



HOW SHALL WE SING THE LORD'S SONG IN A STRANGE LAND?

To: All Readers Everywhere

From: Myron & Margaret Talcott, Editors, 2003-2004

Last summer our writers began a conversation with Advent texts and a plaintive cry from a Psalm: “**How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land and in a strange church?**”

Ps. 137:4, adap.

We invite you to become thoughtful and prayerful companions in this conversation through the seasons of **Advent-Epiphany**. The two seasons are joined for we believe God’s Good News cannot be fully heard until it is boldly shared.

May your reflections be honest, compassionate, and energizing so your faith, hope and love is deeply refreshed. We pray that all our lives may become springs in the deserts of our congregations, communities and the whole world.

One way you can be a spring: **share these Readings widely!**

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Advent-Ephipany Texts and Writers

Week One: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; Luke 21:25-36; I Thess. 3:9-13

John Kruse is a retired ministerial member of the Wisconsin Annual Conference. About 25 years ago he helped to organize the Wisconsin chapter of the Methodist Federation of Social Action. He has sung all the songs discussed in the meditations ~~but~~ either in a congregation, a chorus, or as an occasional bass soloist. He is a recipient of the UMFSA Perry Saito Award.

Week Two: Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Luke 3:1-6; Philippians 1:3-11

Mark Bromley lives in southwest Wisconsin with his wife Patricia. He is a bankruptcy lawyer, representing debtors across the southern third of the state.

Week Three: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Luke 3:7-18; Phil. 4:4-7

Diego and Ana Orsini are natives of warm, sunny-year-round Puerto Rico. Currently they are serving in their 4th cross-cultural appointment in Wisconsin with their four children.

Week Four: Michah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:47-55; Luke 1:39-45; Hebrews 10:5-10

Marianne Cotter has been a pastor for 19 years, serving both in the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Methodist Church. Currently she is serving as lead pastor of Trinity-Pilgrim United Methodist Church in Brookfield. Marianne is married to Jim Cotter and they have two sons Samuel (16) and Carl (13).

Week Five: 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Ps. 148; Luke 2:41-42; Colossians 3:12-17

Dave Steffenson has been seeking wisdom through a ministry of social ethics and social change. He's carried out that ministry through various avenues such as campus minister, pastor, college teacher, writer, editor, activist, gadfly and curmudgeon. While the world seems to get stranger all the time, he values most his companions in the struggle and his fun with family and friends.

Week Six: Isaiah 60:1-6; Ps 72:1-7, 10-14; Matthew 2:1-12; Ephesians 3:1-12

Amanda Stein is a probationary member of the Wisconsin Annual Conference and is serving in her first appointment at Trinity United Methodist Church in Madison. Prior to pastoring a church, Amanda and her husband, Jason, spent two years volunteering for peace and justice organizations in Guatemala and Mexico. Amanda stays busy working with Trinity's growing congregation and spending time with Jason and their two year-old son, Zane.

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If you are interested in being a writer for our 2004-2005 Devotions (Lectionary Year C) please contact Myron Talcott (myrontalcott@tds.net). Ideas for themes are also very welcome.

Sunday, November 30, 2003

The Sky Is Falling! Dare We Sing?

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and we wept when we remembered Zion / On the willows there we hung up our harps / For there our captors asked us for songs / And our tormentors asked for mirth, saying "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How could we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?
 Psalm 137: 1-4

That last verse is the theme for this year's Advent Meditations. The editors commented, "For many of us, the United States of America and the United Methodist Church have become a strange land....Each day brings news which alarms us and discourages us and diminishes us." So how do we sing the Lord's song in this strange land?

Yet that very question was apparently first sung. It is found in the Hebrew Hymnal (The Book of Psalms). Its setting is among the Jewish exiles in Babylon who were alarmed, discouraged, diminished. It was as if the sky had fallen. The world they knew was gone. They were separated from their land and people. So how could they sing?

Some were saying they shouldn't sing! The Lord's song belongs in the Lord's Temple (now destroyed) and God was not among the Babylonians. Others said they wouldn't sing, certainly not on command. The more the Babylonians demanded to be entertained, the more resistant the Jewish exiles became. And there were others who said they just couldn't sing, because they were too depressed. So they hung their harps on the weeping willows. Yet somehow that very

question was sung! And daring to sing the question may be its own answer.

The most frequently played piece of classical music on Wisconsin Public Radio's "Music by Request" happens to be based on Psalm 137. It is the song of the Hebrew slaves from Verdi's opera "Nabucco." The Babylonian exiles sing of their thoughts flying back to Jerusalem. When the Italian audiences first heard this chorus in 1842 they wept, cheered and demanded an encore. They dared to sing it in the streets and it became an unofficial anthem for this nation which was then seeking independence and unity. To watch this chorus being sung by the "Hebrew slaves" on an opera stage still moves audiences to call for encores.

The haunting question in Psalm 137 continues to strike chords in hearts. Each generation understands it anew. But the question begs another question. Is this Psalm basically an ode to nationalism or **can we envision a land that is not strange to anyone, and then begin to live that vision?**

The Jewish prophets learned from the Exile that God is not limited to any one land or people. We are still learning.

A Prayer/Hymn: # 519 "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (James Weldon Johnson's stirring anthem)

Monday, December 1

The Sky Is Falling: Signs of Gloom and Doom

There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars and on earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will flee from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Luke 21: 25-26

It sounds like a return to chaos, the end of the created order. This is no mere human catastrophe; it involves the sun and moon and stars and the earth and the waters and the heavens. The Oxford Annotated Bible gives four cross-references to verse 25 (Rev. 6:12-13; Isaiah 3:10; Joel 2:10; Zeph. 1:15) in which the earth quakes, the sun turns black and the moon turns to blood; the sun and the moon no longer shed light; heaven trembles; the day of wrath comes bringing ruin and devastation, darkness and gloom.

In other words, this idea of a cosmic cataclysm is found here and there throughout Scripture. It is part of our culture. The Day of Wrath (Dies Irae) becomes a thundering passage in Verdi's "Requiem" and Berlioz's "Fantastic Symphony." We get the idea that the sky is falling from more than Chicken Little's descending acorn.

In Handel's "Messiah" these scriptural passages belong to the bass soloist. In the Advent section he sings, "Thus says the Lord; yet once a little while and I will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry lands" A little later, "Darkness shall cover the earth and gross darkness the people" These words are preludes to Advent proclamations: "The desire of all nations shall come" and "The Lord shall arise upon thee."

In the Holy Week section the bass returns with more devastating words, "Why do the nations so furiously rage together? The kings of the earth rise up" These words are a premonition of a final great conflict which culminates, however, with the Hallelujah Chorus and the affirmation "The kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our Lord" The libretto for the "Messiah" keeps pairing devastation with glory.

So, too, the gloom and doom of Luke 21: 25-26 is followed by a glimpse of God's reign in verse 27. "Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory" There are other such glimpses of glory scattered throughout the Gospel lesson. When we hear the dire predictions of coming doom, do we also have a vision of the Reign of God beyond the darkness? How inclusive is that vision? Dare we sing God's reign into being?

The bass soloist is made to rant and rave as his notes run up and down the scale. We know whereof he sings: the world is shaken, the nations rage, kings (and other leaders) rise up. The sky is falling!

We listen uncomfortably to the bass, but then we are asked to stand and sing along with the Hallelujah Chorus. **Dare we sing?**

A Prayer/Hymn: # 515 "Out of the Depths" (Martin Luther's text for Psalm 130)

Tuesday, December 2

The Sky Is Falling: Is This the End?

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. Luke 21: 32-33

True or False? “This generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.” Assuming “all things” to mean the cosmic cataclysm in verses 25 and 26, bringing an end to the earth, the answer is obviously “False.” How many generations have come and gone since these words were written? The earth is still here and we are on it.

True or False? “Heaven and earth will pass away.” Assuming “heaven and earth” refers to the finite created order, the answer is very probably “True.” If we affirm a beginning to creation, is it not likely there will be an end?

The persistent unanswered question is “When?” Is this now the end? It seems in every generation there are those who interpret Scriptural signs to mean the imminent end of the world. So far they have all been proven wrong.

During the Cold War there were radio-TV preachers interpreting Scripture as referring to the Soviet Union, the “evil empire” which would bring about the end. They therefore opposed nuclear weapons reduction lest it diminish the chances for their hoped-for Armageddon. It is a dangerous viewpoint that eagerly awaits the destruction of our planet earth. “The world can end as long as I’m saved. Oh Rapture!”

“My Lord, what a morning – when the stars begin to fall” This Spiritual sings of the end

of the world, but not joyously. The Scriptural sign of a falling sky is there, but it’s not a song you clap your hands to. It’s a sobering vision. The conditions of slavery no doubt provided many situations when it seemed like the sky was falling. Another Spiritual acknowledges that for every one of us the end is near: “Steal Away to Jesus.” In that Spiritual the trumpet sounds within my soul, not to announce the end of the world but to declare that “I ain’t got long to stay here” Whether the end time is cosmic or personal you can meet it with a song that bears the burdens of life.

There are, of course, clapping, stomping, joyous Spirituals which look beyond the end time (cosmic or personal) to that “Great Gitten’-up Morning” when Gabriel’s trumpet is for all to hear. Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel from the lion’s den? Jonah from the belly of the whale? The Hebrew children from the fiery furnace? Then why not every one

Today’s verses end with the affirmation that even though heaven and earth will pass away God’s word will not. It’s the word of deliverance – a glimpse of God’s reign.

I suspect the end will someday come. But Scripture really addresses itself to living now, not ending now. So what do we do (or not do) in the mean time? Or should we say “in good time”?

A Prayer/Hymn: #505 “When Our Confidence Is Shaken” (Fred Pratt Green’s mature insight)

Wednesday, December 3

The Sky Is Falling: What Not To Do

Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly in a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the earth.
Luke 21: 34-35

Guard against despair! Don't let your hearts get weighed down with the worries of this life. But that isn't easy. You are alarmed, discouraged and diminished by events in the world around you. Can you be anything other than depressed?

For some it's a good excuse for "dissipation and drunkenness." The world is going to hell in a hand basket; I might as well go along. Who cares? Why bother? Let's get drunk lest the world be too much with us. That's easy!

A beautiful scene in "Fiddler on the Roof" has Tevye slowly pushing a cart across the stage and singing, "Little bird, little Chavala, I don't understand what's happening today; everything is all a blur Behind Tevye the audience sees a dance pantomime in which each of three daughters breaks a marriage tradition. The first daughter abandons the tradition of the matchmaker, the second marries without his permission, the third is about to marry outside the faith. This is too much. Tevye sings his remembrance of Chava in remorse and then puts her out of his mind and life by declaring, "Chava is dead to me! Underneath the song was a four-note pattern used earlier by Tevye when he repeatedly asked his wife Golde, "Do you love me? Now that same question is there, but

unvoiced in a persistently haunting accompaniment. Tevye does not let that question surface in his despair over Chava. He declares her "dead" and kills off a precious part of his life. When your world is coming apart, when the sky is falling, dare you let the love song surface?

