value lies in giving us the chance to come to the conclusions on our own.

Leah T.

John 10:22-30

Moving toward the east side of the great temple in Jerusalem, to Solomon's porch, to find shelter from the chilling wind, Jesus' last scene of public ministry takes place. It is the Feast of Dedication or Feast of Lights, as it was also called. It was a time of hope for the Jews, for it marked the last national deliverance. This was also a time of tremendous celebration for the restoration and purification of the temple, particularly the altar, by Judas Maccabeus three years after its desecration by the Greek general Antiochus Epiphanes in 178 BC. At this feast excitement ran rampant for there was the hope for a new beginning. People from all over the Jewish community were wondering if God's divine deliverer would come to set his people free. They moved closer to Jesus wanting to know if he was the Christ ... "tell us plainly." He says, "I told you, and you do not believe." If we are to have hope we must believe in Jesus.

Rutherford wrote, "Our hope is not hung upon such an untwisted thread as, 'I imagine so,' or 'It is likely'; but the cable, the strong rope of our fastened anchor, is the oath and promise of him who is eternal verity; our salvation is fastened with God's own hand, and Christ's own strength..." What a hope! What a security!

Derl K.

John 10:22-30

Our neighbor's two-story house featured wide eaves. Birds loved to build nests in their ample shade. One day we watched a "dogfight" between two small birds and a large crow. The large black bird had just snatched a helpless young one from the smaller birds' nest. The parents followed in futile pursuit.

Can the devil capture us and take us away as if we were helpless nestlings? Christians debate the issue of their security. Some often quote Jesus: "No one can snatch them out of the Father's hand." It comforts them to know of God's protection. It's true that God doesn't lose any battles. What he wants to happen will happen —100% of the time.

But we must be careful to quote Jesus in context. Before he gave that assurance he also said that his "sheep listen ... and ... follow." If we're not listening to the Lord and following in his steps, we have a dangerously false sense of security.

Emphasis Archives

CHARTING

THE COURSE

Something old, something new

Human beings have an interesting relationship to old and new. We feel nostalgic about the old and hesitate to let it go, but we get very excited about the new and are eager to have it.

The child doesn't want to give up the old toy, doll, or blanket that is tattered by so much day-in-and-day-out love, yet she is eager to get the newest toy being advertised on TV or displayed in the store windows. Traditionally, the bride has with her "something old and something new" on her wedding day. Each New Year we sing the age-old counsel, "Make new friends, but keep the old. One is silver, the other gold."

Meanwhile, even in the midst of all the excitement that accompanies some "new" thing, I am reminded of the sober judgment of Ecclesiastes: "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). I cannot follow that ancient author to every conclusion he reaches, but he has a case to make about there being nothing new under the sun.

A segment of the population lined up outside the doors every time a new installment of the Harry Potter series came out. Yet it wasn't really something new; it was just the latest version of something old. Indeed, that was its appeal — that it was the latest version of something already familiar. Was the first installment so heralded as the seventh? Likewise, with each "new" version of Microsoft Windows, each "new" model produced by Boeing, and each "new" invention by Dyson.

In truth, very few things can be called new. Honestly, we human beings are better customers for the more common phenomenon — that is, the latest version of something old — because it suits our divided allegiance to old things and new things.

In our three lections for this week, we bear witness to the God who makes all things new (Revelation 21:5). And we discover the particular beauty found in the truth that his "new" is a perfected version of something "old."

Acts 11:1-18

Chapter 11 follows chapter 10. That may seem too obvious to bother mentioning, but it is an important detail in this instance. Peter is reporting to the church in Jerusalem what he has just seen, experienced, and learned. The experiences that he recounts are reported to us in detail in chapter 10.

To understand the context of this passage, we must begin by recognizing that Jerusalem was the headquarters of the early church. That's where the apostles were (Acts 8:1), that's where decisions were made (Acts 15:1-2), and that's where authority resided (e.g., Acts 8:14-15; 11:22; 12:25; 15:2). It is to this uniquely important church that Peter returns to give his report.

The issue at hand was the phenomenon of Gentile Christians. That doesn't sound like much of a phenomenon to us, of course, since nearly everyone in most of our congregations is non-Jewish. But to the church of Acts 11 — perhaps only a decade removed from the ascension of Jesus — the Gentile Christian was still a brand-new phenomenon. Frankly, the church was uncertain what to do about it.

It requires a real exercise of the imagination to climb back into the throes of a conundrum once it was been resolved. That is the task for our congregations this Sunday in considering this passage: trying to understand all the fuss in the early church surrounding Gentile believers.

That fuss is expressed here in one sentence: "So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'" But the fuss persisted beyond this episode, causing trouble in Antioch (Acts 15:1-2), famously in Galatia (e.g., Galatians 5:7-12), and perhaps also in Philippi (Philippians 3:2-3).

The battle had several fronts: theological, cultural, historical, and ethnic. And who can see or say with clarity where doctrine leaves off and prejudice begins, where tradition is mistaken for truth, or where our way has become synonymous with God's way? Suffice it to say that, for the most earnest and unadulterated antagonists in this ongoing debate within the early church, there was a genuine, theological concern: namely, if the Jewish law is the expression of God's guidance and the revelation of his will for holy living, then are not Christians obliged to obey it?

For as long as the Christian believers were all Jewish, there was not much to debate. Indeed, the issue of the law's relevance to the Christian might not have been adequately explored. What about these Gentile converts — men and women who had not grown up observing the law of Moses? Shouldn't they be

instructed in that law and initiated in their observance of it by circumcision of the males?

Peter's response to the entire issue — both here and at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 — is simply that of a bystander who has witnessed God's activity. He does not reason from his head or conjure up his own theological policies. Rather, he simply reports what he saw God do.

First, there was the vision from God on the rooftop, with its obtuse message and dawning meaning. Second, there was the coincidence of the visitors from Cornelius' house, sent by an angel. Then, most dramatically, there was the sending of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles, even before they were baptized (let alone circumcised).

Peter's conclusion? "What was I that I could hinder God?" It was a most sensible verdict. People through the ages could have spared themselves a great deal of grief if they had adopted the same attitude.

Though the theological issues surrounding Christian Gentiles continued to trouble the church and dog Paul's ministry, for this moment, at least, there was happy resolution. After hearing Peter's full report, the critics were silenced. And, in the end, "They praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'" Jonah, we recall, was not so pleased by the Ninevites' salvation (Jonah 4:1-3). These Jewish Christians in Jerusalem deserve some credit, therefore, for their joyful response to God's work among a different group of people.

Revelation 21:1-6

Ask the average churchgoer what the book of Revelation is about; he or she will likely respond, "It's about the end of time." A perusal of this ultimate chapter from Revelation, however, prompts us to think again. Is this book about the end, or is it about the beginning?

Right at the start of the passage, John reports the sight of a "new heaven" and of a "new earth." Shortly after, he witnesses the delivery of the "new Jerusalem." And then, toward the end of the passage, John hears the Lord declare, "See, I am making all things new." The book is about endings, to be sure, and we will observe that part of the truth in a moment. For our starting place, however, we should proclaim to our people that Revelation is a starting place, not just an ending place.

The new beginnings reported in Revelation do not just reveal God's plan; they also reveal his character. For the very fact that he plans a universal fresh start is a testimony to his mercy and his grace.

Meanwhile, our selected lection also makes clear that the new beginnings require the ending of old things. "The first things have passed away," John reports, and we do well to list those things that are itemized in our passage. "The first heaven and the first earth" are among the things that pass away. Likewise, the sea, "the first things," every tear, death, mourning, crying, and pain all "will be no more."

Here, too, we meet with the mercy and grace of God. By ourselves, you and I cannot put an end to such things as tears, death, mourning, and pain. The Lord knows we have devised a

great many techniques — some of them quite counterproductive — to try to steer ourselves clear of such unpleasantness. For as much as we say that we hate death and pain, human beings seem to create more of it, not less.

The people of God could not have taken down Jericho's walls (Joshua 6), scared off the Assyrians (2 Kings 19), or rolled away the stone (Mark 16:1-4) by themselves, but all these were eliminated by God. So, too, feeble humanity cannot rid itself or the world of sin's terrible ripples, but God can. And God will. He will bring all these horrors to an end, even as he launches a perfect new beginning.

The real beauty of that new beginning, meanwhile, is not found in that which has passed away or that which has been made new. Rather, the profound excellence of what is promised and envisioned in this passage is the immediate presence of God. "See, the home of God is among mortals," the voice declares. It is an astonishing headline. The same God whose Son "lived among us" (John 1:14) in the temporary mission of the incarnation now "will dwell with them" as a permanent arrangement. "They will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them." Once again, this promise is proof of the amazing grace of God.

Ask the congregation the question again: "What is the book of Revelation about?" They say it's about the end. Yes, it is. But it is also about a beginning. Through it all, it is manifestly about God's grace.

John 13:31-35

Our gospel lection is brief, but features three distinct themes. First, Jesus speaks about glory and being glorified. Second, he talks about leaving. Third, he teaches about loving. We will consider all three themes.

We are surprised by the tense of Jesus' verbs when he talks about glory. "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him," he declares. Take it out of context and ask the average person, "When do you suppose Jesus made this statement?" I imagine that most folks would guess Easter. Perhaps a few might think of his baptism or the Transfiguration. But this is an improbable scene: Judas has just left the room to betray Jesus, and "now the Son of Man has been glorified"?

New Testament scholar R.V.G. Tasker sees no contradiction here. "The passion of the Son of Man," Tasker argues, "is the most splendid expression that the world can ever see of God's love for humankind." Consequently, inasmuch as the unhindered departure of Judas marks the beginning of that passion, Tasker sees this moment as one of glory for both the Father and the Son.

The second prominent theme in this passage is the expressed prospect of Jesus leaving. "I am with you only a little longer," Jesus affectionately tells his companions. Given the context, we are inclined to think that Jesus refers to his death. In just a few hours, after all, he would be arrested, and by that same time the next day, he would be dead and buried. The sadness that he anticipates in them regarding his departure makes us think of the death he is about to suffer and the confused grief they are about to experience.

A broader examination of the material, however, suggests a

different picture. Jesus makes multiple other references to “going” during this Last Supper discourse in John (13:3; 14:4-6, 12, 28; 16:5-10, 28), but they do not add up to a picture of his death and burial. On the contrary, the overwhelming sense of these “going” sayings is that Jesus is going to his Father. We typically associate that more with his ascension than his death, but this is consistent with the broader tone of the fourth gospel. John’s is the most serene and victorious portrayal of Jesus’ death, and so at the Last Supper Jesus appears to be looking past his passion to his exaltation. Such a mindset is captured by the writer of Hebrews when he says of Jesus that “for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2).

The third theme is the new commandment (from which, incidentally, Maundy Thursday gets its distinctive name). At first blush, the commandment may not seem new at all, for the commandment to love appears both earlier in Jesus’ ministry (Matthew 22:34-40) and earlier in scripture (Leviticus 19:18). Where, then, is the newness? It must either be in the intramural emphasis (i.e., “one another” rather than “your neighbor”) or in the standard for love (“as I have loved you” rather than “as you love yourself”).

Within the context, the intramural element should not be discounted. Surely the messages of the Last Supper discourse are primarily “in house,” and the behavior of the believers toward one another is an element of these teachings (13:14-15; 15:12, 17 cf.). The primary newness of this commandment, however, is not who shares this love but rather who models this love. “As I have loved you” — this is the operative element in this love command. To love you as I love myself is a tall order, to be sure, but to love you as Jesus has love me is of an entirely different magnitude. We will explore that magnitude a bit more below.

Application

In our consideration of each of the passages assigned to this week, we observed the theme of newness.

The scene from Revelation dripped with newness. The new heaven, new earth, and new Jerusalem are all explicitly identified. Beyond them, there is the broad promise that God is making all things new.

The brief passage from John’s gospel, meanwhile, features the “new commandment” that Jesus gave to his disciples. It doesn’t occupy a lot of space, but it occupies an important place in our remembrance of the occasion and in our understanding of Christian living.

Finally, the episode from the book of Acts does not make explicit reference to something “new,” yet something new is at the very heart of the story. Indeed, there is only a controversy to be resolved because of that something new. Peter has followed God’s lead in doing a new thing: Welcoming uncircumcised Gentiles into the body of Christ, and seemingly changing all the old definitions about what is unclean, who is acceptable, and what God requires.

As we look more carefully at this prevailing theme of newness, we discover a happy pattern: namely, that God is, in each case,

simply offering a perfected version of something old. Or, as we are accustomed to hearing in our advertising, “new and improved.”

The principle is most explicit in Revelation. What specific things are identified as new? Heaven, earth, and Jerusalem. These are all things that already exist. They have already been part of God’s plan and God’s work in the past. Now, however, he is issuing new (and perfect) versions of each.

Likewise, the commandment to love is not altogether new. As we noted above, it goes back in Jesus’ own teaching, and it goes all the way back to the Old Testament law. Yet this love is a new version of the old model. And this love — the way he has loved us — is the perfect version.

Then there is the episode from Acts. In truth, the old principles remain in place: namely, that God has a covenant people, among and through whom he intends to do his work. But now that people is broadened. Indeed, it has become all-inclusive, which is his perfect picture (Genesis 12:3; Isaiah 2:2; Jeremiah 3:17). So the church is revealed as the new version of the covenant people of God.

We love that which is old. We love that which is new. Here is a great testimony to God’s love and redeeming grace: that he takes what is old and makes it new. Including us (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Alternative Application

John 13:31-35. “A Lesson in Love.” Is there a subject that has inspired more novels and movies, more poems and songs, than love? Is there a part of life that brings more joy or causes more grief than love? Is there a greater factor of our emotional health, our sense of well-being, and our personal fulfillment than love?

In the day-to-day routine, we may not give love the prominence it deserves. When we’re seeing life clearly, though, we recognize that love — and our love relationships — ranks higher than anything else in our lives.

That human experience should resonate very naturally, therefore, with the gospel emphasis on love. Love is presented as the greatest commandment for human beings (Matthew 22:34-40) and the quintessential attribute of God (1 John 4:8). Here, in this climactic set of teachings from Jesus, we discover that love is our new commandment (v. 34) and our distinctive hallmark (v. 35).

The irony with human beings is that, while love is so essential and so fundamental, we are not necessarily very good at it. So much defective love, vacillating love, conditional love, and counterfeit love is foisted upon people in their human relationships, and then we perpetuate our dysfunctions from one generation to the next. We need the author of love — indeed, the one who is love — to come and tutor us in this universal basic.

Near the culmination of his lifelong lesson, the tutor gives his final assignment to his students. “It’s time for you to love one another,” he says, “and now you know how to do it. For you should do it just the way that I have loved you.”

It is worth our meditation, individually and collectively, to consider just how he has loved us. Then let us turn around and apply that to our fellowship and our families, to our neighbors and coworkers. For when we love like him, it will be apparent to all that we are his.

Psalm 148

This psalm of praise is a beautiful expression of devotion and honor. It stretches from the personal to the global and back again as the mighty deeds of the holy are extolled. It has been set to music and enacted in liturgical dance. The praises have rung out from children’s choirs in New Jersey to tribal dances in Zimbabwe. These are powerful words indeed.

In singing and praising this psalm, however, and interesting question arises. Do we praise God because God needs praise? This is God, after all. The Creator of the universe: The one who has ordered the planets and set the stars in place. This is the God who has created each person and numbered the hairs on our heads. Are we to believe that this omnipotent God demands praise from us? Are we to understand that God needs our praise like some toddler requires the praise of parents so that he or she can grow up with a confident sense of self? What are we talking about here? Where does praise come from, anyway?

Most of us offer praise when we’re impressed. We pat our child on the head and say, “nice job,” when he takes out the garbage without spilling any on the way. We praise friends who succeed at various tasks, and we seek to shake the hands performing artists who have wowed us with their mastery of the instrument.

Does this mean that we’re impressed with God? If our praise of God emerges because we think God has done a nice job, we’ve missed the mark. If we say, “Nice work, God. I really like those Redwood trees,” and move on to the next thing that impresses us we have done more than miss the mark. We have tried to supplant God by passing judgment on God’s handiwork. It’s like we wander down the aisle in a department store pointing at the merchandise. “I like this, and that, and that. But I don’t like this.” What happens when we suddenly aren’t impressed by God? What do we do when the bus full of kids slides off the road on a stormy night? Does our praise give way to criticism? Do we shake our head and remove our affirmation and support? If this is the case, we have missed the boat entirely.

Praise is not approval, it is surrender.

We dance and sing and shout our praises because we have given ourselves over completely to God and receive God as our master. Praise of this magnitude steps away from judgment and patronizing nods of the head. This praise gives everything up so that the whole being can be lost in the act of praise. Stomp the feet, shout as loud as you can! Shake your head and pick your guitars and drums and anything you can find! It’s time to surrender everything to God in praise.

This is the attitude expressed in this psalm, and it moves us to the question of what kind of praise do we offer in church each Sunday? Is it the patronizing nod of approval? Or is it a divine act of surrender?

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Illustrations

Acts 11:1-18

Many by now are probably familiar with the movie *End of the Spear*, an independent dramatization of the real-life spearing of five American missionaries by natives of the Ecuadorian rainforest in the 1950s. This tribe, the Waodani, was once an extremely violent society with revenge killings running rampant and even threatening to wipe the tribe out altogether. Many of the villagers and other native tribes in the surrounding area avoided the Waodani like the plague because of their violent nature. If there was one group of people that would not accept the gospel, this would be it. However, because of the work of people like Rachel Saint, the sister of one of the slain missionaries, many of the Waodani have now come to know Jesus as their Savior.

Peter didn't think that a Roman could become a Christian, but when he saw the work of the Spirit in Cornelius, he knew that God could reach anyone. As he told the Christians in Jerusalem, "If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" (v. 17).

Craig K.

Acts 11:1-18

In many churches, holy communion is served from the "common cup" rather than or in addition to, individual glasses. One morning in Bible study when the class was studying Acts 18, Emma had a question for the pastor.

"Pastor," she began, "it has always bothered me that we call the communion chalice, the common cup. Isn't this the cup that contains the consecrated wine? How in the world can we call common what the Lord has blessed?"

She had a point. Although "common" in this case meant communal, to avoid confusion, from that day onward the church referred to the common cup as either the chalice or the communal cup.

