

An illustration of a town at night, enclosed in a purple arch. A bright yellow star is in the sky, with a beam of light shining down from it onto a central building. The town consists of various light blue buildings with dark roofs and windows, some with yellow lights. There are green bushes and trees interspersed among the buildings. The sky is dark purple with several small white stars.

DAILY DEVOTIONAL READINGS FOR

***Advent and Epiphany 2005-2006**

**Wisconsin Chapter
Methodist Federation for Social Action**

Image by ChristArt.com

These pages are available on the web site of the Wisconsin Chapter of the Methodist Federation for Social Action (www.wisconsinumc.org/mfsa). You are encouraged to download these materials for distribution locally to interested persons and groups in your community. If you want a *paper* copy, send your request with \$5 for printing and postage to the editors, Myron and Margaret Talcott, 6754 Raymond Rd #214, Madison, WI 53719.

Convictions that provide a Context for our Writing

by Myron Talcott

In our **struggles**, we may find *gifts*: gifts that inspire in us a *new vision*.
God helps us shape our vision into *Hope!* + *Love!* + *Peace with Justice!*

*“The great secret of life is how to survive struggle without succumbing to it,
how to bear struggle without being defeated by it,
how to come out of great struggle better than
when we found ourselves in the midst of it.”*

Joan D. Chittister, Scarred by **Struggle**, Transformed by **Hope**,
Erdman’s Publishing, p.19 (emphasis added)

Joan Chittister understands how deeply we are affected by changes around us and within us. In her book, she names **struggles** in her own life which brought profound changes in her self-understanding and in her roles in her community and society here and overseas.

She names also **gifts** for her growth which she discovered in the midst of those struggles gifts she might have missed without those struggles. Her faith and witness are inspiring!!

I read Sr. Chittister’s book while writing an overview of my experiences in ordained ministry. She names nine struggles and gifts which are part of her journey in life and faith. What she writes about struggles with fear matched one particular crisis I had as a pastor. Though I was not very aware of feelings deep inside me and seldom talked about them, I could now tell anyone nearby, **“If fear is a river, I’m in a flood!”**

Only after this experience did I see that in my **struggle with fear** I received the **gift of courage** to get through a whole series of circumstances over which I had little or no control. Chittister calls fear “the catalyst of courage” (p. 51) and she calls courage the **“seedbed of hope.”** (p. 48).

“Thank you God, for all your gifts, especially this one!”

Writers and Editors

Bob Adams is a United Methodist Elder and a retired pastor, retired, who, when such things are discussed, describes himself as an Evangelical Protestant Catholic, or maybe a Catholic Evangelical Protestant, who suspects that we shall be judged not by what we have believed ABOUT Jesus but by how well we have believed and practiced what HE believed and practiced. (Mathew 7:21-24). Kyrie eleison!

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Sue Burwell is Pastor of the Monona United Methodist Church. Sue enjoys reading novels, going to movies, attending concerts and singing in the Madison Philharmonic Chorus. She has always loved camping and this past year has upgraded to a used conversion van so that she no longer has to sleep on the ground. Now she can enjoy camping even more.

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David Werner is thankful to serve as Pastor of Calvary United Methodist Church in West Allis. Within the mystery of life, Dave and Barb involve themselves with five children, four grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. His e-mail includes this Chinese proverb: "If I keep a green bough in my heart, the singing bird will come."

Steve Zekoff is a United Methodist Pastor whose home is in Lake Mills and whose ministry is in Evanston, IL, with the General Council on Finance and Administration. Steve was the first editor for these Advent-Epiphany Meditations beginning in 2000. Each Advent Steve has provided the Meditations to members of the Sunday Adult Class at the Lake Mills U M Church.

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*As you read the Texts of Advent-Epiphany and the witness of our writers,
we hope and pray you will open your hearts to their experiences and to times
you have been immersed in struggles and found - or will find - gifts in them.*

Myron and Margaret, November 2005

Texts for November 27, 2005 to January 7, 2006

Week 1 – Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; I Corinthians 1:3-9;
Mark 13:24-37

Week 2– Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1, 2, 8-13; II Peter 3:8-15a;
Mark 1:1-8

Week 3 - Psalm 148; Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126;
I Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Week 4 – II Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Psalm 72; Luke 1:47-55;
Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

Week 5 – Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40

Week 6 – Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12 Psalm 72:1-7; Ephesians 3:1-12;

[Some Psalms in the these readings appear out of Lectionary sequence]

(No text on this page)

Isaiah 64:1-9

Jim Christensen

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.... We all fade like a leaf.....You have hidden your face from us.”

Come, come, come! How often do we identify with the cry of Isaiah? In our personal lives when we are ravaged by illness, divorce, age, failure? In our community lives where sometimes we feel we have no place? In our nation when we are plagued with a useless war? In our world in which the future so often looks bleak? Come, God! Come, come, come!

It is generally considered that this passage comes from a time when Israel was in exile. Accurate or not, it is clear the writer was experiencing an abandonment in which he was desperately calling for God’s presence, even intervention. Still, though he may have been hanging by quite a thin thread, he was hanging on.