Who cares? Despair brings with it a loss of concern. Why bother? Depression makes it hard to get out of bed. But remember, you're not being singled out. "That day will come to all who live on the face of the earth." To paraphrase another Gospel verse, "the sky falls on the just and unjust alike." That's the way the world is. How do we choose to live in it?

Today's passage advises us to be on guard, lest we fall into dissipation, drunkenness and despair! Be watchful and listen. Try to hear the question that repeatedly underlies our worries about the world. It's the question the world keeps asking us, "Do you love me?"

The risen Christ asked that question and a puzzled Peter replied, "Of course." So Jesus said to him, "Don't despair, do something! Show some concern. Care and bother a lot." Or words to that effect. In the Gospel story what Jesus said was, "Feed my sheep," and we are left to figure it out.

A Prayer/Hymn: # 706 "O Holy City Seen By John" (Walter Russell Bowie's visionary words)

Thursday, December 4

The Sky Is Falling: What To Do

Now when those things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near... Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all the things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man
 Luke 21: 28, 36

Is that all? Just stand up and raise your head ... and of course, pray?

Many theater companies and directors use the Alexander Method. At the beginning of each rehearsal you lie flat on your back and relax your body, part by part, as you rid yourself of daily stress. Gradually you rise up and eventually you are standing tall, on the balls of your feet with your head held high and eyes focused. This is your position of strength. You are ready. It's a matter of attitude.

Paul Robeson had the deepest and most beautiful bass voice in America. In the 1920s he gained fame as Joe in "Show Boat," singing "Old Man River." From then on audiences at his concerts called out for that song. Paul Robeson also loved the music, but the words were not what a proud and sensitive African American wanted to sing. So he made changes. In the original text the singer likened himself to the Mississippi River, not knowing if the world had troubles, not caring if the land weren't free. However, Mr. Robeson sang, "That's the Old Man I don't want to be." He changed the phrase "Get a little drunk..." to "Show a little grit and you land in jail!" And Paul Robeson was not going to sing "I gets weary and sick of tryin'. I'm tired of living and skeered of dyin'." So he ended the song with, "So I'll keep laughin' instead of cryin'."

I'll keep on fightin' until I'm dyin', while Old Man River just keeps rollin' along. Mr. Robeson turned the weighed-down stevedore named Joe into a fighter for civil rights named Paul. He had to stand up to a land that wasn't all that free. It's a matter of attitude – and words!

Stand up and raise your head. That's the opposite of being weighed down with the worries of life. Be alert at all times. It's a call for awareness of the world around you, that you might respond. Pray for strength. It's an alignment with God's will, enabling positive response. It is putting yourself in a position of strength to withstand evil and to shape the good. It's a matter of attitude, from which words and deeds emerge.

This passage does not give us a program to meet the events of the Last Days. Who knows when or what that would be? We are, though, to be ready to "stand before the Son of Man." Jesus told a parable about the Son of Man coming at the end of time. In that parable those who were ready were those who had already met him in the least of their brothers and sisters, whom they fed and welcomed and clothed and visited and healed. (Matthew 25: 31-46)

It's a matter of attitude – and words – and deeds.

A Prayer/Hymn: # 517 "By Gracious Powers" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer's final New Year's poem)

Friday, December 5

The Sky Is Falling: A Sign of New Life

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the reign of God is near." Luke 21: 29-31

Let's look at a parable inserted earlier in this passage. It's a gentle parable: "Consider the fig tree." It's about Spring: "all the trees sprout leaves." You know what that means: "Summer is near." So also you should know the meaning of the cataclysmic signs of distress. The end of the world? Not necessarily. Rather, the coming of God's reign.

The parable reminds me of a beautiful passage about the end of winter in the Song of Solomon. "The fig tree putteth forth the green figs and the vines with tender grapes give a good smell. So, arise my love, my fair one, and come with me." (S 2:13 KJV) It's Spring! The time for new life has come.

Our earliest Easter hymns unabashedly used images of Spring as symbols for new life and resurrection. In "Come Ye Faithful, Raise the Strain" (# 315) the 8th Century theologian John of Damascus refers to Spring as the Queen of seasons, which comes to render joy:

Tis the spring of souls today, Christ hath burst his prison,
And from three days sleep in death as a sun hath risen;
All the winter of our sins, long and dark, is flying
From his light, to whom we give laud and praise undying.

John Mason Neale, who translated this hymn from the Greek, wrote his own Easter carol on the theme of Spring, "The World Itself Keeps Easter Day." More familiar is "Now the Green Blade Riseth" (# 311), also echoing this early Easter/Spring theme with its repeated refrain, "Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green."

What a strange juxtaposition in Luke 21 between the parable of the fig tree in spring and the dreaded dark day of wrath. But it is an ever-present juxtaposition. Earthquakes and floods, wars and rumors of war (used to stock-pile weapons of mass destruction) are

indeed always with us. But so is Spring, the eternal return of new life, always with us. Chicken Little went around proclaiming that the sky is falling. In reality it was an acorn, a begetter of great oaks, a sign of new life.

However you look at it, the reign of God is coming. It could even be here. With it comes a troubling question. "Can the reign of God come on earth without earthly empires falling?" All empires rise and fall, while God reigns within, or underneath or alongside the "kingdoms of this earth!" In an era of competing nationalisms dare we sing the subversive songs of God's reign on earth?

A Prayer/Hymn: #730 "O Day of God Draw Nigh" (R.B.Y. Scott's anticipation of the Reign of God)

Saturday, December 6

The Sky Is Falling: The Reign of God Is Near

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. Jeremiah 33: 14-15

This is the lesson from the Prophets which accompanies Luke 21: 25-36. It, too, looks at “the days that are coming,” but sees them as the fulfillment of God’s promise. It is appropriately an Advent lesson for it speaks of the Branch from the line of David who will initiate a reign of justice and righteousness in the land.

Glimpses of this reign of God have appeared throughout the Gospel lesson: “Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” (21: 27) “Your redemption is drawing nigh.” (21:28b) “You know that the reign of God is near.” (21: 31b) The reign of God is there as promise amidst the predictions of a chaos regained. Indeed it is there as more than promise. It has its own reality.

When we look around us and see earthquakes and upheavals of both natural and human origin, when we understand ourselves to be living in a strange land contrary to our hopes and values, why not look as well for the reign of God among us? It is near enough to see. It is here enough to live. So why not sing one of the Lord’s many songs?

I had just sung the Shaker Song “Simple Gifts” at a church anniversary service which ends, “And when we find ourselves in the place just right, ‘twill be in the valley of

Love and Delight.” I then sat down next to a young man who had entered the ordained ministry from that congregation. He leaned over and quietly told me he now really understood the words. You see, he was no longer under ministerial appointment – not because he lacked the gifts and graces for ministry. The United Methodist Church had denied him the opportunity to serve when its officials learned he was gay. What a strange land for those who profess the accepting love of Jesus Christ. Here’s a song affirming the gifts and graces of life are there for all. In the midst of a strange land we find our valley of love and delight by simply living in the reign of God.

I don’t know what to make of predictions of cataclysmic last days. Did Jesus believe in an Apocalypse now? In our Gospel lesson he seems to be passing on the rumor. Yet earlier in Luke 21 he warns against following those who proclaim the Last Day and the second coming (21:8). “The Sky Is Falling” is a description which carries existential meaning at some times more than others. However, it is no excuse not to sing. So here’s one more verse from one more song, a favorite of Pete Seeger:

***Through all the tumult and the strife I hear
that music ringing.
Since love is Lord of heaven and earth,
How can I keep from singing?***

A Prayer/Hymn: #707 “Hymn of Promise” (Natalie Sleeth’s affirmation of renewed life)

Sunday, December 7, 2003
Philippians 3:9-11

Introduction

You should have heard my wife when she heard I was going to try to write a week's devotions. Well, laughter is good medicine. She suggested that the call should come to me if there's a foundation to be fixed, a church to be built, or perhaps a wrong-doer in need of smiting. (I'm a good smiter.) But she'd never call me to lead devotions.

She's right. I'm not a "devotions person." My daily prayer is like this:

"Dear God: Whaddaya need done today? ...OK. ...You betcha. ...I'm on it. ...Lemme know if there's anything else. ...Bye"

Affirmations? I have a few:

"Whole lotta chores to do before sundown."

"Less talk, more work."

"Always working, never shirking."

"Get out of my way and let me get to work."

A neighbor who grew up in the days when horses pulled the plow told me that his family had devotions at noon. What we called dinner time. Anyway, his Dad always ended those devotions with a prayer, and the prayer always ended with a phrase that came to sound like a single word: "Amen, boys hitch up." And when the word was

spoken, the family flew out the door to continue the day's work.

Prayer is hard for us doers. It goes on too long, and we get impatient. Once we know what the job is and how we're going to do it, we want to grab the hoe and start killing weeds. That's affirmation #2: "Less talk, more work."

Now, I've been paying attention part of the time in church. If the sermon's a snore or the prayers go on too long, I steal that time back to think about how to do the next job. But I do listen intently every now and then. So I've heard God's more spiritual people say things that help me understand something of their lives. I gather that their souls would starve on the quantities of meditation that sustain me. I don't want anyone starving, so I've done my best here to provide more spiritual food than I usually consume. Just be ready. It may not feel very spiritual.

"And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God Philippians 3:9-11

Amen. Boys, hitch up.

Monday, December 8, 2003
Malachi 3:1-4

Sin? What Sin?

The messenger is coming. And the messenger will bear a holy writ which declares judgment. We await that judgment in fear, because we think judgment may fall against us. I don't think judgment happens that way, though.

Judgment is passed continuously. Like Marley's Ghost in A Christmas Carol, we wear the chains we forge in life, link by link. My father lived his entire life in a small farming community. He used to say that it was a miracle that any people who had lived fifty years together still had a civil word for anyone else in the community. Absent forgiveness, that would be true.

Fortunately, we Christians are like my neighbor Clem. He went fishing over on the Mississippi and was startled by the inopportune appearance of a game warden. Clem set his ice-chest full of fish down, and said "howdy" to the warden. The warden demanded to see his fishing license.

"Ain't got one," said Clem. "Don't need one, neither."

"What?"

"These here are pet fish. I keeps 'em up at the house, and evenins' I brings 'em down here for a swim. When they's done, I whistles, and they jump back in the cooler here."

"No such thing," says the warden.

"Sure enough is. I'll show ya."

Clem dumped the fish back in the water.

They swam away, and Clem stood on the bank whistling. He whistled a long time. The warden's patience ran thin. "When you gonna call 'em back?" he demanded.