Emphasis Archives

Acts 11:1-18

Our world suffers color, ethnic, and racial divisions. The early church faced prejudice problems, too. Beginning as

an all-Jewish movement, some believers thought it should remain that way. They resented Peter's Spirit-led mingling with the Gentile, Cornelius, in Caesarea. "So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him."

"We're related to the Queen of England," my mother used to tell us when my siblings and I were young. She spoke derisively of my dad's origins basing her judgment mostly on his parents' modest circumstances.

When my dad retired, he and my mother researched their genealogies. They never uncovered any royal connections on my mother's side. My father, however, could trace his roots to about the twelfth century.

It proved my mother's early "snootiness" unfounded. She and my dad discovered good and not-so-good ancestors on both sides of the family and later laughed about it. Because all of us have descended from Adam, the in-between-lines are pointless.

None of us is worth a raft of rancid rats' nests unless adopted anew into God's family by Christ's mercy. His is the only special line worth our concern. Peter's critics were wrong. So are those who make prejudicial judgments of any kind.

Emphasis Archives

Acts 11:1-18

Bishop William Willimon of the North Alabama Annual Conference of the United Methodist church, tells of receiving a letter from a lay person complaining that their pastor is frequently seen leaving a bar in the community. You could understand why this would be upsetting for people inside the church — their pastor frequenting a neighbor bar. The bishop called the pastor to see if this charge was true.

The pastor confirmed that it was true, that he and some lay people go to the neighborhood bar on Thursday and Friday evenings. Further, he explained that the church he was serving had been declining for over a decade with no new members. So the pastor and several lay people decided to go to the bar and talk with anyone who wanted to talk. As a result of this ministry the church gained ten new members all on profession of faith. This year, the pastor told the bishop, they expect to receive twenty new members. Further, the pastor told his bishop that he would only stop going to the bar when Jesus does.

The very notion of associating let alone eating with Gentiles went against every-

thing that Peter believed. It went against his very nature. God had other plans that included all people. Peter had a dream or vision in which he was instructed to accept all people. He explained, "The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us." That notion represented a giant leap in belief — all people were precious in God's sight. Peter was open and welcomed Gentiles into the faith.

Tim S.

Revelation 21:1-6

"Water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink." This famous line is from the poem *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In the poem, the crew of a ship is stranded at sea — surrounded by sea water but lacking any fresh water to drink. Water is important to living things because it allows us to sustain life. Without water, we would shrivel up and die! However, we also realize that not just any water will do. We cannot drink salt water; we cannot drink contaminated water; we do not drink water that is unfiltered or muddy or full of chlorine. So when we hear about the gift of the water of life, we should not be surprised that this is a different level of water. There is water unfit to drink, water fit to drink, and water fit to be the gift of heaven. Each kind of water has its own purpose, and each is an important part of our lives.

Leah T.

Revelation 21:1-6

John's series of visions began in Revelation 19:11 and began with the "I saw" statements. The apostle sees a new world where those who have accepted Christ as Savior are drawn into this new existence with God. John applies it to the visual in verses 1-2 and to the audible in verses 3-8.

Billy Graham wrote that heaven will be the place of perfection that each person has longed for all of his/her life. Everything that has made earth ugly, unlovely, and tragic will be absent in heaven. There will be no more night, no death, no disease, no sorrow, no tears, no ignorance, no disappointment, no war, and no sin! It will be filled with health, vigor, virility, knowledge, happiness, worship, love, and perfection.

Author C.S. Lewis said, "A continual looking forward to the eternal world is not a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christ is meant to do.

It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next.”

Derl K.

Revelation 21:1-6

We’re used to infomercials with their “But wait ...” Before television, marketers printed another line on their packaging, “new and improved.” The word “new” caught the eye of our grandparents’ generation the way, “But wait ...” catches our ear.

In the Roman world in New Testament times “new” was viewed with suspicion, especially in religion. Rome tolerated new religions, but only if they bolstered the same (Roman) values as the established religions.

John’s experience of heaven granted him the sight and sound of “new.” Through Jesus, God creates a new intimacy with human beings and offers us fresh comfort and strength. John’s experience was then shared by other Christians whose intimate living with God eventually gave them the strength to turn the old, dying Roman Empire upside down and to supplant it with the new religion of the living Jesus.

Emphasis Archives

Revelation 21:1-6

Have you ever gone shell hunting at an ocean beach? I well remember the beautiful shells we found at Sanibel Island in Florida.

Every shell seemed to have a special, unique beauty. It was especially productive to be the first one out in the morning, when the tide and waves had carried new shells from the ocean depths.

One time, a friend was finding a beautiful variety of colorful shells. One new one with majestic color sat on a little bar of sand, his intention was to add that one to his collection later. He was gone a very short time, but upon returning saw that the shell had disappeared. A large wave had washed it ashore, carrying with it new shells, but that wave had also pulled the prized beautiful shell back into the sand and water. Revelation 21:5 says, “The old things have disappeared.” Regrettably, sometimes we have neglected the new until it is too late to claim them as our own. Remember today is the day of salvation. “Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Emphasis Archives

John 13:31-35

At our church, we have a family that moved to the United States several years ago from Taiwan. One of the great things about having people from another part of the world go to our church is that we get to see all the little cultural differences that not only set them apart, but also enrich the rest of us. That, and when they talk, it’s hard to not know they’re from another culture, as they speak in what they jokingly call “Chinglish.”

As Christians, we too have something that sets us apart, something that should let people know we’re different. As Jesus said, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (v. 35).

Craig K.

John 13:31-35

It is said that Albert Einstein kept two pictures of great scientists on his office wall: Sir Isaac Newton and James Clerk Maxwell. In his later years, Einstein took down the pictures of Newton and Maxwell and replaced them with two others: Mahatma Gandhi and Albert Schweitzer, two of the most noted humanitarians of his day.

Someone asked him why he had made the change. Einstein replied that he was coming, more and more, to appreciate that it is service, not science, that makes the difference in life. “Only a life lived for others,” he said, “is a worthwhile life.”

Emphasis Archives

John 13:31-35

“How can she be so stupid?” I asked my wife. Driving east, we came to a four-way stop. A car heading west arrived at the intersection just after we did. The woman driver had her left-turn signal on. We went first, proceeding east across the intersection. Suddenly, there she was, about to make a left turn directly into us. We both stopped abruptly making furious eye contact. I gestured that we had the right-of-way. “Where did she get her license?” I thought.

She angrily pointed at the front of our vehicle. “What part of my old Ford pickup didn’t she like?” I wondered. After another block, we intended to turn left. I reached to turn on the blinker and noticed it was already on — blinking for a right-hand turn. That’s why that “stupid” woman had pointed at our vehicle.

When I criticize someone else’s misdeed,

I usually soon discover either I was partially at fault, or else I duplicate the other person’s behavior shortly thereafter.

Jesus foresaw our road rage when he advised us to take the railroad ties out of our own eyes before we try to remove splinters from the eyes of others. He’d also say, “Keep calm. Leave the retaliation to me.” Vengeance usually destroys the avenger before it harms the person to whom the vengeance is directed. If we don’t all soon cool it, the only people left to express road rage will be hears drivers. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

Emphasis Archives

John 13:31-35

Billie is in her 90s and recently has been reminiscing about her long life. She thinks about events from her childhood. She is thankful for parents who taught her Christian values and habits. They not only taught with words she claims but also by their actions. Her parents influenced her life through her teen and young adult years.

One question continues to come to her mind, “Will the world be a better place because I have lived or because I have died?” As she evaluates her life other questions come to mind, “Have I loved my neighbor as myself? Have I treated others as I want them to treat me?” Her definition of love is simple, respect every person and be as kind to them as you possibly can. They might not have earned your respect and may have rejected your kindness, which she discovered through experience requires that you try harder to show love and kindness to them.

“I know I have failed many times,” Billie honestly reflects, “how thankful I am that God is merciful and forgiving.”

To attempt to live with pure love in your heart will change individuals and ultimately society. Billie hopes that her children and grandchildren will follow her example.

The distinguishing factor in each of our lives is how we have shown our love to other people. In the Upper Room prior to his arrest and crucifixion Jesus gave the disciples and us a new commandment, to love one another. Jesus set the example as he told his friends, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

Tim S.

CHARTING

THE COURSE

The road ahead

When the Danish novelist, George Brandes, was a young man, he looked up to Henrik Ibsen. Ibsen was much older than Brandes, but he took notice of the young writer. Once, Brandes asked the famous dramatist for help and encouragement.

Ibsen wrote a long letter in response, sharing this advice: If you want to serve your world, you have to look inside first. You have to find out what you're made of. You have to mine the depths of your own heart.

Then you have to be true to yourself, letting your faith shine for others. Said Ibsen, "There is no way in which you can benefit society more than by coining the metal you have in yourself."

He was right. No Christian can bring anything of true value to his world by putting on airs, by denying the grace of God within, or by keeping the power of the Spirit locked up. Pious hypocrisy is of no benefit to the world.

We're always eager to talk about the worst in society — corruption, greed, shams, materialism. Are we also eager to talk about the best of God within us? The strength of those who hold weak hands and trembling knees? The generosity of those who break bread with the poor? The courage of those who say "No" when the rage of the world says "Yes" or of those who by faith in God say "Yes" when the scoffers of the world say "No"?

These are the things that Paul, John, and Jesus mention in our texts for today. Someone calls to Paul out of the darkness of another room, and he establishes a church of light in territory previously alien to the gospel. In political exile himself, John finds his heart torn by the struggles of his congregation in Ephesus and those of Christ in the rest of the Lycus and Meander River valleys, and he places before them a future that motivates. Jesus nudges his disciples tenderly into a foreboding future, pointing them to the hope they possess, which is stronger than the world around them. It is faith and trust that pave the good road ahead.

Acts 16:9-15

Soon after the Jerusalem council of Acts 15, Paul and Barna-

bas were eager to visit the Galatian congregations and inform them personally of the good outcomes in this early Christian theological debate that affected them so deeply (Acts 15:36). However, tensions soared between the pair of evangelists as they argued whether John Mark should be invited along (Acts 15:37); after all, he had suddenly "deserted" them on their first mission journey. In the end, Barnabas felt a family obligation to give it a try with Mark again, while Paul chose a new partner named Silas to join him in these travels (Acts 15:39-41).

It was probably late in 49 AD when Paul and Silas left Syrian Antioch. They traveled overland to the communities in central Asia Minor where Paul and Barnabas had established Christian congregations about eighteen months earlier. At Lystra they were joined by Timothy (vv. 1-2), a promising young man whose mother was Christian, but whose father was not. Together, as a growing company of itinerant preachers, they had in mind to go further north in Asia Minor (vv. 6-8), to new areas where Jewish settlements in Hellenic cities might give them an open door for talking about Jesus.

While pondering their options at Troas, Paul may have had some medical problems, for the text of Acts 16 shows a shift at that point from third-person references to second-person recollections. Obviously doctor Luke joined them in there. It was also in Troas that a divine directive came to Paul in a vision, and the company headed across the Aegean Sea to Macedonia. At Philippi they found a small group of Jews worshipping at the river's edge on a sabbath (v. 13), and when Paul spoke about Jesus, a new Christian congregation was formed in the home of Lydia (vv. 14-15).

Lydia's story is only briefly told, but it hints at hurts and losses. For one thing, she is a woman, trying to make her way in a man's world. For another, she is an independent merchant, plying her trade a long way from home. Finally, she is a seeker, glomming onto a barely visible community of religious practitioners camping out for secret meetings on Saturday mornings. Something inside of her seems to resonate with pain and loneliness.

Sometimes the healing of our hurts starts only when we find another song to sing. Take the story of Helen, for instance. She had her sights set on a law degree from Ohio Wesleyan College. Then the flu epidemic of 1918 hit, taking her father as a victim. Suddenly everything had changed. Helen couldn't go to college; she had to get a job to support her mother.

The next ten years, Helen worked for an electrical utility

company. Just when she thought she was destined to remain lonely and unmarried, young Franklin Rice stepped in. He was a dashing entrepreneur, an up-and-coming banker. When they married in 1928, Helen's future was bright with promise.

A year later, the stock market crashed, and Franklin's financial world fell apart. He couldn't take the pressure, so he committed suicide. The litany of Helen's life is overwhelming: a deceased father, a lost car, a vanished fortune, a dead husband, a lonely existence.

You may know Helen better than you realize. You see, she eventually took a job with the Gibson Greeting Card company. Helen Steiner Rice became a folk poet who spoke the language of thousands of Christians.

Some years ago Helen was asked which poem she thought was her best. She couldn't tell, she said, but she did know which one meant the most to her. It was one about standing together at life's crossroads, looking toward the end and realizing that God's vision is that of a bend in our road.

That might well be the song Lydia sang the day Paul and Silas rolled into town with a vision for her future that she had never before considered.

Revelation 21:10, 22—22:5

Most of the elements of John's great vision for the future of the world are not new with him. These things had been seen earlier by the prophet Ezekiel (chs. 40-48), even though the historical context was a bit different and needed its own points of connection. Both men lived in times of enormous political and social unrest: for Ezekiel the great upset was Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple, which called all of God's favors with Israel into question and made the future extremely uncertain; for John the trouble of the times was Roman persecution of the Christian church, leading many to believe that the power promised by the risen Christ was only a flash-in-the-pan.

A longer view was needed, a vision of culminations required. So God gave to Ezekiel a panoramic high-definition wide-screen scan of the future age when the temple would be rebuilt beyond splendid, and the people of God had truly become a nation of priests. Then, according to the portrayed scenes, even the world itself would turn from wilderness waste into winsome wonderland where animals and humans would romp in a playful habitat.

John's vision of the future was built out of like-kind looks. Rivers, trees, and homing creatures would fill an expanse where humanity is restored and renewed, and the brilliance of God's good favor would shine with great radiance. One striking difference between the two eye-candy glimpse, however, was the temple. For Ezekiel it served as the solid residence of God-among-us; but John knew the rest of the story: Jesus is the breathing, heart-beating, living temple in our midst, and the divine glory radiates through him.

"What you see is what you get!" we sometimes say. But for the world of the Bible, what you see by faith is what you get, even if it doesn't show up on the radar screens of the world. This

is essential for those who are called to walk in trying times.

A.J. Cronin was a doctor who worked in England in the 1920s, and saw this well. In his autobiography, *Adventures in Two Worlds*, he describes working in the hospital of a poor northern mining district early in his career.

One evening a boy dying of diphtheria was brought to him. The hospital was dirty and poorly equipped, with no trained help. Still, Cronin had no alternative but to cut a hole in the boy's throat and insert a breathing tube in his windpipe. Only this emergency tracheotomy saved the fellow's life.

Exhausted, Dr. Cronin left the room. He called a young nurse to sit by the bed. She was only a wisp of a girl, and half starved, but she was a nurse, and she would have to do. "Make sure the tube stays clear, and don't take your eyes off of him," he told her. Then he lay down in a corner and slept.

Suddenly the young nurse was shaking him. She had fallen asleep too, and the tube had shifted. The boy had suffocated; he was dead.

Dr. Cronin's eyes blazed in anger. He told her that he would report her; that she'd never work as a nurse again. Standing in front of him, frail, timid, and shaking like a leaf, she mumbled something under her breath. "What's that you're saying?" he demanded.

So she said it a little louder: "Please give me another chance!" But he was furious that she dared ask such a thing. "You're finished," he said. "There will be no more chances for you!"

He stormed away and tried to sleep, but sleep wouldn't come because her words echoed through his mind: "Give me another chance. Please. Give me another chance!"

In the morning he tried to write the letter of discipline, but the picture of her pleading face wouldn't leave him. Finally he tore the letter up.

That's not the end of the story. That poor, feeble creature, more child than woman, went on to become the matron of one of England's greatest children hospitals. In her later years, she was known throughout the nation for her wisdom and devotion.

You see, she never forgot what happened that night. She never forgot her failure, but neither did she forget the grace that had given her a second chance. She carved her future out of her past, based upon one slim vision of eternity. She saw a new future — God's future — and she became part of it.

John 14:23-29

Jesus' "Farewell Discourse" (John 13-17) is a lovely, tender, intimate pause on the hard road of redemption. For a brief while the disciples sit with their master, wondering at his care in washing their feet, wrestling with the words of departure he was announcing, and lost in the kindness of his friendship. But the road ahead still needed to be traveled. Jesus had to go to the cross, and the disciples needed to get out of town with a message that would brush against the practices and policies of the day with world-shaking consequences. They might well become disheartened, just as Jesus faced the last few hours before crucifixion with trepidation. What kept both going was a clearer look at the final destinations on the road ahead. So the words of Jesus in today's gospel reading.

During World War II, many members of the Lutheran church in Germany lost their faith because Hitler seduced them into ways of living that kept them from practicing their faith. There was one man whom Hitler couldn't seduce. His name was Martin Niemöller. During World War I, Niemöller was a great hero in the German military. During World War II, he refused to bow to the authorities. He was marching to a different drumbeat. And march he did. When Hitler couldn't make him change his tune, couldn't bring him in line with the Nazis' brutal policies, he had him thrown into a concentration camp.

Seven years later, when he came out of the camp, this is what he said: "Christianity is not an ethic, nor is it a system of dogmatics, but a living thing." Everyone who saw the fruits of his life knew who he was and where he stood and how he builds his reputation.

Sometimes it seems fashionable to downplay our faith, to show ourselves in tune with our world, to treat Christianity flippanantly. "Don't become a fanatic," we say. "Don't go overboard with religion. I believe in my heart; just don't ask me to make a big deal of it."

Our faith is a big deal — or it's no deal at all. Our relationship with God is everything or nothing. According to Jesus, we either develop the habit of deep faith or we get stuck in the habits of the world. This is what Jesus' disciples needed to know on the eve of his departure.

Probably no one has expressed these sentiments better than the novelist Peter De Vries. De Vries grew up in a Christian home but spent most of his life trying to sort out who God was to him. His most powerful novel, *The Blood of the Lamb*, is also his most tragic. It follows the career of Don Wanderhope.

Don's family believes in God. They trust that God holds all things in his hand, and they know he will always be there for them. Don, however, doesn't find this to be the case. One tragedy after another dogs him, and he wishes God wouldn't pay so much attention to him.

At the climax of the story, Don's wife bears them a daughter, the one spot of grace in her father's otherwise troubled existence. When his wife is diagnosed with leukemia, Don is even willing to give God another chance. He goes back to church and prays for her. He begs God to heal her, to touch her life with relief.