In my prayers I generally try to avoid asking, at least keeping asking to a minimum. It seems somehow a perversion of prayer to be focusing on

asking. Yet, when my wife, Marion, was hovering between life and death, I fervently prayed that she would live. She did not. “O God, are you really there? Come, come, into my life.” Maybe I was hanging by quite a thin thread, but I was hanging on. And, ten plus years later, I am writing this meditation.

We approach Christmas. Bells are ringing. Carols endlessly fill the airwaves. Shops are laden with stuff trying to convince us that if we just buy enough of the right things, everything will be all right. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day will come and go. And everything will not be all right. Just to remember that may be helpful. Remembering that may even bring to us an awareness of what we are looking for and push us to do something.

Like Isaiah, we need to remember that God is still here. The writer may not have seen the end of the exile. But, for him, the reality of God’s presence and openness to God’s future prevailed. “Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are the work of your hand.”

God, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves today, keep reminding us that you are still here. Help us to be thankful for what has been and what still is. Help us to see what needs changing and to know what we can change. Bring us to awareness that Christmas is, above all, a renewal of your presence in our world and in our lives. Amen.

Isaiah 64:1-9

For some of us, adjustment to military life is a struggle. During the three years I served as an officer on active duty in the U.S. Navy my personal struggle was nothing compared to the nation's struggle with the Viet Nam War. In general, military discipline was not difficult for me. In fact, the Navy sent me to Naval Justice School to become the ship's legal officer. (This was a gift from God – being paid to learn about the law with my father and both grandfathers as attorneys. In addition the school meant that I spent six weeks of autumn in Newport, Rhode Island, with beautiful weather and fall foliage.)

Being the ship's legal officer and the X Division Officer (supervising the Ship's Office) meant that I was frequently in direct contact with the Executive Officer. The XO had been passed over for promotion and was, therefore, being forced out of the Navy. His bitterness often meant that he was angry. As the officer he supervised most directly, my sins and transgressions (Isaiah 64:5) were most apparent to him. However, his close scrutiny of my work meant that my peers less often incurred his wrath. Sure, I did make mistakes. Sometimes I was actually right, but his rank and position meant that I did things his way. This struggle lasted for over a year, but I grew and was strengthened by the adversity.

Power is a quality we all associate with God. Power is also closely connected to the military. A powerful military can protect a people and a nation and its allies. It can also cause mischief in the world. Within the military power comes from rank AND also from personal

George Affeldt

qualities. The most effective officers I worked subordinate to were those whose intelligence or experience or inspiration solved problems quickly and often with insight from junior officers.

God wields power in mysterious ways that we don't fully understand. Creator God initiates actions. Sustainer God upholds people. Provider God serves us from great abundance. God's presence and "personal qualities" inspire us. We must remember that we are called to be God's hands ministering to our world, peopled with the children of God.

One lesson I learned from my X Division assignment is that time passes and heals wounds. Whatever the daily trials were almost forty years ago, they mean little today. A critical factor in my survival was that I was sustained by my friends, the group of junior officers who were my peers. Many of them expressed appreciation for my work and for my forbearance. If the XO was focusing on me, they could accomplish their work in peace. I learned that personal sacrifice benefits many others. The supporting presence of the Holy Spirit carried me through this struggle.

Today I carry with me gifts from this early adult experience. I try to surround myself with friends and allies. I know that sometimes criticism is not justified and should be allowed to roll away just like water off a duck's back. At other times I learn from the comments and perceptions of others, and altering my activities may benefit all concerned.

Above all, trust in God, the God of Awesome Deeds.

Tuesday, November 29, 2005

Psalm 80:2b

“Stir up your might and come to save us!” Sue Burwell

One day I was on a side street, on my way to the Post Office. I came to one particular intersection and slowed down, because many times those coming from the street on my right don't take the stop sign on their corner very seriously. Sure enough, a car zoomed around the corner right in front of me. Had I not slowed up, even though I had the right of way, they would have crashed right into my passenger door. The license plate on this car that was now just ahead of my front bumper said: TRSTGD. Immediately I was muttering to the person in that car, telling them that it was all well and good to trust God, but there's a fair portion of this life we need to take responsibility for ourselves--like using our brains and obeying stop signs. We want to be rescued, saved, spared, and we think God should do it, sometimes taking ourselves out of the equation.

As we read Psalm 80, we find that some manner of crisis has taken place. James Mays says: “Whatever the original historical setting, the psalm in its continued use belongs to the repertoire of the afflicted people of God on their way through the troubles of history.” There is some kind of problem they can't seem to solve, and they are praying earnestly to God, to “stir up your might and come to save us!” That's all well and good, unless we are praying for God to do what we can do for ourselves. In fact, someone has proposed that God won't do what we can do for ourselves. William Sloane Coffin puts it this way: “*One shouldn't be too upset about the way the ball bounces if one has dropped it oneself.*”

We are in such a messed up world, and too many times I hear people say that we just need God to get us out of this situation, and to make things

right. Yet, my take on all this is that God has given us amazing capabilities, we just haven't used them up to their full potential. We have too often had our minds centered on just what we want or what we need, and in the process have ruined our environment, have lost sight of justice, and have left behind any hopes for a peaceful world. We've gotten ourselves into this pickle, and I believe God has given us the resources to get ourselves out of it, if we will be used them creatively.