Clem looked puzzled. "Call who back?"

"The FISH!"

Clem smiled slowly and asked, "What fish?"

That's how it is with sin. We can dump all our sins into the ocean of God's Grace, and when our personal devils accuse us, we can ask them, "Sin? What sin?"

This is no limited-time, while-quantities-last offer. It is life's greatest bargain, open to all any time any day. Take advantage of it and whack a few of the links off those chains you're dragging.

Slow down a minute and give your burdens to God. And then give this day all you've got to give.

Tuesday, December 9, 2003
Malachi 3:1-4

We Have a Choice

We continue today with Malachi Chapter 3, Verses 1-4. This passage is like the one from Jeremiah 33: 14-16, which we examined last week. Desolation surrounded Jeremiah. Jerusalem was in ruins and the kings of Judah were routed. The land was a waste without humans or animals. And the Lord promised Jeremiah that a righteous branch of David would spring up bringing justice and righteousness. Justice and righteousness would produce peace and safety in Jerusalem. Here, in Malachi, justice again precedes peace: first the fire that produces righteousness, then the peace of God will reign.

In our public and personal lives, we strive to reverse God's ordering of events. We demand peace and safety as preconditions for justice and righteousness. We tell ourselves that "current circumstances" legitimize injustices that we consider necessary for just a short time until peace and safety come along. Once we have peace and safety, we claim, then we will be just.

I heard a Homeland Security official justify our inhumane imprisonments at Guantanamo Bay by saying, "Well, 9/11 changed everything." Sixty years earlier, she would have made the same argument with different dates: "Well, 12/7/41 changed everything." That motif was first played at the dawn of human existence.

We understand now that some American responses to Pearl Harbor were wrong. Japanese Americans should not have been deprived of their rights after that attack just for being Japanese. We overreacted, justifying our behavior by the perceived exigencies of the day. Fifty years hence, we will understand our post-9/11 behavior

as a regrettable, if not reprehensible, response to provocation.

Will we also understand that no provocation is ever truly fresh? When will we understand that terrorism grows from injustice, that it is the response of the dispossessed to other organized aggression and repression? Injustice is the ladder that promoters of evil climb in their quest for power. It discredits the advocates of peace and diplomacy and gives war its constituency.

It is easy to see this work among nations, but do we see it in our own lives? Often we hold grudges thinking we will set them down when the grudge-target corrects their behavior. We behave like naughty children, answering the call of peace and forgiveness with the blood-stained phrase, "Well, but..."

We too, each of us individually, postpone the dawn of peace and justice by clinging to our grievances. We close our eyes to the light in the eastern skies as we tighten our grip on our own cargos of injustice, clutching worldly wealth in one hand and our stock of hatreds in the other, planning to let go of neither until peace and safety are guaranteed.

We have a choice. We can sit here clutching our wealth, defending our position atop this reeking dung-heap of human hubris, or we can hear the words of Jeremiah. If we listen, we will learn that peace and safety come after justice and righteousness. History bears ample witness that their order is not reversible. Soon we shall go forward into a new year. Shall we go in war or in peace?

Wednesday, December 10, 2003

The Prophecy of Zechariah:

...to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. Luke 1: 69-75

Twenty-first century American Christians must surely affirm that we have been rescued from the hands of our enemies and may serve God without fear. Never in history has a nation been as richly blessed as we are. When cometh the blessing, then also cometh the question. Are we serving in holiness and righteousness before God all our days?

Nationally, we insist on crying poor. We shirk our United Nations dues. When we give aid, we tie it to purchases of dangerous weapons. The portion of our national wealth devoted to the assistance of other nations is 1/3 the portion Sweden gives. It is 1/2 the average portion for nations in the European Union. This from a nation that consumes a larger share of the world's resources than any other. We are the fattest pig and we are doing the least for those who starve.

The United States of America is not a nation in

service to God. We use our wealth to assure our continued wealth; we deny assistance to end human suffering if we cannot identify some bit of national self-interest to be advanced by that assistance. Why is the ending of human suffering, standing alone, less than a compelling appeal to our national self-interest? If we were a Christian nation, there could be no more compelling call. And the fact that suffering cannot move our hand forces this sad conclusion: we are a nation in service to Mammon.

Woe betide a nation richly blessed which hoards its wealth, spurns the beggars at its gates, and locks its doors against the starving multitudes. It will not suffice to claim that we can't afford to help when any just person can see that we have more than anyone else. This nation is an edifice which cannot stand, which must in the fullness of time crumble and be swept away before the Reign of Holiness.

Hast thou chosen, O my people, on whose party thou shalt stand,
Ere the Doom from its worn sandals shakes the dust against our land?
Though the cause of Evil prosper, yet 'tis Truth alone is strong,
And, albeit she wander outcast now, I see around her throng
Troops of beautiful, tall angels, to enshield her from all wrong.

Backward look across the ages and the beacon-moments see,
That, like peaks of some sunk continent, jut through Oblivion's sea;
Not an ear in court or market for the low foreboding cry
Of those Crises, God's stern winnowers, from whose feet earth's chaff must fly;
Never shows the choice momentous till the judgement hath passed by.

James Russell Lowell, *The Present Crisis*

Thursday, December 11, 2003
Luke 3:4

Who Cries Out in the Wilderness Today?

When I think about the righteous leaders of yesteryear, it is easy to think that I would have followed them if I'd been there to do it. The choice seems easy, as I gaze through my retrospectoscope. Certainly, I would have followed Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Woodrow Wilson, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, or any of the others in that pantheon of heroes whom death has rendered safe for admiration.

You can't get into baseball's Hall of Fame until you've been out of the game for five years. For the Pantheon of Public Heroes, it takes a little longer. We only canonize those who won't be making any new demands on our sense of justice. Once death silences them, we're sure they've hammered us with their last harangue. We begin to feel safe. Then we call the bronze foundry and order up a statue.

But can we, tender and soft as we are, take up our cross and follow today's Christ? Ay, there's the rub. Hear again the words of James Russell Lowell:

By the light of burning heretics Christ's bleeding feet I track,
Toiling up new Calvaries ever with the cross that turns not back,
And these mounts of anguish number how each generation learned
One new word of that grand Credo which in prophet-hearts hath burned
Since the first man stood God-conquered with his face to heaven upturned.

For Humanity sweeps onward: where today the martyr stands,
On the morrow, crouches Judas with the silver in his hands.
Far in front the cross stands ready and the crackling faggots burn,
While the hooting mob of yesterday in silent awe return
To glean up the scattered ashes into History's golden urn.

Perhaps you know this verse:

Then to side with Truth is noble when we share her wretched crust,
Ere her cause bring fame and profit, and 'tis prosperous to be just;
Then it is the brave man chooses, while the coward stands aside,
Doubting in his abject spirit, till his Lord is crucified,
And the multitude make virtue of the faith they had denied.

This day, look for God's new Messiah. Good candidates:

- people pursued by hooting mobs;
- speakers making demands every responsible person knows must be rejected;
- somebody you're pretty sure should be arrested and prosecuted to the full extent of the law;
- folks tied to stakes with lots of combustible material around.

Friday, December 12, 2003
Luke 3:3:6

Making our Imprint

“And all flesh, and all flesh, and all flesh shall see, shall see...” What person, having heard Handel’s Messiah, can read these words without hearing that music? Today that music exists as fact. We forget that it was once a faint synaptical spark in the mind of a gifted composer. And the same is true of the words. Once an unsettled composition-in-progress, it is now prose carved into memory.

The Biblical words and Handel’s music help fill the valleys, level the high places and straighten the crooked. For they made God’s word memorable, and ministered the Word to humanity.

Few of us will leave on this world the imprint made by this phrasing or by this music. Yet each of us, somewhere, makes a print no more erasable. Ordinarily, we do not know when, where, or how we have done it, but each day it happens. Someone takes a lesson from our conduct. The student learns. Once learned, our conduct straightens or twists that learner’s path toward

God. The road is leveled or made steeper. The world is made better or worse and the change occurs because we have passed through.

The question is not whether we sing in a strange land. We are in a strange land, for this is not our home. We sing because we can do no other; to live is to sing a song others hear. The vital question is whether our song is God’s song.

John Wesley, in his *Rules for Singing* urges us to be no more afraid of our voices now than we were when we sang the songs of Satan. He bravely assumed that we no longer sing the songs of Satan. But that quibble aside, this rule is as good for daily living as it is for Sunday morning hymn-singing.

Did Handel know the full power of his composition? Did Luke expect his words to endure two millennia? Probably not. But they struck out boldly, singing God’s song, and that shapes people to this day. Let us join that song, and give voice with strength and conviction.

Saturday, December 13, 2003

Calm in the Midst of Struggle

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, and to give knowledge of salvation to the people by the forgiveness of their sins.

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Luke 1: 76-79

We end the week with a caution for all doers, and you know I count myself a doer. We are saved by grace, not by deeds. It is God's mighty work that will bring the dawn from on high to break upon us, not our efforts.

While I take this as a caution, it is also a comfort. How blessed it is to know that it is not our will but God's that determines the fate of this tiny universe we inhabit. Were it left to us we should tremble and quake, for failure would be certain.

We are called to strive and to struggle, but we may exert ourselves serenely, knowing that "behind the dim Unknown, standeth God within the Shadows, keeping watch above His own."

Serenity in struggle is a great gift. Those blessed with it stand apart, whatever their endeavor, for their soul is calm in the middle of the storm. That calm informs and instructs all the efforts of the gifted, so that much is achieved where otherwise all would be lost.

And that is the point of this Scripture. We may all be calm in the midst of our struggles, for God is God and will determine our course. Let us stand upon God's grace; all other ground is sinking sand.

And so let our feet be guided into the way of peace; though we are blind and cannot see our path, God sees all and will lead us onward.

Sunday, December 14, 2003
Zephaniah 3:14-20

Restoring Hope

There is a saying among Hispanics, "Dios, mándame más, que más me merezco". A literal translation could be: "God, send me more, because I deserve more." This saying reflects a fatalistic way of thinking calling us to accept all pain and all problems in life in silence and resignation. We need to accept everything that comes because that is the way it is. It is not only fatalistic, but it fosters a passive way of viewing and living the life that God has given us.

This form of thinking has been used against Hispanics and other racial groups in many countries around the world. One day, a friend of mine said to me: "Diego, don't you think that Americans are more intelligent than we are?" Suffering has led many of us to believe that we are second class citizens.

Zephaniah helps me to understand that instead of a second class life or an eternal suffering, God is giving us hope and encouragement. Maybe this moment is one of suffering and pain, but it will not last forever. The oppression will end and we will be set free!

Zephaniah knew about oppression. His people, according to the scripture, were in exile. They might have felt that God had abandoned them and that their captives were having a great time abusing them. In exile, Zephaniah reminds us that the people were suffering the consequences of their own sins and mistakes. But he also reminded his people that God's mercy was at hand, right around the corner.