She dies anyway. Don leaves the hospital carrying the birthday cake they were going to share together. He walks past a church. Hanging over the doorway is a life-size statue of Christ on the cross. Taking the cake in his hand, he throws it at Jesus. Icing drips from the face like blood.

That's Don's final prayer. That's what he thinks of the God who betrayed him. However, Jesus prophesied that we would have these times of loneliness in the world. That does not mean either he or the Father is unknowing or uncaring. It simply means that life is tough. What keeps us going in the right direction has got to be the call of eternity that assures us of a resolution, which transcends all of the garbage we have to deal with now. This is the teaching of the Paraclete. It is the presence of peace that grows in the soil of adversity.

Application

Several years ago, Fred Ferre spoke to a group of theology students about the source of his father's faith. His father was Nels Ferre, a distinguished theologian and author.

Nels came from a family of ten in Sweden. At thirteen, he was sent to find his future in America on his own. At the train station on the day of his departure, Nels' family surrounded him, holding hands as his father led in prayer. Then each member of the family said a prayer. That was his last earthly contact with his family.

Nels boarded the train and sat by the window, watching his family wave to him and cry. As the train rolled out of the station, his mother ran down the wooded platform alongside it. He slid the window open and leaned out just in time to hear her calling, "Nels! Nels! Remember Jesus! Remember Jesus!"

That's what we're doing in these brief moments together, in the season of Easter: remembering Jesus. Remembering God's love for us. Remembering what it means to be what we were meant to be.

There are many other things we could be doing right now, but is anything more important than carving our future out of our God-initiated past? "A man's real possession," said Alexander Smith, "is his memory." He was right.

Alternative Application

John 14:23-29. Nazi death camp survivor Elie Wiesel wrote a book called *The Trial of God*, which retells the story of great atrocities committed in the town of Shamgorod in 1649. As beautiful Hanna, daughter of Jewish innkeeper Berish, is preparing for her wedding, the Christian citizens of Shamgorod explode with angry violence, killing all the Jews in their town except Berish and Hanna, whom they horribly mistreat.

When a roving band of Jewish musicians arrives to celebrate the Feast of Purim, there's little cause for festivity. Since the feast must be observed, Berish suggests that they hold a trial to accuse God of all his crimes against the human race.

Berish says, "I want to understand why he is giving strength to the killers and nothing but tears and the shame of helplessness to the victims."

We all struggle with similar thoughts, don't we? Even if we haven't been hurt in life as badly as Elie Wiesel, or Berish, the innkeeper, we've all been troubled more than once by the problem of God's silence when our pain mounts up. This is when we need to remember Jesus' words of confidence, encouragement, and hope. Only he can supply a good future for us out of any broken pasts.

Psalm 67

If you spend any time in a car in the United States, you've seen the bumper sticker that says, "God Bless America!" At first blush this is a sentiment that finds agreement with most people. But when you contrast the words and sentiment of the ever-present bumper sticker with the words of Psalm 67, we are given reason to pause and think.

In this psalm the call for blessings is a humble, prayerful request. It is an acknowledgement of blessings received and a hopeful prayer that they might continue. "May God be gracious unto us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us...." Contrast this, if you will, with "God bless America!" The latter is more demand than it is prayer. It is more like the assertion of an expected reality than a prayerful request. It does not give thanks for blessings received, nor does it realize that God is perfectly able to remove those blessings.

If we think about it, we have much to lift up in prayer. God has blessed America! God has blessed America in a thousand powerful ways. The question that needs to be asked is not so much about God blessing America, but about how are we using the blessings God has given us to build God's kingdom? Do we use our phenomenal wealth to feed the hungry and heal the sick or do we keep two thirds of the world's resources for our own use? Do we share the richness of our natural resources as a nation, or do we try to control markets so that the resources of the world flow to us?

Oh, yes. God has blessed America. But the time has come for all Americans to consider how it is we will use our blessings to honor God. The time has arrived when we are being called to account for how we are using the many blessings God has bestowed upon us. The moment is upon us when the eyes of the world and the eyes of God are watching to see how we will move down the pathways of justice and hope; how we will stand on the fields of equity and prosperity.

One way for us to enter this moment is to peel the bumper stickers from our cars and replace them with something like this. "May We Use Our Blessings to Honor God."

The Legacy of Jesus

Gospel Note

In this portion of what John reports as "farewell discourses," Jesus points beyond his impending departure from his followers to four specific aspects of his legacy to them: 1) his words, which, if kept, will guarantee the presence of God and the Christ; 2) the Holy Spirit, as a teacher and reminder of these words; 3) an unearthly peace; 4) a promise of his future coming (though whether this reference is to be taken in the apocalyptic sense is unclear).

Liturgical Color: White

Suggested Hymns:

Dear Christians, One And All
One There Is, Above All Others

Easter 6

O God,
when we take an honest look at our lives, we must admit that it is often difficult to perceive your presence.
We know that you are near but we are often too busy to notice.
We tend to fill up our days with pursuits which are frequently meaningless.
We look for you in the places where we are most comfortable and then we complain when our vision becomes blurred.
We want to put ourselves first.
These are some of the reasons why it is often difficult to perceive your presence.
We need your Holy Spirit to guide us.
We invite you to make your home in our hearts, for without you we will never feel secure.
We need you to teach us how to keep your Word, for without your Word we are adrift in the sea of life.
Grant us the humility to put you first, then we will be able to perceive your presence everywhere!
Amen.

Excerpted from *Contemporary Lectionary Prayers: Based Upon Cycle C Lectionary Gospels* by Dennis Koch,
[CSS Publishing Co., Inc.: Lima, Ohio]

Illustrations

Acts 16:9-15

God created “heaven and earth,” one aspect of which means what is invisible to us (heaven) and what is visible (earth). These two “realms” are bound together and we live within both.

Because many modern people don’t think about the spiritual realm, they’re surprised to read in the New Testament how the invisible presses upon the visible. Ancient people were sensitive to the spiritual realm, and throughout the Bible, God grants contact with the spiritual realm through visions — the book of Acts is driven by visions.

The membrane between the spiritual and the physical realms is porous. We humans are on one side of this open window that’s covered by a flimsy curtain (Lydia might insist it’s purple). God is on the other side. God permeates this thin veil either by a gust of the Spirit or by the brightness of glory. Either way, God’s presence is seen and heard in our world.

Emphasis Archives

Acts 16:9-15

Lydia, the woman in the reading from Acts, is described as a seller of purple cloth. Why purple? Why is purple cloth any different from blue cloth, or green cloth, or orange cloth? In Jesus’ time, purple was the color of royalty. Purple cloth was purchased by the affluent and wealthy. In that time, fabric could not be colored in just any hue. Dyes were natural, and common colors were earthy — browns, yellows, greens. Purple dye was created by crushing thousands of tiny shellfish. The dye was rare, and the fabric said to be worth its weight in silver.

Leah T.

Acts 16:9-15

Chicago, Illinois, October 8, 1871, Dwight L. Moody stepped to the pulpit to preach to his waiting congregation. Weariness and fatigue weighed heavily on his tired body. The work of ministry, the hours demanded, and his workload pushed him to the limit of his physical abilities. His sermon title and text was, “What Will You Do Then with Jesus Who is Called the Christ?” He preached from the depths of his heart and soul to the multitudes gathered in that

church building. He always gave an opportunity for people to respond to the gospel message. But this day he was exhausted and at the end of the message he did something he never had done before and would never do again. He looked straight into the eyes of his people and said, “Now I give you a week to think that over. And when we come together again, you will have opportunity to respond.”

His musical director, Ira Sankey, moved forward and began to sing. As the song progressed, the blare of sirens could be heard in the streets of Chicago. Voices could be heard, “Fire, Fire,” and within minutes fire devastated the city of Chicago that day in October 1871. The death toll ran into the hundreds. A hundred thousand people were left homeless. Businesses were ruined. Lives changed forever. A few months later said Dwight L. Moody said, “I would give my right arm before I would ever give an audience another week to think over the message of the gospel. Some who heard that night died in the fire.”

When Lydia and those at the edge of the water that day heard Paul tell the wonderful news of the gospel, they responded positively. We should never put off making a decision to follow Jesus.

Derl K.

Acts 16:9-15

Often God speaks to us in the dark. In fact, sometimes we can see and hear clearer in the night than any other time. God came to Samuel in the night and told him he was calling him to do a special task for his people (1 Samuel 3:1-18). Jesus came walking on the water one stormy night when the disciples were afraid their boat would sink. Jesus whispered courage and hope to his followers in their fears (Mark 6:47ff). As the candles and shadows flickered on the table, Jesus broke bread and gave them a cup and said, “Remember me” (Mark 14:17ff). In today’s text, God spoke to the apostle Paul one night and it changed the direction of the mission of the church. In a vision, a voice came to Paul saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” Paul, at that time, had planned to go in the opposite direction, but he listened to that vision that came in the night and in that turning west, the gospel has come down to us. Lydia, a prominent citizen of the town, became the first European convert. God would use her to open a door for the gospel because of her

influence. One wonders what would have happened to the history of the church had Paul not responded to his Macedonian call that came that night in the dark.

Emphasis Archives

Revelation 21:10, 22—22:5

In the movie, *Insomnia*, Al Pacino’s character, detective Will Dormer, gets sent to Alaska on a murder investigation. Of course, it is summer in Alaska when Dormer goes and that means 24-hour daylight. Dormer, who happens to be under internal investigation for an incident in Los Angeles, arrives in Alaska tired. He tries to sleep, but he finds that the constant daylight makes sleep impossible. As the movie progresses, this lack of sleep becomes a major factor in the story line.

John’s glimpse into heaven’s glory in the book of Revelation reveals that there will be no sun or moon there; the Lamb, Jesus, will light the city. No dark. No night. How will that affect our sleep? Oh, right ... in heaven we won’t need to sleep.

Emphasis Archives

Revelation 21:10, 22—22:5

Some people look at me like I have two heads when I tell them this, but one place I would love to see is Alaska, even in the winter! I have never been there, and I would love to take in the rugged beauty of Kenai Fjords National Park or Mount McKinley. But one of the greatest things I’d like to see is the “midnight sun” that gives Alaska’s summer its particular distinction. In the northernmost part of the state, the sun never fully goes down, giving that area 24 hours of daylight around the summer solstice.

This passage in Revelation puts an Alaskan summer to shame. In New Jerusalem, there will be no night, any night! The radiance of the tangible presence of God will be all the light that city will ever need!

Craig K.

Revelation 21:10, 22—22:5

Ask people, “What special tree was located in the Garden of Eden?” Most will reply that it was the tree of knowledge of good and evil. That was an exceptional tree, but not the most special one. The most important tree there was the tree of life. That plant could have given Adam and Eve eternal life, but they never paid much attention to it. They became fixated on the other tree.

How could they be so unwise as to spend

their time on that forbidden fruit, and why did they believe the devil's lie? We need only look at our own choices. The tree of life is planted in heaven. We can enjoy its abundant fruit forever. It's ours if we'll faithfully follow the Lord and turn away from greed, doubt, power quests, and selfishness.

Will future generations say of us as we have of Adam and Eve, "How could they be so foolish as to not go for the good stuff — the tree of life?" "On either side of the river (of life) is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." Are you endeavoring to eat the fruit of that tree? Or are you making Adam's and Eve's mistake?

Emphasis Archives

Revelation 21:10, 22—22:5

There have been times in Darlene's life when she felt as though she lacked a clear sense of direction. Distractions during the day, including responding to requests from her children, leave her little time to contemplate important matters such as her relationship with Jesus.

"I have to find time each day, removing myself from the distractions to find my true compass," she states. Darlene enjoys quiet walks in a park near her home. Another favorite is a walk through the forest. "The guiding light," she claims, "is the still small voice of the Holy Spirit." In her hectic life Darlene realized that she needed to slow down in order to hear the whisper of the Holy Spirit. Another spiritual discipline that she finds helpful is prayer. She discovered that prayer is less about what she says but more about listening, which she does on her walks.

Time set apart daily gives her the perspective she needs. No matter how hectic her days are she purposely removes herself to spend quality time with God.

The apostle John had a powerful vision, "And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God." In the New Jerusalem that he saw there was no temple. The temple had played a central role for centuries and was viewed as the dwelling place of God, but in his vision the temple was now gone. The significance is that according to John

in the future there would be no need for the temple because God would dwell in the lives of all people.

Tim S.

John 14:23-29

"I do not give to you as the world gives." How many times have you been embarrassed by giving an inferior gift? Maybe you give someone you care about a nice gift card to a restaurant they like, while their gift to you is a new car. Whoa! Most people would turn down the car — it's too much! That is not how the world gives! We expect to exchange gifts of similar or equal value. They may not always match in monetary value, but they should roughly equal out when all factors — effort, time, money, desire, sentiment, and so on — are taken into account. We don't know how to handle ourselves when someone gives us a gift that we could never return — like a new car ... or eternal life. But thankfully, Jesus does not give as the world gives. His giving is done in terms of not justice, but grace.

Leah T.

John 14:23-29

Spouses of famous people can be smothered by the notoriety of their husband/wife. That was not the case of Anne Morrow Lindberg, the wife of Charles Lindberg. Through his love Anne developed and matured. In his book, *Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life* Charles Swindoll shares her success story. In her own words she writes: "To be deeply in love is of course, a great liberating force and most common experience that frees ... ideally, both members of a couple in love free each other to new and different worlds ... The sheer fact of finding myself loved was unbelievable and changed my world, my feeling about myself." Through that love she discovered confidence, strength, and a ripening character. Anne Morrow sensed from Charles' love that he believed in her. Consequently, she began to believe more in herself and realized that she could do more than she thought possible.

Jesus Christ can free our lives and give us unbelievable confidence and power to love unreservedly. He reverses the self-centeredness to other-centeredness. He has

the ability to forgive our rebellious acts of sin. His Holy Spirit meanwhile has the ability to cleanse our sin-infested heart. These actions of God produce within us a deep love for him and the world around us.

Derl K.

John 14:23-29

In the 1810 Mexican War of Independence, Guanajuato was the first major city that Mexicans freed. Spanish troops eventually retook the city and retaliated with the infamous "Lottery of Death," in which the names of citizens were randomly chosen, determining who would then be tortured and hanged.

The terror that Guanajuato's citizens experienced while waiting for names to be drawn was like the dread and anxiety that each of Jesus' disciples expressed. Someone will betray him. Who is it? Is it I?

The answer is, "Yes." It is I. Each of us stands under threat of our heart being exposed, our weakness known. We are all sinners. We constantly betray Jesus. Grace is the term that describes how fortunate we are that we need wait neither for a random, unjust sentence upon us nor even the sentence we deserve. Jesus forgives us.

Emphasis Archives

John 14:23-29

In John 14:25, Jesus speaks of the coming of the Holy Spirit as the "Comforter," the "Counselor" the "Helper." Then, in verse 27, he gives the further assurance, "Peace is what I leave with you."

The world today is crying out for peace. On the Plains of Waterloo in Belgium there stands a bronze lion forged from the guns of Napoleon's forces who were defeated there in 1815.

It is a fitting tribute to the futility of war. A recent visitor observed that inside the vicious creature's mouth, a swallow had built a nest, twining the mud, twigs, and soft lining for the nest around the potentially destructive teeth. The song of the swallows reached out over the former battlefield, with a new dimension of peace. Peace not from guns and power, but peace from considering the birds.

Emphasis Archives

CHARTING

THE COURSE

Hope for tomorrow

The book of Acts is Luke's second volume, continuing the story from his gospel. Volume one essentially relates his version of the story of Jesus with the central message that the gospel is meant for all people everywhere. Volume two recounts how this message was indeed being spread throughout the world by the early church. Luke had several reasons for writing this book but the essential reason was to obey Christ's command found in Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

For Luke the ascension of Jesus was an essential element of the story he sought to share with the world. He concluded his gospel with the ascension. "Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God" (Luke 24:50-53). After a brief introduction to his second volume Luke returned to the ascension of Jesus as the place to begin the story of how the gospel spread throughout the world.

Our epistolary text calls attention to the power of God demonstrated by the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. The writer goes on to maintain that our hope emanates from these realities. As we saw in our epistle on Easter Sunday, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17).

We have in our gospel lesson an appearance of Jesus to the disciples and the ascension of Jesus. As we have already seen, Luke concludes volume one of his two-volume work with this account. The fact that Luke ended volume one with the ascension narrative and repeats it with an even lengthier version in volume two must surely indicate the importance of the ascension for this author. Luke tells us that the last thing Jesus did was bless them. They withdrew to Jerusalem and "were continually in the temple blessing God." Their lives were filled with gratitude. Luke's second volume reveals how they moved from expressing their gratitude by worshiping in the temple to dedicating themselves to service in the name of Christ.

Acts 1:1-11

Luke began his second volume with a quick review of his first volume, the gospel of Luke. Both are addressed to Theophilus, which means "lover of God," and may simply have been Luke's way of addressing his works to Christian readers. He reminds us in Acts 1:1 that his first book was about the life and teachings of Jesus. This second volume would be about the growth of the Christian church and how the gospel was spreading unhindered throughout the then-known world. While the four gospels contain the word *church* only three times, the word appears 23 times in Acts.

Tradition indicates that there were forty days between the resurrection of Jesus and his ascension. Luke begins the book of Acts with a reminder that Jesus spent those forty days teaching his disciples and preparing them for the days ahead when he would no longer be with them.

Some people have suggested that the book of Acts should be called the acts of the Holy Spirit rather than the acts of the apostles. Luke stresses the work of the Holy Spirit from the very beginning. During these forty days Jesus instructed the apostles to stay in Jerusalem and wait to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. This coming of the Holy Spirit does not mean that the Holy Spirit has never before been present in the world. John reports Jesus breathing on the disciples and saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit" before his ascension (John 20:22). Of course, the Holy Spirit is eternally existent as one of the persons of the Trinity.

In verse 4, Jesus told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the "promise of the Father." They apparently misunderstood what Jesus meant by "the promise." They still connected the promise of God with the anticipated restoration of Davidic Israel. In verse 6, the disciples asked Jesus if this was indeed what he meant. Jesus changed the conversation and informed his followers that they were asking the wrong question. He shifted from conjectures about future possibilities to issues regarding present reality.