“There is no reason to assume, for example, that God will end nuclear weaponry. If the world ends in a nuclear blast, it will not be this God who did it. We created nuclear weapons; we can end them ourselves. As W. H. Auden put it: ‘May it not be that, just as we have to have faith in God, God has to have faith in us and, considering the history of the human race so far, may it not be that faith is even more difficult for God than it is for us?’” *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope* by Joan Chittister, p. 43.

I am inspired by Habitat for Humanity's process of doubling the number of houses that are built. Initially, volunteers and outside sources provide the cash to build a house. Then when a family moves into their new house, and begins to make payments on that house, that money is used by Habitat to start another new house. What a creative way of financing the building of homes. And, yes, those persons who have built that house give thanks to God on the day that it is completed, but they haven't simply stood around wringing their hands, in the midst of a crumbling neighborhood, asking that God do something here. They've picked up a hammer, and with God's help, built a house.

Yes, Advent is a time to look forward to God breaking into our world, and also a time to realize that the way God may help mend/save our world, is by using us!

Psalm 80:17

Sue Burwell

“But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself.”

I grew up, the child of two loving parents who both worked in our community’s school system. My mother taught kindergarten and my father taught and was the junior high principal for many years. Each of them had teaching careers of thirty five to forty years, so it’s an understatement to say that they loved children, although my dad probably had his doubts some days. As principal he had to deal with some difficult junior high discipline problems. I’ve often thought that these two parents should have had a houseful of six or eight children, but instead they had only me. They were married for a number of years before I ever came along, so by that time, they assumed they might be childless forever. I’ve heard my arrival was a real treat not only for them, but for the neighbors, my aunts and uncles, and even Dad’s classroom of sixth graders who wrote notes and gave gifts. I still have the faded pink Christmas ornament one of them decorated, with a dim outline of my name in glitter on its surface, and each year it finds a place of honor on my Christmas tree.

I came into this world, a very special child, in my parent’s eyes, and amazingly through most of my years with them, I continued to hold that status. But, it was something I was never very comfortable with. Yes, I was an only child, but deep down, I just wanted to be like everybody else. It was one of those strange situations where I wished my parent’s love and attention could just be lavished on someone else for awhile. Shortly after I had learned to talk, I guess I informed my parents that I wanted a baby sister, who was a child of color. Growing up in the early 1950’s, in rural northern Indiana, I’m not even sure where I had had contact with persons of color, but I had

already sensed my parents enormous capacity for loving children. Regardless of my unique request, I remained an only child.

I’m intrigued by the request of the psalmist: *“But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself.”* The congregation is apparently identifying themselves as God’s special people, those created by God’s right hand. Being at the “right hand” is a special place to be. Think about the preference and special place, afforded to right handed people. When children are beginning to pick up crayons or pencils or scissors, there is always the question whether they are right or left-handed, and the silent hope that they will be like the majority. Yet if someone is the special child, or the child of privilege, or the person in the majority, that probably means somebody else ISN’T special, or has no privilege, or is in the minority.

In Anne Lamott’s book, *Plan B Further Thoughts on Faith*, she speaks of the struggle to truly put into practice the idea of an inclusive faith. “It was clear that Veronica was speaking directly to me. She said that Christians have a very bad reputation in the world, and we have earned it, with our hate and self-righteousness. We speak in reverent terms of grace, justice, equality, mercy, and then we despise people who are also created in God’s image, who are Her children, too. Veronica said that if the president had been the only person on earth, Jesus would still have loved him so much that he would have come down and died for him. This drives me crazy, that God seems to have no taste, and no standards. Yet on most days, this is what gives some of us hope.” (p. 221-222)

In hope, we are awaiting the birth of Jesus Christ, who truly was the world’s special child. He continues to be the one who reminds us that right handed, left handed, white or brown skinned, male or female, gay or straight, we are all infinitely loved by God.

“Restore us, O God. Let your face shine that we may be saved.” Ps. 80:3: **Sue Burwell**

I can still remember the ring of people that encircled the floor of General Conference in Pittsburgh in 2004. This was a group of people that was taking a stand for the full inclusion of all people in the life of our church. As they stood around us, some of the delegates joined in the circle, and others of us stood at our seats. Our delegation was only about six rows from the front of the auditorium, and as I stood, I just thought to myself, I am going to just keep standing right here, my feet firmly planted right in this place. I am standing for all those people who are not here today and who are not even sure that this church is the place they want to be or stay.

There were many emotions in that room, and tears were shed. But the overriding memory I have of that experience was a kind of luminous one. There was something shining, glimmering, in that place. People were standing tall, and in some way, my backbone was strengthened. “Restore us, O God. Let your face shine that we may be saved.” In the strangest way, there was something of God’s face shining, even in the midst of the pain and the struggle.