God, through Zephaniah, was giving his people hope. God did not want to perpetuate the pain of the people. On the contrary, God was and is looking to restore people. That has been His plan from the very beginning! In the midst of bad times, God is reassuring the Israelites -- and us -- that better days will come and God himself guarantees it: "The Lord has spoken."

In this time of Advent, Zephaniah helps us to understand in our hearts and minds that as human beings and as Christians there is hope and we will be liberated from all oppression. Not by our own hands, but by the mighty power of a God that is taking care of us all. The God that gave us His own Son Jesus Christ to save us does not discriminate against us. He cares not what our color of skin is or what language we speak.

For Zephaniah, these were words of Good News of salvation and of hope in the future. Today, we can experience what Zephaniah experienced even if we sometimes think that we live in a strange land, even if the world is going in the wrong direction.

We can be beacons of light allowing God to shine through us, singing with joy and rejoicing, knowing that God will soon bring to an end the pain and the suffering in our lives. Thank you, Jesus!

Diego Orsini

Monday, December 15, 2003
Isaiah 12:2-6

A Cross Racial/Cross Cultural/Cross Spiritual Life

What is it to live in a strange land? One day I went to my counselor at Dubuque Seminary and said to her: "Do I need to take this course?" It was a Cross Cultural class. It was not that I didn't want to take the class. My point was to make them aware that I was already in a Cross Cultural/Cross Racial class.

For the last 8 years after moving from Puerto Rico to Wisconsin, I have experienced, by living in, a different country, culture, language, way of life, and church different from that in which I grew up. I needed to adjust to a new climate and learn new ways of doing things, all the time building from the foundation that I already had. Everyday was and is a challenge with decisions to make and paths to take in my journey of faith.

I will never regret the day that my wife and I decided to come to Wisconsin from Puerto Rico because, like Isaiah, we are thankful to God for the world that He has shown us. Isaiah was immersed, but not by choice, in a new culture, race, language, and religion. But even amidst those changes, the prophet lived and witnessed the power and the love of God in his live and the live of the people.

Two weeks before we left Puerto Rico, I felt in my heart the need to respond to God's call and become a pastor. After a year of living

in Wisconsin, I was assigned to a two-point cross cultural appointment. I could have refused; after all, this meant serving a different culture, people of a different color of skin, and having to work really hard to improve my mastery of the English language. But instead of seeing my limitations or the challenges of a different culture and people, I prayed to God and trusted in the call that he was giving me at that time.

As Isaiah, I shout aloud and sing with joy because by giving God the opportunity to work in my life in the "exile," my family and I have been abundantly blessed. We have shared our ways to experience God in my tradition and help some people to learn Spanish. We even took a group from one of the churches that I had served to Puerto Rico! Also, we have acquired new ways to worship our Lord, learned a new language, and, more important, have gotten to know brothers and sisters that we would not have met otherwise!

Yes, God has done "glorious things" and that's why I'm thankful because God has fulfilled his promises in my life, my family, and in the people around us. "***Great is the holy one among us!***"

Diego Orsini

Tuesday, December 16, 2003
Luke 3:7-18

An Uncompromising Message

Like Jesus, John the Baptist does not believe in giving the crowds a "sugar coated pill." John was direct and to the point: "you brood of vipers." There was something wrong and John was not afraid to say it. He knew why God called him, he knew that he needed to be faithful to that call and ministry, and he was willing to respond to that call, fully knowing the consequences. John's life was literally cut short, but his message truly prepared the way for the Lord.

We could read the story of John the Baptist and his story could sound foreign to our ears. My question when I read his story is: Could I be like John the Baptist if the time ever comes that I need to give my life for the kingdom of heaven?

That is a hard question and there is no easy answer. Names start popping in my mind: Peter, Paul, Ruth, Esther, Rahab, the friends of Daniel...Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Stanley Jones, Archbishop Romero, Vidal Garcia. These, and many others, gave their life for what they believed in their hearts.

As pastor, my everyday call is to be true to my call as a Christian. Is that an easy task? NO! The temptations of this world enticing me to back off my beliefs are always there. Someone might say: "It is better to take the easy way, rather than the hard way"es, the temptations of this world, the voice of the devil is real: "Take the easy way; follow

the crowd; don't change anything; don't look for trouble."

But instead of being part of a misguided crowd, God calls me -- and us -- to be a leader, preaching and living the Good News, the message of Advent: "The kingdom of God is here!" This is the message that John the Baptist and many people around the world have preached and still preach today to a world that is in urgent need of Good News.

Sadly, we have a lot of people in our churches that have decided to take the easy way, sitting in the pews, believing they can do nothing and doing nothing. Charles Wesley, using the letter to the Ephesians said: "Wake up you sleeper and the light of Christ will shine upon you" I think many people can't sing in a strange land because they have just stopped believing in the Advent message. They can't sing in strange land, not because it is a strange land, but because it is a strange message.

The times demand that we, as Christians, reclaim the Good News of Advent. The times demand that we, as Christians, reclaim the message of Zephaniah and Isaiah of hope and encouragement knowing that God is with us no matter what. And if God is with us, who can be against us?

Diego Orsini

Wednesday, December 17, 2003
Luke 3:10-14

Living with Passion

After having been confronted by John the Baptist for their evil ways, the crowd, as one, wants to know, “then what are we supposed to do?” (Luke 3:10). They recognized that the message preached by John demanded something from them. But, what was it? Two words come to mind that summarize John’s answer: compassion and contentment.

We are to have compassion for those who have not. We are to treat others how we ourselves would like to be treated. It’s a compassion that goes beyond our feelings and is translated into action. If somebody asks you for something, give it to him or her, John says.

Many times we get so caught up in executing something to the letter that we forget to do it -- whatever “it” is -- as if we were doing it for the Lord himself. We drop a few coins in the homeless man’s tin cup, but we look away as we do it. We write a check out for a missions project or other church need, but we forget to pray for the recipients of our generosity. We lend our time at a soup kitchen, but do not give ourselves in the process.

In Spanish, the word compassion is “compasión” which literally means “with passion”. Perhaps it is this “passion” that is sometimes lacking in our giving. Yet we are reminded time and time again throughout scripture that what the Lord wants from us is not what comes easy to give, our leftovertime or resources, but our first fruits in all we do or are. So, from today on let’s strive to be not just compassionate Christians. **Let’s be passionate with our compassion.**

Second of all, I think John’s answer to the question “what are we to do” talks to us about being content with what we have. After all, it’s not what we have, but who we know, which will actually give us joy. John invites us to look at the glass as half full. To focus on what we have, not on what we don’t. And to be content -- or happy -- with it.

Let us face this Advent season with joy for the child who was given with passion and for the God who loves us just as we are and is content to call us His own.

Ana Orsini

Thursday, December 18, 2003
Philippians 4:4-7

It's the way you live it!

Pretty soon we will begin to unpack our Christmas ornaments. They've been in boxes for almost a year now and we need to dust them, perhaps fix some light bulbs and start thinking about how we will decorate the tree differently this year. But let me tell you: it's not the way you put it up; it's the way you live it!

We live in a generation of "closet Christians." They come out for special celebrations, Christmas being one of them. They need to be taken out of the boxes, dusted off and are ready to pretend to be what they are not. Then after the celebration they return to the box and then to the closet till next year or the next big celebration.

That is why, when the Apostle Paul wrote this letter, he was not encouraging everyone, rather he was encouraging those who were burned out, those who were giving their lives for the Gospel of Christ. Men and women who dedicated their lives, and maybe ~~gave~~ their lives, but now they were feeling tired, abandoned, and alone in ministry. Sound familiar? It happens today. Statistics show that only 20 percent of the membership of the church serve in ministry.

How can we rejoice, as Paul said, when "brothers" and "sisters" criticize everything we do or try to do? How can we not be anxious when people undermine the efforts of others to preach and to live Christ? The Philippians were down and they needed a shot of Good News. Paul gave it to them. I can hear Paul: "Hey, I am here. I am your partner in ministry, even though I am in jail. It may seem horrible in here or out there, but let me tell you: Rejoice! God is with me and God is with you!"

Unbelievable. Paul used the word "rejoice." "Yes, you Philippians have hit the bottom, but now I am telling you "Rejoice... and in peace guard your hearts and minds... what ever you've learned and heard... put it in to practice. And the God of peace will be with you."

The times call for Christians men and women willing to get out of the closet -- and stay out -- and live what they believe. The Church of Christ can not stand on the sidelines anymore and must not keep quiet about what is happening around us. **The Church of Christ needs to live what we believe in this strange land.** "Rejoice in the Lord. I will say it again: Rejoice!" Let me tell you that Paul was not giving a pep talk. The Apostle was challenging people to be agent of change, ambassadors of the kingdom of God to a world that goes in the opposite direction of what God says is best for it.

The great Puerto Rican baseball player Roberto Clemente died in an airplane crash in 1972 trying to help the people of Nicaragua after an earthquake. He once said: "Anytime you have an opportunity to make things better and you don't do it, then you are wasting your time on this earth."

Zephaniah reminds us about hope. Isaiah reminds us about living thankful lives. Luke reminds us not to compromise our message. Now, Paul invites us to live that message among the people. Will you? Time is so precious ---- don't waste it. Remember: "...the God of peace will be with you."

Diego Orsini

Friday, December 19, 2003
Philippians 4:1-3

What a Beautiful World

"Blessed are the peacemakers, because they will inherit the kingdom of God." (Matthew 5:9) God bless the Apostle Paul! Instead of accusing or taking sides, Paul is trying to make peace by helping these two women to work together. How beautiful it is when we work together!

This event reminds me of when my wife and I went on a mission trip to Europe where more than 5,000 people from over 70 countries were spreading the Gospel of Christ. After a week of training in Germany, we spent three weeks in London doing door to door evangelism. We were a group of 75 people, from over 35 countries working and living in a small Baptist Church. Yes, we were all from different countries, languages, and cultures, but there was something that made this mission trip special: we were together because of Christ!

From Puerto Rico, Holland, South Korea, Brasil, Ireland, Egypt, and many other places, God brought us together to fulfill a call and a mission. When we were knocking on doors in London we were amazed to find that many of the residents were from India, Venezuela, Portugal, Africa, the Middle East, and many other places!

This event really shaped my life and my call as a Christian. It helped me to understand that I am not alone in my journey. There are millions and millions of people around the world confessing and living their faith in Christ. What a joy and comfort! Millions of Christians committed and with one purpose in mind and heart: to share the Good News of Christ!

Can you imagine what a wonderful and beautiful world it would be, if Christians around the world put aside all their differences and set their eyes on Jesus. Is this an impossible dream? Is this a star that we can not reach? Is it not a miracle that God can do for the good of all of us, if we allow him to?