It is quite natural when confused about the present that we focus on the future. When the world around us is chaotic, as is every age, we quite naturally dream about what could be. When times are difficult and we suffer shortages of this world's goods it is easy to fantasize about better times. Jesus responds to the disciples by suggesting they focus on the task at hand. God wants to empower them to accomplish great things as they become faithful witnesses for the kingdom. It's also easy

in difficult times to focus on some idealistic past. Again Jesus shifted the conversation from the restoration of the past to the transformation of the present.

There is another important lesson found in verse 7. We do not “know the times or periods that the Father has set.” There are those who engage in endless speculation about the timetable God has set for his creation. Jesus indicated that even he did not know all the dates on the Father’s calendar. “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Matthew 24:36). Albert Einstein said, “Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow.” *Carpe Diem!* Seize the day. In Luke 24: 49 Jesus instructed the disciples to stay in Jerusalem until they have been empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is to be only a brief respite before they begin their work throughout “all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The disciples are not to wait forever. They are to prepare themselves for a great journey. Too many Christians don’t know how to wait on the Lord. Many more don’t know when to stop waiting and start working. A lighter quote from Dr. Seuss might be just what the preacher needs to make this point: “Waiting for the fish to bite or waiting for wind to fly a kite. Or waiting around for Friday night or waiting perhaps for their Uncle Jake or a pot to boil or a better break or a string of pearls or a pair of pants or a wig with curls or another chance. Everyone is just waiting.”

Ephesians 1:15-23

Our epistle lesson is contained within the author’s expression of gratitude and prayer for his readers. The prayer follows the Pauline pattern of giving thanks to God for his readers. It also follows the apostle’s usual procedure of including rich theological material within the written prayer. This prayer follows Colossians 1:3-4 and Philemon 4-5. The text reveals Paul’s desire for the followers of Christ to comprehend the saving power of God. This power is demonstrated in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

Paul begins the prayer by indicating that he has heard about the Ephesians’ faith Jesus and their love for others. These are the characteristics that will make any church great. The great commandments, first given to Moses and then affirmed by Jesus, are “Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:29b-31a).

Many of today’s churches could learn a great deal from this prayer. Too few churches are known for their faith in God and their love for others. The book of Ephesians is written to a universal audience. In verse 23 Paul reminds us that the church is the body of Christ, and as his body every church should be known for its faith, love, and hope (v. 18.) Also see 1 Corinthians 13.

Many churches rely upon advertising and marketing for creating a positive image in their community. There is nothing

wrong with using these tools. But there is a difference between publicity and reputation. As I sit at the computer and write this I have church volunteers setting up for a community event we have been promoting for several weeks. We expect several hundred people from our community to attend. However, we cannot simply program an experience that will draw people into our fellowship and make them a part of the body of Christ. They will either experience the spirit of God and the love of Christ in our midst or they will not. I pray they will.

Not only do I believe people are looking for a church that genuinely embodies faith in God and love for others, I also believe people are looking for a church that knows where it is going and offers hope for the future. This hope is best demonstrated by the resurrection and ascension of Christ. Through these acts God demonstrated that he holds the future and has the power to overcome.

Our communities are full of people who have lost hope. Many have been laid off from their jobs. Many are facing serious disease and discouragement. Our epistolary reading states unequivocally that Jesus ascended into heaven where he is seated at God’s right hand. Everything is under God’s authority. Jesus is “above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.” He is head of the church who called to embody him in faith, love, and hope.

Luke 24:44-53

Coming at the end of his gospel Luke reviews some major themes of his book. All that Jesus did and said was in agreement with scripture and to fulfill prophecy — “that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled” (v. 44). At the center of Lukan theology is the theme of repentance and forgiveness of sins (v. 47). Finally, the Holy Spirit will empower the followers of Jesus to become effective witnesses as they take the gospel throughout the world.

A witness is a person who testifies regarding something he or she has seen or experienced. The disciples had seen the miracles performed by Jesus. They had experienced his presence. They had sat at his feet and learned from his teaching. They had observed his crucifixion and seen the empty grave. They were about to witness his ascension. Jesus was instructing them to testify as witnesses to the world.

Jesus led his followers out to Bethany and blessed them. While there was nothing magical about this blessing, there was something miraculous. This was more than a meaningless benediction or mere well-wishing. This was an act of bestowing divine favor upon them. Jesus was bestowing God’s gift of well being, peace, power, and the presence of the Holy Spirit upon all who sought to be faithful followers and obedient disciples.

Application

We find in these lessons several important truths. The most important truth is *the actuality of the ascension that affirms the reality of the resurrection*. Today’s pericopes confirm the centrality of the statements we find in the ancient Apostles’



Preaching The Psalm

Psalm 47

Somewhere someone once said that “a people who do not know awe are a dangerous people.” Awe happens when we encounter something so huge and beautiful that it stops us in our tracks. Walking to the edge of the Grand Canyon inspires awe. Driving down the California Coast through Big Sur inspires awe. Listening to Yo-Yo Ma play cello inspires awe.

We could easily construct a long list of awe-inspiring things in nature and humanity. The truth is that awe sometimes gets away from us. It’s hard to know why this happens, but it does. Sometimes we get too busy, other times we are too full of ourselves. Still other moments find us in the grip of a cynicism that will not allow us to stop and be filled with awe.

This psalm is about awe.

“Clap your hands Oh you people, shout to God with songs of joy! For the Lord, the most high, is awesome...” The words in this psalm certainly call us to celebration and praise, but it’s more than that. Here we are called to a clear and powerful experience of awe. If we actually stop to ponder the mighty works of God, praise erupts. If we pause for just a moment to take in the workings of something as common as the human hand, awe can slow us down and stop us for just a moment. If we look around at God’s amazing creation, we just might find ourselves in that jaw-dropping, eye-popping moment of awe that comes before we start singing and dancing.

What would happen if everyone made covenant to pause each day so that a little awe might creep into our consciousness? What if each day we found ten minutes to simply stop and drink in the utter grandeur of God and God’s handiwork that shimmers all around us? Consider what might happen if we took it upon ourselves to become a people who were filled with the awe of God.

For one thing, it might keep us mindful of our place in the grand scheme of things. For another, it might remind us that we’re not in charge of the universe after all. Finally, in awe of God, we might just develop a new appreciation for one another as that awe creeps in and spreads to the way we view each other.

For just as a people without awe are dangerous, so too are a people full of awe also full of God’s wonderful power.

Creed: “And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.” Jesus *really* lived. Jesus was *really* dead. He *really* “rose from the dead.” He *really* “ascended into heaven.” Christianity is not based on empty speculation but rather on historical facts.

The second important truth we see in our lessons is *importance of the cross*. “The Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day” (Luke 24:46b). The cross was always a central part of God’s plan for his kingdom.

The third important truth we find here is *the nature of the mission*. Jesus had prepared the disciples and was now sending them out to evangelize the world: “that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47).

The fourth important truth revealed is *the necessity of being empowered by the Holy Spirit*. “And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). Christians may differ in opinions about how the Holy Spirit works in our lives. But we deny the importance of the Holy Spirit’s power at our own peril. Too many Christians confuse talking about God’s work with doing God’s work. Action is important. Actually carrying out the mission is vital. But seeking to accomplish the incredible mission God has given us without his power in our lives leads to burn out and ultimate failure.

Alternative Application

Acts 1:1-11. When the disciples asked Jesus in verse 6 “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?” Jesus insisted they were asking the wrong question. No one but the Father knows the answer to that question. Jesus encouraged the disciples not to get mired in endless speculation about the future but rather to focus on the task at hand. In Luke 24:29 Jesus instructed the disciples to stay in Jerusalem until they received the Holy Spirit.

Many Christians focus on action and fail to spend adequate time “waiting on the Spirit.” This kind of neglect of the inner life often leads to burnout and even loss of faith. Other Christians focus on “spiritual formation” to the neglect of action. These Christians emphasize Bible study and prayer. However, if our spiritual disciplines don’t lead us to service in the world we’ve missed the point of the gospel. The great spiritual giants through the ages have stressed a “middle way.” We must tend to our own spiritual needs but this should always prepare us to fulfill the mission God has given us.

Illustrations

Acts 1:1-11

I am not afraid to admit that as a child, I was guilty more than once of peeking at some of my Christmas presents early. I even learned how to cut a small slit in the wrapping paper to get a little peek inside. As an adult now, I have left aside my gift-peeking ways, but I'd be lying if I said I haven't been tempted every now and then!

Sometimes in life and in faith, the best gifts don't come to us right away. We have to wait until the time is right to receive them. The disciples discovered this when Jesus was about to ascend. "He ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father" (v. 4). That promise, the gift of the Holy Spirit, had to come at the right time, and the disciples would find it was definitely a gift worth waiting for!

Craig K.

Acts 1:1-11

Back in the days of the old west, there used to be three classes of tickets on the stagecoaches. The ride was equally bumpy and dusty, no matter which ticket you held. The real value of the ticket emerged only when the stagecoach got stuck.

If you held a first-class ticket, it was your privilege to remain in the coach, while the crew labored to push it out of the ditch. If you held a second-class ticket, you were expected to step down from the coach, and stand off to the side while the others worked. If it was a third-class ticket you held in your hand, you had to get out, roll up your sleeves, and push.

Except for those who are young, disabled, or needing the community's special care, the only type of ticket in the church is third-class. Everyone is expected to work, to use their talents to advance the mission of Jesus Christ. There's no standing around, no "looking up toward heaven."

Emphasis Archives

Acts 1:1-11

One Saturday, Lori found herself running errands around town. As she drove past her church she recalled the announcement the previous Sunday concerning one of the church's shut-ins. She had wanted to visit Martha, who returned home after a week

in the hospital, but never actually did. Like most of us Lori wanted to visit this dear woman from the church but other activities always seemed to crowd out her good intentions. When she returned home she decided that she would stop to see Martha that afternoon.

The two women, born years apart, discovered their mutual love of reading. Martha told her wonderful stories of her mother reading to her when she was a young girl. It was her mother who stimulated her lifelong passion of reading. Martha asked if Lori would read to her the next time she visited, her eyesight made it difficult if not impossible to read. Lori said she would read to her then. Martha picked out one of her favorite books and Lori began reading. She continued reading past the time she intended to leave. She found it difficult to stop reading. Lori promised that she would return on Friday to continue reading to her and would make it a point to visit her every week. Lori was also intrigued by her reminiscences of her childhood.

On Wednesday came the news that Martha had died. Lori was devastated. There would be no more stories from her childhood, no more afternoons reading together. The following week Lori met with her pastor, asking if there might be other shut-ins that she could visit on a regular basis. Lori was soon visiting with several women from the church, for one she cooked, another she helped with the cleaning, another she took grocery shopping.

During the forty great days of Easter, the risen Lord was with the disciples turned apostles. This must have been a wonderful experience, being with Jesus, the type you hope never ends. Luke reports, "After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." When Jesus dramatically ascended into heaven the apostles momentarily stood speechless. However, they would not be silent for too long, they would share the good news of Jesus Christ to the entire world. Telling others about Jesus quickly became their passion.

Tim S.

Acts 1:1-11

The disciples asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Every generation poses the same question, "Lord, is this when you

will make your big move? Are you finally going to take care of the bad guys and give us good folks our reward?" Jesus answered as he always does, "I never talk about my timing."

Many modern people speak as if they know God's plan for the end. Because of Middle-East tensions or some self-calculated formula, they think the Lord is presently in some kind of two-minute drill. Perhaps he is, but no human being knows for sure.

Far more pertinent for all of us is whether God's kingdom is in us. Does the Lord control your mind? Or do doubt, worry, bitterness, and selfishness, dominate your thoughts? If Jesus comes tomorrow, unless God's peace and his love rule our hearts, we'll be on the outside looking in anyhow.

Emphasis Archives

Ephesians 1:15-23

A bed has both a headboard and a footboard. These are important pieces of a bed: They help keep the mattress aligned on the bed frame and are often beautiful to look at. However, a bed that is made up only of a headboard or a footboard is no bed at all. The headboard and footboard border the bed, make the bed attractive, make a person lying in bed feel protected, but they are not the be-all end-all of that bed. The part of the bed that does the real work in this setup is the mattress. Without a mattress — the "body" of the bed — this is not a bed that is useable. Just so: Jesus has set himself as the head of the church, the alpha and omega, the headboard and footboard that make us feel safe. But the work of the church cannot be done without its people. The mattress. The body in Christ.

Leah T.

Ephesians 1:15-23

Paul writes the people of Ephesus some important God-principles of life. He tells them that they were marked and sealed with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13-14). The Ephesians readers would understand his point. They were citizens of a maritime community that carried on an extensive timber trade. Merchants of the neighboring port cities would buy the timber from the lumber sellers of the area. Once selected their lot of timber was stamped with a signet ring, which was an acknowledged sign of ownership. The timber was left at

the harbor, and then others took the timber and floated it down the river. Once at the designated spot the merchant would send his purchasing agent with the signet ring to claim the timber. Without that signet ring the timber would not be given to the agent.

Bickersteth wrote, "The Holy Spirit impresses on the soul now the image of Jesus Christ; and this is the sure pledge of the everlasting inheritance."

His impression on the Christian is emblazoned with:

- The spirit of Truth
- The spirit of Faith
- The Spirit of Promise
- The Spirit of Praise
- The Spirit of Redemption

The Holy Spirit is not an option, but an essential possession in our Christian experience. Where's your mark?

Derl K.

Ephesians 1:15-23

Mark Twain responded to the Philippine-American War in 1899-1902 by writing *The War Prayer*. It was rejected by his publisher, but then was published after Twain's death. The fictional setting is a nation ready for war. Everyone is excited, with bands, parades, fireworks, and the like. On Sunday, a preacher exhorts devotion to flag and country, justifies war for such a good cause, and prays for God's aid.

An old man enters worship. He announces he's come from God and that God has heard their prayer. He then prays a translation of the people's prayer: "Help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells ... cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead ... drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded writhing in pain...."

The power Paul writes and prays about isn't the power to get our own selfish personal or national way, but to live for Christ who is "far above all" that we substitute for God's will.

Emphasis Archives

Ephesians 1:15-23

Paul Wharton tells a story about a wise old Middle-Eastern mystic. He confessed: "I was a revolutionary when I was young, and all my prayer to God was: 'Lord, give me the energy to change the world.' As I approached middle age and realized that my life was half gone without my changing a

single person, I revised my prayer: 'Lord, give me the grace to change all those who come into contact with me. Just my family and friends and I shall be satisfied.' Now that I am an old man and my days are numbered, I have begun to see how foolish I have been. My one prayer now is: 'Lord, give me the grace to change myself.' If I had prayed this right from the start, I would not have wasted my life."

— quoted from *Stories and Parables for Preachers and Teachers*, Paulist Press, 1986

Emphasis Archives

Luke 24:44-53

For many years, Egyptian hieroglyphics were a mystery to scholars. There was nothing to provide a basis for translation, so a verifiable, accurate description of the walls of hieroglyphics at the Pyramids and at other historic Egyptian sites and on ancient Egyptian artifacts was next to impossible. However, in 1799, an artifact was discovered that radically changed the entire science of Egyptology. The Rosetta Stone had the same message inscribed on it in two Egyptian languages and classical Greek. Scholars had found their map into the uncharted territory of ancient Egyptian culture.

For many of us, the scriptures can be just as enigmatic as hieroglyphs, leaving us scratching our heads. The disciples had similar problems until Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (v. 45). As we prayerfully read God's Word, the Holy Spirit can be our Rosetta Stone, opening our minds up to new depths of meaning in those pages.

Craig K.

Luke 24:44-53

"And they were continually in the temple blessing God." That's what the disciples constantly did. When they went to the house of worship, they "blessed" God. The word "bless" here means to eulogize. When we eulogize people, we say good things about them. Some funerals we perform challenge us because it's hard to find nice things to say about the deceased. But the ocean will run out of water sooner than we'll lack qualities and characteristics of God to praise.

Prepare for worship this week by considering reasons why you should eulogize the Lord. When you get to worship, bless-eulogize him. Whenever you're inclined to

talk about a world or family concern, or one of your chronic aches, stop your tongue in mid-mouth and say, "Tongue, we're not going there today. Today we're only going to bless God." If a fellow worshiper complains about a politician, neighbor, or malady, gently steer him/her to God's goodness, too. You'll have the best worship ever, God will be pleased, and your neighbor uplifted.

Emphasis Archives

Luke 24:44-53

Ron was in his first year of seminary and had the opportunity to worship at a variety of churches. There was one large downtown church that he felt drawn to even though it was a different denomination. At first he thought it was the pipe organ and the way it seemed to vibrate the rafters was why he came. Ron later realized that it was not the music but rather the pastor. The pastor who was nearing retirement had a distinctive way of reading the scripture and preaching. It was evident that this pastor had read the Bible for many years and knew just what words to emphasize. Some might say that his preaching style was simple, yet he retold the biblical story in such a way that it came to life.

Ron knew the Bible passages, some of which he researched for seminary classes, yet this preacher made them come alive in a fresh way. Ron once told his classmates that it was as if Jesus were present with him.

Easter afternoon two friends were on their way to the village of Emmaus when they encountered a stranger. While they did not know his identity we know that it was none other than the risen Lord Jesus. As they walked together the risen Lord taught them scripture. In the presence of the Lord Jesus, scripture took on new meaning; their faith came alive in a new way. Before evening these two individuals would return to Jerusalem and share with the disciples that they experienced the presence of the risen Lord Jesus when suddenly Jesus stood in their midst.

Tim S.

CHARTING

THE COURSE

Table to table

We have a table in our home that goes way back. When my wife's grandmother died, her children and grandchildren divided among themselves the various pieces of furniture and artwork that were in her house. My wife was eager to bring home this one particular table.

For all of their growing up years, she and her cousins had spent Thanksgiving at this grandmother's house. This particular table had stood in her grandmother's kitchen — part of a little breakfast nook. My wife cherishes so many fond memories of eating cereal, drawing pictures, and playing games with family at that cheerful table.

My wife's grandmother has been dead for more than twenty years now. That table has been part of our homes in four different cities over the course of those decades. How many different friends from assorted places have we hosted around that table? How many meals, conversations, and games have taken place there?

When we first inherited the table, my wife and I had no children of our own yet. Now we have three daughters, who themselves have eaten cereal, drawn pictures, and played games at that same table.

I'm thinking back to when my wife was a little girl, sitting at that table. Could she possibly have imagined or envisioned this future? Could she have guessed the kitchens around the country where that table would be placed? How about the people who would sit at it? Could she have imagined the children who would play at it?

