

Monday, November 26, 2001

"the voice of one crying out in the wilderness...." **Mark 1:3**

Punctuation can be everything. I still remember an Advent program years ago, where the children in the Sunday School gave weekly presentations during worship. They were grouped by grade levels, and shared skits, songs, readings, which were to lead us through the four weeks. One particular week we were to hear a portion of the annunciation story, read aloud by Nellie, a fourth grader. The first service she did a great job, but by the second service she was getting tired. The story was somehow paraphrased as: "Mary was going to have a child by God." There was no comma before the last two words of that sentence, but a weary Nellie read it as though there was a comma there, drastically changing the meaning of the phrase and creating an opportunity for good-natured laughter from the congregation.

In these first verses from the Gospel of Mark, we encounter the phrase: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord...." I've long wished for an added comma after the word "crying", (the Isaiah 40:3 reference seems to support this idea.) I believe the wilderness is two-fold. It's the locale for John the Baptist, the gutsy fellow who came to bring a message of repentance, getting people ready for Jesus, the main act to follow. He appeared in the wilderness of a desert. In addition, I believe John is speaking to people who may be in their own particular form of wilderness.

In what we might describe as the wilderness of our world, we find people left out and overlooked because of their economic status, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and class. To prepare a way, calls us to be the voices that cry out for these people. If we don't speak up, the wilderness may continue to be a dangerous place for those who live there.

FOR REFLECTION: Archbishop Oscar Romero said: "Some want to keep the Gospel so disembodied that it doesn't get involved at all in the world it must save." How can you best embody the Gospel?

Sue Burwell

Tuesday, November 27, 2001

“the voice of one crying out in the wilderness....” **Mark 1:3**

One of my favorite places in the world is Iona—a small desolate island in the Inner Hebrides chain, off the western coast of Scotland. This rocky, windswept place has few houses, stores, or people, but lots of sheep, very old rocks, and the ancient history of being the place where St. Columba arrived to bring Christianity to this corner of the world in 563AD. About Iona, it's said to be a place “where the veil between heaven and earth is thinner.” For me, the isolation of this island is my form of wilderness. Other people may define wilderness as the Boundary Waters, the Rocky Mountains, the Amazon, and the outback of Australia--places of escape from the pressures of everyday life.

From what we can tell, wilderness for John the Baptist might have been the desert—an uninhabited, dangerous space, a place of testing. Yet, also a place where God might be found. John brings a message from God—from the wilderness—to the people. The message was to repent—to stop and take a look at their lives and see if they are God-directed, God-connected, or not. And if they are not, they're to do something about it, turn their lives around and make changes.

Our modern day life is probably more often like the wilderness of John the Baptist than it is the wilderness of Iona, or the mountains or the forests. A world full of greed and gluttony, wealth and waste, loneliness and hurt, may be a wilderness that contains voices that lead us away from God. These may be voices, which seduce us into thinking that the good life is defined by money, status, power, and the best and the newest of everything.

As we begin to think about decorating for the Christmas season, I wonder what the newest decoration will be. Remember back a few years ago, when the icicle lights were brand new and kept appearing on more and more of the houses in the neighborhoods? Well, what will it be this year that our consumer culture convinces us we have to have? A friend of mine reminds me that in the past, when we decorated for Christmas, we had the practice of simply using what we had the year before. What a novel idea!

PRAYER: During this season especially, help us to not get lost in our culture's wilderness. Help us hear other voices as we await the birth of the Christ Child in our lives. *Amen.*

Sue Burwell

Wednesday, November 28, 2001

“the voice of one crying out in the wilderness....” **Mark 1:3**

A couple of years ago, I saw the Grand Canyon for the first time. The view from the south rim was quite impressive, but I decided that someday I really wanted to see the bottom of the Canyon, and since I was two years away from my fifty-year marker, my goal would be to get to the bottom of the Canyon by the time I reached age fifty. I shared my dream with my friend Elaine, and before long we had made reservations for the mule ride. Arthritic backs, knees, and hips ruled out the possibility of making the trip on foot.

The past May we found ourselves at the corral outside the Bright Angel Lodge, listening intently to the mule driver’s instructions. And before long, there we were, saddled up on Bebe and Rob Roy, making our way down the trail. In retrospect, I can honestly say I’ve never done anything so physically, mentally, psychologically demanding in my life. I soon determined that the ideal mule ruler would be someone in their twenties, very physically fit, and an avid horse rider. None of those words describe me!

The first few hours were the most stressful. Mules tend to walk right along the edge of the canyon, and it’s a long way down. Every now and then one of the mules’ feet would slip off a rock, and you would wonder what was next to slip. I was both exhilarated and scared at the same time. But whenever I questioned my sanity for choosing this adventure, I would look ahead of me, and right in front of me I could see Elaine, doing just fine.

When we have to do something difficult, when we need to take a stand for justice that’s unpopular with the home crowd, it can give us great encouragement to follow someone else’s lead—even if that person is only one mule’s length ahead of us.

FOR REFLECTION: Who are the contemporary prophets that encourage you?

Sue Burwell

Thursday, November 29, 2001

"the voice of one crying out in the wilderness...." **Mark 1:3**

I was on my way to church on a Sunday morning; a man approached me and asked if I was the pastor of the church. I said yes, and we made our way toward the front door. Charles needed money for food and for rent at the boarding house. I told him I could help him out with \$50, so he asked me to please make out a check to the boarding house. As I wrote the check, he told me about a song he had written, about homeless people, and asked if I would like to hear it. I hesitantly looked at the clock, worship would begin in less than twenty minutes, and said sure, I would like to hear the song. We headed to fellowship hall where I enjoyed the talents of this baritone poet. As we left the hall, more people were arriving for worship, and Charles asked about the school supplies being collected in the hallway. He shared that his son could really use some of these things, so before long we had filled a new orange backpack. Our organist appeared, having heard the music, and before long, Charles was seated at the grand piano in the sanctuary, singing another original song with her, about love reaching out. By then, the sanctuary was filling up, and Charles was invited to stay for worship. We omitted the middle hymn, and listened to his music, applauding when he was done singing. Charles visited with some of our folks after worship, enjoyed refreshments at fellowship hour, and was last seen walking across the parking lot with an orange backpack over his shoulder.

We who live in our particular wilderness of affluence and comfort may not know much about Charles' wilderness of hunger and homelessness and a job that doesn't pay a living wage. I admit I don't know what is the best way to address his situation. But I do believe wherever our own forms of wildernesses can intersect, that may be one of the ways we can begin to address each other as God's children. To meet Charles and be blessed by his talents and personality, that makes it more difficult to ignore the harsh wilderness realities of his life.

PRAYER: O God, during these weeks of preparation, keep us aware of the wilderness places in many people's lives, those places we would rather overlook as this season of celebration takes hold of our lives. *Amen.*

Sue Burwell

Friday, November 30, 2001

“the voice of one crying out in the wilderness....” **Mark 1:3**

I am a regular reader of the magazine **The Other Side**. Within its pages, I often find a controversial voice, speaking to that part of me that would rather be quiet. Sometimes these prophetic stances, from a wilderness we are yet to name, sound like voices from outer space. The world says they're crazy voices, confrontative, on the margins, off the wall.

This past summer, **The Other Side** was brave enough to include four articles about gender issues and the church. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott wrote one of the articles. I remember reading her book, **Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?** over twenty years ago, and here is this woman with a strong backbone, continuing to be a voice for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered people. Virginia persists in speaking out about the humanity of all people and the need to accept people just as they are.

I have been fortunate to count as friends, family, neighbors, and co-workers, people whose diversity is called by the names gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered. These are human beings who are dear to my heart. As a pastor in a denomination that is still struggling to fully welcome all people, I find my voice names them too few times. I'm probably hesitant to be too vocal about the rampant heterosexism in the church because I've already experienced the consequences of naming that situation. Yet, when I think of one of the areas for repentance needed by the church, I can't abide my wimpy silence.

When God called Jeremiah to be a prophetic voice to those people so long ago, Jeremiah was sure he was too young, wasn't a good speaker, and wouldn't know what to say. God's response was that God would give him the words to say and God's presence would be with him as he went about this work.

What reasons might we give for being silent? We could say we are too old, too young, too comfortable, too established in our profession, too respected by our peers. Thankfully someone like Virginia Ramey Mollenkott hasn't let those kinds of reasons silence her over the years.

FOR REFLECTION: Around what issue, concerning what marginalized people in the world, have you been silent? What could help you find your voice?

Sue Burwell

Saturday, December 1, 2001

“the voice of one crying out in the wilderness....” **Mark 1:3**

A prophetic voice that came of the wilderness of a prison cell, into the wilderness of a bigoted world, was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a German theologian and pastor, and a Nazi resister during WWII. When Hitler made it plain that his ways were the answer to protecting the German people from the communist threat, Bonhoeffer along with others tried to confront his tactics. Dietrich’s family, neighbors and parishioners didn’t want to hear his message. Neither did Hitler. Bonhoeffer called people of faith to take a stand. Unfortunately for him, he was imprisoned for his beliefs and eventually died in prison, as one who spoke from the wilderness.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s imprisonment moves me to think about our country’s prison systems—systems that are laden with injustice and oppression. How do we deal with the fact that we live in a country where the death penalty is still a reality in a number of states? And what do we do with the realization that people are sitting on death row who are found to be innocent of their alleged crimes?

Amnesty International has recently focused attention on Wisconsin because of our Supermax prison. This organization is asking many questions about our maximum-security prison. Why does Wisconsin need a Supermax facility with a capacity of 500, when we have an overall total of 20,000 prison inmates? Why are juveniles a part of the Supermax population? Why aren’t family members allowed to visit, in person, rather than on closed circuit TV? Why are prisoners not allowed adequate recreation time and why is long-term isolation the norm?