Yes, "blessed are the peacemakers", and blessed are those who open their hearts, minds, and doors to their fellow brothers and sisters and invite them to sit, to eat, to fellowship, to love, and to be with God. In this season of Advent, this message of hope can give us the eyes to see this miracle in our churches, communities, families, countries, and the whole world. "One God, one Christ, one Spirit, and one undivided Church."

Diego Orsini

Saturday, December 20, 2003

Isaiah 12:6

Singing for Joy

Five years ago our son Giancarlo was born gravely ill. We discovered at his one week check up that Giancarlo's heart was on the right side of his chest and that it was malformed. As a result, his heart only had two chambers instead of four, his aorta was tiny and his only valve was leaky. It was indeed a miracle that he had not died at birth.

He was taken to Children's Hospital in Milwaukee and family and friends were asked to pray for him, as the following day he would have the first of three open-heart surgeries.

During the eleven hours of his surgery our faith was greatly tested. But time and time again we remembered that all we had was God, and that was all we needed. Giancarlo made it through that and the other two surgeries with flying colors. His doctors have told us that he is their poster child. They would like all the children with similar hearts as Giancarlo to have the outcome that he has had.

And for that outcome and many other things, we can truly say with Isaiah, "Shout aloud and sing for joy ... for great is the Holy One of Israel among you." Yes, great is the Holy One among us!

God knows what we need even before we ask Him for it. God provided beautifully for

Mary, Joseph and Jesus. He provided a place for His son to be born in, provided peace and harmony for Mary and Joseph and through the gifts of the Wise Men, provided all they would need for their escape to Egypt. Great was the Holy One among them!

The day of Giancarlo's surgery my sister-in-law Naty, who works in Veteran's Hospital in Puerto Rico, told one of her doctor friends of Giancarlo's condition. His response was: "tell your brother and sister-in-law not to have him operated here. Tell them to take him to Children's Hospital in Wisconsin." See, he was under the impression that Giancarlo was in Puerto Rico, but three years before God had placed in our hearts that we move to Wisconsin.

Little did we know then that God was putting everything in its place so that this child could be at the right place and at the right time!

As we move closer to Christmas and the New Year, we too can rest assured that God has every little detail of our lives under his control, that nothing we'll face we'll have to face alone and that we too can shout for joy because the Holy One is among us!

Ana Orsini

Sunday, December 21, 2003

A Little Thing

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel... Micah 5:2

God used the little town of Bethlehem, and the little clan of Judah, to produce a ruler for Israel. Micah's message is that a ruler is coming. He will lead the people into security and away from exile and oppression. He'll come from David's hometown, Bethlehem, a branch off of David's family tree. This ruler will bring peace to a war-torn people.

As early Christians began to shape their understanding of who Jesus was and is, this passage from Micah took on new meaning. This passage became a prophecy foretelling the coming of Jesus. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The city of David was in fact a hick town. A tiny place. The focus in Advent is on the One who is to come. The one who appeared as powerless in the eyes of the world -- he became the victorious conqueror. The one who humbled himself, who suffered the humiliation of crucifixion, became the Savior of the world.

God had a long history of using little things for grand purposes. God had chosen David, the youngest of Jesse's sons, to be king of Israel. When Solomon, David's son, takes the throne, he confesses to God that he is "only a little child" (1 Kings 3:7) and yet God uses him to be

King of Israel, architect and builder of the Temple, a ruler with of incredible wisdom.

When God called Jeremiah, he pleads "I am only a boy" but God replies "Do not say, 'I am only a boy;' for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. (Jeremiah 1:7).

All this is good news indeed for those who work for justice. Isn't it reassuring to know that God can use our little efforts to produce something great? I remember once complaining to my spiritual director that I felt my work on the Commission on Religion and Race was not accomplishing anything. I traveled to meetings where we talked about huge problems but it seemed like nothing much was done. I felt like my efforts weren't doing anything. She vehemently replied "how do you know your efforts aren't doing any good? How do you know what God can or cannot do through you?" It was humbling to realize that yes, even my small efforts can be useful when placed in God's hands.

Look around! What is God busy doing with "little things" right now?

Tuesday, December 23, 2003

Mary for the Pagans -- Part One

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,.... Luke 1:39

We live in a pagan world not unlike the era of the early church. So say Thomas Bandy, George Hunter and other church growth experts. Our world is not dominated by a Christian world view but rather is characterized by a fragmented plurality of beliefs, values and spiritualities. Writing in the November/December *Net Results*, Thomas Bandy gives advice to “disciples traveling through this post modern, pagan wilderness:” He says we need to “Honor the Blessed Virgin.”

Many Protestants find this piece of advice confusing. “Honor the Blessed Virgin?” Unlike the the Catholics and the Orthodox Church, we Protestants don’t “do Mary” very well. Recently I visited a big Catholic church for the funeral of a parishioner’s father and was overwhelmed by the feminine visual images in the sanctuary. Mary was everywhere! For those who worship under an empty cross, in sanctuaries decorated with brightly-colored banners, growing plants and bare stone walls, the paintings and statues of Mary in a Catholic or Orthodox sanctuary are remarkable!

Thomas Bandy says pagans, unlike Protestants, don’t have any problems with Mary. This was true in the time of the early church as well as today. Whenever there is war, family strife, and an uncertain future, the leading female nurturer

becomes the most important relationship for any child. Mary as a religious figure is accessible because everyone has a mother. Whether our mother was good, controlling, doting, overbearing, distracted, alcoholic, or angelic, everyone has experienced first-hand a mother/child relationship.

As Christians we follow Jesus, a man who was probably closer to his mother than to any other human being. As United Methodists we are guided by the words and work of John Wesley, a man who was profoundly influenced by his mother, Susannah Wesley.

In the July/August 2003 issue of *Interpreter* magazine, United Methodist pastor Donald Lacy urges United Methodists to try the “Hail Mary” prayer and spend time daily getting to know someone of another denomination as a way of promoting ecumenism.

Is this the moment in history when United Methodists need to pay more serious attention to Mary?

Let’s spend the rest of the week with Mary as we prepare our hearts for the Advent of the Christ child. Let’s ponder what she can teach us. Let’s see what we can learn from the scriptural and the human Mary.

Wednesday, December 24, 2003

Mary for the Pagans -- Part Two

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

Luke 1:42

During seminary at Boston University School of Theology I lived one year on Mission Hill in Roxbury, a Boston suburb. Roxbury is a heavily Catholic area. Driving around Roxbury one day, I heard the words to the “Hail Mary” prayer broadcast on the radio over and over: “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.”

As a Christian feminist, Mary has always held a fascination for me. She is, after all, the most important female figure in Christian theology, art, music and tradition. It’s clear that in Irish and many European settings, the figure of Mary was layered on top of pre-Christian feminine images of the divine. Part of the process of converting “pagans” was to transfer the devotion to these other figures onto Mary. It wasn’t hard.

In years past and still today, thousands and thousands of people annually make pilgrimages to sites related to Mary (Lourdes, Guadalupe, Czestochowa, etc.). Part of the reason they go is because many feel Mary “understands” our human plight more than the distant God the Father. Telling Mary your problems seems even easier than telling Jesus. She understands. Thomas Bandy, church growth consultant, says the importance of Mary is easily grasped by “pagans.”

In my feminist explorations of Mary over the years I always hit a wall though when it came to relating in Mary in prayer. We pray to **God**. Can we pray to Mary? Will she hear and answer our prayers?

As I understand it, Catholics venerate Mary, but pray to God. Is that a valid theological

distinction or is it just patriarchal hair-splitting?

If a “pagan” is someone who doesn’t go to church, doesn’t confess Jesus as one’s savior and never cracks open a Bible, I was a “pagan” once, in my twenties, as a college graduate making my way in the world. Worship in a church was outside my radar screen. Yet once I had a powerful prayer experience with a mother figure. At the time, I was working in a field I had never considered as a ‘career’ before landing a job as manager of a discount commodities brokerage firm in Boston. The business world was new to me – exciting -- and I was making a decent wage. However, the work was very stressful. Often I’d come home frazzled and exhausted.

After one particularly difficult day, I found myself sobbing in my apartment, releasing all the tension of the day. I began praying a lament about my life at that moment. “Mommy, you never said it was going to be this hard” were the words that came out of my mouth. From the depths of my soul came a cry for help from the one person I felt was able to help me. My **mother**. My mother was the one my unconscious said was responsible for the order of things.

What is the cry of your soul this Advent? Is there a way you can share what is in the depth of your being with Mary, the mother of our Lord? I suspect there might be a “pagan” inside you, a part of you that is yet unconverted, a part of you that stands outside the Christian faith looking in and therefore might be able to see Mary more clearly than those of us steeped in Protestantism.

Let your heart speak to Mary today.

Thursday, December 25, 2003

Mothers as Spiritual Leaders

And blessed is she who believed that there would be fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.
Luke 1:45

Mary's authority and stature in the Christian faith is rooted in her role as mother of Jesus. We know little about Mary as a person. The gospels, after all, are not history but a retelling of the "good news" of Jesus Christ. Mary is praised for her great faith. Scripture tells us Mary believed what the angel Gabriel told her -- that she would give birth to a child, Jesus, who will be the "Son of the Most High" -- and therefore she is blessed.

There's a Spanish saying "an ounce of mother is better than a pound of clergy." If you had a loving mother, then you may agree with that proverb. No matter what kind of earthly mothers we had, mothers are models for the spiritual life.

Once a certain abbot was visiting the Russian Saint Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833). The visitor asked Seraphim for advice about how to direct the monks under his care. Father Seraphim has this advice:

"Let every Abbott become and remain as a wise mother: a mother who loves her children and lives not to satisfy herself but to satisfy her children. The infirmities of her infirm children she hears with love. Those who have fallen into filth she cleans, washes them calmly, clothes them in new white garments, puts their shoes on, warms them, feeds them, looks after them, comforts them and from all sides, strives to pacify their spirit so that she never hears the slightest cry from them; and such children are well disposed to their mother. Thus should every Abbott live not to satisfy himself but to satisfy those subject to him.

He should be condescending to their weaknesses; bear with love the infirmities of the infirm; heal their sinful diseases with the plaster of mercifulness; raise with kindness those who have fallen into transgressions...keep constant watch over them; by every means comforting them, and from all sides defend their peace and repose to such an extent that the slightest cry or murmuring will never be heard from them; and then they will zealously strive to procure for the Abbott peace of repose." (from *Spiritual Instructions of St. Seraphim*)

This description of Abbott as mother figure seems both impossibly idealistic but also true. As a mother and pastor, it's love for my children and my parishioners that is a guiding force in my life. Yet Seraphim seems to have an extremely exalted view of mothers. Yes, there are many times that mothers perform selfless acts of love for their kids. Yet mothers can get too entangled emotionally in the lives of their children and stultify their children's growth. A mother's giving can come with a hidden price -- the expectation that they will get affection, attention, love, etc. in return -- and she may feel bitter if that price isn't paid in full.