Acts 16:16-34

"One day," Luke recalls in the first person, "as we were going to the place of prayer..." "The place of prayer" was where Paul's ministry in Philippi had begun. Without a sufficient male Jewish population to form an official synagogue, the town of Philippi had, instead, a designated place of prayer. It was not a formal structure, but a selected spot along the riverbank. That was where Paul had first found a group of devout women, including Lydia, who hosted the missionaries in her home.

We see in so many towns along Paul's itinerary that his custom was to go first to the synagogue and to stay there, teaching and discussing, even arguing, hoping to kindle a response

to the gospel first among its most natural audience. Sometimes his synagogue ministry was brief (as in Acts 13:14-51) and sometimes it was much more extended (see Acts 19:8).

In the absence of a formal synagogue in Philippi, perhaps Paul kept returning to "the place of prayer." On this particular day, Paul and his companions encountered a different woman: not one of those devout women, whom they had found meeting together by the river, but rather a demon-possessed slave-girl. She followed Paul and his group as they traveled about town, crying out, "These men are slaves of the most high God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation."

Interestingly, the content of her message was entirely accurate. Perhaps it was her tone that was inappropriate. Or perhaps it was the source of her inspiration that was unwelcome. Or perhaps it was simply the daily and relentless nature of her presence and proclamation that had become a nuisance. Whatever the case was, on one particular day, Paul "turned and said to the spirit, 'I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.'"

Her liberation was surely a cause of rejoicing in heaven. In Philippi, however, it was the cause of a commotion. Like the residents of the Gerasenes (Mark 5:14-17), the disruption to commerce was more compelling than the healing work of God to the girl's owners, the magistrates, and a larger mob of Philippians. Paul and Silas were publicly stripped and beaten, and then thrown in prison — all on the basis of accusation, without the benefit of a fair trial.

So it was that Paul and Silas, having only done right in God's sight, found themselves naked, bleeding, and chained in the dungeon of a foreign city. There, in the middle of the night, they "were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them."

What a marvelous picture. Any place is a place of prayer for the true man or woman of God. You do not have to be sitting on the pleasant grass of the riverbank; you may make the dingy dungeon a place of prayer, too. Likewise, any setting can be a setting of ministry for the true man or woman of God. It does not need to be in the sun-splashed columns of the Areopagus, sitting with the sophisticated thinkers of the day. It can be in a dreary inner cell, surrounded by society's most uncivilized element.

Then comes the earthquake. Luke does not explicitly report the phenomenon as an act of God, but it certainly recalls earlier divine interventions in prisons in the book of Acts (5:17-19; 12:3-11). Paul and Silas, along with all of their fellow inmates it seems, were suddenly set free. When the jailer responsible

for them realized the state of affairs, he sought to do himself in. Paul stopped and reassured him, leading to the jailer's profound question: "What must I do to be saved?"

Over the next few hours, Paul and Silas became guests in the home of that jailer. He and his household heard the good news about Jesus, were baptized, and rejoiced together in the warmth of Christian fellowship.

It is a day in the life of Paul, and it illustrates supremely for us these three truths. First, God's work will always meet with mixed reactions. Second, God's work can be done anywhere. Consequently, faithfulness to God in all times and places will always meet with opposition and will also always yield fruit to his glory.

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

From beginning to end, this text is about coming.

"See, I am coming soon," declares the Lord in the very first verse. Later, the Spirit, the bride, and everyone who hears all cry out, "Come." Then a broad invitation to "everyone who is thirsty" is extended to come. Near the end, the Lord reiterates his promise that he is coming soon. Then the author concludes with his earnest prayer: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"

The text reverberates with invitation. Interestingly, however, it is not a one-way invitation. While the prevailing theme is the anticipated coming of the Lord, the additional invitation to "everyone who is thirsty" reminds us that the movement is mutual. We are not merely passive spectators waiting for him to come: we have some coming of our own to do.

Furthermore, in a generation that is largely indifferent to the prospect — or even the likelihood — of Christ's return, we are well rebuked by the spirit of this passage. Are our congregations marked by such eagerness, a holy impatience, for Christ's return? Do our hearts and our prayers reflect an attitude of "Come, Lord Jesus!"?

Perhaps we would feel a greater anticipation if we had a greater sense of the "reward" that Jesus says he will bring with him. This is a theme which, in my experience, is largely ignored in mainline American Christianity. Perhaps our life is plush enough that we don't feel such a longing for heavenly reward. Perhaps we prefer a more egalitarian view of heaven that doesn't include any distinction in treatment (such as varying rewards). Or perhaps our proper emphasis on God's grace and our sense of our own unworthiness precludes us from thinking much in terms of deserving any reward, at all. Whatever the case, we may neglect the truth of heavenly reward.

The prospect of reward, however, is certainly a prominent issue in the seven letters with which Revelation begins (2:17, 28-29; 3:11-12). It is also a theme in some of Jesus' teachings (Mark 9:41), especially in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:12; 6:1-6, 16-18).

Interestingly, while the rewards suggest receiving what one has earned, the entrance into the city itself does not seem to be a matter of merit. Rather, "blessed are those who wash their robes," we read, for they will have the right to "enter the city by the gates." The washing of robes, of course, suggests a certain uncleanness, which needs to be washed away. We presume,

based on the earlier reference to washed robes (7:14) that this reflects salvation by the atoning blood of Christ.

Meanwhile, we discover in the previous chapter that not everyone will be able to enter the city. "Nothing unclean will enter it," we are told, "nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life" (21:27; see also 22:15). Putting the passages together, therefore, we conclude that evil deeds can disqualify one from the city, and good deeds can qualify one for a reward. Entrance into the city, however, requires a cleansing.

Finally, our passage also includes several revelatory references to Jesus. He is the central focus of the book, and here he is identified by several important phrases: "the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end," "the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star."

The first three phrases are synonymous, perhaps reflecting the backdrop culture of Hebrew poetry, which often gives multiple expressions to a single truth (Job 4:3-4; Psalm 1:1 cf.).

In his drawing of the Vitruvian Man, Leonardo da Vinci famously illustrated that the length of a man's arms from fingertip to fingertip is equal to his height from head to toe. At six-foot-two-inches, therefore, I am able to touch any of my young children's head and toes at the same time. This is the image, then, that I have of Jesus as Alpha and Omega. He is able to touch simultaneously the start and the finish, the beginning of history and its end. His size dwarfs our scope. His reach exceeds our limits and his span covers our extremities.

The "root and descendant of David" is a fascinating mixed metaphor. That Jesus is the promised descendant of David — "son of David" (see Matthew 1:1; 9:27; 21:15) — is part of his identity as the Messiah. That he is also the "root of David," however, speaks to his preexistence (see Matthew 22:41-45). Jesus does not just come from David; David comes from him.

Finally, "the bright morning star" does not have any specific precursor in scripture. William Barclay observes, however, that Jesus had previously identified himself as the light of the world (John 8:12), and so "when the Risen Christ said that he was the morning star, he claimed again to be the light of the world and the vanquisher of all the world's darkness."

John 17:20-26

John's gospel gives us the longest look at the Last Supper. He devotes five entire chapters to the events and dialogue that occur on that evening. In a gospel that is just 21 chapters long, it is an astonishing allocation of space to just one evening from Jesus' life. Our selected lection comes from that large Last Supper resource. Specifically, John 17 records Jesus' prayer before he goes to the garden, where he would be arrested. Our passage is the last portion of that prayer.

The passage begins with a sentence that brings us in. "I ask not only on behalf of these," Jesus prays in reference to his disciples gathered around him, "but also on behalf of those who will believe in men through their word." *That's us.* This is where we come in. We have this grand privilege of overhearing Jesus praying for you and me and our congregations, for we are "those" — the ones who were not there on that occasion, but who

would come to believe through the witness of the apostles.

And see what he prays — for them and for us — “That they may all be one.” It’s a prominent theme in this section, as Jesus points to the oneness experienced between him and his Father, and then adds the emphatic prayer that “they may become completely one.” Or, as the Amplified Bible renders it: “that they may become one and perfectly united.”

It is instructive to us that this is so central to Jesus’ prayer for his followers. I wonder how prominent this theme is among our prayers for one another. Amid all of our prayers for physical and material needs, how passionately do we pray for oneness?

The model and source for this desired unity is in the Trinity. The Father and Son are two, yet one, and so Jesus prays that “they may be one, as we are one.” We are reminded of Charles Wesley’s poetic observation about human beings: “ordained to be transcripts of the Trinity.”

The oneness Jesus of which speaks seems to be born out of two realities.

First, there is the tantalizingly important preposition “in.” “I in them and you in me,” Jesus says, as he prays “that they may become completely one.” The language recalls Jesus’ earlier statements about those who eat his flesh and drink his blood (6:56), his own relation to the Father (10:38; 14:10-11, 20), and especially the connection between the vine and branches (15:1-10). This oneness is not portrayed as mere collegiality, going forward together arm-in-arm. Rather, there is a more mysterious union, where the one is in the other, and the other is in the one.

Second, the theme of unity seems to be all bound up with the theme of love. The disciples’ oneness, according to Jesus, will bear witness to the world that the Father has loved them even as he has loved the Son (v. 23). Indeed, R.V.G. Tasker concludes that it is actually supernatural love that produces the desired unity.

That love takes over as the prevailing theme of the rest of the passage. Jesus affirms that the Father has loved the disciples, even as he has loved the Son (v. 23), he affirms that the Father has loved him “before the foundation of the world” (v. 24), and he prays “that the love with which you have loved me may be in them” (v. 26).

The love that has been shared eternally between the Father and the Son, therefore, has come into the world. The followers of Jesus have come to know and experience that love, are called upon to share and reflect that love, and their life together is to be shaped by that love, until they are formed into a holy oneness with God himself.

Application

Our gospel lection begins at a table — the famous and cherished table of Jesus’ Last Supper. Perhaps no table in history has been so often remembered, portrayed, and reenacted as that one.

As they were gathered around that table, Jesus prayed for his disciples. Along the way, he prayed also “on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word.” The prayer anticipated a certain future, but a future the disciples could not possibly have imagined.

Our selected passage from the book of Acts, meanwhile, gives us a peek into that future. At the end of that passage, we see another table. Like the first one, it is populated by believers;

yet none of the original cast of characters is there.

This table is only a few decades removed from the first one, but it is many miles away — all the way from Jerusalem in Palestine to Philippi in Macedonia. See the people seated there: Paul, Silas, a Greek jailer, and all the members of his household.

In all likelihood, none of these people had even heard of Jesus on the night when he ate that Passover meal with his original disciples. And none of those original disciples had likely ever been to Philippi. Yet, a few years later, those folks around that Philippian table have all devoted their lives to Jesus!

Frederick Hosmer sang, “Wider grows the kingdom, reign of love and light; for it we must labor, till our faith is sight.” Wider, indeed! The witness and work of those original disciples had sent unimaginable ripples to strangers so far away. It is with that same confidence that “we must labor,” unable to envision how far and with whom the Lord will prosper our work.

Alternative Application

Acts 16:16-34. “We’ve A Song to be Sung to the Nations.” In the dark days of the Babylonian exile, the captive Jews wrote this poignant lament about their circumstance: “By the rivers of Babylon — there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How could we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:1-4).

The misery of their situation and the cruelty of their captors are undeniable. Yet their conclusion may be disputed.

I cannot pretend to know what it is like to be dragged away from my homeland in chains with the churches and government buildings smoldering in the background, and be carried off as captive to some foreign land. It is nearly unimaginable for me. Then, in the midst of that foreign setting, for my oppressive captors, drunk and taunting, to ask me to sing a few bars of “America, The Beautiful” or “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

This was the bitter circumstance of the Jews in Babylon. And so they moaned, “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”

Enter Paul and Silas. They, too, are in a foreign land. While their arrival there had been voluntary, they had been unjustly arrested, publicly humiliated, and harshly imprisoned. The comforts of home and the goodness of God must have seemed very far away. Yet, there in that brutal setting, they were “praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.”

Paul and Silas did not hang up their harps. They sang the Lord’s song, even as captives in a foreign land.

Henry Ernest Nichol, a nineteenth-century British churchman and musician, believed that the world needs to hear what we have to sing. “We’ve a song to be sung to the nations,” he wrote, “that shall lift their hearts to the Lord, a song that shall conquer evil and shatter the spear and sword, and shatter the spear and sword.”

Our conditions may not be overtly as harsh as the Jews in Babylon or the apostles in Philippi, but our world is just as inhospitable to the gospel. And it is just as in need of hearing it.

Psalm 97

Foundations are important. Some time ago a young pastor noticed that the church he was serving had a certain lean to its structure. At first he didn't pay much attention to it because it was an old building and no one else seemed too concerned about it. With the passing months the leaning became more pronounced. Growing concerned, the pastor put on his old clothes one Sunday afternoon and crawled under the church. In the cobwebs and dust, with a flashlight he crept under the sanctuary and looked around. Once his eyes got adjusted he noticed with alarm that the church had no foundation.

The whole church had been built upon beams that had simply been laid in the dirt. There were no granite foundation stones. There was no concrete perimeter. There was nothing except those beams that were soft with rot from lying directly on the moist earth under the church building.

This is a true story. Ultimately, a new foundation was put in place and the building was saved. But the point seems clear enough. On uncertain foundations the whole building is at risk. On uncertain foundations, our whole enterprise of faith is at risk.

This psalm helps us to get clear in this regard.

"Righteousness and justice are the foundations of His throne!" God's kingdom, it turns out, isn't built on church membership or on liturgical correctness. It's not built on narrow interpretations of doctrine or the appropriation of social issues. No. God's throne, or to put it another way, God's reality is built on the foundations of justice and righteousness. Imagine how the mighty institutional churches, and those not so institutional might look if their foundations actually were justice and righteousness.

In this simple, clear utterance we can see a way forward for lost and wayward church communities. In these solid foundational principles, the people of God can move forward, whatever their culture or social leaning.

Let the church build its ministries and its community on justice. In the neighborhoods where the church is located, let the community focus on justice. Whether it is hungry people or immigration concerns, let the church move. Whether it's developing schools or providing opportunities for young people who are left alone, let the church live out its witness to the call of God to build the kingdom on the foundation of justice.

This is not only the right thing to do — it's the evangelical thing to do. Meet the needs of the people in the name of the Lord, and they will come. For the foundations of the throne are righteousness and justice.

Acts 16:16-34

"And the walls came a-tumblin' down!" This line comes from the song "Joshua Fought The Battle Of Jericho," an old favorite that celebrates the Old Testament story of Joshua leading the Israelite around the walls of the city of Jericho and God knocking those walls down. Walls come "a-tumblin' down" many times in the Bible. Jericho is just one example. Another is Samson, whom God gave the strength to push down pillars and make a building collapse. A third is today's story, when God gave physical strength to songs that already had strength of the spirit. Maybe the Bible is teaching us an important lesson through this repeated theme. As Christians, it is our call to knock down the walls that separate us from others and reach out with the hope of Christ.

Leah T.

Acts 16:16-34

There are no guarantees of a protected life when one becomes a Christian. Recently four clergymen were dragged from their churches by terrorists opposed to Christianity. They were told to renounce their faith in Jesus or face dire consequences.

On a video tape sent to their denominational headquarters, their murder was recorded. The first pastor was brought into a room and made to kneel. The interrogator asked him to renounce his faith. Calmly, the pastor refused. Again, he was told to abandon his foolishness. Once again, he refused to repudiate his Savior. A third time he was told to disown Jesus. Once more, he calmly stated, "Jesus is my Lord and Savior."

His captors began the horrible scene of taking their machete and laboriously cutting the pastor's head off in front of the video camera. All four men were decapitated for their faith in Christ.

These faithful pastors remind me of Paul and Silas in Acts 16. They were taken by people who hated Jesus. They were beaten and thrown into prison. Later we learn that Paul and Silas were murdered for their faith.

Someone wrote, "If one has not been persecuted for his Christian faith, he has not walked with Christ long enough or close enough."

Derl K.

Acts 16:16-34

An earthquake can be misinterpreted, as was the 1755 quake in Lisbon, Portugal, and 60,000 to 100,000 people perished because of it. It also shook people's confidence in God. Did God cause such a thing? Why would God allow this?

We can draw the wrong conclusions about physical phenomena such as earthquakes. We are more likely to understand and appreciate human behavior in difficult circumstances, such as how people respond to being in prison. In 1688, the English Quaker, William Dewsbury, wrote that he "as joyfully entered prisons as palaces, and in the prison-house, I sang praises to my God and esteemed the bolts and locks upon me as jewels."

No matter our physical circumstances or what we might think of them, God's people can survive and thrive by God's grace, even in the shaky circumstances of an earthquake or prison.

Emphasis Archives

Acts 16:16-34

At the time of the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912, many people were praying to be saved. Radio communications were just coming into regular use. As soon as the iceberg was struck by the *Titanic*, the radio operator on the *Titanic* began to send an SOS signal. Close enough to be of help and to save lives was the steamship, *California*, only thirty minutes away, and that ship also was equipped with wireless radio. Unfortunately, the trained radio operator had shut his equipment off at 10:30 p.m. and had gone to bed. Less than an hour later, the *Titanic* was sending its frantic distress SOS. This was to no avail, as the radio on the *California* was deaf to the pleas for help.

Truly God hears every prayer. But the channel to answer that prayer demands that we are close enough to God to hear and respond.

Emphasis Archives

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

Joe Walker served as an army chaplain. He recalls one particular day when a prisoner requested to be baptized and become a member of the church. The man's crime was murder. Joe reflects that if ever there was a person who did not deserve divine forgiveness it was this man. As Joe spoke with him he felt that his remorse was genuine, and his plea for forgiveness was heartfelt.

As the two men continued talking, the prisoner poured out his soul, never blaming circumstances or claiming he was not guilty of the crime. Joe set the date for his baptism and joining of the church. What came to Joe's mind was how Jesus spent much of his time accepting people whom the religious leaders viewed with scorn — tax collectors, lepers, thieves, and other sinners deemed as unqualified to be forgiven or saved.

Now many years later as Joe reflects on his time serving as a military chaplain he makes the bold claim that nothing he did was as important as extending forgiveness and grace to this young man.

The apostle John's powerful vision of the end time provides an opportunity for all people to come to Christ. No one deserves God's grace or unconditional love. John recorded these words, "And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift." The gift of salvation is available to all people; sometimes we in the church forget this truth. Who are the people living in our community whose lives would be transformed if we showered them with God's unconditional love?