Some have described this prison as a psychological death row, and a place that capitalizes on the politics of law and order and overlooks the humanity of its inmates. Yet to speak out about Supermax may not be an easy thing to do. Our families, neighbors, and churches may not want to hear these words about this situation in our own back yard. But isn’t this one of those instances where, to keep silent, we will simply be a part of the system that by our silence, supports injustice?

FOR REFLECTION: When have we last visited or communicated with someone in prison? What could we say/do that could be a voice of hope for prisoners?

Sue Burwell

Sunday, December 2, 2001

“the voice of one crying out in the wilderness....” **Mark 1:3**

When someone uses the phrase “we thought we knew you, but I guess we didn’t,” that signals to me that something major has happened in the relationship and maybe something important has transpired. I wonder if that’s what the officials of her church said about Joan Chittister. Joan is a Benedictine Sister and a Bible-based feminist. For a number of years I have used her daily readings to begin my day, and I find her to be an inspiration. Joan speaks out whenever she can, on the need for the church to be inclusive of both men and women. She pleads for Catholics to get involved in facing the pressing social and economic issues of the day and she confronts the evils of a patriarchal system. Because of her outspoken ways, officials of the church have described her as “objectionable.” Some years back, Chittister had a meeting with a top official in the Roman Church. He told her that “her likes were a threat to the church and that American religious were infecting Catholicism.” “You are right”, Chittister replied. “And it’s too late to stop that infection now because the disease is the Holy Spirit.”

(National Catholic Reporter, Jan. 12, 2001)

I believe Joan Chittister’s “objectionable” voice is an important voice both inside and outside her denomination. I sometimes question how some of these Benedictine Sisters stay within the mother church where they disagree with so many official stances of the church. Then in the next breath, I find I’m posing that same question for myself and others who struggle to stay within our own denomination, where we disagree with many of the official stands of our church.

Somehow Joan has been able to remain in her church, and to work for change from within it. She may rely on the hope that there are still plenty of thinking people who, when they hear what she has to say, may decide the church can be something different. Perhaps that's the same hope many of us need to have about our denomination, as we work for change from within it.

PRAYER: Powerful God, give us the energy and the stamina to be “objectionable” people, that we may work for change in a church we love. *Amen.*

Sue Burwell

Monday, December 3, 2001

Read Mark 11:15-19

This week we look at Mark 11:15-19 - Jesus tossing moneychangers out and reminding all who would listen of the prophet's vision of prayer being a key to life. I have chosen to look at this passage from the perspective of recent historical events. This reflective scheme can be personalized by using episodes in your own life.

On this day in history -
1967 - 1st human heart transplant performed in South Africa.

At this same time a social heart transplant was needed for the disease Apartheid.

With this image from our past, questions arise regarding what social heart transplant currently needs to take place in:

- your world
- your nation
- your community
- your home
- your heart.

Here is one set of suggestions from my immediate situation (yours will be different):

- transplanting international conversation for the space shield symptom of Nationalism
- transplanting universal health insurance coverage for privatized policies pointing to Capitalization of Humanity
- transplanting improved recycling for fear of tax increases showing Short-termism
- transplanting meals with the neighbors for frozen, individually packaged meals indicating Me-ism
- transplanting courage to do something about one of the above for Giving up.

Another way of envisioning this challenge from Jesus is to open one's heart to pay attention to what one prays about. Will your heart be opened to hear what GOD's presence would offer for direction? Will your heart be ready to be jump-started with a renewed passion for social justice? Will your new heart beat strongly for a social issue? Will you enter the realm of disease (one of those mentioned above or one that you recognize being called to heal) and use your skills to transplant hope and change?

Advent is in part birth pangs. This is a week that calls us to birth all that is needed for making rough places smooth and bringing down tyrants. To be born again is to transplant our hearts "on earth as it is in heaven."

Pray for courage and then apply it.

Wesley White

Tuesday, December 4, 2001

Reread Mark 11:15-19

On this day in history -

1970 - Cesar Chavez jailed for 20 days for refusing to call off United Farm Workers lettuce boycott.

As a result of Jesus' actions and teachings about prayer we hear about the religious leaders and important people plotting to have him killed.

Religious leaders by their silence and important people protecting their perceived bottom-line were responsible for the poverty and death of farm workers over many years. Cesar Chavez entered the temple of capitalism to remind it of its responsibilities to all the people, including migrant field workers (people are not made for capitalism, but capitalism is made for some people). As a consequence, the powers that be tried to get rid of Cesar. The jailing remembered on this day was just one of the tactics used to attempt to discredit Cesar and his nonviolent approach to changing the world.

A key to the movement for dignity among farm workers was Cesar's fasts. This was his way of throwing out the moneychangers. Listen to what he has to say about fasting and see if that is not still a powerful tool for those of us who follow John Wesley's methods of spiritual growth. Listen to Cesar and hear Jesus teaching in the temple: "A fast is first and foremost personal. It is a fast for the purification of my own body, mind, and soul. The fast is also a heartfelt prayer for purification and strengthening for all those who work beside me in the farm worker movement. The fast is also an act of penance for those in positions of moral authority and for all men and women activists who know what is right and just, who know that they could and should do more. The fast is finally a declaration of non-cooperation with supermarkets who promote and sell and profit from California table grapes."

As you prepare for Emmanuel (GOD with us) - know that fasting for justice will enhance your Christmas by putting things in better perspective. Check out Alternatives for Simple Living <<http://SimpleLiving.org>> for other ways to "fast."

Listen to Cesar and hear Mary sing her Magnificat: "The love for justice that is in us is not only the best part of our being but it is also the most true to our nature."

Fast well.

Wesley White

Wednesday, December 5, 2001

Reread Mark 11:15-19

On this day in history -

1955 - Historic bus boycott begins in Montgomery, Alabama with Rosa Parks

Rosa Parks knew what she was getting into when she sat down on the bus. Jesus knew what he was getting into when he strode through the temple evicting folks.

Rosa was well fortified with community and prayer. Jesus was well fortified with disciples (more than the 12) and prayer.

Today is a call for "community and prayer" in your life. I covet that for you.

Community or family for Jesus was those who pay attention to GOD's presence in their life and the life of the world. Anyone who does so is part of Jesus' faith community (even if our Book of Discipline and Social Principles try to cut GLBTQ persons out of full community participation). A sign for this community is baptism.

Hear the first two questions asked of those baptized into this community of faith and listen for Rosa Parks responding in her action.

- "Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?"
- "Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?"

The disease of apartheid in the United States of America is called Segregation. This evil thought itself pretty powerful until "community and prayer" rose up to sit down on it.

What are you teaching and learning about "community and prayer" these days?

Jesus tossed folks out; Rosa sat down. What will you do to give evidence that the Baptismal promises in your life are bearing good fruit? Will you at least ask a pointed question? Will you support the Wisconsin United Methodist Federation for Social Action or a similar organization with your prayers, your presence, your gifts, and your service? Will you see that there is a social justice ministry alive and well in the congregation you live within? Will you find a passion and develop some leadership for "community and prayer"? Of course this list goes on far enough to find you, challenge you, and support you.

Standing up or sitting down we are quick to say "No!" to evil. By such we confess Jesus as our savior, put our trust in his grace and way, and promise to join him in opening people of all ages, nations, and races to the presence of GOD.

Wesley White

Thursday, December 6, 2001

Reread Mark 11:15-19

On this day in history -

1930 - Missionary linguist Frank Laubach wrote in a letter: "Sometimes one feels that there is a discord between the cross and beauty. But...a man has not found his highest beauty until his brow is tinged with care for some cause he loves more than himself. The beauty of sacrifice is the final word in beauty."

Each of the four gospels looks at the episode of Jesus disrupting the temple rituals from a different perspective. Matthew, Mark, and Luke have this event near the end of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem - a sort of final straw. John has it as the first independent action of Jesus that sets the course of his presence among us.

Paying attention to the different words used in these stories we hear about what is to be in the center of our relationship with GOD - Love burning like a fire (John), a place of prayer (Mark), a place of healing (Matthew), and a place of teaching (Luke).

Each of these angles on the story brings beauty with them. Each of these four work with the others. We enter the whole of them through one door or another.

Some of us enter through the door of passionate love and need that honed by prayer and teaching that it might be a healing in our time.

Some of us enter through the ordinances of God, prayer and the like, and need that to come alive with passion and healing power that teaching might flow through the land.

Some of us enter through a time of healing when we were not GOD's child, and then we were GOD's child, and need continued prayer and teaching to set us free to be passionately involved in loving ministries.

Some of us enter through new ideas and images and need the emotion-laden disciplines of passion and healing that what began in the head might flow from the heart as prayer.

In this biblical scene Jesus had a cause larger than himself - Jesus loved prayer more than profit.

Which way have you come to a cause you love more than yourself? What cause is that? How do these four elements of passion and prayer and healing and teaching work together in your life?

Wesley White

Friday, December 7, 2001

Reread Mark 11:15-19

On this day in history -

1965 - Pope Paul VI & Orthodox Patriarch Athenagoras I simultaneously lift mutual excommunications that led to split of the two churches in 1054.

Even though this event in 1965 happened, there are still struggles between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions which have not been overcome. The conversation continues.

Three questions Jesus "cleansing of the temple" brings forth are 1) what is the role of violence and separation for such a good cause as prayer? 2) when things have come to such a dramatic impasse how can healing take place? and 3) is there any room for compromise between the usual polarities of spirit and world, peace and justice, prayer and profit?

I am struck by the constant need for a larger picture. It may be instructive to listen to how the Pope and Patriarch ended their Joint Declaration by going beyond their own authority and doctrinal differences:

"At the same time, we make an appeal that everyone will make a determined effort to solve the current burning problem of ecology in order to avoid the great risk threatening the world today due to the abuse of resources that are God's gift.

"May the Lord heal the wounds tormenting humanity today and hear our prayers and those of our faithful for peace in our churches and in all the world."

Pope and Patriarch are on to something here. We seem incapable of patching up our differences until there is a larger threat. New threats can make old divisions uncouth.