Mother Mary **is** a spiritual leader for us. She trusted in God's Word when it was spoken to her through an angel. When we hear or read God's Word for us, do we take that Word to heart? Do we listen to scripture with the same openness that Mary received Gabriel's message? Let Mother Mary be your spiritual guide today. Let her show you how to receive God's Word into your heart.

Friday, December 26, 2003

The “Marys” of Today

“He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”
 Luke 1:51-53

Lisa Rahman is nineteen years old. She is a Disney sweatshop worker in Bangladesh. She works at the Shah Makhdom factory. Lisa was not allowed to speak to her co-workers. Her trips to the bathroom during her workday were timed. If she questioned her working conditions or her wages, she ran the risk of being fired or beaten. Yet Lisa did not let fear paralyze her. Lisa and her co-workers began to advocate for changes at her workplace. And they won.

In the summer of 2003, the United Methodist Women’s Social Action Network invited United Methodist Women to write letters to Disney, Hasbro, Mattel and other toy manufacturers. These big corporations contract with companies in Bangladesh and elsewhere to produce the shirts, toys and games for the children in the U.S. to enjoy. Often the workers who make these products labor in unsafe conditions for very little money. The companies where Disney’s products are manufactured employ many young women. Women like Lisa Rahman.

According to the National Labor Committee, for eight years young teenage women sewed Disney shirts and were forced to work 14-15 hours a day, seven days a week. They were paid just 5 cents for each \$17.99 shirt they made. When the workers banded together to improve their

working conditions, Disney responded by pulling their work from the factory. Improvements were made in the working conditions. United Methodist Women were encouraged to write to Disney, urging them to return to the factory and this time respect the rights of the workers.

Lisa Rahman is a modern day Mary. “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” (Luke 1:52-53). Like Mary, Lisa knows that often for justice to be done, the rich must be sent away empty and the hungry must be filled with good things. Mary’s song in Luke 1:47 and following magnifies God’s greatness. It is a song of trust in our God who is an advocate of the powerless. Mary had trust in that kind of a God. Do we?

Who are the “Marys” of our day? Which poor, young, unknown women has God chosen today, to help bring the kingdom a bit closer? Who are the ones in our world today -- men and women - - who have the courage to trust in the God who sends the rich away empty and fills the hungry with good things?

These are the ones who are truly blessed.

Saturday, December 27, 2003

Claiming Mary as My Spiritual Guide

“...for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. Luke 1:49

My own mother is now 82. She had a full career as a newspaperwoman. She is author of two cookbooks, and long ago retired from being public relations director of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. She has collaborated with my father on various journalism publications, traveled to almost every continent and triumphed over many adversities in her personal life. A few years ago, I asked my mother of all that she had done in her life, what gave her the most satisfaction. “I suppose it was raising you and Liz (my older sister).”

“...for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” (Luke 1:49). I am so grateful for God giving me the chance to be wife, mother and pastor. All three roles have given me joy. I’m especially grateful for the closer relationship I have with my mother. My parents are not Christians. When I became a baptized Christian at the age of twenty-seven, they did not understand fully why I made that choice. They did not choose Christianity for themselves. But they never stopped loving me nor did they treat me differently after I made that choice.

Part of being a good mother is letting your children go. Letting them be free to be who they are meant to be. As the mother of a son who is now sixteen and will probably leave home in two years to go away to college, I’m aware of the need to begin to let go of him. Mary, as a mother, is a role model for us in letting go of our children and allowing them to be the people God created them to be. Yes, it was hard for Jesus to go to the cross. And it was hard for Mary, his

mother, to stand by and watch him die. Any mother who has lost a child has a soulmate in Mary. Watching a child die -- grieving that loss -- is one of the hardest things a parent will ever have to do.

We talk of the sacrifice God the Father made -- that “He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). But what about the sacrifice Mary made? She gave her son as well. We don’t have any record in scripture of Mary trying to stop Jesus from going to the cross. Peter tried to stop Jesus. But not Mary. The only instance of Mary being anything close to an interfering mom is in the second chapter of John’s gospel when she asked Jesus to help with the wine shortage.

I love my parishioners. But I want my love to free them, not bind them to me. I am aware I may need to feel loved in return. One of the dark sides of ministry is that pastors/spiritual leaders use others to meet their own emotional needs. In a similar way, a mother may “live through” her children, not allowing them to grow up and be themselves. Mary let Jesus go. Love sets people free. Love never hangs on. It’s not what we do for our children but what we teach them to do for themselves that matters in the end.

Can we choose to be more like Mary today? Who can we love today in such a way that sets him/her free? Think about Mary’s sacrifice -- her letting go -- and what it might inspire you to do today, for love’s sake.

Sunday, December 28, 2003
I Samuel 2:18-20,26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17, Luke 2:41-52

A Break from the Story

Today is “Low Sunday” though you won’t find that scheduled on the Common Lectionary. That’s the “inside joke” name for the next Sunday after the “high” of Christmas Eve/Day. People are still on family trips or in the shopping malls exchanging gifts and hunting sales so attendance is often really low at church. The poinsettias are getting brown around the edges.

I’d like to find a book which tells how the committee that draws up the Common Lectionary does its work. Some of their choices and pairings seem really strange! This week’s readings don’t fit in. This is still the Christmas season--low or not-- yet as far as I can tell, none of these readings have anything to do with the Christmas Story.

However, the readings are neither “low” nor “strange.” They are profound. In their own way they provide a larger context for the Christmas story which looks to the future. They provide a helpful break from the story and they speak to our overall theme: **“How Shall We Sing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land?”** (Psalm 137:4)

In April 1964, another Colorado clergy friend and I, both of us not long out of seminary, stumbled into Hattiesburg, Mississippi to participate in an ongoing, nationally church-sponsored voter registration action.

Every week a group of a dozen or more clergy from all over came to join the local African-American civil rights and church people to witness for the right of all people to register to vote without any barriers. We picketed the county jail in the morning and went out to talk to local black people in the afternoon to encourage them to go down to the courthouse in the face of great danger to register to vote. We hoped the presence of white clergy (“outside agitators” from “up Nawth”) could prevent overt violence.

While we were there, Mississippi passed an anti-picketing law. About 45 of us challenged it, were arrested, and spent a long weekend in the county jail. Released on bond, we white clergy came home to campaign for the Civil Rights Act which passed that year and to later to see our Supreme Court appeal provide a key precedent for the whole civil rights struggle.

On return, I titled my reports, “How do we sing the Lord’s Song in a strange land?” Mississippi was a very scary and strange land to me then, but that week was also the most life-changing spiritual retreat I have ever made. Today, the United Methodist Church, in fact, the whole United States, are very strange lands for me. I hope in this “break week,” these readings will help us explore how to sing in harmony with and to a strange and troubling world.



Monday, December 29, 2003
I Samuel 2:18-20, 26

Two Boys Face the Future

Two boys. One serving God already in the Temple. The other, also in the Temple, beginning to catch on that he had a special mission for his life from God.

Both were very young, perhaps just experiencing puberty. Samuel was in that growth spurt stage of late childhood or early adolescence so his mother had to make him new ephods (a liturgical apron for his uniform) as he outgrew them and bring them to him in the Temple where he worked on the staff as a priest in training.

Jesus was in that same stage of adolescence. He surprised his mother with his boldness when she chastised him for disappearing by staying behind to learn from and dialogue with the Elders of the Temple holding forth in informal classes in the outer courtyards. He was a sassy teen intent on doing what he wanted to do.

This is the only likely authentic story from Jesus' childhood and teen years that we have. In the Gospel of Thomas and other apocryphal documents, there are fantastic stories where Jesus was depicted as being fully aware as a boy of having supernatural powers which he used much like Jim Carrey did when he was made temporary God in the recent comedy film, "Bruce Almighty!" He would strike down playmates for slights they gave him and then resurrect them from the dead, or he'd shape sparrows out of clay and bring them to life.

But it isn't Samuel's devotion nor Jesus' magical powers that are lifted up in these two parallel stories. No, it was said of both that they "grew in wisdom, and in stature, and in favor with God and all people." Samuel is the prototype Luke used to tell the story of Jesus.

Both mothers, Hannah and Mary, sing similar songs about their sons. The former, "The Song of Hannah," is believed to be the model for the latter, "The Magnificat." In both, the sons are depicted as prophets, leaders, the source of power that will scatter the proud, bring down the powerful and lift up the lowly, and bring judgment on the rich and faithless. Samuel is the prophet who anoints both Saul and David, bridging the transition from judges to kings and placing the powers of the kings in the context of stewardship of God's Creation and its gifts.

Jesus not only becomes a powerful prophet in line with the Isaiahs, Micah, Hosea, and Amos, but he becomes the Suffering Servant who establishes "on Earth as it is in Heaven" the Realm of God which is here but still coming.

No wonder Marquette University's Daniel Maguire comments on the two mothers and their radical songs by saying, "with mothers like these, no wonder they turned out the way they did." They turned the world upside down as they grew in wisdom, stature and favor with God and humanity.



Tuesday, December 30, 2003
Psalm 148

Radical Inclusivity

On first glance, Psalm 148 seems to fit least of all into the Christmas season. It's a "Creation Hymn" *par excellence*! It could be called the short version of the more famous ode to nature, Psalm 104.

J. Clinton McCann, Jr. says, "While the songs of praise generally push toward universality, Psalm 148 takes **inclusivity** to the limit! . . . In other words, praising God is the vocation and goal of all creation." And it's not an admonition such as, "everything that breathes **should** be praising God," but rather, "it is a matter of everything that **is** praising God."

The first half of the Psalm shows the heavens praising God (heaven and earth are included in a unity); then the song has a bridge reminding us that the Lord established everything and fixed their bounds which cannot be passed. In the second half, praise comes from all the earth (universe?!) -- from creepy crawlers to trees on up to the rocks of the mountains themselves -- they **are** singing aloud their praise and thanksgiving. And all peoples of all kinds and stations in life are included in the great all-inclusive, ecological democracy of Creation with God as the Source.

It was this Psalm that inspired St. Francis of Assisi to write his famed "Canticle of the Sun" to Brother Sun and Sister Moon, etc., etc., where he clearly includes **all** of Creation as part of God's family. No outsiders here!

The Psalm makes it plain that each thing in Creation has its own niche and purpose, but all are knit together in **one inclusive**

community -- which is the model for all life including our human institutions, our economy and our life together on this puny and endangered planet. Our goal is "the Common Good." (Cf. The Earth Charter at www.earthcharterusa.org)

The other important thing to note is "[God] established them forever and ever; [the Creator] fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed." While the ecology of Earth is a process, the process includes **limits** and strictures that must be observed and obeyed.