Tim S.

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

Water is so precious, yet so many suffer from a lack of it. While many of us only associate dehydration with a dry mouth and maybe some chapped lips, the results of that condition especially in its extreme form, can be much more serious. Mild dehydration can be accompanied by loss of appetite, dry skin, and fatigue. Moderate dehydration can bring with it muscle cramps, headaches, and nausea. Extreme dehydration, in which a body has lost 10% of its body fluids, can cause racing heart rates, seizures, unconsciousness, and even death. It can also cause confusion and loss of memory and potentially permanent brain damage.

We crave water. But in this passage, we are offered water of a different kind, one that the soul of every human being craves even more: the water of life. "And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price" (v. 17).

Craig K.

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

When Dale was four years old, his mother was hospitalized for several weeks. Since Dale's father was in the midst of putting in the spring crop, Dale was sent to

stay with his grandparents. In those days, children were not allowed in the hospital, and four-year-old Dale was facing his first extended separation from his mother.

The first day went fine. Grandpa took Dale downtown for ice cream and to get the mail. Dale even turned the mailbox key, reached in the tiny slot, and retrieved the mail. Grandma made Dale's favorite meal, pancakes and maple syrup, and they allowed him to watch television, something that Dale's family did not yet have on the farm.

At bedtime, Dale began to miss his mother. He cried, stating emphatically that only mommy could tuck him in properly. Grandma sat on his bed and reassured him that his mommy would be coming home soon. But to a four-year-old, time has no meaning; two weeks might as well have been a year. He cried himself to sleep for most of those two weeks he spent at his grandparents. On the day that Dale's father picked up his mother, Dale was the happiest boy in town.

Jesus said he'd be back soon. I wonder if any of us are as homesick as Dale at Jesus' absence.

Emphasis Archives

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

During the last several years, the Young at Heart Sunday school class had some great discussions. The people in the class had been together for some time and felt comfortable sharing and asking questions that they might not ask in other settings.

John asked if it was ever too late for a person to accept Jesus Christ. "Could people really change their ways?" Bob wanted to know. Esther said she felt that for some people it is nothing more than a show — saying the right things — but the person never really changes.

Bob told of someone he once knew who claimed to be a Christian, but the way the person conducted his business made Bob seriously question that assumption. This man did not treat his employees well and would try to take advantage of his clients.

Fay knew someone who lived a terrible life, made all the wrong choices, spent time in jail, but who, once he claimed Jesus, was a totally different person. He began helping other people and reading his Bible daily. Whenever there was a need, he would go out of his way to help in any way he could. She told the class, "Yes, once Jesus enters our hearts it is possible to completely change."

Emphasis Archives

John 17:20-26

In algebra classes, students are taught several properties that apply to numbers and equations. One of these properties is the Commutative Property. The Commutative Property is used when you have an expression — for example, three plus five — in brackets and have another number in front of the brackets to be multiplied. Let's say the expression is seven times parenthesis three plus five, end parenthesis. [7 (3 + 5)] The Commutative Property says that you will multiply the seven by not only the three, but also by the five. The function transfers to both numbers in the brackets, not just one. The lesson from John is saying something similar. The value of God is applied to Jesus, but it does not stop there. Jesus has passed that value on to us — in a way, applying the Commutative Property to create a community of followers of God.

Leah T.

John 17:20-26

New Testament writers commented a lot on what the community of believers ought to have as the mission in the church. They reminded people that they have to live the life before they could carry out the mission Christ called them to carry. Jesus made it plain that the reason he wanted people to develop an authentic church was “that the world may believe” (John 17:21). Someone wrote that there is no doubt that when the church distinctively lives out the gospel in relationship to one another, it becomes the most powerful force for evangelizing the lost.

The mission strategy Jesus uses in John 17 can be outlined:

- The Mission of the Church is Unity through Faith. Faith in Christ is the force of life.

- The Mission of the Church is Unity through Love. As God has sought the best for us ... we seek the best for others.
- The Mission of the Church is Unity through Integrity. The church is honest with God and with others.

Derl K.

John 17:20-26

Humans seem compelled to create “out-groups.” It's not enough to be part of a group. We then define others as, well, “others.” Religions do it, too. Jesus, however, actively and habitually seeks out-group people. He spends time with lepers, the ritually unclean, mentally and physically ill, tax collectors, demon-possessed, women, children, non-Jews, and the broadest out-group dubbed, generally, “sinners.” He eats with them!

On the night of his arrest he indicates that his entire ministry moves toward “others,” those not yet in the fold of God's care. People we don't like or don't want as friends are Jesus' “others.” In school they can be geeks or nerds, jocks or princesses. They can be people of different color or ethnic origin.

They are especially those upon whom we etch the word “enemies.” Among the many motives involved in killing Jesus was his insisting that we can't have enemies, but must love “others” to become our friends.

Emphasis Archives

John 17:20-26

After that last supper, Jesus gave the church words of comfort, encouragement, and challenge. He told them not to let their hearts be troubled (14:1). He told them if they asked anything in his name it would be granted (14:14). He reminded them they would never be abandoned or orphaned (14:18). He told them that he would send the Spirit to teach and remind them of all

they needed (14:26). He promised them that, despite it all, at the center of the storm of their lives there would be a great peace — the peace of God (14:27). He gave them many words to think about and he said: “I have said these things to keep you from stumbling” (16:1). But the great prayer in our text today is Jesus' prayer for his disciples and for the church. He prayed for many things before he left. Toward the end of the prayer we have the central part of this last will and testament he left them. “... That they may be one as we are one” (17:22). He uses this word, “one,” four separate times in the latter part of the prayer. Doesn't Jesus still long for one-ness when he prays for his church? The religious wars that have been fought by Christians with Christians are many. The divisions in the church even after all these years are ever-present. Practically every denomination is torn asunder by a multitude of issues on which people cannot agree. Uniformity was not Jesus' prayer for his beloved. He prayed that, despite whatever differences they had, they might find a commonality in Christ Jesus. So, like Christians through the years, we meet and lift up this last longing that Jesus gave us in his prayer. He prayed: “... that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (17:23). You might flip through the yellow pages of your phone book and hold up all the pages that list the different varieties of Christian churches. In the deep-South town where I live there are fourteen pages of such listings. We do not have to agree on polity or doctrine but those who proclaim Jesus is Lord really are brothers and sisters. We are not to be competitors but colleagues.

Emphasis Archives

CHARTING

THE COURSE

No fear

A woman struggling through the difficulties of the Great Depression went to the front desk of an insurance company in Minneapolis. In her hand she carried a worn and yellowed piece of paper, an insurance policy issued many years before.

The woman asked whether she could stop making payments on the policy for a while, since she had run out of money. At first the desk clerk was a bit rude. After all, he got calls like this nearly every day, and he didn't want to be bothered with another one.

But then he took another look at the paper. It was a life insurance policy in a man's name. And it was worth \$300,000 — right in the middle of the depression.

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "This is a pretty valuable policy, ma'am," he said finally. "Have you talked with your husband about it?"

"My husband!" she exclaimed. "He's been dead for three years."

There she was, a woman in poverty, a woman crushed by financial fears. And in her hand she held a piece of paper that could turn her life around.

Fear keeps us clutching at paper, tightfisted and anxious. But faith in God releases to us the power of the kingdom of heaven. Faith in God is greater than any fear that might grip us. Remember Paul's words to young Timothy: "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline."

The words "Fear not" appear 365 times in scripture, one for every day of the year. That's probably how often we need to hear our Lord warn us about the mesmerizing power of fear and doubt: "Don't be afraid. Only believe!"

Certainly, on this Pentecost Sunday, "No Fear!" is the ruling command. Jesus' disciples rise up with courage they had never before experienced as the Spirit's fresh fires firmed them. Paul, also, counters life with or without the Spirit, and notes the confidence gained when the Spirit whispers the foundations of faith in our hearts. And Jesus himself, even before the awful day of his crucifixion, promised that in the troubling of this world, one thing was certain — the Paraclete would blaze a trail of clarity and security for those who wished to walk in the footsteps of their master and friend.

Acts 2:1-21

The book of Acts is the second of Luke's two volumes on the life and work of Jesus, presented first through his direct incarnate person in the gospel, and now through his body the church. There are several guiding forces that shape the way in which Luke tells this second part of Jesus' story. One of them is clearly stated by Jesus in Acts 1:8: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." With that in mind, Luke describes the way in which this witness came to Jerusalem (chs. 2-7), Samaria (chs. 8-12), and then began its push toward the ends of the earth (chs. 13-28).

Because the witness of the church in Palestine was first guided by Peter, and that beyond Palestine gained its momentum from Paul, these two figures are central in each major section in succession:

- Peter and the Jewish/Palestinian Witness (Acts 1-12)
- Paul and the Gentile/Mediterranean Witness (Acts 13-28)

The initial organizing structure of Jesus' missional command in Acts 1:8 seems to be further developed by Luke in a clear series of church expansions that are tracked throughout the work. Each successive wave of missional outreach is built upon the previous field of witness, but pushes the engagement one step further:

- the witness to Jerusalem (2:1—6:7)
- the witness to Judea and Samaria (6:8—9:31)
- the witness to the Gentiles (9:32—12:24)
- the witness to Asia Minor (12:25—16:5)
- the witness to Europe (16:6—19:20)
- the witness to the ends of the earth by way of Rome (19:21—28:31)

All but the last of these regional (or, in the case of the move to a Gentile audience in 9:32—12:24, ethnic) expansions is brought to a similar conclusion of the type: "And the word of God grew and multiplied..." It appears that Luke perceived of the missional witness of the church in each of these sections as having pervaded those regions sufficiently so that all people within them had access to the message about Jesus. In the last section, however, the gospel is again briefly stated to both the Jews (Acts 22) and the Gentiles (Acts 26), but there is no con-

cluding progress report of completion. Though some believe this indicates that Luke was planning a third volume, intending to track Paul's next series of journeys once he was released from Rome after his appeal to Caesar had been adjudicated, a more likely theological hypothesis would be that Luke projects the open-ended mission work related to reaching "the ends of the earth" onto the continued life of the church. Viewed in this way, the church is always writing chapter 29 to the book of Acts, so any "progress report" is only partial and interim.

The momentum of the stories told in the book of Acts is derived from a single critical incident that took place in Jerusalem during the Jewish religious festival known as Pentecost. Jesus' instruction for his disciples to stay in Jerusalem and wait for a special gift (Acts 1:4) must have seemed vague at the time, but the arrival of the explosive power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost made sense. This celebration was a harvest festival and a time for recalling the gift of the original covenant documents to Moses at Mount Sinai. These two themes intersected marvelously with what was taking place. First, there was the dawning of a new age of revelation and divine mission, paralleling that first covenant declaration in the book of Exodus. Second, during the Pentecost harvest festival, the first sheaves of grain were presented at the temple, anticipating that God would then bring in the full harvest. This expression of faith served as a clear analogy to the greater missional harvest of the church that was begun through a miraculous "first fruits" in Jerusalem that day.

The striking symbols that accompanied this powerful event were likely understood well by most who experienced them. First, came the sound of a powerful wind. A single word, both in the Hebrew (*ruach*) and Greek (*pneuma*) languages, serves to designate "wind," "breath," and "spirit." Thus the sound of a rushing wind captured the attention of all who were about to breathe in the Spirit of God. Second, there appeared a single blaze of fire that became multiple flames above the heads of the disciples. Jesus' cousin John had said that he baptized with water, but that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Luke 1:16). This vision represented the single divine Spirit baptizing all at the same time.

Peter capitalized on these themes when he preached a sermon explaining Joel's prophecy of the "Day of the Lord." Peter tied together God's extensive mission, the history of Israel, the coming of Jesus, and the splitting of the Day of the Lord so that the blessings of the messianic age could begin before the final divine judgment fell. The pattern for entering the new community of faith was clearly outlined: repent and be baptized. The first indicated a transforming presence of the Holy Spirit in individual hearts, while the latter became the initiation rite by which the ranks of this missional society were identified (over against the badge of circumcision in its unique application to the nation of Israel, which was now being replaced — see Colossians 2:11-12).

Although not explicitly stated, there seems to be a conscious undoing of the troubles that started at Babel through the miracle of multiple-language communications at Pentecost. In Genesis 11, the human race was becoming unified against its creator, and the divine solution to dissipate this rebellion was to multiply the

languages spoken, forcing the community to become segmented into competing groups. At Pentecost this action is reversed, and the many people who communicate in their diverse local languages suddenly all hear the same message of grace. They are then knit together into a new common humanity of the church. Babel is undone by Pentecost!

Romans 8:14-17

The apostle Paul speaks of fear in religious terms. Fear is the enemy of faith, he says. Fear is a tool of the devil. Fear is the wall around the mind that wants so desperately to believe.

Maybe you know what he means. A businessman used to belong to a Presbyterian church, but for some reason, his relationship with the church soured. Now that he's getting older, though, he thinks about God often and wonders what will happen to him when he dies. Yet he can't bring himself back to church because of that old spiritual skirmish. The scars left by theological wounds still linger years after he received them. He's not sure what he believes anymore.

A family stopped going to church several years ago because they were involved in a controversy in which church members accused one another of thinking and believing falsely. The debate eventually ran its course, but the pain lingers. The family members are afraid of what might happen if they let religion play a large role in their lives one more.

A young man's brother died some years ago. He's afraid now to look God in the face because he doesn't know what he will find — will he see a sadistic monster who plays with young lives? Will he find a stern judge who sentences first and asks questions later?

Fear is a crippler. It binds and enslaves us. It rules over us with a whip. Fear can also characterize our faith. Even if we do believe in God, even if we do go to church, a religion of fear can keep us from riding the winds of grace. A religion of fear shouts "No!" so loudly that we can't hear the "Yes!" of God's love. Fear keeps the rider on the ground.

Generations ago, one of the great churches in Edinburgh was Free Saint George's Church. Alexander Whyte, its preacher, had a powerful pulpit ministry. His sermons roared like fire. His thunder shook the rafters. His congregation sat in quivering silence as he delivered hot, spicy warnings from scripture.

As the congregation grew larger, the church decided to call a second minister. Young Hugh Black was hired as the junior colleague. Every Sunday, Whyte mounted the pulpit in the morning, Black in the evening. Soon a saying developed about the two: in the morning Whyte black-balled the saints, and in the evening Black whitewashed the sinners. Whyte spoke of the terrors of hell, and Black spoke of the love of God.

The congregation in the morning grew smaller, stiffer, and more argumentative, while the congregation in the evening grew larger, more enthusiastic, and more graceful. Whyte built walls of fear, but Black opened the gates of love. While the former resonated with elements of prophetic judgment, the latter learned Paul's wonderful applications in today's lectionary reading.

John 14:8-17 (25-27)

Jesus knew the hypnotic power of fear, the crippling power of anxiety. That is why he so often tells people not to be afraid. In fact, his command not to fear is recorded more than any other single teaching. The gospels record almost two dozen instances in which Jesus challenged people to give up their fears and to try believing in God again. He said it to Peter. He said it to the ruler of the synagogue when he was told that his little girl had died. He said it to the disciples as a group on a number of occasions. Again and again he said it: “Fear not. Don’t be afraid. Only believe.” Here, on the night before he dies, it is the echo of his words, and it will be the first thing he says again after his resurrection.

If doubt and faith are necessary partners in our hearts, fear and faith are mortal enemies, often locked in combat. Only when we acknowledge that faith is stronger than fear can we climb again into the saddle of our religion and ride the horizons with our God.

Of course, we cannot summon up courage on our own, or make it magically appear at the snap of a finger. That is why Jesus said one very important thing about faith — it is the gift and work of the Paraclete, the continued presence of Christ with those who own him and are owned by him as Lord and master and friend.

Application

When we go on a family bike ride, no one thinks much about how we’re going to glide along. It happens rather naturally.

It wasn’t always that easy. When our three daughters were learning to ride, they all took a few spills. At one point or another, each of them said, “I’m never going to get on that bike again!” And here we are today, a family of bikers.

Fear can keep us flat-footed, but the promise of greater things teaches us to try again.

If you have been thrown by the bike of your religion, if you have scars from your encounters with the church, if your theology scares you, the challenge of scripture is this: Get back on the horse; find your way into the saddle again; learn how to ride your religion once more.

How do we do that? We begin, in part, by realizing that faith is more powerful than fear. That’s difficult, because fear is a powerful force in our lives. Like a horse that has thrown us, fear towers over us. And well it should, because God has given us the strength of fear to keep us from being destroyed. Fear is the alarm that goes off in our hearts whenever danger threatens. Fear can make us run faster and jump higher than we ever thought possible.

A hunter came back to his camp late at night, clothes in shreds, hair full of brambles, skin cut and bruised. He was carrying a beautiful trophy: a magnificent leopard. As his partner looked the animal over, he said, “I don’t see a bullet hole. How did you bag this fellow?”

“Oh, I ran him to death,” said the hunter.

“What?” exclaimed his partner. “You can’t chase a leopard that fast!”

“Who said anything about chasing?” came the reply. “I

was out in front!”

Fear will do that do us, won’t it? Fear speeds up our reaction time. It strengthens our muscles. It demands that we run from burning houses. Whenever our senses tell us we’re being challenged, our adrenal glands squirt some fear into our system, and our energy level increases. You’ve probably heard stories of mothers who lifted crashed automobiles to release a trapped child. Fear said, “Get that child out of there,” so they did.

The power of fear can hypnotize us, too. It can stand before us and cast a spell that keeps us from moving. Maybe you’ve seen a hypnotist at work. She puts a man into a trance and draws a circle around him on the floor. Then she tells him that he can’t cross the line — that his feet won’t be able to because of the barrier set against him. When she wakes him from his trance, try as he might, he cannot cross that line. The hypnotist’s suggestion keeps him pinned.

When a rider is thrown by his horse, fear could keep him down. But a true horseman knows that if he doesn’t climb into the saddle again, he’d be a poorer person for it. He needs to ride. That’s how he is.

“Even youths,” said Isaiah, “grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:30-31). They know that the life of fear is so much poorer than the life of faith.

Alternative Application

John 14:8-17 (25-27). When Alexander the Great was a boy, a man from Thessaly brought a horse to his father. The horse was for sale, and it was a raging beauty. No one at court had ever seen a horse so glorious.

King Philip had his grooms test the horse, but they returned discouraged. “The horse is no good,” they said. “He’s skittish. He’s wild. No one will ever tame him.”