In 1965 the "burning problem of ecology" was recognized as a point that could lead to the healing of even 900-year-old divisions. As I write this the United States' minority-elected government is flaunting its disregard for global warming issues in order to enhance business profits. This is a natural set up for those who follow Jesus to again disrupt the economic temple. Today we are called to see prayer and scripture made visible in the environment.

What is your passion level for focusing on the evil of abusing the resources that are GOD's gift and thus helping to heal any number of divisions between us? I pray that as the wounds between us are mended our earth will flourish and as we care for creation the wounds between us will be healed.

Wesley White

Saturday, December 8, 2001

Reread Mark 11:15-19

On this day in history -
1936 - NAACP files suit to equalize the salaries of black & white teachers.

In this scripture passage Jesus files suit to equalize our prayer with our habits.

Actually, I have had a most difficult time to make that a parallel. I tried all sorts of images to be equalized with prayer and finally gave up and picked one which hints in the direction of our routinized life, the unspoken and unexamined rituals of our day and circumstance - the unconscious.

What would you try to equate with prayer? Try spending only five minutes coming up with something and you'll see my dilemma.

The good part of this attempt to square a circle is that it brings back to mind the foundational bedrock that prayer is and the need for constancy in prayer.

Prayer breaks open the usual to finally get to the celebration we have so desired and found to be so out of reach (like pursuing happiness without capturing it). With prayer we experience the over-flowing cup, the fullness and abundance of life.

With prayer we knock and knock on GOD until GOD's repentance comes and a change is made. With prayer we wait in stillness, secure under GOD's wing and in GOD's hand. With prayer we stay awake to look death in the face and say, "Thy will...." With prayer we rail about being "Forsaken." With prayer we know what "enough" means.

With prayer we set out to rectify such injustice as inequities in the way we treat each other. Three cheers for the NAACP back in 1936 and their work between black and white teachers.

What will your prayers bring you to work for? We also need equality between custodians and teachers and administrators. We also need equality between educators and factory floor workers and CEO's. We also need equality between nations.

As you travel more deeply with prayer - beware - there will be many temples of commerce and prejudice that will need to be cleansed. Pray with others for the task of cleansing is larger than any one person, it is a community issue.

Wesley White

Sunday, December 9, 2001

Reread Mark 11:15-19

On this day in history -
1948 - UN General Assembly unanimously approves Convention on Genocide and goes on to ratify the Declaration of Human Rights.

As we close this week of looking at historical events through the lens of Jesus' cleansing of the temple and emphasizing prayer we come to the phrase, "for all the nations." There is nothing more Jesus-led, Christ-centered, than praying together (across the usual boundaries).

To follow Jesus is to invite all manner of folks in to pray. I don't take this to mean there will be one prayer that we will pray forever or that there will even be one prayer style.

Little children will be welcome to offer their bed-time prayers of "God bless my Mommies and my Daddies" (remember it takes a village...) right alongside folks gathered around a Lord's Table, "It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty...." right alongside those who can only murmur, "Help me."

We will invite in pray-ers from other traditions and rejoice with those who begin, "Blessed art thou, O Lord GOD, King of the Universe..." and "Shanti, Shanti, Shanti unto all...." and "In the name of God, the infinitely Compassionate and Merciful..." and "O Great Spirit..." and so much more.

We will even invite in all who pray for God to be on their side. Inside they will pray for all nations and find themselves praying for God to also be on the side of their enemy.

We will invite in those who pray through their actions as well as in their hearts and by their words. We will rejoice that the United Nations gave form to the prayers of all people through their declaration against genocide and for human rights.

G-O-D, who desires us be in loving community with one another - I pray that those who follow this WUMFSA Advent devotional might be strengthened to be advocates for prayer and thus for peace. Thank you. Amen.

Wesley White

Monday, December 10, 2001

“A HIGH PRICE for Following Jesus!”

"I have not come to bring peace but a sword." **Matthew 10:34b**

The words of Jesus above are not among my favorites. I find Luke's word "division" in place of "sword" less offensive but still startling. (Luke 12:51, emphasis added). I much prefer to see Jesus as "the Prince of Peace" and to claim for myself his promise: "Blessed are the peacemakers; they shall be called children of God." (Matthew 5:9)

Still, either text may be more realistic than assuming we can follow Jesus today and pay no price in our relationships to family and friends, with work colleagues, in our community and nation and, yes, in our congregation. Sometimes, especially in our congregation. Indeed, if "everybody likes us all the time" we are wise to ask, "Am I truly saying and doing all Jesus expects of me?"

However, the fact we pay a high price and feel deep pain is not, by itself, a sign we are following Jesus. We may be doing so but there may be other reasons for the responses we experience. I see (sometimes!) there is always more than one reason for people's responses to me!

Matthew 10 is named "The Disciples' Ministry and Its Cost" including the cost of "growing opposition." (In *Interpretation: MATTHEW*, by Douglas R. A. Hare.) Hare calls verses 26-42 "encouragement to fearless confession" and understands Matthew to be speaking not only to the first disciples but also to followers of Jesus in the Post-Easter Church.

Matthew prepares us to ask during this season: "To what ministry and witness am I called? How will my immediate and extended family respond? What price am I prepared to pay when people I'm connected to deeply hear my words and see my actions? If my neighbor, employer, landlord, banker, a government official - or a member of my family - brings pressure on me to change my views and activities, what will I say and do?"

Myron Talcott

Tuesday, December 11, 2001

“Starting Where Jesus Started: with His LOVE!”

“I give you a new commandment,” said Jesus, “Love one another. As I have loved you, so must you love one another.” **John 13:34**

“We are loved and we belong.” So writes Ronice Branding after reading John 13:34 (above.) Branding asks, “Have we allowed ourselves to receive this gift of love?” How do you answer?

In the midst of needs and wounds and wants within us and constant pressure upon us to consume more, to meet expectations-beyond-number, and, always, pressure to conform - “go along to get along,” - how do we believe and feel “Jesus loves me - this I know - for the Bible tells me so!”

What is true and healthy for us to believe for ourselves, namely, “we are loved and we belong,” is critical also for all our words and witness to other people. Branding quotes Henri Nouwen’s counsel about peace-making but I’m confident he would not limit them to that arena only: “Nothing is more important in peace-making than that it flows from a deep and undeniable experience of love.”

Please name for yourself a person and a place where love and peace are needed: in your family with a neighbor or friend, at work or where you volunteer, with a person or group in your church or your community, someplace in our nation or anywhere in the world. Take enough time to be specific in who and what you name so you can put all I write to the test, “Does this help me?”

In her book, *PEACEMAKING*, Ronice Branding describes “a journey from fear to love,”

“A journey that goes inward where hearts are disarmed of guilt and fear and outward where relationships are reconciled and bonded and where human systems and institutions are confronted with God’s will for justice and peace.”

Remember person(s) and place(s) you named (above) and let’s see where, with Branding’s help, we can grow from here!

Myron Talcott

Wednesday, December 12, 2001

“What FEAR and VIOLENCE do to LOVE”

“Instead of eating, I mourn, and I can never stop groaning. Everything I fear and dread comes true. I have no peace, no rest, and my troubles never end.” Job 3:24-24

Have you been where Job is? (above) Perhaps you are there now - or may be during moments of this Advent-Christmas-New Year season. The holiday season is not fun for everyone! Please remember: seldom can we tell by looking at their outside what a person is feeling on the inside.

FEAR contradicts our confidence we are loved by God and erodes our feelings of worth and self-esteem. Though we may believe God is always near, what we may feel is the cold grip of fear.

Ronice Branding writes of “bringing HOPE through the work of LOVE, breaking cycles of fear and violence by changing conditions that breed insecurity and defensiveness. *PEACEMAKING: The Journey from Fear to Love*, Ronice E. Branding, CBP Press, St. Louis, MO, 1987. I’ll draw on terms from the book to make Branding’s meaning clear - I hope!

We are insecure when we are alienated (disconnected) from God and our selves and feel we are unloved, unlovable, unaccepted, rejected by others and ourselves. A voice cries out inside us, “If people knew who I really am, deep inside, nobody would love me; not even I can love me.”

We do not simply wake up one morning and say, “I think I’ll feel lousy and worthless today!” Our feeling valued and secure is shaped, in part, by relationships; when we are deprived of love in our family, isolated and rejected by some people & living in hostility and conflict with others, we are likely to decide we are “no damn good” and to doubt that even God cares whether we live or die.

But don’t stop now. There is more to the story including this GOOD NEWS: God does care!

Myron Talcott

Thursday, December 13, 2001

“Injustice is Violence-Creating-Violence!”

“Israel, the LORD who created you says, ‘Do not be afraid - I will save you. I have called you by name - you are mine. When you pass through deep waters, I will be with you; your troubles will not overwhelm you.... I love you and give you honor. Do not be afraid; I am with you.’”

Isaiah 43:1,2,4,5

“Deep waters...and troubles?” Some people have these by the ton-or tons! Their need for safety clean air, pure water, food, health care, emotional warmth, housing, a job (it may take more than one job!), and a voice in the decisions which affect their lives - to many these “ basics” are not only “unavailable” - their deficits are “off the map” of many officials and congregations which could make a difference. I know they can; I’ve worked with some who did!

When people are “passed over” and “left out” by the private and public sectors of our economy and communities - and ignored by many public groups in our society which should see to the well-being of all our citizens - a person’s feelings of self-worth and connection to God and other people will decrease, and their attraction to and participation in violent behavior will increase.

Sometimes the behavior is directed against themselves. Sometimes it is directed to or projected upon others. In all cases, we have patterns of violence that cry out for attention and healing, love and justice. In short, for our faithful, creative, courageous work of peace making!

Remember the persons and places you named for yourself on Tuesday’s page. Listen carefully to the voices of the people. Can you feel the pain beneath their cries? Can you see the concerns within their words and music? Perhaps what’s real for me is true for you: often I cannot see and hear and understand because I do not want to. Sometimes the weight of pain is more than I can bear and the depth of complexity is more than I can comprehend. My circuits are overloaded!