We now have an economy motivated by greed (a form of the hubris of Adamah in the Garden) that demands continuous growth and expansion or it will collapse. One of my many slogan buttons says, "**Do you still believe in infinite growth from finite resources?**"

The whole rationale of Industrial Growth Capitalism is to keep pushing the limits. At some point in the near future the consequences will come crashing in on us. This is the great ethical problem of our time and lies behind all the other problems of racism, poverty, warfare, etc.

The remaining meditations this week deal with "growing in wisdom." The essence of wisdom begins in knowing how dependent and interdependent we are in the Web of Life and on all its gifts; and even more, to know the limits **and** the possibilities because when we know those, there can be unlimited growth in the intangible and spiritual.



Wednesday, December 31, 2003
Luke 2:41-52

On Becoming Wise Guys

We live in the a time of a great **knowledge explosion**, but what we need much more than that is a **wisdom implosion!**

We should know by now that **knowledge and wisdom are *not* the same thing.** Knowledge tells us how to make a hydrogen bomb, Wisdom deals with whether we should or not. We have an overwhelming excess of the former and a tremendous lack of the latter. The Egyptians and the Babylonians had separate gods for Wisdom and they honored Wisdom highly. We ridicule or imprison or even crucify people who seek to impart wisdom to us.

Last October I was on a river cruise ship sailing through the Three Gorges of the Yangtze (Chang Jiang) River in central China. After four days in the fantastically beautiful river canyon and a trip up the side canyon of the Lesser Gorges, we emerged to sail through the last remaining opening in the Three Gorges Dam. It is still under construction but the great river is now filling up behind the dam. For over 365 miles upstream, the river will initially rise 135 meters (over 400 feet) and will eventually submerge 175 meters of the canyon, one third of the depth of the gorges.

When we disembarked to see certain sites, our buses made their way through the now empty cities on the river being torn down that now look like pictures I've seen of postwar Berlin or Dresden. Over 1.2 million people have been moved out of the lower third of the gorge. Many have been moved to a better life, but many more have not. The most viable part of the river community has been destroyed and the people's tie to their ancestral land has been broken.

China set out to do a few good things for the Common Good with this largest structure on earth (not counting the Great Wall). This dam will provide irrigation water, which will make it unnecessary to build twelve or more coal-burning utility plants like the ones that now poison the air; they are making lots of money and jobs; and most importantly, they hope to control the worst of the downstream flooding on the great agricultural plain below. The folly of the Great Wall may be repeated in this dam.

Science and technology thrive on **knowledge**It's the correct role of science to "think the world to pieces," in order to understand how it works in all of those pieces. Technology uses that knowledge in practical ways in order to apply and magnify our energy. The result is both benefit when it succeeds and destruction when it doesn't. Or more likely, we can never do only one thing. Every achievement also brings ten unanticipated results and over half of them are likely to be negative or destructive.

Wisdom is about making choices. Ecology "thinks the world whole." Ecology seeks to understand how it all fits together and works as a system. Wisdom can learn from ecology. The whole earth is one single organism called **Gaia** in this holistic sense.

Both Samuel and Jesus already had a lot of knowledge. They both could navigate the intellectual complexities of the Temple at a young age. It is written, however, that they grew in Wisdom. Knowledge was assumed. It is from **Wisdom** that they gained their stature. They grew in seeing the whole picture and imparting that wisdom to others.



Thursday, January 1, 2004
Luke 2:52

Conventional or Reflective Wisdom

Wisdom is a matter of growth and development. We have to learn to be wise just as we have to learn the knowledge needed to subsist and thrive in this world. But where can we go to learn wisdom?

I don't know how to answer that since wisdom is not institutionalized in the way knowledge is institutionalized in education, research and development.

We can get wisdom from observing nature. Wisdom comes from our relationships with others. Wisdom comes from making mistakes and venturing into new quarters.

We take it for granted that Jesus grew in knowledge. He is shown having a Rabbi's grasp of the scriptures from which he often quoted, even on the cross. In terms of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, he knew the Scriptures and he knew the tradition. But he also grew in wisdom by his own human experience and the power of his reason, informed by the Holy Spirit, to discern what was going on and what the alternatives might be.

Jesus stands out in scripture as **not** being a man of his times. He treated everyone differently and humanely – especially the downtrodden, the poor, the sick, and the outcast. He was especially different in his relationships with women. In other words, he did not live by the Conventional Wisdom of his day.

Conventional Wisdom means the popular notions of the day, or as the Dictionary puts it, a generally held view, notion, or opinion.

It's what everyone supposes or believes to be generally true or the way things are supposed to be. Economist and philosopher John Kenneth Galbraith, who coined the words "conventional wisdom" says, "These are the days when men of all social disciplines and all political faiths seek the comfortable and the accepted; when the man of controversy is looked upon as a disturbing influence; when originality is taken to be a mark of instability; and when, in a minor modification of the scriptural parable, the bland lead the bland."

In contrast, the gift of Wisdom allows one to reflect on human experience and see things in a new, more comprehensive light. I normally don't expect flights of inspired prose from *The Interpreter's Dictionary* but the gift of Wisdom is beautifully described by S. H. Blank in closing the entry on "Wisdom":

"Meaningful as is the Law, powerful as is the prophetic element, wisdom yet adds a dimension. Wisdom is a deposit of reflection upon human experience, the trivial along with the ultimate, both superficial and profound. It is philosophy rooted in the soil of life: truth springs out of the earth. It is philosophy although it is not reduced to a system. It teaches rational living, which, at the same time, is good and godly living. It teaches that the life controlled by reason is the life beset by the fewest sorrows. And it teaches how when troubles come, as apparently at best they do, the wise can bear them. Righteousness and peace kiss each other."



Friday, January 2, 2004
Colossians 3:12-17

A Counter-Culture Wardrobe

In the Colossians passage Paul reminds us, as persons of faith, that wisdom includes some putting on of new clothes. I fear our current American “emperor,” like the one in the old story, has no clothes and doesn’t know it. That’s true of many emperor wannabees who have too much power and not enough wisdom.

The majority of people wander around confused because they follow Conventional Wisdom which has enough truth in it to get by, but has just as much error or obsolete matter to confuse and cause them to lose the way. On the other hand, people in power either come to power with an ideology or they develop one which is the antithesis to wisdom.

The dictionary defines *ideology* as a closely organized system of beliefs, values, and ideas forming the basis of a social, economic, or political philosophy or program. I’d add “religious” to that list. All “fundamentalisms” are ideologies. Highly developed ideologies become set in concrete and attempt to rule everyone and everything from the standpoint of having the only Truth.

We live in a time of warring ideologies and fundamentalisms of all kinds that are wreaking havoc on human life and the health of this planet.

Paul was clear that those who follow Christ do not follow doctrines of ideology, they

behave differently and see the world differently from all the swirling conventional and ideological “wisdoms.”

The “strange land” where we are trying to sing today is not the exotic place of exile as it was for the Israelites, or as it is today for the followers of Osama Bin Laden. Today’s strange land includes what is familiar to us as we are ruled by the ideology of the materialistic American Dream and absolute faith in the god-like hidden hand of the market. Everywhere the strange land beckons for us to follow its siren songs.

In light of this, Paul says we have to equip ourselves for going into this strange land and singing the new song that was sung by the prophets and sages down through the ages. This song was proclaimed in all its glory by the Christmas angels who sang to this unlikely sovereign born in a remote stable to usher in God’s realm. We have to put on new clothes, new behaviors and actions to live now in this new realm even though it’s not really here yet.

Paul says we should clothe ourselves with the opposite yard goods from what the conventional and ideologues put on. We are called to wear counter-culture duds – to be unlike the rest – not in trying to be more weird than anyone else – but by putting on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience; bearing each others burdens and forgiving one another just as God in Christ forgave us. These are the clothes of practical wisdom.



Saturday, January 3, 2004
Colossians 3:15-17

Embrace, not Kill, the Umpire!

In describing the clothes Christians must put on to survive and sing the Lord's song in a strange land, Paul says there is a foundational garment to put on. No, it's not a girdle and it won't slim you. But without it, you won't be able to grow in wisdom and stature. And it often won't win you favor with anybody.

"Above all," says Paul, "clothe yourselves with **love**, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." God intends that all of Creation be bound together in the perfect harmony of **love**." That's the foundation of wisdom, an "ecology of love."

No matter how many answers knowledge gives us, nor how much insight the gift of wisdom provides, there is a "bottom line" to wisdom that is embodied in the question, **"What would love have us do?"**

I believe all of our problems go back to the fact that while we have evolved in expanding and perfecting the gifts of our humanity from God such as our intellect, our technology, etc., we have been slow to evolve in our wisdom.

Teilhard de Chardin, the 1950s theologian and biologist, believed that we are evolving toward becoming the "ethical species," so that we could fulfill our niche of both caring for the world and enjoying it fully with God in celebration.

Austrian zoologist Konrad Lorenz said in 1965 that "Man appears to be the missing link between anthropoid apes and human

beings." Ecologist James Gustave Speth, Dean of Yale University's School of Forestry, states, "We are entering the endgame in our relationship with the natural world. Whatever slack nature previously cut us is gone."

All humankind is in the last race of its existence, a race for our lives. The next twenty years is, in the words of the title of a very good environmental book, now at "God's Last Offer." The race is to become the ethical species, fully human, in time to use our wisdom and live in favor with God and all Creation.

Paul says we can move into, affect, and sing our songs in this strange land if we "let the peace of Christ **rule** in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God." (Col. 3:15-17) The word "rule" here literally means "umpire" which in its rulings is always in favor of love as the secret to unity in the community.

Let us sing God's songs of love out of dedicated hearts as we turn from Christmas back to seeking to transform the strange land where we dwell. As Ecology Professor Cal DeWitt of Madison likes to quote, **"So live in this life that God will not count you a stranger in the next one."**



Sunday, January 4, 2004

What Brings Us Life?

May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

3

The Quiche Maya of the Guatemalan highlands will tell you that they are the people of corn. As the old men and women tell their Pre-Columbian creation story, recorded in the Mayan text, *The Popol Vuj*, they recount how their gods failed in making people of out of clay and wood until they successfully molded humankind from golden kernels of corn.

Corn still brings life to the Mayan people today. Throughout the rugged countryside of Guatemala, the mountains – no matter how steep – are covered with a patchwork of cornfields. In Guatemala, a country where 75 percent of the land belongs to only one percent of the population, farmers must often grow their crops in the smallest and poorest of fields.

For those of us who can walk into a superstore and select one of a thousand products shipped from across the world, it is difficult to fathom the lives of others who

still rely on a mountainside to yield their staples. Few of us can imagine being tied to something, as the Mayans are to their land, whose yield could mean life or death.