Philip was about to send the man and his horse on their way when young Alexander stopped him. “Let me try,” he said.

Philip was worried. He didn’t want the horse to throw his son. But Alexander knew how to coax his father, and Philip finally gave in.

Alexander walked quickly to the horse’s head and turned its face toward the sun. He put his mouth to the horse’s ears and spoke softly to it. When he got on its back, the horse carried him like an old friend. The two flew together as if they were one.

“How did you do it?” people asked him later.

This was Alexander’s secret: “I saw he was afraid of his shadow. So I turned his face toward the sun, and I told him I was his friend. And when we rode together, there was nothing to fear.”

Beautiful, isn’t it? That’s the meaning of our lives — to be turned toward the Son of God! To be strengthened by his glory and guided by his grace; to hear his great love whispering in our ears.

Suddenly the shadows of fear fade, and the horizon of faith is limitless.



Preaching The Psalm

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b

This psalm is so powerful in the way that it paints God's wonderful actions. From the millions of species of creatures to the seas and the mountains, the work of God is lifted up with a poet's heart. Psalms like this, though, tend to extol what God has done, as though the Creation was done in the six days and that was that. But the truth is that God's creating power has never ceased.

Every day and in every way, Creation continues to unfold. From the startling scientific revelation that our universe is expanding to the daily creation of new land masses by volcanoes in the Pacific Ocean, God continues the mighty work of Creation. From the incredible rhythms of life and death in the seasons to something as delicate as a butterfly forming in a cocoon, God continues the ongoing saga of creating.

Because of our own finitude it's easier to see the Creation of our world as a one-time thing. It's done now and we get to live here. That's good. But what does it mean for our lives if we walk through our days and nights in the midst of the sacred act of Creation? What if God's handiwork is being crafted right under our noses? What if we ourselves are part of this process, and God is in the midst of creating us? What if, God forbid, we are unfinished?

Most people who have lived seventy years or so tend to have this perspective. They know the changes and growth they have been through in their lifetime. They know that they have not remained static. They know that God has been at work creating within them throughout all their days.

How different our lives would be if we could see ourselves as constantly being created by God. How incredible our world might be if our communities saw themselves as partners in God's ongoing act of Creation!

Then we could say with gusto, "How manifold indeed are works, O God! How manifold and continuing! How manifold and ongoing!"

Illustrations

Acts 2:1-21

“Multiculturalism” has been a big buzz word for years in my native Canada, as well as here in the US. In the spirit of cultural tolerance, we emphasize that everyone’s culture is valid and acceptable, and that together, each separate culture can come together and enrich all of us. And that is true. Our church has members in it from China and Hungary, as well as relationships with other churches and organizations in Belgium and Belize and Canada. It is wonderful having all of these different cultures and perspectives come together.

What is important for us to remember as Christians is that Christ is for all of us, Jew and Greek, slave and free. Pentecost illustrates this perfectly, as the Holy Spirit allowed the apostles to proclaim the gospel to people scattered over the entire known world (see vv. 8-11) and all the various cultures therein. The Holy Spirit can still empower us to reach across cultures, fulfilling the prophecy of Joel: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (v. 21).

Craig K.

Acts 2:1-21

People can sit side-by-side, but be light-years apart. It happens regularly. Folks share houses, airplanes, buses, movie theaters, and even church buildings but chasms divide their hearts and minds. Wrangling, disputes, and spats evidence their separation.

When Acts tells us that the disciples were “all together in one place” it refers to more than physical togetherness. It means that they were emotionally and spiritually in sync. They proved it by the mighty things they later did for God. “Together” people do astonishing things.

What brought the disciples together making them such a powerful force? First, they all obeyed Jesus. He told them to wait in Jerusalem, and they did exactly that. Are you currently in full obedience to him?

Second, the disciples continually prayed. Some of us entreat God only if we think we need something or feel that we’re in trouble. Do you pray constantly?

Third, the disciples were open to God’s Spirit and were ready to act for him. How “together” are you? Are you ready to act with

fellow Christians for God’s glory? If so, God’s Spirit may soon work powerfully in you.

Emphasis Archives

Acts 2:1-21

Josh always enjoyed attending church camp each summer. Over the years, he made friends with boys from other churches in the area. Josh even convinced some of his friends from school to attend. “It will be great,” he told them.

After he graduated from high school, Josh was asked if he would be a counselor at the church camp that summer. He immediately agreed and was really looking forward to working at the same camp that had meant so much to him.

The boys he was assigned were active and picked fights with other boys. The first couple of days it seemed as though Josh did nothing but break up fights. One boy accused another of stealing his basketball, which was found in one of the other cabins. This was not what Josh expected.

One evening, after a trying day, Josh called all the boys together. He told them in no uncertain terms that their fighting must stop. “And it must stop *now!*” he said. Then he shared his experiences of attending camp and the friendships he made. He spoke of all the positive things that could take place if they would stop fighting. That was a turning point. From that moment, the boys began cooperating and friendships developed. Before the week ended several boys accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior. On the last day, one of the boys said he hoped Josh would be his counselor the next summer. Josh wondered what would have happened had he not spoken up when he did.

Pentecost was Peter’s moment. He stood up to correct the notion that the believers had too much to drink and launched into his first sermon. By the time he finished, over 3,000 people became believers.

Emphasis Archives

Acts 2:1-21

Recently Sandy purchased a CD of bird songs. She wanted to identify the various birds in her yard by their songs. After listening to the CD she was able to hear the chirp of the oriole amid the chatter of the sparrows. “I was once oblivious to the different songs,” she reflects, “but now I know which birds are nearby — even if I do not see them.”

One day Sandy wondered if it was possible

to hear God’s voice like she heard the various birds in her yard. She wondered if it was possible to train ourselves to hear the voice of God amid the chatter and noise of the world. This question led her in a spiritual quest, to carefully listen for God’s voice, “the voice that tells us to stop and help a child, or reach out to a stranger, or send someone a note of encouragement.” Sandy concluded that it is possible to hear God’s voice in your life.

God speaks in many ways — through scripture, sermons, other believers, books, and also in the silence. Too often we are too busy or preoccupied to hear God voice. When we pause to hear God’s voice we realize that we are never far from God.

The apostles were waiting and praying as they had been instructed when suddenly the Holy Spirit dramatically descended upon them. “And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.” The first gift of the Holy Spirit was speech, as the apostles took the message of salvation out into the street. The commotion drew the attention of passersby. Each heard the message in his own native language. The Holy Spirit gave the apostles the ability to speak in such a way that all people would understand. The Holy Spirit gave them the courage they needed to take the gospel into the entire world.

Tim S.

Romans 8:14-17

When a family has problems, everyone suffers. If one member becomes ill, the illness does not only affect that person. The rest of the family goes through the process of caring for him or her, even at risk of catching the illness themselves. If two family members are feuding, the feud does not only affect them; it affects the way the entire family acts toward those people and how the family as a group operates. Despite the hardships that come with being a family, there are also good things. When someone in the family is successful, everyone can share in the pride of that individual’s accomplishments. When someone in the family gets married or has a baby, everyone comes together to celebrate life and happiness.

Leah T.

Romans 8:14-17

Margret Sangster relates an illustration about an invention that the Japanese came

up with many years ago. She said that they have small dry wisps of wood or straw that are dropped into a bowl of water and like magic begin to spread into all shapes and sizes. One moment they are dry, waterless, dehydrated, and dead. The next moment they expand, blossom, change into a beautiful decoration.

When the Holy Spirit fills an individual the human soul that has been chilled, dried, barren it is then bathed in a flood of spirituality that warms, enthuses, and hydrates. His power regenerates and cleanses the heart and makes it completely available to God to do with as he pleases. In that moment the impulse to grow in grace germinates and with nurturing and careful attention the process of spiritual development and improvement in Christlikeness of character and personality develops.

Are you ready to change, expand, and blossom? Allow the Holy Spirit to fill your life!
Derl K.

Romans 8:14-17

The Israeli tour guide was amazed that people would expend money and effort to travel to Israel only to flaunt their unbelief. A man in the group snorted derision when, at the traditional spot of Jesus' Sermon the Mount, Jesus' prayer was read, "Our Father..." He spoke loudly enough for most of the 45 pilgrims to hear, "God, a father? I could tell you the brute *my* father was."

The next morning, in Jerusalem, the group waited in the hotel lobby as the guide said good-bye to his wife and fussing children. Then, as he explained the day's schedule to the group, his daughter came running, crying, "Abba! Abba!" He picked her up, comforted her, and carried her back to her mother.

As the tour group climbed onto the bus, a lady said to the skeptic beside her, "Now, do you see what it means to call God 'Father'?"

Emphasis Archives

Romans 8:14-17

Is there any way to prove that we are God's children?

In this passage of Romans, Paul brings to mind the elaborate, safe, and secure method of adoption used by Rome. Adoption was very detailed and difficult. When a son was adopted, he had to pass out of the possession and control of one man, and the other became the owner. Three times the symbol-

ism of sale, constituting the adoption was carried out. The first two times, the father would buy him back, then the third time he became the property of the adopting father. The adopted person then gained all the rights of a naturally born son. Even if other sons were born later, they did not gain a higher title or place. The old life of the adopted person was completely removed. The one adopted truly became a new person.

The adoption was carried out in the presence of seven witnesses. Paul reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the witness, the only witness needed, when we are adopted into the family of God.

Emphasis Archives

John 14:8-17 (25-27)

One of my favorite Disney movies growing up had to be *The Lion King*. In fact, I'd be hard pressed to find a Disney movie made since then that would top it. I like the story so much that I even went to see the Broadway musical based on it. Probably my favorite moment in the story came when Simba had to decide whether or not to go back and reclaim his kingdom. The decision was made when he saw his father's reflection and realized that his father's spirit lived on, in *him*.

Jesus also defined his existence in his relationship with the Father: "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (v. 10). And now, with the Helper among us, we can know that his Spirit lives in *us*.

Craig K.

John 14:8-17 (25-27)

The Hawaiian-language translation for *paracletos* (often translated as "advocate" in English) is *kokua*, a word that literally means "help" or "helper." In Kalaupapa, the famous settlement for people with Hansen's Disease, or leprosy, the word had a deeper significance.

Kokua was the name given to a person who accompanied a new patient to Kalaupapa. The *kokua* entered the leper colony with the patient and never left. Those who agreed to become a *kokua* essentially gave up their own lives for the sake of the other person, choosing to companion them for the rest of their days. They cast their lot with one who had become an outcast forever.

It's similar to the role of the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus refers to as our *paracletos*, or advocate.

Emphasis Archives

John 14:8-17 (25-27)

Ahmad was excited. His third grade class was putting on a play based on many of the nursery rhymes that the children knew. "It will be great," he told his grandmother. "Come and see it."

So, Ahmad's grandmother made the two-hour trip to see her grandson's first dramatic efforts. After the play, Ahmad ran to his grandmother and said, "Did you see me, Grandma?"

"No, I didn't see you. I didn't know who you were," she joked (of course Grandma knew all along).

"I was Humpty Dumpty, Grandma," Ahmad said. "When you saw the egg, you were looking at me!"

Jesus wasn't in a play, nor was he in costume. But when he lived on earth it was very much like Ahmad's egg. When you looked at or listened to Jesus, you were in reality looking at and listening to God.

Emphasis Archives

John 14:8-17 (25-27)

Years later Scott recalls the terrible day when his father died of a sudden heart-attack. Scott was fourteen years old at the time. It was a terrible shock for his entire family. A month later, Scott along with his mother and sister moved to his mother's hometown. "I remember the fear of those first weeks of grief and separation," Scott says of readjusting to a new life. His greatest fear was that his mother would die leaving him and his sister "alone in a world that we did not know and could not trust." He experienced stress and anxiety over the thought of becoming an orphan thrust into the care of strangers.

As Jesus met with his disciples' hours before his arrest he sought to comfort them. Jesus knew what would happen to him, namely that he would die on the cross. He also knew that the disciples would be left without a leader. That night Jesus reassured his friends, "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you." They would not be left alone, Jesus was sending the Holy Spirit that would empower them to continue as well as expand the ministry he began. "I will ask the Father," Jesus said, "and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever."

Tim S.

CHARTING

THE COURSE

Knowing our limits

During the years when Jesus was passing his childhood in Palestine, the Latin poet, Ovid, was writing a collection of poems titled *Metamorphoses*. Included in this retelling of classical myths of the ancient Greeks is the familiar story of Daedalus and his son Icarus (Book VIII, lines 182-239). Daedalus had been exiled to the island of Crete, where his marvelous inventions had so ingratiated him to King Minos that the king refused to let him leave. Convinced that Minos would block any exit by land or sea, Daedalus decided that the only way of escape was through the air. He ingeniously crafted wings from feathers, thread, and wax for himself and his son.

As he instructed his son how to fly with these wings, he warned him, “You must follow a course midway between earth and heaven, in case the sun should scorch your feathers, if you go too high, or the water make them heavy if you are too low.” Ovid muses about how peasants and workers must have been astonished as Daedalus and Icarus made their escape through the sky, “believing that these creatures who could fly through the air must be gods.”

Of course Icarus failed to heed his father’s warning, and soon his exuberance led him to soar ever higher until “he came too close to the sun, and it softened the sweet-smelling wax that bound his wings together.” The wax melted, the wings disintegrated, and his cries for his father were literally drowned by the sea into which he crashed.

Daedalus’ warning to his young son neither to fly too high nor too low captures the essence of humanity’s constant search for moderation between destructive pulls of hubris and humiliation. As Paul puts it in writing to the Romans, “We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God ... but we also boast in our sufferings.” The psalmist proudly declares we are “made a little lower than God” even as he wonders why God should care at all about us mere mortals. Our sinful nature drives us, like Icarus, to try to transcend our human limits through intellectual and technological prowess, but the scriptures argue instead for living within our limits and within a gracious relationship with God.

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

In the eighth chapter of Proverbs we meet the personification of wisdom as a woman. This choice of gender may be in part because the Hebrew word for wisdom, *hokmah*, is grammatically feminine, but probably owes more to the parallel figure of “Folly” in the preceding chapter of Proverbs, personified in the role of an adulteress “decked out like a prostitute.” Both figures are presented as a women standing at the gates of the city calling to all who pass by to join with them (Proverbs 7:6-12; 8:1-5). But Wisdom is no seductress. She is in fact the very design of creation and its order from before even the first of God’s creative acts (vv. 22-23). It should come as no surprise then that those who are looking for direction in making their way through this world should look to her and her counsel.

But, she is surprising to the culture of ancient Israel, nevertheless. In such a patriarchal society, a woman “beside the gates in front of the town” would have been largely ignored. The “gates” were the place where men gathered to make decisions for the community and to settle disputes. Women were not heard from at the gates, even when their personal interests were at stake (recall the story about Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz in Ruth 4). Thus it is not surprising that Hokmah must plead for people to heed her counsel; she holds the keys to life, but human cultural expectations blind people to the presence of God’s wisdom in their own midst.

In the liturgical context of Trinity Sunday, it is impossible to read the description of wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31 without calling to mind the evangelist’s description of the pre-incarnate Christ as the Word in John 1:1-5. There we again meet one who is the divine counsel to God in the work of creation. But that counselor was not only “with God, [but] was God,” and is called the “Word” rather than “Wisdom.” Once again, the peculiarities of grammatical gender are no doubt at work, for the Greek word for wisdom, *sophia*, is feminine like its Hebrew counterpart. Because God’s wisdom is not just personified as a literary figure of speech in the gospel, but actually incarnated in the human person of Jesus, the evangelist shifts the imagery from “wisdom” to “Word,” the grammatically masculine *logos* in Greek. The Father, the Word, and the Spirit (as we learn later in John’s gospel from another of this Sunday’s lections) are the one God who works to bring us the divine counsel, wisdom, and knowledge that we need.

Romans 5:1-5

One of the first lessons I was taught in biblical exegesis is that when you are given a passage that begins with the word, “Therefore,” then you know you have been dropped down in the middle of something. Before you keep reading ahead, you need to look back. The focus of Paul’s argument to this point in Romans has been on the need for human redemption from sin and God’s means of accomplishing that redemption through Christ. This brief paragraph marks a transitional point in the letter where Paul moves from stressing the surety of that redemption to addressing the reality that while we are already completely reconciled with God the full benefits of our redemption from the consequences of our sin is yet to be realized.

In bringing the first phase of his argument to a conclusion, Paul stresses that having been “justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 1). As the verb tenses make clear (another point of emphasis from those early exegesis classes) that justification was accomplished in the past through the death and resurrection of Jesus, so we already have in the present, peace with God. That peace brings with it some remarkable benefits. We have access to God’s grace that enables our very living and have hope of sharing in God’s glory itself. No wonder Paul exudes that we have something to “boast” about.

Paul then suggests that our continued suffering plays an important role in balancing our exuberance about our special relationship with God with the continuing effects of our sinfulness in shattering God’s good created order (Romans 8:18-23). All our technological marvels have not brought an end to suffering; but by the same token, suffering does not obliterate the glory and honor of humanity. In other words, to be in the “image of God” inevitably involves both suffering and glory.

The very glory we enjoy as a result of our relationship with the Divine is grounded in God’s participation in suffering with and for creation. The highest demonstration of God’s love for us is “that while we were still weak... Christ died for us” (v. 6). When we were weak and ungodly, when we were sinners and God’s enemies, Christ died for us so that we might be reconciled to God. God is the love that stands at the beginning of all things, and the glory toward which all things move. Christ is the active agent bringing God’s love to action, the one through whom we are able to experience God’s salvation. The Holy Spirit is the one through whom and in whom we actually experience the love of God. It is the Spirit who continues to give concrete expression to divine love and does so within us where God’s self converges with our own selves.

John 16:12-15

Having heard the first scripture lesson for this Trinity Sunday from Proverbs, one must wonder why the lectionary committee chose this text to be read from John’s gospel. Yes, the passage presents Jesus’ indirect claim to unity with the Father in that “all that the Father has” belongs to him and will be revealed to his disciples by the Spirit. Certainly it was true that his original disciples were certainly not ready to bear the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity even before his crucifixion

and resurrection, and one may wonder if we are even now ready for the Spirit to lead us into that truth. Yet, clearly passages like the prologue to this gospel figured more prominently in the development of Trinitarian doctrine.