It’s time to ask, “Are we connected to all the Power available?”

Read Isaiah again (above).

Myron Talcott

Friday, December 14, 2001

“Following Jesus requires Love-in-Action!”

“Our love must be not just words or mere talk; love must be something active and genuine.”

1 John 3:18

“Peace-making is... a way of life removing barriers that separate us from whom we can become so we can become reconciled with God, ourselves, those around us, the earth, and humankind.”

In this perspective, Branding names these arenas and characteristics of faithful peacemaking:

spirituality - we trust in God’s grace and promises and are disarmed of fear;

relationships - we are caring and truthful - nurturing community and sharing power;

life-style - we share and conserve resources and in other ways also we protect the earth;

conflict - we respect the dignity of our adversary; we negotiate the issues & seek areas of common security; we reject violence and revenge.

citizenship - we participate! When the government violates its moral integrity, we risk challenging the government!

solidarity with people who are poor and powerless - we are compassionate; we are willing to risk our security to change root causes of pain and injustice.

When we see all this is faithful peace making, we may feel overwhelmed! Does Jesus really expect you and me to take on this whole load? I am helped to understand what Jesus expects by Luke’s story of Jesus and the fishermen who “worked all night and caught nothing.” (Luke 5:1-11)

I notice three things especially: 1) Jesus starts where the fisherman are: exhausted and frustrated by their experience as we may be by our current experiences. 2) Jesus builds on what they know how to do - fish - but asks them to go to “the deeper waters.” 3) When they find the fish that are there, Jesus calls them to follow him to the next place of their fishing: among human beings!

In each area listed in bold above, we know how to do something of what is called for. Jesus asks us to “take the next step.” Reflect on Luke’s story and ask, “Where is Jesus calling me next?”

Myron Talcott

Saturday, December 15, 2001
“The Spirit of Following Jesus”

“No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in union with us and God’s love is made complete in us.” I John 4:12

Loving one another means paying attention to one another: - family - neighbors - friends - strangers - even our enemies. We do not always want to do so! Praying for God to open our hearts and minds may be the first step to listening, hearing and caring; reading to understand and working on behalf of people, groups, and organizations that need our support to stay alive.

All of us have practical reasons to build better relations in our families, communities, and with all people of the earth: “If we do not learn to live together, we will surely perish together.” Followers of Jesus share with others of Biblical identity and experience - Jews and Muslims - faith reasons to work for love-justice-peace: it is in our working that you and I see God and know God and experience the fullness of God’s presence and power in our lives!

Because the work of loving ourselves and others is so difficult, and the list of injustices so long and the path to peace so hard to see - harder still to follow, Ronice Branding offers us counsel:

1) Be aware of our motivation. Guilt or trying to please others may suffice for a while, but they won’t sustain us for the long haul. Both motives are based in fear...rather than in love of people, truth, and justice. Motives of guilt and “pleasing others” are a contradiction to peacemaking.

2) Select deeds that feel right. No person is called to do everything. We are called to live in faithfulness and that includes making sure our deeds are integrated with our feelings. Wholeness is a value of peacemaking.

3) If action makes you afraid, examine the source of your fear. When you find what and where your fear is, you may discover ways to put it to rest.

4) Wherever possible, act in community with those who share your concerns and are supportive.

5) Keep balance in your life - acting and reflecting; speaking and silence; doing and being, working and playing; seriousness and laughter. Even Jesus withdrew from people to pray. (Matthew 14)

6) Try new ventures; step out in faith. You will not be alone. God strengthens those who ask!

Myron Talcott

Sunday, December 16, 2001

“Scared of a Cross? A Second Opinion!”

Jesus said, *“Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”*

Matthew 10:38

Ask me if I’m scared of a cross and, though I’ve never seen a real one, my first answer will be “Yes!” Tell me a cross back then meant what the electric chair means today and my answer is, “I’m SCARED! Physical pain plus social shame plus D Y I N G is truly unimaginable to me!”

But here is a second opinion about bearing a cross in Jesus’ name and for his sake. The opinion begins with what Henri Nouwen told a group meeting at the St. Benedict Center near Madison. “One day I met with some senior staff people of U. S. Senators in the Capitol. We were talking about being Christian disciples when one of the young men asked, “Henri, to follow Jesus, do I have to sell my red Porsche?” Smugly, we waited to hear him answer, “Yes, of course you do.” But Henri said, “I told him, ‘No’” We gasped out loud in astonishment and insisted he explain.

“If I tell him today he has to sell his red Porsche, he will turn away from Jesus just as did the rich young ruler. Instead, I said to him, “Choose a tiny step to take today; take another tomorrow and another to take each day afterwards.” “What about his Porsche?” we clamored. Henri said, “By the time he is called to sell his Porsche, it will be just one more small step in his journey.”

Today, I cannot imagine taking up a cross and dying. But as I look back over my witness and service to Jesus, I can see small steps I have taken which, had I seen them earlier, would have looked enormous. So my goal for myself is to take one small step at a time--each one stretching my faith-in-action a little bit more in the direction Jesus is calling me to grow, serve, & witness.

If it should happen I need to take that “last step” to death - a step Jesus and many followers of his around the world have taken, I pray I may have the courage and strength to do so - trusting in the faith I feel deep in my heart; I gained it from Paul’s witness in Romans 8:38-39:

“Nothing in life...or death...can separate us from God’s love in Jesus Christ.”

May this faith empower you to take your next step from fear to love-in-action!

Myron Talcott

Monday, December 17, 2001

Rewards

Read: **Matthew 10:40-42**

Some folks in our churches have the unfortunate idea that those who work in the church, whether lay or ordained, should not need to be complimented. If we're working for God, we ought to have no thought but to give God the glory. After all, if we work for the praise of others, didn't Jesus say we "have already had [our] reward?" Yet, when I called up "reward" on my computer concordance, there were 77 entries under "reward"!

The bible writers evidently understood long ago that we *need to be rewarded* for our efforts, or we quit working. (No pellets, no bar pressing, thank you!) I love the simple assurance of the Wisdom writers (Proverbs 22:4) -- *The reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches and honor and life.* (So how come I didn't win the lottery? Especially since I promised to go 50-50 with the Lord? Not enough humility, you think?)

But the prophets were very different. No moneygrubbers in this bunch. But also, no "rewards" that most of us would appreciate. The prophets, Jesus pointed out, were beaten, tortured, mocked, and killed, often at the hands of the priests and /or governments who claimed to serve God.

Because we don't often see these promises fulfilled in our lives, many Christians have turned to promises of reward such as found in Daniel 12:13: "*But you, go your way, and rest; you shall rise for your reward at the end of the days.*" This echoes in Matthew: [5:12] *Rejoice and be glad [when you are treated badly] for your reward is great in heaven. . . .* "

As a seeker after social justice, I find this putting off of rewards "till we all get to heaven" to be problematical. Are we to live with injustice, hoping for that old "pie in the sky by and by"? Also unsatisfying is the assurance that "virtue is its own reward." I want something more. I want to see my efforts succeed. I want a payoff for all my hard work, all the risks I've taken, all the time I put in. Nothing motivates me to work as much as seeing success.

But God pushes me [as God so often does] to look again at the beginning of this passage: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and . . . the one who sent me." A little promise of the Presence of God, those little moments in the midst of a good work when we are somehow certain that God smiles at us, even though we have seen no success. Those nights when we sink into bed, muttering a prayer under our breath asking God to "please fix" and hear God say, "I've got it. You get some sleep now." Those days when we groan in frustration at plans gone wrong and hear an echo of our sigh from the "other side."

The reward is not in the work itself, nor in the success of our efforts, nor in the symbols of that success. The reward is much greater than that – it is the sense that God labors beside us, granting us the strength of the Spirit, and the comforting Presence of the One Who has called us. The reward of the disciple is a cup of water from the Fountain of Life. And you were hoping for?

Sandra Herrmann

Tuesday, December 18, 2001
REWARDS

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple -truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." **Matthew 10: 40 - 42**

One day, visiting at a friend's, our conversation was interrupted by a carload of Native Americans pulling into her yard. A woman leaned out her window and waved a canteen at us. "We're out of water, can we get some from you?"

My friend immediately got up from her chair and retrieved the canteen and started back to the house to fill it. The woman leaned out the window again and asked, "Can my little boy use your bathroom?" Without even a second's hesitation, my friend said, "Sure. Follow me!"

At that, every door of the car opened, and half a dozen people, from grandmother to little guy, got out of the car and stretched and started walking around the yard. The little boy followed my friend into the house, leaving me sitting in my yard chair, wondering what on earth was going on.

You see, I was raised in the city. People don't just stop their cars in your driveway and ask for water and the use of your bathroom in the city. You go to a gas station or a restaurant for these things. And strangers don't wander through your yard (at least they didn't in my childhood neighborhood – they certainly do today!). The thought of somebody I didn't know coming into my home made me very uneasy. And I was amazed that it didn't bother my friend. I sat there, very ill at ease, watching these strangers seeming to make themselves at home in my friend's yard, not knowing what to say to them, so looking away.

As if all this were not enough, when the little boy came back outside, the woman asked if the grandmother could use the bathroom also! That was about the last straw to me.

When the crowd had all had a long drink of water and the canteens were refilled, they were on their way with many thanks. They had had a long day of fun, but ran out of water and couldn't find any place to stop along the way. My friend was rewarded with smiles and blessings, and even I was included in the general well wishes. As the car disappeared down the road, I said to my friend, "Didn't it bother you, these strangers in your home?" She looked at me as though I were a little crazy and said, "No. I have little kids. I know what it is to be on the road and have one of them need to use a rest room, and nothing is in sight. Besides, don't you know that when entertaining strangers, you may be caring for angels without knowing it?" Yes, I had heard that scripture; but I'd never thought that angels might look dusty, sweaty and tired. But I learned that day that for some people, being kind is first nature. And my friend was one of them.