The Mayan people will tell you who they are, where they come from, and what makes them live and thrive. The certainty with which they speak challenges the listener to reflect on the source of his or her own life.

Who are we as Christian people? What gives us life and makes us prosper?

These are serious questions to ask, especially at Christmastime. I wonder if the bright lights and tinsel of the Christmas season haven't made us forget who we claim to be.

Is it Wal-Mart or Jesus Christ on whom we rely as our life-giving source? What is the meaning of prosperity? Is it defined by our culture or by our faith?

PRAYER: Dear God, in this busy season of commercialism, let us remember that our prosperity is rooted in you and not in material gifts. From you springs life, and when we live in you, your people live in righteousness. Help us remember the meaning of Christmas this day, O Lord. Amen.

Monday, January 5, 2004

Light and Darkness

For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Isaiah 60:2

As symbols, darkness and light express theology's most profound truths. Throughout the Christian year we use these terms to speak of conversion, redemption, and the struggles between good and evil. At Christmastime we use words like "light" to speak of Jesus Christ, the one who enters the darkness of our world.

We can, however, overemphasize the polarity between light and darkness. To say that light represents all that is holy and that dark symbolizes all that is sinister shortchanges both terms. Darkness, too, has a positive connotation, whether it is a person's race or the difference between day and night. Darkness, theologically speaking, can be a source of birth and blessing, a place in the shadows where God can meet us.

In these dim Wisconsin days, we celebrate Advent, a time of blessed darkness.

PRAYER: O God, help us to remember that gifts are made more joyous through anticipation. Encourage us to make this time holy by preparing our lives for your coming. We look forward to your glorious arrival. Amen.

Whether it is in the darkness of Mary's womb or in the earth below, great things are being readied. Advent invites us to find an obscure, sacred place where we can restore our souls and ready ourselves for the coming of the Lord.

In the weeks preceding Christmas, as our northern hemisphere moves farther from the sun, we have a chance to make sacred space in the darkness. This is our opportunity to ready ourselves for the arrival of great things. Only by purposely taking this time in the darkness will we come to understand the true meaning of the coming of the Light.

What are the ways that we can use this time to ready ourselves for Jesus' arrival?

What preparations do we want to make so that we can fully receive our Lord?

Tuesday, January 6, 2004

Bethlehem

And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, ~~are~~ ^{are} no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to ~~she~~ ^{she}pherd my people Israel. Matthew 2:6

Bethlehem is universally loved as the Christmas village. We fondly sing the carol “O Little Town of Bethlehem” and imagine Jesus cooing in a manger while cows stand by in the starlit night. To us, Bethlehem is the quaint site of Jesus’ birth.

To the gospel writer Matthew and our biblical tradition, however, Bethlehem is much more significant. It was not just a meek village on the southern outskirts of the city of Jerusalem, but a town rich in tradition. It wasn’t the accidental site of Mary’s laboring, but the wellspring of a royal line which included Jesus. **Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem signified his sovereignty as the Messiah.**

A quick study of a concordance reveals Bethlehem’s rich historical and theological heritage.

- 1- Bethlehem of Ruth: the village of courtesy (Ruth 2:1-23)
- 2- Bethlehem of David: the village of consecration (I Samuel 16:1-13)
- 3- Bethlehem of Three Mighty Men: the village of dedication (II Samuel 23:13-17)
- 4- Bethlehem of Micah: the village of hope (Micah 5:2)
- 5- Bethlehem of Jesus: the village of revelation (Luke 2:1-20)

These passages, abundant in story and context, make Bethlehem one of the holiest of holy cities. They show that Jesus’ entrance into this world, particularly in this city, was not a mishap or coincidence but another stroke of God’s handiwork.

Considering the sacred importance that Bethlehem has in our biblical tradition, what does it mean that Jesus hailed from this town? Can there be sanctity in a certain location? Looking at the modern-day civil strife in the Holy Lands, what is our role in helping to restore peace to that region?

PRAYER: Dear God, help us to better understand our history and tradition so that we may better understand who we are today. Let us not forget your labors in years gone by and may we remember our work of this day. Move us to restore the holiness of your lands and the sanctity of your people. Amen.

Wednesday, January 7, 2004

Seeking Jesus

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Who is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we have observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

Matthew 2:1

The great English poet, T.S. Eliot, in the same year as his conversion to the Anglican faith, wrote a narrative in verse titled "The Journey of the Magi." The poem's narrator, one of the Magi, is reflecting on his pilgrimage to the place of the holy birth. He remembers the harshness of the trip, the loss of the comforts of home, and the strange spiritual experiences.

The narrator concludes that even though his hard pilgrimage had ended, a new journey – one of even harsher spiritual change – was just beginning for him.

In the Bible this theme of journeying in the Bible is an important one. The Hebrews journeyed from captivity in Egypt into the Promised Land; Jonah journeyed on a boat to avoid Nineveh; and in today's reading, the Magi journey to find Jesus.

Unlike the birth narrative in the Gospel of Luke, which gives the great pastoral images of the shepherds and their flocks at Jesus'

birth, Matthew focuses on the lives of journeying men.

We are told that they came from a long way away—from the "East," perhaps Arabia, Persia, or Babylon. After paying the boy child homage and offering him gifts, they depart from Bethlehem, going a different way than they had come.

It is likely that the Magi traveled tens or hundreds of miles and overcame many obstacles to see baby Jesus. Seeing their perseverance and determination begs the questions, "how far would we go to find Jesus?" "What are we willing to overcome to find him?"

I think that when we do go to extremes to find Jesus, we will see that, like the Magi in T.S. Eliot's poem, finding Christ is the beginning of our search, not its ending. We, like him, are new people when we find Jesus – hard though that may be for us. And after our encounter with him we can never walk the old familiar roads again.

PRAYER: Help us, O God, to be a seeking people. Charge us to encounter and reencounter Christ in our lives, particularly in this Christmas season. Guide us on this journey and help us seek new ways of living. Amen.

Thursday, January 8, 2004

Camels

A multitude of camels shall cover you, the many camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord. Isaiah 60:6

Camels. What funny creatures. Big lips, shaggy fur, humped backs. These are the majestic creatures that we imagine the three kings riding upon as they travel to see the baby Jesus.

But when we take a close look at the gospel narratives of Jesus' birth, nowhere are camels mentioned. It simply states in Matthew that the men came from the East and wanted to pay homage to the boy child; no camels, no horses, no donkeys are mentioned.

We also assume that there were three men, although scripture doesn't specify a particular number. Perhaps our folk stories say there were three men because there were three gifts offered to the child: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And in fact, there were no kings. The words "wise men" or "astrologers" are the preferred translations from the Greek.

No camels, no three kings? What else do we think we know about the Christmas story but don't? What else do we assume that's in the

PRAYER: Holy God, continue to show us new insight. Tell us again the stories of old and push us to read, study, and relearn our tradition. Make every Christmas new and amazing to us through your wisdom and beautiful word. Amen.

gospel but is not? **It's time to return to the scriptures.**

The myth that surrounds us at Christmastime is strong. And with hundreds of years of tradition, it's hard to break with what's familiar. But, without much consideration or scriptural justification, seemingly, we put kings on camels off to see the baby Jesus.

Returning to the scriptures realigns our thinking and helps us from making such mistakes. If we study the Bible and look at Isaiah 60 (v. 6) we can see that the presence of camels was a sign of the Lord's arrival. And, if we examine Psalm 72 (v. 10) we see that kings of Tarnish and the isles, Sheba and Seba will fall down before the Messiah and bring him gifts. Camels and kings are part of the story, but enter through the Hebrew, not the Christian, scriptures.

Reading and studying the Bible keeps us honest about what we think we know and challenges us when we make assumptions. By returning to it again and again we find new insights and we are inspired to learn more.

Friday, January 9, 2004

God's Glory

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

Isaiah 60:1

Who has ever seen the glory of the Lord?

I've asked myself this question when the words "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord" have come out of my mouth singing the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." Though I've never seen the glory I don't think I should feel too bad about it. Biblically speaking, only a select few people have ever had the pleasure.

Most often God's glory is understood as God's holy light; it can also be rendered as God's presence (from the Hebrew word *kavhod*) Although God appears in our scriptures from the first chapters of Genesis, it is not until half-way through Exodus that the word *kavhods* is used – when God's glory is revealed on Mount Sinai.

In Exodus 19 and 24 God's presence comes to Israel in clouds and fire to pass along the Ten Commandments and give instructions for building the Ark of the Covenant. In another passage Moses' face reflects the

intensity of the dazzling light so that Israel cannot look upon him. Before God's glory the prophet Ezekiel fell prostrate.

If we understand God's glory as more than light and fire we are able to see God revealed in a different way. Rather than mere external manifestations, **God's glory is the revelation of God's actual presence.**

Such a divine appearance is the root meaning of the word *epiphany* And what makes reading Isaiah 60 appropriate to us now in this season is just that—to us Christians, Jesus' coming into the world is the manifestation of God.

Who has ever seen the glory of the Lord? Maybe none of us have. Or, perhaps all of us have—in Jesus Christ.

How do you see God's glory or presence in the life of Jesus? In what ways can we live a more holy life by living as Jesus did? Where do you see God's glory revealed today?

PRAYER: God of glory, help us to see your holy presence. Allow us to recognize you in the life of Jesus. May we learn from his example that your glory is not only around us, but can be in us as well. We give you thanks. Amen.

Saturday, January 10, 2004

God's Revelation

For surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation.

Ephesians 3:2

I didn't grow up in the church. I wasn't baptized until I was 18. I didn't regularly attend worship until I was 21.

Yet I started seminary when I was 23 and was pastoring a church by the time I was 29. I've experienced mysteries and I've had revelations.

Christ can have a profound, life-altering impact on people's lives. Although I wasn't a church-goer in my formative years, when I was exposed to the teachings of Jesus through Sunday worship, spiritual retreats and singing in a gospel choir, I was moved and changed—one could even say I was converted. Through these experiences the mystery of Jesus Christ's transforming love was revealed to me. My life was never the same again.

And so it is that I can relate to the Apostle Paul and his writings. Paul was on fire, tirelessly writing, traveling, and preaching in order to spread the word about Jesus -- despite the fact that in his early years he hadn't known a Christian life. However, by a fall to the ground and a mysterious, blinding encounter with Christ, God was revealed to him. His life was completely changed. He then dedicated his life to helping reveal this same mystery to others.

In this Christmas season we celebrate the mystery of God's revelation in our lives. How can we share this revelation with others, particularly those who don't know Christ? How can we welcome them into our churches and share our spiritual experiences?

PRAYER: Gracious God, be with us in this season, leading us to new ways to see and experience you. Help us remember, dear Lord, that Jesus was given to the whole world, not just to church-going Christians. Inspire us to spread the word of Christ, especially to those who are lost and lonely. Amen.