What this passage does offer is some insight into what theologians have sometimes called “the economy of the Godhead,” that is, the specific and defining functions of each person of the Trinity. It is by the work of the Spirit that humanity is now drawn into the relationship of the Godhead. The Spirit accomplishes this not by drawing attention to the Spirit’s own place as one person of the Trinity, but by revealing the essential nature of God as being in relationship within the Godhead itself (the Spirit “will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears” in the relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit, v. 13). Although there are things that properly belong to the Father, they are not held by the Father as an exclusive possession, but rather freely shared among the persons of the Godhead. The Father shares “all that the Father has” with the Son who in turn provides those things to the Spirit to be made known to humanity (v. 15).

Again, it should be stressed that such Trinitarian interpretations of these words go far beyond what the disciples themselves could possibly have conceived at the Last Supper, and even beyond what the evangelist’s first readers would have understood at the close of the first century. Within both that narrative context and the historical “life-setting” of the fourth gospel itself, this passage is far more about acknowledging the limits of our ability to understand the mystery of God than about providing specific answers to complex theological and philosophical questions. Conceding our inability to grasp the divine mystery, Jesus here promises that the “Spirit of truth” will continue to guide our halting steps toward understanding by drawing us into the relationship that already exists between the Father and the Son. As was true of the disciples it remains so with us: there are “still many things” that God has to teach us that we cannot fully comprehend, but the relationship continues.

Application

Nothing serves to put us in our place so rapidly as when our own technology confronts us with evidence that we are not only not the center of a universe constructed around us, but are instead isolated on the “third rock” orbiting one minor star among billions on the fringes of one minor galaxy among billions in the vastness of the universe. This awareness, couched in a thorough secularism, is captured in an observation by a young radio astronomer in Carl Sagan’s *Contact*. In response to the question of whether humanity is alone as the highest form of life and yet confined to earth, she echoes her father’s response to her in childhood: “If so, it seems like an awful waste of space.”

Yet the very technology that “puts us in our place” is itself evidence that unlike any other limited and mortal life form known to us, we have “dominion” over our environment. In the words of praise the psalmist directed to God: “You have given humanity dominion over the works of your hands.” All too often we have used our “dominion” not as a tool for faithful stewardship and care, but as an excuse to “dominate.” Our very

success has made us lose sight of who we truly are. The psalmist asserted that humanity has been “made a little lower than God”; we simply omit the qualifying phrase, “a little lower than,” and look upon ourselves as the peasants looked upon Daedalus and Icarus, “believing that these creatures who could fly through the air must be gods.” It is God’s sovereignty that sets the bounds of humanity. Human honor, glory, and dominion are God-given gifts, not inherent qualities or inalienable rights. Human dominion is derivative. The assertion of the human self apart from the claim of God over us is the essence of wickedness, and it invites disaster, ecological and otherwise.

The humiliation of humanity ultimately lies not in its insignificance as measured on some cosmic scale, but in its refusal to accept its status as creature in rebellion and enmity with its creator. The glory of humanity ultimately lies not in its knowledge or technological wizardry, but in its status as the object of such divine love that God would take on humanity even in the fullness of suffering and death to bring reconciliation to the relationship between creature and Creator.

There is, then, something of a spiritual lesson to be drawn from Daedalus’ warning to Icarus. Because of his actions and his fate, we quickly conclude that we must now allow hubris to carry us too high. If we come to see ourselves as gods, holding absolute dominion over all things, surely our wings will be melted away and we will plunge to destruction. But as Daedalus also warned, there is a danger to flying too low as well. If we do not accept the change that has been brought to us by our reconciliation with God in Christ, if we see ourselves only in the desperation of suffering and cosmic insignificance, then the weight of those things on our wings will likewise drag us down into the waves. The truth of who we are in relation to who God is is found in that middle path through the sky that rejects both hubris and humiliation.

Alternative Applications

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; John 16:12-15. Of all the Sundays and special days in the cycle of the church year, Trinity Sunday is the only one that designates a specific doctrine of the church. Now in a broader sense, all the Sundays are about doctrine. Pentecost last week is about the work of God’s Spirit in our lives and world. Good Shepherd Sunday and Christ the King Sunday emphasize truths about who Jesus is in relationship with the world and with each of us individually. Advent, Epiphany, Easter — all these designations point to important theological ideas, but they are also firmly rooted in events or stories of the scriptural tradition that give witness to those spiritual insights into our relationship with God that are theology in its most basic sense. Trinity Sunday is different. It is about a doctrine — and without doubt, one of the most abstract, mind-bending, abstruse theological concepts not only of Christian faith but of any religious tradition.

You don’t hear too many sermons about specific Christian doctrines any more, especially complex ones like the Trinity or the doctrine of the two natures of Christ (which presents many of the same philosophical and mental challenges). Most pastors,

myself among them, find narratives and practical life-issues connect more easily with our congregations in our current cultural climate. Perhaps that is why one of my clergy colleagues once opened our lectionary study group in the week leading up to Trinity Sunday with the question, “So what practical difference does the doctrine of the Trinity make in your lives?” To be honest, I almost broke out laughing when I heard him. “You have got to be kidding! As esoteric a doctrine as the Trinity? Practical difference in my daily life?” But that question echoed as a challenge in the back of my head. In the end, I think I found an answer.

The eternal relationship of creator, redeemer, and sustainer within the one God was, in the view of the great reformed theologian Karl Barth, the essential spiritual truth of the doctrine of the Trinity. God is relational within the very divine essence, and we are created to share in that life of relationship. But to do so requires that we “hear [Wisdom’s] instruction and ... not neglect it.” Blessedness belongs to those who find the Word, for there we “find life and obtain favor from the LORD.” That insight is a personal difference the doctrine of the Trinity has for my life, but there is another even more practical way it should affect our daily lives.

As with Hokmah at the city gates, Christ even now has much to teach us that we still are not able to bear (John 16:12). Whether personified as the woman Wisdom or incarnated as the man Word, our culture continues to resist the divine counsel for life that would bring us into genuine relationship with God and the creation formed by God’s design. The Spirit continues to bring that counsel to us, female and male, wisdom and word, to continue to personify and embody God’s design to those who persist in the darkness hovering over the gates of sinful human judgment. Being in relationship with the God whose very essence is relationship should be the most practical aspect of our lives, shaping our whole understanding of life. The hope that others will come to share in that relationship in many ways depends on it.

Preaching The Psalm

Psalm 8

God has given us dominion over creation. It says so in the Bible! This means we're in charge! We get to run things and subdue nature and do whatever we want! The childish and reckless glee of this reminds one of a bunch of kids left on their own for the first time without the parents watching. "You mean we get to decide? We can do whatever we want? Yahoo!" The chuckles of delight and abandon come right before these kids manage to fall into a well or set the house on fire while playing with matches. Yes. The parents told them to do whatever they wanted. But the unspoken piece of it all is that their actions had to take place within the bounds of reason. Perhaps the problem is the unspoken part. Boundaries need to be clearly articulated in most areas of human endeavor. Otherwise we tend to run amuck.

For us, the boundaries are clearly laid out in scripture. We don't get to merely do what we want to do. Indeed, we are called to God and God's way before all else. God has left us as stewards of the planet and given us the guidance we need to take care of God's Creation responsibly and honorably. Yes, the question runs through this writer's mind as it may run through the reader's thoughts. "What was God thinking?" We are more like the kids left alone shrieking for joy at our newfound freedom than we are a group of people with whom the welfare of the planet has been entrusted. We love the idea of being in charge, but we disdain the idea of accountability. We dearly long for the times when we're able to call the shots, but we do most anything we can to keep from having to obey God's Word.

We're lower than God all right. One is left to wonder, though, if it's only a "little lower," as scripture indicates. This is a serious consideration. We are, as we read in scripture, "created in God's image." It leads us to ask in what ways we are like God. It leads us to confess that ways that we diverge from God. When we lend our energies to creating and building; to healing and hope, we are a little like God. Yet, when we try to be in charge of it all, when we insist on our own way, and when we slip into the abyss of selfishness and greed then we are not like God at all.

We are created in God's image, but the mirror sometimes gets distorted by our endless ability to blunder our way through life. We are a little lower than God, yet sometimes we seem to want to dive off the cliff and get a lot lower. Perhaps we can join hearts and minds as we strive to maintain our natural position just a little lower than God as we care for Creation and one another?

Illustrations

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

Before he can paint a masterpiece, an artist must first prepare his canvas. Before his trees or mountains, valleys or oceans, before his brush strokes populate his painting with creatures or plants or humans, he needs the correct tools. Before he commits the first color, he must clean his brushes. He must prepare his palette. He must choose the right canvas or paper or whatever it is he is planning to paint. Perhaps he must stretch his own canvas or cut his own sheets. He must set up his easel and perhaps must adjust its height or angle. He must plan his work and decide where the first stroke will go — all before he paints one tiny star or simple tree.

Leah T.

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

Thomas Alva Edison was an inventor, scientist, and businessman who changed the lives of people around the world with his inventions. He invented over a thousand different products that after generations are still being used. His biographers state that the greatest challenge was the development of a practical incandescent, electric light. After countless experiments and failures he finally switched on the light for the world! But it wasn't just the invention of the light bulb, but according to inventors.about.com he had to actually invent a total of seven system elements that were critical to the practical application of electric lights as an alternative to the gas lights of his day. Those developments included:

- The parallel circuit
- A durable light bulb
- An improved dynamo
- The underground conductor network
- The devices for maintaining constant voltage
- Safety fuses and insulating materials
- Light sockets with on-off switches

Every one of those elements had to be invented, through careful trial and error, developed into practical, reproducible components.

Richard Grant said, "The wisest person is not the one who has the fewest failures but the one who turns failures to best account."

Each person will fail many times, but it is

how we meet those failures and make them into successes in life that shows wisdom!

Derl K.

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

"I lived with my single father until I was twelve," Amanda said. "Then I went to live with my grandmother. I knew nothing about housekeeping, but Grandma said that I'd learn. Grandma was good at everything, but a little impatient. Her favorite line when I was learning was, 'Here, I'll show you.'"

"She'd push fabric through the sewing machine like she was flinging a Frisbee. She'd sweep almost like she was dancing. Everything graceful and efficient. 'Here, I'll show you.'"

"Although I'm fifty years old, for me housework isn't a thing. It's not even an activity. It's my grandmother and her name is on it: Julia. As I work, she still instructs me in better ways to do things and rewards me when the job's done.

"In Proverbs where Wisdom is a woman speaking and instructing people, it's not hard for me to understand such personification. It's just that I'd name her 'Julia' instead of 'Sophia.'"

Emphasis Archives

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

After centuries and millennia of reflecting upon the order of creation, one would think we have a pretty good handle on it. Certainly, since Rene Descartes (philosophically) and Isaac Newton (scientifically) laid the foundations for a mechanical view of the universe, we have made huge strides in understanding and engaging life with great inventions, inspired by deeper insights into the nature of things.

For example, understanding the nature of gravity has helped us escape our own earth's gravity and explore the space between ourselves and neighboring planets. Discovering electricity has engendered a whole different work schedule and empowered the computer age. Splitting the atom has changed war and politics.

Yet, the wisdom of God's creation goes deeper than our former mechanical view of the universe. Now there is a whole new worldview that perceives reality as "a dynamic web of interrelated events" (Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*). What has been called the "bootstrap" hypothesis contends that the universe is not constructed "from a set of basic entities with certain

fundamental properties" (like constituting particles called atoms and neutrons and protons). Rather, life is a matrix of natural phenomena that influence each other on many levels, some of which we are only beginning to fathom. In some sense, everything contains everything else and there is a mutual influence connecting everything together (a cosmic whole, if you will).

Wisdom indeed calls to us, and we have so much more to hear before we can even claim to catch a glimpse of the "circle on the face of the deep."

Emphasis Archives

Romans 5:1-5

While open persecution of Christians is not prevalent in this part of the world, many Christians experience isolation, humiliation, and even violence and death on account of their faith. I've read and heard story after story of how Christians, young and old alike, have stood strong, enduring rape, beatings, attempts at brainwashing, and even suffering death for their faith in Christ. One pastor in Iran was imprisoned for two years in a cramped cell with no room even to stretch out. He was later reported to have said that all the tortures and torments he suffered worked to his good, and that he only had love and forgiveness for those who made him suffer.

It is in these persecuted brothers and sisters that we see Paul's words personified: "More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (vv. 3-4).

Craig K.

Romans 5:1-5

Five years ago Hannah graduated from a private college and stepped out of her comfort zone by accepting a teaching position in an inner-city. She would teach middle school students in a school plagued with the problems of violence, teen pregnancy, and poverty. "I did not realize that this job would challenge, turn upside down, and ultimately change my life," she reflects.

While Hannah wanted her students to break free of problems associated with poverty she did not realize that at the same time she would become a mother, father, counselor, and friend to her students. And she did not realize the impact her students would have on her faith and life. There were times when she felt angry and exhausted.

There were times when she was ready to quit, but through it all she continued. She saw her students in a different light; they were children who needed the love and support of adults. While they had much against them she strongly felt that they still had potential.

After five years Hannah says that her students deepened her faith and redefined her definition of success. "I no longer believe that success is the perfect job, the high paying salary, or the biggest house. Rather success is showing God's love to all people, especially those who tend to be ignored or forgotten."

While we may want to avoid unpleasant experiences the apostle Paul teaches that, "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope." "I may have taught my students lessons in math, science and history," Hannah says, "but they taught me lessons in perseverance that deepened my faith."

Tim S.

Romans 5:1-5

When Kate was informed that she had ovarian cancer, her world fell apart. She was only 39, had three wonderful children, a loving husband, and a career that was finally taking off. Now cancer. For the first few weeks, Kate was down. She more or less believed, although she never let her children know, that her life was over.

However, with the support of her husband, her oncology team, and her pastor, Kate's spirits revived. She underwent hysterectomy surgery, entered chemotherapy treatment, and joined a cancer support group comprised mainly of women who had had ovarian cancer. In a short time, Kate's hope began to rise and with it her desire to live and fight the disease. With her improved spirits, her endurance increased. Although the treatment made Kate violently ill, she managed to continue to keep in touch with work via home computer. She continued to make her children's lunches and read bedtime stories to her youngest child. And for the most part, she was able to be in church Sunday mornings.

Kate isn't out of the woods yet. It has been two years since her operation, and Kate knows that there is always a chance for a recurrence. But her hope is strong, and as a result so is Kate's endurance. She is ready for any fight. She quipped to her

pastor, “If hope indeed produces endurance and endurance character, I must be in the leading role.”

Emphasis Archives

Romans 5:1-5

“We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. Not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings.” Many people I know are inveterate boasters. I’ve done my share of crowing. But people rarely blow their own horns the way Paul brags in this section.

Have you ever heard folks boast about their sufferings? Most complain when they suffer. A few stoically endure affliction, but few folks brag about it. I suspect that the reason we don’t boast about our sufferings is that our faith isn’t to the level that brings us peace with God. Often our faith isn’t in Christ’s work on the cross; it’s in our ability, our genius, our health, our financial success, or our winning personality.

If our confidence is in what Christ accomplished for us, enemies and circumstances can strip all we have, yet we’ll be so confident in the Lord that we’ll be at peace. No one can take that away from us. It’s ours forever. In what do you boast?

Emphasis Archives

John 16:12-15

Before she attended her cousin’s college graduation, Layla had never seen a sign language interpreter. She sat mesmerized during the speeches, watching the interpreter’s hands fly through the language, the interpreter watching the speaker intently and carefully translating every word. Layla thought about how she would feel as a deaf person: despite the handicap, she would probably feel valued and respected at events that had sign language interpreters. No matter what your difficulty in understanding, you feel valued when someone takes the time to make sure that you, too, can understand. Maybe your interpreter is someone who

can sign; maybe it is someone who speaks another language; maybe it is someone who takes the time to tutor you in a class. Sometimes all we really need is someone to give us a little help in order to understand.

Leah T.

John 16:12-15

“Don’t tell the children everything,” the chaplain said to the young widow, “but don’t lie to them, either.” She was talking about helping children deal with a tragic death in the family. You don’t inform children of all horrible details of a tragic death. They can’t bear everything at once. It’s enough initially to tell them that their loved one died and to reassure them that you’ll care for them. The time will come (maybe as early as tomorrow) to inform them more fully.

Jesus is the compassionate one. He promised not to leave his students orphaned (John 14:18), and he deals with them now as they are capable of understanding him. He’s the great counselor who promises another “Counselor.” The Holy Spirit will bring the fullest and deepest understanding of who he was and what he meant. For now Jesus doesn’t tell them everything. He won’t lie to them, either. They’ll understand better later (maybe by Sunday morning).

Emphasis Archives

John 16:12-15

In the short span of just ten years, some eighty million people have read the more than seventy *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books edited by Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen. The books include *Chicken Soup for the Couple’s Soul*, *Chicken Soup for the Golfer’s Soul*, *Chicken Soup for the Cat & Dog Lover’s Soul*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul Teen Trilogy*, and *Chicken Soup for the Grieving Soul*. These best-sellers are basically stories — true stories about people’s experiences, which they have submitted.

People read stories for inspiration, for comfort, for encouragement, and for help in their daily lives. They might be experiencing a period of loneliness, a lack of courage, a loss of desire, a period of uncertainty, or a trying time in their lives. While there is a *Chicken Soup for the Jewish Soul*, there is decidedly Christian atmosphere about the books. They exhibit a very clear moral compass and a combination of individual will, spiritual faith, patriotism, love, forgiveness, and the kindness of neighbors. Thousands of readers send in their stories with several hundred a day submitted just for *Teenage Soul*.

While these books may have great value, Jesus Christ’s words have infinitely more value. Prior to his death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, he promised his Holy Spirit who, through God’s holy word, would lead us into all truth and equip us for Christian living in every circumstance.

Emphasis Archives

John 16:12-15

Who is the world’s greatest evangelist? In about 1960, many of the churches in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, worked together and invited Dr. Jack Shuler, a well-known and very effective evangelist, to hold a week of services. Early in the week, Shuler announced that for the closing service on Sunday evening the world’s greatest evangelist would be present. Billy Graham was just receiving worldwide attention, and everyone thought it would be him.

On Sunday, he announced the indisputable truth that the Holy Spirit is the world’s greatest evangelist!

“But if Christ lives in you, the Spirit is life for you because you have been put right with God ... those who are led by God’s Spirit are God’s children” (Romans 11:10, 14 TEV).

Emphasis Archives