I believe we can be revived, so that we have new commitment and energy for the struggle. I remember being on a mule ride headed to the bottom of the Grand Canyon a few years ago, having just ridden through the area of the trail that is called The Furnace. The sun was beating down, and it was probably close to one hundred degrees and would get up to one hundred six degrees at the very bottom. Even though I had been drinking water, it wasn’t enough. My electrolytes got all out of kilter, and soon

I was feeling worse and worse, seated on top of that mule. I had the good sense to remember the guide’s instruction to tell him if we weren’t feeling right. I spoke up, and he told me to lay my head down on my mule’s mane. So, I literally hugged that mule, but couldn’t get my head low enough to make a difference.

The guide then helped me slide off the mule and proceeded to pour water over my head, and fill my canteen with a Gatorade mixture. I started to drink it slowly, and gradually I could see clearly and could think clearly, and had the feeling that maybe I would just survive a few more hours! At the bottom of the Canyon, I sat myself fully clothed in Bright Angel Creek for awhile, followed by a good meal and an even better night’s sleep. By morning, I was ready to go again. Although my posterior was quite sore from the previous day’s ride, I was sitting pretty tall in the saddle just because I was breathing and walking and had climbed back onto that mule again! From a puddle of nothing much the day before, my body and spirit were now revived.

These words are attributed to St. Columba: “Alone with none but Thee, my God, I journey on my way; What need I fear if thou art near, O King of night and day? More safe I am within my hand, than if a host did round me stand.”

God has the power to enter our lives in the places that may seem most dark and dismal. For me, that’s exactly the hope of this season.

“Revive us, revive us; restore to Thy grace,
And then we shall live in the light of Thy face.”
A.J. Gordon

I Corinthians 1: 3 – 9

Steve Zekoff

God's Grace Makes Possible....

Serving on the staff of the last three General Conferences has provided me an intimate view of what goes on both publicly and behind-the-scenes. This quadrennial gathering of leaders elected and sent by their annual conferences is United Methodism at its best, and worst, for a concentrated two weeks of worship, committee work, legislating and fellowship. Those serving in various servant roles during the Conference have no vote or an official, public opinion on anything as we go about our tasks on behalf of all present. Personal commitments and feelings about many of the issues surface, of course, but are kept private.

Serving in that context, GC 2004 was a particularly challenging personal experience. I left Pittsburgh with several painful memories that could have outweighed the many affirmative recollections from the two weeks of conferencing if I would let the negative hold the positive hostage. By God's grace, I didn't.

Following one of the particularly hurtful series of exchanges during plenary, when many delegates and observers began questioning what the denomination we loved was becoming, I found myself sitting with a friend who was also a life-long Methodist. The two of us shared our pain and tears about how the Church that had taught us both, one in the north and one in the south, that we

were to welcome all God's children into the Body of Christ.

Now some vocal United Methodists were contending that only those who had a particular understanding about scriptural teachings could be full participants in the life and fellowship of the Church. And some of those same voices were starting to say around the edges 'since we can't agree on these issues, its time for us to set in place a plan to separate.' Neither my friend nor I were of the mind to repeat Methodist history reminiscent of the pre-Civil War division into the northern and southern churches.

The Spirit was present for the two of us that day. I realized that after some words that came across hateful to me had broken the depths of my spiritual heart, other words were immediately offering healing. My friend received back from me the assurance that there were many of us across the church that remained committed to teaching and practicing a faith that was about inclusion rather than exclusion. The Word prevailed against words that were alien to my experience of the Church over the years.

"God will also strengthen you to the end." In the midst of feeling abandoned by my church, God's reassurance became present for me through another sojourner on the way. God's grace made it possible to continue on for another day.

For meditation: Identify when the Spirit was present for you through another person in a time of despair. Name an occasion when the Spirit worked through you for someone else. Thank God for those experiences of grace.

Mark 13:24-37

Steve Zekoff

“Does Anyone Really Know What Time It Is?”

There is a temptation when the going gets rough to forget *who* and *whose* we are.

But as we are reminded in Mark's gospel, "*Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.*" And we seldom know what form Jesus' presence among us will take.

I was attempting to discern for over a year just where I was being called to serve next. It had been determined early in 2004 that the agency where I work would leave the Chicago area after nearly a century's presence. For personal reasons, I chose not to move further from my family with the agency after the Evanston office would be completely closed. My decision put me in a situation of having a time-certain maximum time I could serve in the appointment, with no idea what my next position would be.

Many significant professional and relationships have been developed and nurtured me in over 13 years in the appointment. A valued colleague based in Washington, DC sent me an email in late July to let me know that he had resigned his position and would be moving soon to San Francisco. The move was the result of a family member

receiving a promotion, but that he had no idea what employment he could obtain in California. That unknown gave him some anxiety.

I later shared with some co-workers that I found myself, in the midst of my personal future remaining uncertain, responding to him. I assured him that with his skills and experience I had no doubt that he would find himself again serving in an appropriate position. To which one of my listeners wryly observed "Time to wake up and smell the computer!"

Christ came in an unexpected way at an unanticipated hour in those exchanges. Even though I didn't anticipate that the time had come for me to experience God's assurance, the Spirit worked through those trusted colleagues to bring it.