Sandra Herrmann

Wednesday, December 19, 2001
REWARDS

Read: Matthew 10: 40 - 42

I have had dogs most of my adult life. An Alaskan Husky (big!) a Shih-Tzu, a Lhasa/Westie mix, and currently a Poodle/Bichon Frise mix. I love dogs over all, with their ingratiating ways. Dogs have a way of making you feel like you're the center of the universe, mourned in our absences and cheered in our homecomings.

I have trained every one of my dogs myself, and if there is anything I know about dogs, it's that they perform best for a reward. When they're puppies, this means treats. Liver bits, cheese bits, pieces of real meat – a reward for a trick, even half done, spurs a puppy to perform. I ask for the trick, and the puppy is so eager, he's trying to get his nose in my hand, since he can easily smell that it's something wonderful.

At the same time, I'm petting the puppy and telling her she's wonderful: "What a good dog! What a smart dog!" The puppy loves being told she's loved, dances for me to pet her, runs to me because coming to me might mean a treat and definitely means she gets my praise. Little by little, the puppy learns how to do the trick, and as she learns, I withhold some of the rewards. It's no longer enough that the tail touches the ground – it has to *stay* there for several seconds. It's no longer enough to *try* to roll over; he has to *succeed* to get the reward.

Sometimes in our lives it feels as though God isn't here anymore. We've been walking in a certain way, and it's been hard, but we've learned how to get the job done. We perhaps had a real sense of God walking with us for a long time, but now we don't. And we wonder, "Did I miss a turn here? Did I get too comfortable? When did it happen, exactly, that I stopped hearing God's voice, feeling that Presence with me?" We think it's a failure on our part (can't be a failure on God's part, so this is the only explanation).

I suspect that there may be another explanation, and you've probably guessed what I'm aiming at here. I suspect that a good deal of the time that "dark night of the soul" is really an indication that we're doing just fine, we're on the right path, we really are getting stronger, better, finer. But God is not so quick to "reward" us with a sense of "well done, good and faithful servant" precisely *because* we should be able to do our task as a matter of course now. We've been working on it for a while, and we've had some material successes; we've picked up on the goal that God has set for us, and therefore we don't need a huge compliment from God to keep us going.

Every faithful servant of God has had this experience, even more so for the "great saints" whose autobiographies are part of the landscape of our faith. So I take courage. Maybe God has more faith in me than I have. Maybe I'm doing better than I had thought. I still need to be listening to my Master. I don't get to do tricks when and how I think I should. But maybe I'm not so far off of my Christian walk as I had feared.

Sandra Herrmann

Thursday, December 20, 2001
REWARDS

*"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple--truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." **Matthew 10: 40 - 42***

Many Christians come to the Church as idealists. We want to do great things for God. We want to save the world, put an end to violence and war, teach people to love one another.

Then we get to work. We find that every job, no matter how big, starts small. We find ourselves, not striving gloriously in the front lines of a huge crowd of Workers for World Peace, but debating heatedly with a few people about one single action: Is it politically astute to hold a march or a demonstration, or should we picket or boycott? We find out that the major international corporation we are working against employs the people next door, who resent your yard sign, and say so repeatedly. We learn that parents just want good day care, and are a little leery of our day care **because** we say it's a Christian Day Care. We learn to avoid "hot button" topics when we're working ecumenically.

It's not that the work is hard, it's that it's daily work, and the details are boring.
It's not that the hours are long, it's that the hours are spent in debating rather than acting.
It's not that the goal is too far away; it's that the steps from here to there have to be picked through the debris of earlier treks in the same direction.

After awhile, we begin to realize that we are not the first ones to try to change the world, and the battle-stories of those long in the fight begin to sound like what happened to us, just yesterday. We begin to notice that for every step forward, there is a sidestep or a backward step. We begin to think to ourselves, "This is not working." But we can't imagine a new approach; something that will work better than everything else that has been tried.

This is the time when it is really a good idea to take some time off to do something else, something that will allow you to see accomplishment in a short period of time. Take up a hobby in which you exercise creativity. Allow yourself to buy the proper tools, be it good paints and decent brushes, or some strings of beads to make a matched set of jewelry, or something as simple as a recorder to play. Don't turn it into work. You don't have to be able to throw a matched set of pots. Buy the green ware and paint it and let the shop owner fire it for you. Don't make your hobby as difficult as the rest of your life. Pick something easy. This is supposed to be a break, a reward for all your hard work!

Just as it's never too late for a happy childhood, it's never too late to reward **yourself** for all your hard work. And you may even find that God is peering over your shoulder admiring your accomplishments.

Sandra Herrmann

Friday, December 21, 2001
REWARDS

*"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple--truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." **Matthew 10:40-42***

In the letter to the Galatians, we find a list of the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." When I was a brand-new Christian, I kept searching myself for signs that these "fruits" were in fact growing in me. I took seriously and literally the need to be bearing fruit so I would be found worthy of calling myself a disciple of Christ. But I didn't see much of any of these things in me.

I prayed long and hard, sometimes, that I might be given these gifts. I thought of them as rewards for the followers of Jesus. If you were "doing it right," these gifts would appear, miraculously and all at once. And most of the Christians I associated with at that time agreed with me. Those who follow Jesus are rewarded in this way.

Well, I finally got fed up. I was no more self-controlled than I was in what I considered to be my "pre-Christian state." I tried to reform myself, only to fail again and again. I thought I had joy, and I could find peace every once in awhile, but I was beginning to wonder if I'd actually been converted at all. Shouldn't every Christian show these gifts?

So I made a mistake. I went to talk to God about all this, and I said, "For example, Lord, I'm still very impatient. It would be nice if you'd help me be more patient. Especially with my husband." Why do I say I made a mistake? Because I had fallen right into God's hands. I had said, "I need to be changed." And I inserted no 'ifs, ands or buts' into the request.

I had never read the passage in Hebrews (12:11-14) that says "Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord."

I soon found myself behind every slow-moving vehicle in the county. Farm wagons, dump trucks, and little old ladies with their hands gripping the steering wheel in panic, all drove in front of me. Not just a few times, either – God was making a point here, you see – but seemingly every time I had someplace to go in a big hurry. Or even when I wasn't really in a hurry, but with a purpose in mind, impatient to get on with my itinerary.

Later, I preached on this and made a joke of it. But I had learned something serious. The fruit of the spirit is not like Newton's apple. It doesn't just drop on your head. It drops repeatedly, relentlessly, until the lesson is learned. But the discipline becomes its own reward when someone says, "I don't know where you get the patience...." And I reply, "Be careful what you ask for."

Sandra Herrmann

Saturday, December 22, 2001

REWARDS

*"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple -truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." **Matthew 10: 40 - 42***

I was new to the ministry, new to Annual Conference boards, and I was eager to participate fully. We had been discussing a strategy for addressing an issue before us for a seemingly long, long time. I finally said, "Well, I have an idea. Why don't we _____?"

There wasn't even a pause in the conversation. Others had been "standing in line" with their own ideas, I suppose, and needed to get their hearing as much as I did, and I sat back in my chair and thought, "Am I invisible? Can they not hear me because I'm new, or because I'm a woman, or what?"

And then a man on the board said, "You know, Sandra said something a minute ago that I think we need to listen to. She said, '_____'. And I think it's a good idea." I was instantly "in love" with this man who not only heard me, but also made sure that I was heard by others by lending me his voice.

Now, looking back, I know that it would have been a common experience to have someone in the group repeat what I had said without any reference to my speaking. He was, and still is, an enlightened person who didn't need to look good or smart or important. He didn't need to grab the idea and run with it. He, instead, used the status he had with that group and helped them to hear me, and helped me to feel that I was part of the group. I have been forever grateful – and forever aware that his kind direction of everyone's attention to my small contribution is a good way to introduce a new member to any board or any group.

Later, I heard this said another way: "There is no end to what a person can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit."

I think this is truly the essence of what Jesus is saying to his disciples as well. I reach out or down to those who need a hand up, and the reward is not that I look like a good person. The reward is that I gave a hand up to someone who needed it right then.

This isn't to say that others will recognize us, wonderful people that we are, for what we have done. Sometimes we will give a boost to a person who turns out to be far greater than we can ever hope to be. Like Mozart's father, we fade into the background. But if our reward lies in what we have done rather than the recognition we have gained, we can soar in our appreciation for having been able to play this small part in the Commonwealth of God.

Sandra Herrmann

Sunday, December 23, 2001
REWARDS

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple--truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." **Matthew 10:40-42**

One of the jobs I dread the most is weeding a garden. Not only does my back give out rather early, but also I don't really appreciate the sweat running into my eyes, which it usually does, given the position one has to get into to do the job. And then there's the problem of the lovely plant coming out of the dirt much more easily than its taller, stronger neighbor that you intended to pull. And then there are the thorns, nettles and deadly nightshade. Not to mention the slimy little buggy things that often come under my hand.

But no matter. Weeding does have to be done, like it or not. Standing or stooping or kneeling, hoeing or pulling by hand, it's weed or have the flowers and veggies choked out.

I have discovered, over the years, that a good deal of my problem with weeding has been in my perspective. I tend to keep looking at all the work that still needs to be done. I drag my little basket along with me, piled high with weeds I've pulled, but seeing only the petunia ringed by thistles (that man in the birdseed store told me these seeds wouldn't product plants in this climate!). I sigh, I moan, I lay back on the grass (mistake – thought I'd put that nettle in the basket! Ouch!). I rest a little, and then tackle the task again.

It's only when I'm too exhausted to pull one more plant that I actually sit on my garden stool and contemplate the garden. Why, look at that! I have it more than half done! You can actually see the radishes! In fact, that one is getting pretty big. Better pull it and eat it. Yum! Love the taste of the dirt on their fat little roots.

Seriously, now, I begin to realize that most of my life has been lived that way. I was constantly looking at all that had to be done, at the mess that had to be straightened out, at the weeds that had to be pulled, at the state of the world, and the task seems – no, is – gargantuan. I need help. I can never do it all. I haven't the time, the strength, and the life span. I sink into a hopeless mindset. Woe, I will never see the end of it, never see success, and never hear God say, "Well done!"

But sitting on my stool, I begin to see that I have accomplished. I have loosened the soil, and the little plants look perky, and I'm discovering that there's more than one, single radish in here. I'm renewed to go back to the job, pulling up a few more thorns and fluffing a few more snapdragons. There are also a few other rewards. Unbidden, unrecognized for weeks (so I left it alone, since it didn't have the ropey look of a weed) I have a Jack-in-the-pulpit behind the garage. Planted by a former resident? An accidental volunteer? No matter. It's a magical reward for doing a job I hate.

Can't argue with that.

Sandra Herrmann

Monday, December 24, 2001

Read: Matthew 25:31-46

It would have been an unthinkable frivolity to speak of the Titanic's sinking in the Atlantic Ocean on the day of her departure from England. To prophecy the end of the world - Doomsday, on the day of Creation, was unfathomable. Yet, Christmas is a day that gets its deeper meaning retrospectively from the memory of Jesus' death on the Cross.

The fact that Christmas falls on December 25th is but one indication that the early Christian church tried to cope with the cultural environment of Mediterranean Europe, into which it launched its mission to spread God's Word and the story of Jesus Christ. December 25th had originally been a major pagan festival, *Sol Invictus*, the "Birth of Unconquerable Sun," marking the winter solstice. The sun's triumph over the darkness in the sky was comparable to the triumphal entry of Christianity into the world of the Roman Empire.

For the last four weeks we have been waiting for the arrival of Jesus on earth, preparing ourselves to welcome the newly born Infant Savior, which is the fundamental spirit of the Advent season. Yes, we have waited, waited, and are still waiting for the arrival of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, not just for the last four weeks, but for the last two thousand years. Jesus has not come yet! I am talking about His Second Coming, the *Parousia*, since I do not expect to see Jesus born again in the fragile form of an infant.

Yes, today we may enjoy watching our children's Christmas Pageant during evening worship at church. In the spirit of joy and peace, we may hear joyful voices praising God, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!" Though we rejoice that Jesus' Second Coming is a joyful day of Love for those God favors, we must also remember that for others it will be a day of Justice, bringing tears for the many lost.

Sungsoo Hans Hahn

Tuesday, December 25, 2001

Read: Matthew 25:31-46

Yes, today is Christmas, 2001. “*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace among those whom God favors!*” (Luke 2:14) Merry Christmas to all of you! I feel blessed with the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season, though some long for its commercialism to end, not because I want to overemphasize all the elements of popular culture during this season, but because I do like the timing that Christ should come when we are going through a very difficult and dark period of the seasons - the cold winter. Some may enjoy winter sports, yet there are many, many others who struggle to survive through this season of bitter cold.

Under the snow-covered soil, lie the hidden seeds of life, waiting the coming spring, yet still shivering in the cold temperatures that threaten the hope of new life with its freezing power. There is no attractive scene to turn our eyes to, except the frozen, barren land and the solemn trees having their dry branches stretched towards the overcast sky as if they are pleading for power from above. Gloom and chill are the words of the season. But, lo and behold, a new life has come into this darkness, shattering away the power of environmental death, sending a signal to our horror-ridden hearts that the Light is shining upon us. Yes, it is indeed the time for a big celebration. Just stay alive, and the time will come when the Light can be seen again!

But, why is it the Light of the world? We have waited for so long, until today, with our endless longings that were announced to have ended some 1,300 years ago by the prophet Isaiah. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in land of deep darkness on them light has shined.” (Isaiah 9:2) Why was it so dark? I want neither to romanticize the peril of poverty by virtue of spiritualizing the poor in spirit, nor to disregard the reality of sins in the world. However, I do think that Christmas should be a more important day to the poor, not just in spirit, but also in body. How can it be so? I expect that many would be able to stand under the shadow of the manger and begin to see from the perspective of the down and out, and not of superiority and celebrity, because they are illumined by the soft light that reflects on the face of the Infant Jesus with its message - “Shalom!”

Sungsoo Hans Hahn

Wednesday, December 26, 2001

Read: Matthew 25:31-46

We are now going through the season of winter, having our existence enclosed within thick coats and gloves to keep our body temperature warm and comfortable. Here in Madison, Wisconsin, the snow will cover the soil for the seeds to endure the severe cold, making us feel the mystery of seasonal change at a comfortable distance. Though we may know the theory of Nuclear Winter, (the aftermath of nuclear explosion that would obstruct the sun's rays from penetrating through the huge mushroom clouds and make the world continuously freezing cold), we do rarely admit that the mushroom clouds do in fact begin to rise from our hearts.

The word "Judgment" makes one envision cold winter, sending a chill down our spines at the mere thought of the possibility that we could be sentenced to eternal punishment, if we are not evasive or sophisticated Christians. I don't think many Christians seriously question themselves. Why? Because we don't really think this place called "Hell" exists? Or, because we think that we will surely go to "Heaven"? Or, because Jesus was punished on behalf of our sins, we've been forgiven - at least from eternal damnation? As for me, I don't accept the Bible in its old, literal expression, without having gone through my existential struggle with the interpretative process. But, I do think that there will be, and should be "Judgment" of our lives.

Without judgment, divine or human, there will be no justice. Without justice, there will always be the so-called "least of these" whom Jesus mentions in Matthew, repeating their cruel conditions of life, generation after generation, without the hope of exit from that fate, and the so-called "privileged" who always try to make Jesus their patron Christ. The God of Jesus is not the god of fate, but the God who calls us to be free from fate, ordering us to shape and enact our own destinies, as Harvey Cox, an American theologian, once commented. Hebrew people have a word for it - "Shalom." Shalom, in the sense of love and joy and peace, can only be achieved through the judgment on the part of the privileged first of all.

Sungsoo Hans Hahn

Thursday, December 27, 2001

Read: Matthew 25:31-46

Some may think that the picture of judgment of the nations in this text is not speaking on the humanitarian ethic of good works, but rather upon how the nations, or the people, have treated Jesus' followers. That may be the case with the early Christians who were traveling from village to village, spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ. If we read Paul's letters to the Corinthians, especially 1 Corinthians 4:9-13, and 2 Corinthians 11:23-29, we see the early mission field where itinerating preachers faced hostility of the world, including Paul himself, as he says in 1 Corinthians 4:9-13:

“To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.”

In our world where Christians live amongst people of many religions: Jews, Hindi, Buddhists, Muslims; I would read this passage from Matthew 25 with some expanded applications. We rub shoulders, manage our daily tasks, and cooperate on a global scale, with the people of other religions. We have to admit that Christianity alone cannot save this world from its manifold dangers of environmental emergencies, economic disasters, and political conflicts.

Christians, particularly in North America, are relatively well off in comparison with other people in Third World countries. And many, who are hungry, thirsty, and naked, are mostly of other religious backgrounds. Multi-national enterprises have been invading their territories with the power of mammon, destroying their indigenous culture and life-styles in the name of Gold, not of God. Now is the time when Jesus and his followers should help the nations; the nations will judge the genuine Jesus and his followers.

Sungsoo Hans Hahn

Friday, December 28, 2001

Read: Matthew 25:31-46

The end is coming, whether it is the catastrophic doomsday of the cosmos, as some scientists have already declared, or whether it is personal death. Let's say that about 4.5 billion years ago, the cosmos came into being by the so-called Big-Bang, a grandiose cosmic explosion from a single point, as some famous physicists (including Stephen Hawking who has long been confined in his wheel-chair) have been pondering this theory of the beginning of the entire universe. But the end is coming to every beginning.

Everything that exists now will someday be vanishing into oblivion. The expectation of this is grim in nature. We just do not know, and do not want to know if it is the end of our personal journey on earth. But the day is coming, probably sooner than we think it should be, if not of a cosmic nature, then in our own returning to the original breath that was endowed at our birth. But the physical end of existence is just the opposite end of chronological beginning. We want to know the point where the beginning meets the end, which is usually called *kairos*.

So, what do we see at the end of time? A glorious passage into the Eternal Peace, namely, into the bosom of Jesus Christ who has been waiting for our arrival in heaven? Well, Jesus did not mention this at all. Jesus is coming to us again. But who is this Jesus? I think Jesus is every place if we try to find his face. If we go to him with our expectation of seeing him in those whom he loves, he will surely come to us on the clouds of hazy horizon. Mother Teresa once said, "As I look into the dying persons' faces on the street of Calcutta, I see Christ's face there." There is also a legendary story about St. Francis of Assisi. One day when he encountered a leper on the road, he dismounted his horse to extend his helping hands, the face of the leper changed to be seen as the face of Christ. Christ's face is in our hearts, but is revealed through others.

When is our end time? It is the moment when the spirit of Jesus comes into our hearts in such a way that we begin to exercise our bodily activity to the urgent need of others' bodily activity that is being threatened to its impinging end. Their threatened end conjoins into our new beginning in God's Sovereignty, judging our spiritual reality from their perspective of bodily existence. It is not just a small act of extending our hospitality, but an urgent need of another person's life and death situation. When we see that their life is on the verge of extinction, our life is on the verge of new birth!

Sungsoo Hans Hahn

Saturday, December 29, 2001

Read: Matthew 25:31-46

Whenever I see a portrait of Jesus on the walls of many churches, I always experience personal doubt about the way in which the face of Jesus is portrayed with flowing brown hair, intending to emphasize Jesus' gentleness and dignity. I can imagine the difficulty expressing the many faceted personalities of Jesus the Christ on canvas can be. Many of us expect him to be what we feel embodies his role as Christ; kind yet decisive, warm-hearted but stern too, humble yet lofty, smart but strong, humorous yet tearful, and so on.