I was reminded that the Spirit still worked in mysterious ways, and not on human time. I was reminded that I was God's child and had been given gifts and talents that still could be used to serve the Body of Christ. And I was reminded that I needed to let the community be with me during the bad times as well as the good times.

Suggestion for meditation: Is there a time you unexpectedly experienced Christ's presence. What did it teach you about being prepared to receive Jesus at any time?

Isaiah 40:1-11

Robert Adams

*“A voice commands, ‘Cry out!’ and I answer, ‘What will I say?’ All flesh is grass and its beauty is like the wildflowers: the grass withers and the flower wilts when the breath of YHWH blows on them. How the people are like grass! Grass withers and flowers wilt, but the promise of our God will stand forever. (Isaiah 40:6-8)**

I often find myself participating in “A Service of Death and Resurrection,” or its contemporary equivalent, for people I have known well. It reminds me each time of that which is never far from my mind: our mortality.

Like the grass of the field and the flowers of the garden, we are planted, we sprout, we are nurtured into full growth, we mature, we bear fruit, wither, and eventually we die. No one is exempt from the full course of this journey, although, for some, it may be cut short by disease or violence.

So it is that generations come and generations go, but in all truth: “the word of our God will stand forever!”

Prayer: Eternal One, you have given me the gift of another day. Grant that I may so use it that at its ending, I may have more cause for thanksgiving and less need for confession. I pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Biblical quotations from **The Inclusive Hebrew Scriptures, Altamira Press, Walnut Creek, CA 94596 and **The Inclusive New Testament**, copyright 1996 by Priests for Equality, W. Hyattsville, MD 287-200243.*

Before there were homo sapiens at all, there was God. If in time our species should die out, as many species have done, often at our hands, God is, was, and ever shall be.

The challenge of this brief life is to discover what “the Word of our God” calls us to be and to do. Our struggle is to fulfill that understanding: to “walk the talk.”

We are called to bear “*the fruit of the Spirit...love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*” (Paul to the Galatians, 5:22-23a*) Micah said, “*God has already more abundantly clear what ‘good’ is, and what YHWH needs from you: simply do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with YHWH*”. (Micah 6:8*)

And Jesus? This is what he said: “*It isn’t those who cry out, ‘My Savior! My Savior’ who will enter the kingdom of heaven; rather it is those who do the will of Abba God in heaven.*” (Matthew 7:21*)

Isaiah 40:1-11

Jim Christensen

One of my friends sometimes says to me, "Jim, you are so pessimistic." I don't like to hear that. I would rather be known as optimistic. So I respond, "Not pessimistic, just realistic."

I look at the direction my beloved country is going. A war that has no justification. A negative trade balance that is constantly increasing. A national debt that shows little hope of abating. Global warning too often ignored.

An article in Harper's Magazine, August, 2005, points out that far from being a much claimed Christian nation, the United States lives in a totally opposite manner from the Christian way. *Our motto is Benjamin Franklin's "God helps those who help themselves" rather than the Biblical command to love and care for our neighbor.* The article provides examples and statistics elaborating on the theme.

With all this, I claim to be a realist. If it also makes me a pessimist, so be it.

But there is more. Like the author of our text today, I am an optimist, a long-term optimist.

God, in this Advent/Christmas season, may we live in the comfort of your presence and your promises. Amen.

Isaiah is speaking to a people in distress, a people who have gravely erred, a people with little hope. Jerusalem has "served her term."

Yet, resounding are the familiar words, *"Every valley shall be lifted up...The glory of the LORD shall be revealed...He will feed his flock like a shepherd."* *"Comfort, O comfort my people."*

Like other prophets of that era, Isaiah had warned his people of the disaster that would follow from the way they were living. At the same time, his basic trust in God never wavered. *"In quietness and in trust shall be your strength."* (Isaiah 30:15b) Actually, his trust continued and grew in his community so that one of his followers echoes that trust in our text for today. His words came to life again in a much later prophet, John, announcing the coming of Jesus. (Luke 3:4-6)

And the words never end. They live today. As we celebrate the coming of the One who fulfills these words, let us hear anew, *"Comfort, O comfort my people."*

Psalm 85:1,2,8-13

Andy Oren

I turned fifty yesterday! What a long and strange journey it has been. Like many, I came back to the church in my late twenties after a divorce. I was working in a manufacturing plant in Milwaukee and between child support payments, trying to hold on to my house and taking care of aging parents, I was really struggling. One night a neighbor who I hardly knew came to my door and invited me to come to a Bible study they were hosting in their home. I surprised myself by agreeing to go.

That began a faith journey that continues to this day. I always believed in something but didn't want anyone to tell me what it was. When my life went to pieces I found I had nothing to really turn to. So I began to tentatively explore the teachings of Jesus. I was taking baby steps but I was moving in the right direction.

But I was still troubled. I worked with a fellow who didn't believe in God at all yet everything he touched seemed to turn to gold. He had a nice house in the suburbs and all the toys. I was struggling to keep my head above water. I thought, "Come on God! I'm trying...when does it get better?"

Well, it got better. The same neighbors who had invited me to the Bible study introduced me to Julie and we've now been married sixteen years. More importantly, I realized that all I had been going through was preparing me for what was yet to come.

After twenty-six years I quit my job and went to work at my home church as a lay minister. Four years later I became a Licensed Local Pastor and have been blessed to serve Faith United Methodist Church in Milwaukee for two years.

A voice cries out, "*In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*" (Isaiah 40:3) I certainly spent time in that wilderness and that has allowed me to meet people where they are and share honestly from my own life.

In a sense, I have become a highway in the desert, an avenue through which people can begin to move ahead, towards God, just as my neighbors had been for me so many years before.

I wonder sometimes why it took me so long to turn to Jesus. I guess I had to learn that true faith does not come easy and it is a struggle. And it will always be struggle because we are called to live in a world that fights us every step of the way. Everything from temptation to apathy pulls at our commitment to follow Jesus.

That's why it is so important to take steps to renew your faith as often as you can. "*Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion...*" (Isaiah 40:9). For me one of the high mountains is the Lay Ministry Academy offered by our Wisconsin Conference. I went as a participant in 1996 and have continued to go back as a facilitator ever since. Every time I go it is a mountaintop experience because you encounter people who are honestly seeking a way to do ministry in their lives...not in the church but in the schools, the boardrooms and with that neighbor living next door.

Some years ago I was walking through the machine shop at the manufacturing plant I had worked at. Marilyn, a machine operator, motioned me over and above the din of her NC machine said, "Are you really religious?" I laughed and said, "Why, does it show?" She then told me she had been diagnosed with cancer and asked if I would pray with her which we did right then and there. Moments like these are difficult to explain other than to say they are grace-filled but be assured they will come if you allow Jesus into your heart.

So there is a danger in taking your faith seriously. It can change your life. But the rewards are oh so very great. "*Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.*" (Psalm 85:10).

Psalm 85: 8-9

Myron Talcott

“The War Comes Home to Me”

Note: Telling the truth can be painful. The truth is I wrote this page in July of 2004, long after the war in Iraq began, even longer after was first talked about by the Administration. I don't know why I didn't question this war much sooner and oppose it more vigorously more often.

Telling the truth is painful but it can also be helpful in two ways. First, when we find courage to tell the truth, we are become more free, whole, and responsible. Second, remembering our pain can help us be gentle instead of judgmental when we invite/encourage/challenge other people to tell us how they changed their values, views and actions concerning our government's policies.

I awaken in the darkness - long before dawn's early light - knowing great evil has been done by the leaders of the United States government and leaders of a few other nations (very few.)
Knowing also WE have done great evil - we, the people who gave our permission.

No, we did not give our permission, but we gave our consent and ridiculed any who objected. No, we did not give our consent, but we did not stop them. Perhaps we could not have stopped them - but we - I - could have WANTED to stop them more loudly/ deeply/ passionately/ consistently.

But even as I listened and read and thought against the war, part of me - I hope a small part only -*wanted* to believe they might be correct, wanted to trust they might have sufficient reasons, *wanted* to trust that out of great loss of life and property and money, some good might come.

Why did I give them the benefit of the doubt?
Why did I ignore even for a moment what I know from my life experience?

WAR is a power that poisons one's heart, a drug-of choice that deadens one's conscience
a god-of-sickness that contaminates one's mind,
a god-of-death that destroys one's soul.

Even at this distance - through all the filters the authorities - and I - have created to obscure the truth - to deny the facts - to hide the motives - to trivialize the cruelty - to silence the opposition I hear the cries of the children of Iraq - and their mothers and fathers, uncles, aunts, cousins. I see the fear and suffering of the soldiers of the U S (& “the coalition”) - persons young and not so young now dead - injured - wounded in body, mind, and spirit and the pain of their wives /husbands/children/parents/friends/neighbors.

I tremble For the GENERATIONS of our people who will live with the consequences of the use - misuse - abuse of our power - military, political, economic, political, for a war which was not necessary, which had no foundation in fact or reason.

Determined to remove from power a man we deemed mad, we, ourselves, have gone mad.

One sign of our madness is the President's new rationalization - “America is safer.” Gone are all the other high-sounding motives and goals.

How selfish can we be?

When Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, it was not into safety.

I want to YELL - but no sound arises

I want to CRY - but no tears flow

I want to vomit - nothing comes.

“Rachel - weeping for her children who are no more. And no one can console her.”

Jeremiah 31:15 (Matthew 2:18-19)

Where will we turn for our consolation?

Thursday, December 8, 2005

Robert Adams

“...in accordance with God’s promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, **where righteousness is at home.**” 2 Peter 3:13, NRSV, (emphasis added.)

Righteousness understood as “justice, peace, compassion, right relationships with neighbor and with God” definitely does NOT seem to be at home in today’s world.

Read the morning paper. Although I am writing this four months before you read it, I am safe in saying it will report all manner of unrighteous behavior in legislatures, in corporate governance, in political campaigns, in the violence of our wars and on the streets of our big cities, in our entertainments, in the cheapening of culture and language, and in the church with its pandering to success. I could go on with all this confessing of other people’s sins!