In my imagination, Jesus' face should first of all reflect his young and courageous heart as a revolutionary figure, because he was only in his early thirties, manifesting his identity with his convicted will to confront the status quo of the privileged people who despised the sinners with their rule of maintenance. He was all too human, in fact, too human to be made divine. He was not a man of religious sanctuary, or in other words, church, but a man of secular world. He challenged societal customs whenever these were the source of human injustice, because he loved the unlovable, those whom were not allowed to come into the sanctuary.

Even the way Jesus talks about eternal punishment and eternal life does not seem to be projecting into life after death. To me, the dimension of eternity is not to be calculated on a chronological scale, elongating our time span on earth into the infinite future in heaven. What is the use of living a thousand years if it is nothing more than wishful thinking only because we cannot endure the miserable conditions of life, in fact, without having changed any conditions of our painful life situations on this earth?

Eternity is the description of our present quality of life, meaning that if our current style of life has the seed of hope in our joyful future, it will surely bear its fruit here on earth. Otherwise, it will be threatened by the eternal procrastination of improbability. Yes, the seed is in our hearts, yet we have to make it sprout and grow. The soil of the systemic world structure has to be the very element wherein the seeds may find their place to be sown. I want to find the eternal dimension of life in the young immature face of Jesus, rather than in the old gray-bearded face of Christ.

Sungsoo Hans Hahn

Sunday, December 30, 2001

Read: Matthew 25:31-46

“Oh, my God!” We remember having heard this shouting cry over and over. I am writing this page of my reflection in the evening of September 11th, still knowing not what has exactly happened in our country. This day, September 11th, 2001, will go down the history as the Disaster Day of America. Four airplanes were hijacked by terrorists, three of them were forced to collide into the World Trade Center, Twin Towers in Manhattan, New York, which made the Twin Towers collapse to the ground, and the Pentagon, in Washington. So many lives were taken (I do not know how many at this point). Unexpected, unimaginable, and unforgivable! I haven't any suitable words. But much is being said of terrorism and war; the Attack on America has touched so many around the world.

When I began to write the first page of this Advent reflection, I put the ominous word “Doomsday” into my computer screen based upon my reading of Matthew 25. And only one week later, I have already witnessed the cruel reality of Disaster on earth in the magnitude of “Doomsday.” Doomsday is the Day of Judgment, as it is related to Jesus' Second Coming. Why does Jesus have to come back to this terrible world where he was killed by the force of injustice on his first visit? I think because justice was not done. He showed his Love through the words and deeds of his life, confronting the injustice of the world with his body and blood.

Though the complexity of society has become much different from the one Jesus had to struggle with, the main feature of principalities and powers are now almost the same as before, or even worse: “the Least of These (Matthew 25:45)” are still the same, being alienated and oppressed and marginalized and killed. I do not believe in the mythological phenomenon of Jesus' Second Coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory, at the sound of trumpet, as is described in Matthew 24:29-31, but I do believe in the Doomsday if we do not heed to the meaning of Jesus' First Coming, the declaration of God's Sovereignty, for which we should repent to welcome the new age. Are we ready to welcome the New Year, 2002 today in a much more awakened way, after having seen the acts of terror on September 11th, 2001?

Sungsoo Hans Hahn

Monday, December 31, 2001

Feed My Sheep

Psalm 137: 1-4a

This is the last day of the year. We face uncharted territory, as we stand on the threshold of this brand new year. Having realized some of our hopes and dreams over the past year, the present is a comfortable place. The unknown is a bit unsettling. We would love to stay here. But the spirit calls us to venture with God into new experiences and venues. The Israelites lamented by the Sea of Babylon, "Weeping, we set beside the rivers of Babylon thinking of Jerusalem. We have put away our lyres, hanging them upon the branches of the willow trees, for how can we sing?" (Psalm 137: 1-4a) Like the Israelites, we recall how God was present with us on the other side of the river. But how can we sing the songs of Zion in Babylon?

I neared the busy intersection of New Jersey and New York Avenues in northwest Washington. As usual, I could feel the tension mounting, because it was here that the hungry, the homeless, the dispossessed, crowded around cars stopped at the red light.

A young woman from this intersection haunted me daily. She pleaded with drivers to roll down their windows and hear her plea. At times, in anger, she would throw her sparse belongings to drivers who refused to roll down their windows. At other times, she communicated her frustrations by making faces and displaying behavior too embarrassing to mention. It was easy to write her off by simply saying, "she was unstable." Somehow, I always managed to stop a few cars out of her reach.

This day it was different! There were few cars approaching the intersection, and I found myself stopping within her reach. "I'm Tonya," she said, with the biggest and brightest smile imaginable. Looking into her eyes, I asked, "Tonya, do you live around here?" She pointed to a near by apartment building now used as a shelter for the homeless, and said, "That's where I live." I gave her the bills and received a warm and grateful thank you. Tonya, who only days before I had sought to avoid, now sent me on my way renewed. This beautiful young lady greeted me, a child of God focused and confident, sharing her warmth and displaying a zest for life. She danced like a graceful gazelle.

I was too afraid to risk a close encounter with this child of God. I feared I could not meet her need and would simply add to her string of disappointments. But this encounter with Tonya touched me so deeply, tears rushed to my eyes. I felt I had been drawn by her openness into a holy and hallowed place. She blessed me with the reminder that God knows us and calls us each by name. And that even when circumstances leave us without a place to call home. You are still within God's keeping.

Jesus came into a world of darkness and brought the light. Jesus is still beside us on this very last day of the year. Jesus knows our every weakness and is with us to offer the strength we need. To all who live in the darkness of despair and poverty, Jesus brings light! To the marginalized and rejected, Jesus brings light! To all who suffer abuse or violence, Jesus brings light and will guide you to safety. To all who live burdened with doubt, you need not fear the future. The future is in God's hands. Your light has come!

Prayer: Open my mouth and let me bear gladly the warm truth everywhere; open my heart and let me prepare love with Thy children thus to share. Silently now I wait for Thee, Ready my God thy will to see, Open my heart, Illumine me, Spirit divine. *Amen.*

Mary Council-Austin

Tuesday, January 1, 2002
New Year's Day

Proverbs 4:25 (RSV)

The hymn writer Brian Wren wrote:

"This is the day of new beginnings, time to remember and move on, time to believe what love is bringing, laying to rest the pain that's gone."

There are moments when the events of life cause us to halt all activity, stop and take inventory. Christmas is such a time for me and so is New Year's Day. Like so many others, I recount the past and look to the future with hope. For some others, it is a time of making new resolutions and setting future goals. This is also a time to just give God the praise for allowing me to see a brand new year. The beginning of a new year can be a call to reflect on what it means to walk with Jesus as a disciple.

Jesus entered a world where visiting the synagogue and observing the many rituals had also become routine. But God, who dares to send a baby king, calls us to awaken from our sleep. When our relationship becomes that of simply demanding our own way, or presenting our wish lists void of the servanthood to which Jesus beckoned us, it's time to hear again God's call to discipleship. For being a disciple is not just a statement of what we believe, it is a call to action! We make the decision to become SIGNS ourselves in the same way that Jesus was a SIGN of God's love for all.

There was a story of told about a new Christian, who like most new comers to the faith, was anxious to win his first soul to Christ. He rushes out to share the words of faith with a stranger. As he is about to speak, he hears a silent voice from within saying, "Don't tell him about my love." Just then the man started to talk about a lost he had suffered and the loneliness he felt. The new comer to faith took time to tell him how he had come to know Jesus as a friend who would be with us and never leave us alone. He started once again and heard the same voice, "Don't tell him about my love." Just then, the man sat down on the ground, lifted his shoes and started to pick pebbles out of the holes. The new comer to faith invited him to go to The Clothes Closet.

Once again the silent voice from within whispered, "Don't tell him about my love." He found out that the man had not eaten a solid meal for a few days. So, he took him for a meal. While sitting at the table breaking bread together, the small whisper from with in said, "Now you can tell him about my love." God loves us so much that God provides a way where there is no way. And God loves us so much that God sends disciples forth to feed his sheep. Fed any sheep lately?

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to help make God's love known to others through the things we both say and do. For many, seeing is still believing! When God's love is expressed in what we do, others are drawn to that love - we are carrying out God's mission in the world. As the world looks upon us today, can the active presence of God be seen through our witness? As one nourished by the hand of God, have you fed any sheep lately?

Becoming God's holy one takes time. It requires much prayer and conversation with God. We are admonished by Jesus to feast on the Word, to seek out opportunities for fellowship with other believers. We like the Magi, who upon seeing Jesus, will travel home another way. We too, will tell the world that Jesus the Lord has come!

Prayer: O God, of new beginnings, You cause us to remember and move on. You cause us to trust and believe what your love is bringing, laying to rest the pain that's gone. Let us, with the Spirit's daring, step from the past and leave behind our disappointment, guilt, and grieving, seeking new paths in this year ahead. *Amen.*

Mary Council-Austin

Wednesday, January 2, 2002

Feed My Sheep

John 21:15a (LB)

The late Samuel Dewitt Proctor, educator and author, was one of the Twentieth Century's great preachers. In one of his most memorable sermons, 'The Recovery of Human Compassion,' he reminded us, " That we live in a time when many hunger to experience God's unconditional love and compassion.

Hearing the cries of God 's children, for far too many, is like listening to a siren wailing on a downtown street at night, or a barking dog - both are heard but unheeded." We have material goods beyond what we will ever need or use. Many of us battle illnesses due to excess. Yet we hunger. Our high tech programs have reached people around the world, but far too many within our reach still hunger for simple expressions of kindness, respect and love. While many find little meaning in traditions of the church, they search desperately for hope and meaning.

The Christmas Story is the story of God's love for the whole world. Jesus brought into human experience the ultimate example of God's love.

The compassion Jesus offers should not be mistaken for quick little antidotes for the naive and simple-minded. It is not about using the label 'Christian' to give respectability to our human schemes and prejudices. The compassion of Jesus is not about chanting our Christian melodies and celebrating our festivals. The compassion of Jesus is sharing the love of God with whomever we meet, unconditionally.