Yet, to such a world, to such a people, to such a society, came this Jesus, who made himself at home among them. Righteousness incarnate in this young rabbi was at home with the people who were suffering the violence and injustice and poverty and sickness and oppression of that time and place.

“The light shined in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”

(John 1:5)

It shines still, incarnate among those in whom and through whom the living Christ of our time dwells, imperfectly, intermittently, flickeringly, but “the darkness has not overcome it.” In countless lives, only a handful of them

“celebrities,” most known only to the people they encounter each day, righteousness is at home.

There are peacemakers, reconcilers, bridge-builders. There are those who work for justice on behalf of those who suffer injustice. There are those whose compassion is at work every day in hospitals and nursing homes, in food pantries and homeless shelters, in prisons and jails, in quiet pastoral care, in standing by those who grieve great personal loss. There are those gifted and courageous people who stand up and speak the truth to power and bring light where darkness is but ought not to be.

Our times are not more unrighteous than Jesus times. The times in which we live and move and have our being are a great struggle for us as Jesus’ people. Really **being** Jesus’ people is the great challenge for us as it has always been.

In this struggle and of the challenge of our times, I choose to put my trust in the One Whose unconditional love will not let me go, no matter how much I stumble and waver.

Prayer: *O God within us, God among us, God all around us, God beyond all definition and dogma and doctrine, most Holy One! Help us to be still awhile until we find our center in You again.*

Help us to walk in your Light, so that we may serve You and Your people thankfully, joyfully, and faithfully in anticipation of that Day when righteousness shall indeed be at home in this world. In the Spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Mark 1:2-8

Dave Steffenson

“Messengers”

I've had a mixed experience with messengers throughout my life. Some brought good news: you are now husband and wife, it's a healthy boy, we have a lovely baby daughter for you to adopt, you've won a major scholarship, you've been selected for an important award, your lawyer is here (after three days in a Mississippi jail for civil rights activities), you passed your comprehensive exams (in seminary), we have a nice appointment for you, your grand-daughter's bone marrow is a good match to give for her older sister's transplant which saved her life.

Other messengers brought bad news: Mama has died (from my father when I was 12), you're fired (three times, seldom put that directly), your grant request has been denied, you have to move, I want a divorce, (X) has been raped by an older man, I'm living in someone's garden shed and am broke, I'm in jail, GWB has won his second term, we have invaded Iraq, all of the planet's eco-systems are under great stress and at least a third are entering collapse mode, you're preaching Communism, socialism or whatever!

John the Baptist was the Messenger who came out of the wilderness announcing the arrival of the Kingdom* of God in his cousin Jesus of Nazareth. For some that was bad news, for others that was puzzling news, for still others it was threatening news, and for many it was stunning good news in the midst of their despair!

John was no quiet secluded hermit creeping out of the wilderness. In his imaginative

biblical paraphrase, **The Message**, Eugene Peterson describes John as “Thunder in the desert!” (I've aspired to be “thunder in the pulpit,” but I seldom pulled it off.) John came preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. John was what we call “media savvy” with his rough animal skin garb, wild diet, and primitive ways that only made him a more authentic prophet in their eyes. He baptized a huge following into his movement.

But John, as messenger, was not recruiting them to follow him though many did. Peterson paraphrases the Baptist as saying, “*The real action comes next: the star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out.*”

The various messengers and many messages I've met in my 68 years have led me many ways. Some were fulfilling, some were dead ends, others were frustrating or exciting, and many were confusing, scary at times, often diverting me down many byways. While in high school, at the same time I was being converted to a liberal theology, I also was being lured by God into signing on to the kingdom movement of Jesus. Sometimes I hear John's thunder calling faintly in the distance, and at other times it is close and deafening.

But as we start to relive the story of that Advent journey once again, it continues to change me from the inside out, and keeps me going in hope even when things seem most hopeless

(* “Kingdom” denotes an elitist, hierarchical, controlling, arrangement of power and privilege; “Kindom,” without the “g”, refers to Jesus' image of the family-like community of God which is inclusive, equal, loving, just and compassionate to come “on earth as it is in heaven.”)

Mark 1:2-8

David Steffenson

Cousins

I have eleven first cousins on my Dad's side and none on my Mom's side. "The Steffenson Cousins" aren't close-knit, but when any of us get together we pick up right where we left off and we always have a good time. We have an intimate bond that endures in spite of our many differences and pathways through life. My cousins mean a lot to me. I'm grateful we all drift around and get together here and there as we pursue our various lives. (I'm also fortunate that they are spread around the country so I have different places to visit with a free room!)

John the Baptist came announcing the arrival of someone who is to be the life-giving and life-changing bearer of divine judgment and fulfillment of God's covenant, i.e. The Messiah. He also was announcing the public debut of the ministry of his cousin Jesus with whom he had played as a kid and whose families were intertwined probably something like mine. We don't know how many other cousins either one of them had, but this particular cousin-relationship was special from the start.