Our culture is ruthless -- it leaves homeless people sleeping in train stations. Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" Our culture is violent - it allows death-dealing drugs to exploit and destroy the poor. Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" Our culture is cold -- it treats children as though they asked to be born in less than humane conditions. Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" Our culture is uncaring -- it penalizes the indigent aged for growing old and getting sick. Jesus asks, "Do you love me? Feed my sheep."

Jesus asked Peter, "Peter, do you love me? Feed my sheep." Today, Jesus continues to ask you and me, "Do you love me?" Then be a healing refuge - a place where my children rejected by society are welcomed and made whole. "Do you love me?" Then really listen as God's children face the pain and suffering of the past, "Do you love me?" Then really listen as God's children struggle with the problems of today. As followers of Jesus, we are called to be living examples of God's love.

Prayer: "Hope for peace child, God's stupendous sign, down to earth Child, Star of stars that shine, this year, this year, let the day arrive when Christmas comes to everyone, everyone alive." *Amen. (Star Child)*

Mary Council-Austin

Thursday, January 3, 2002

Feed My Sheep

John 21:15-19

Brent was a non-traditional student and commuted daily to classes. He spoke often of many exciting life experiences, yet he was desperately searching for something to give more purpose and meaning to his life. Brent had long questioned the relevance of faith and religion in his life. He explored a number of spiritual traditions, looking for ways to satisfy the emptiness. Brent was friendly and worked hard at being a regular guy.

Brent would never look you in the eye for any long period of time. Perhaps he feared eyes of judgment staring back at him or signs of rejection. Would he sense in the eyes of others the desire to avoid him or maybe a hurried look with no time to spare? It's not so easy to enter the story of another person. We fear even more the possibility of sharing in another's pain. You could sense that Brent was a very compassionate person. Brent searched desperately for what he extended to others so generously - unconditional caring and affirmation.

One day he approached me wanting to talk about another friend, Eric. Eric had been a star athlete before suffering a career ending injury. Eric spent day and night brooding over a long- dreamed-of sports career. "Eric greets his family and friends with so much anger and resentment," said Brent. "Will you talk with him?"

A few days later I visited Eric. Imagine an ache so deep that words of comfort do not seem to touch: such was Eric's anguish. He lashed out at everyone, while desperately seeking God's gentle touch. Eric yelled about giving up on life but he determinedly struggled to hold onto life. As we talked, he had many questions. Rev., where do you go when your lights are put out? Where do you go when your hoped-for future will never come to be? When it gets dark, where do you turn? Eric knew darkness of the soul and of the spirit.

We all are acquainted with moments of loneliness and darkness. Probably it is not the result of a tragedy like Eric faced, or the deep insecurities faced by Brent. What do you do when it gets dark? The darkness does not necessarily mean the end. My father often said, "Mary, when you feel you have reached the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on." Thanks, Dad.

God has given each of us a reservoir of inner peace and strength upon which to feed. God gives us what is needed to press through the night until day breaks upon the horizon. God becomes for us an oasis in the desert, a wellspring of hope for thirsty and parched souls. Amid disappointments and challenges of all kinds, God's grace is sufficient for all things.

Prayer: O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, are you there;

If I made my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning and

settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me fast. *Amen.*

Mary Council-Austin

Friday, January 4, 2002

Feed My Sheep

John 21: 15-19

After breakfast, Jesus questioned Simon Peter about his love for him. Jesus was not content to leave it at mere words. So, He continued to challenge Peter to prove his love, when He said, "Feed my sheep."

Did Peter have any idea that there would be so many kinds of hunger among the sheep? It doesn't take long to discover the many hungers in this world.

Recently I read, *Finding Our Voices: Women, Wisdom, and Faith* by Patricia O'Connell Killen, an associate Professor of Religion at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington. She reminded me that many of us struggle with faith, disillusionment, and a hunger for God. While facilitating a small reflection group for women, she asked the women why they had chosen to come. One of the women spoke with great passion and said, "I am here because I feel like I am standing by a river, dying of thirst." Professor Killen wrote, "The rest of us sat quietly, soaking in the truthfulness of her response. We all knew what she meant. Her words evoked silence from us because they gave voice to the deep, often frustrated, but still hope-filled longing that the rest of us shared: the longing to be nourished by our Christian heritage on our journeys to God, a longing coupled with the painful realization that often we are not."

Do we still miss this great hunger of many women of faith today? Do we understand that they too were among the sheep Jesus challenged Peter and us to feed? In the Year 2001, women are still receiving less pay for the same work performed as their male counterparts. Women's health care issues receive far fewer research dollars than men's health care concerns. Killen speaking for so many other women, said, "I have known hurt and abuse at the hands of my church, its designated leaders, and its traditional teachings- all of which have, at times, denied my dignity and worth as a female human person." She has also experienced healing and empowerment through her Catholic Christianity's theological and spiritual teachings and its ritual and sacramental practices. She, like many others, struggles to reconcile the two.

In order to address the unique hunger of women in today's society and the church, we must continue to find ways to ensure that their stories are being heard. Their stories should not be devalued or trivialized. We must not forget the many women who followed Jesus. "Though they were first in faith from the Annunciation to the Empty Tomb, they have faced oppression within the Christian community because they are women. From the beginning, women's faith has called them to resistance, to biting criticism, and to a trust in their religious heritage so deep that they persist in hope, in the obstinate demand that their hunger for God be fed," professor Killen reminds us. Again, I wonder if Peter came to realize that there were women among God's sheep to be fed.

Prayer: O God, You have called us to feed your sheep, to feel the pain and suffering of all. You have called us to instill hope and to discover for all kinds and conditions of humanity the promise of the abundant life. Make us instruments of your love. With faith, hope and love, we pray in Jesus' name. *Amen*

Mary Council-Austin

Saturday, January 5, 2002

Feed My Sheep

John 21:15-19

I have heard the words of **John 3:16** many times before. "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" (**John 3:16 NIV**)

On a Sunday afternoon following the Christmas school-break it was as though I was hearing them for the first time. The Residence Hall Choir of Howard University in Washington, D.C. was in concert. That day the soloist belted out the words, "Jesus, to earth he came, and took on the form of man and made the perfect sacrifice." At Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the love of God come to all the world. Christmas reminds us that God's love is for everyone. As a child I found it hard to believe that I was included in the circle of God's love. As I listened to the choir and felt such warmth within, I knew the gift of God's love through Jesus was meant even for me. Jesus is the expression of God's love to everyone.

In choosing Mary to be the mother of Jesus, God identifies with those who are lowly and deemed unimportant in society, even the hungry he feeds. Like the poor and vulnerable in our society today, Mary faced the challenge of being an unwed mother in the eyes of society; she risked being stoned to death for adultery; and risked being abandoned by Joseph, her betrothed. Mary received the announcement from the angel that she would bear the Christ child and with courage, she accepted the risks because she believed the words of the angel.

In **Luke 1:46-55** it is written that Mary said, "*Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord, rejoice, rejoice, my spirit in God my savior; so tenderly has he looked upon his servant, humble as she is. For, from this day forth, all generations will count me blessed.*" In her song of praise to God, Mary remembered the merciful ways of God toward the poor, lowly, and hungry. She saw in the coming Messiah the love of God for Israel, God's people, and remembered God's promise to her ancestors.

Dorothee Soelle speaking in 1971 reminded us that we were all included in God's plan of salvation. She said, "My soul sees the land of freedom and my spirit will be delivered from fear. The empty faces of all God's children will be filled with life and become whole."

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but they shall have everlasting life. There is a wonderful broadness in God's love and that love extends to every generation.

Prayer: O God of hope and power, we thank you for Jesus coming into the world to tell us of your love for all people. Help us to love one another as sisters and brothers as we seek to do your will each day. *Amen.*

Mary Council-Austin

Sunday, January 6, 2002

Feed My Sheep

John 21:15-19

The church calendar highlights January 6 as Epiphany- the day that marks the coming of the Magi. Epiphany is also the time when the Magi return home carrying the news of Jesus to the rest of the world. What does Epiphany mean? Why is it important to us today?

An epiphany is a moment when the light suddenly goes on -- "giving old ideas new meaning, and deeper meaning to journeys too long without purpose." Epiphany is a moment that rescues from the commonplace the radiance of an experience - "the enchantment of the heart." In **John 21: 15-17**, Jesus leads Peter through an experience which would remove the cloud left by his denial of Jesus. Peter denied Jesus three times. Three times Jesus asked Peter if he loved him. When Peter answered, Jesus told him to feed his sheep. It is one thing to say you love Jesus, but the real test is willingness to serve him. Peter had repented, and now Jesus asked him to commit his life. Peter had an epiphany.

The Magi kneeling at the manger experienced an epiphany. They had followed the star and were led to the manger where Jesus was born. King Herod, threatened by this new messiah, did not want to worship him but wanted to kill him. The angel spoke to the Magi and sent them home by a different route.

We, too, have known and experienced epiphany moments. When a phrase, a gesture, a scene, a word, has startled us with new wonder and meaning; when we have a dynamic experience or encounter, we come away refreshed and renewed and directed in new pathways. Life is never the same.

What have been your epiphany moments? Was it a visit made to a special place where you sensed you were in the presence of The Holy God? Was it in reading a revealing passage or listening to the spoken word that something touched you or changed your way of thinking? Perhaps it was around the altar in prayer and there you, like Mary Magdalene, heard Jesus call you by name and sent you forward with new purpose. With each epiphany, we are given work to do.

Peter had to face his true motives when confronted by Christ. How would you respond if Jesus asked you, "Do you love me?" Do you really love Jesus? Are you his friend? In other words, are you willing to go out not knowing, facing this new year with all of its uncertainties, and still follow Jesus? Are you willing to do as he commands and feed his sheep?

Prayer: We pray this day for a change of heart, O God, so that our eyes may be opened to see the work before us, so that our hearts may beat to your rhythm, so that our voices may sing your praises. May the wonder of your presence all around us fill us with joy. *Amen.*

Mary Council-Austin