John's mother Elizabeth and Jesus' mother Mary became pregnant at about the same time, both under miraculous circumstances. As the story goes in Luke 1, Mary went to stay with her cousin Elizabeth, and when Mary came into the house, both children leapt in their mother's wombs in recognition of each other's presence. While the scriptures tell us nothing about the relationship of the two boys from then until Jesus came to John at the Jordan River, it's most likely they got together often while growing up. Both were children of destiny.

After the two women share in this powerful moment, the story says Mary sang a song we call "The Magnificat," a rewrite of a prayer of Hannah in the Hebrew Bible. She applies Hannah's words to Jesus in a prophecy regarding that destiny. *Mary foresees Jesus scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful from their kingly thrones, lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry, sending the rich away hungry, and establishing the kingdom of mercy to fulfill Abraham's covenant with God.*

As Marquette University ethicist Dan Maguire says, "**With a mother like Mary, no wonder Jesus turned out the way he did!**" My cousins and I are nowhere even close to the stature of John and Jesus, but we've all made positive contributions through our families, our vocations, and our leadership where we are. Some of us even participated in movements that dethroned Presidents and overthrew unjust systems.

We could say that these two cousins grew up to not only transform Israel but to change the whole world and transform all of history. For Jesus to come to fruition John was necessary to prepare the way. Both changed and saved lives. The ministry of these cousins continues to save and transform lives even to this very day.

Without being maudlin, we might say that all Christians who have enlisted (by baptism) in this Jesus Movement to establish God's Kingdom here in our midst are also cousins of John and Jesus. We are all family!

Psalm 148

George Affeldt

This psalm invites all creation to praise God. Sometimes it is difficult for us to praise God in the midst of struggle. We may find it difficult to praise God when we are fighting for survival in whatever circumstances confront us.

Verse 8 refers to the stormy winds. During my three years of active service with the U.S. Navy I experienced several storms. The power of God easily comes to mind.

As I remember one particular sailing, we were headed south from Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island, to Bermuda with about one hundred U.S. Naval Reservists on board to augment our normal ten dozen sailors and officers. The seas were rough and the winds were strong. Many of the Reservists had not been to sea in many years. Seasickness was epidemic. It was even a struggle for some in the active crew to keep their meals down.

What I most remember is a six-hour (extended two hours beyond normal) watch beginning at midnight. With below decks full of retching sounds and putrid smells, easily the best place on the ship to be was the bridge where the watch kept the vessel moving through the high and rolling seas.

I had never experienced seasickness and so had been ordered to stand that long watch, while as many as possible tried to sleep and recover. I remember feeling blessed to be healthy, glad to be of service, and overjoyed to be in fresh air, especially as the sun came up in the east.

That experience of the stormy night remains with me for several reasons. Serving by standing watch when many others were unable to do so was gratifying. The gift of good health from God is a bounty that most of us experience or remember gratefully. Since most of the

watch group was as sprightly as I was, there was a special camaraderie among that night's watchstanders. We loved our work.

God calls us to our personal missions in life. Listen to the call of God on your life. God grants us great bounty: for some it is health, for others creativity, for others intellect, for others energy. But for all of us God gives us Love.

God puts us into situations with other people to help us complete our missions and to feel that we are a wanted and important part of a group, the children of God.

Often I recall the times of service, the bounteous blessings, and the inspiration of fellow companions on the road of life. I know that I am greatly blessed.

I also experienced the total darkness of being at sea with only the stars for light. It is a unique feeling, standing on the deck of a moving ship with muffled red lights, to see only dark ocean, dark sky, and billions of bright stars.

Praise God, the Creator.

Steve Webster

“Do not despise the prophets, but test everything. . . .” I Thessalonians. 5: 20-21a

Earlier in this letter Paul thanks the Thessalonians (2: 13) *because “you received the word of God that you heard from us [Paul and his companions]. . . not as a human word but as . . . God’s word, which is also at work in you believers.”* The best of all Christian preaching is prophecy; it is the word of God. A preacher/prophet’s message is not self-authenticating as the word of God, but is known as it does its work in the believers who hear it. So we *“do not despise the prophets, but test everything.”*

How do we test the prophets we meet with today? Paul alludes to prophets whose words do not meet the test early in chapter two of Thessalonians. Paul speaks of those whose words spring from “deceit, impure motives or trickery.” Words that “please mortals,” “words of flattery” may be words of false prophecy. When Paul mentions supposed prophetic words that are really “a pretext for greed,” one thinks of the fortunes that are made by the so-called televangelists. When a certain televangelist recently called for the political assassination of an elected foreign head of state, I heard of a cartoon circulating depicting this supposed prophet wearing a t-shirt with the slogan “Who would Jesus Assassinate?” The cartoonist tested the words of this would-be prophet and found them wanting.

I remember words that did meet the test of true prophecy. Paul describes how he delivered God’s words to the Thessalonians

What words comfort us and build us up?

What words open us to do our part in the ongoing creative work of God in the world?

These are the words that meet the test of true prophecy.

“like a [wet] nurse tenderly caring for her own children . . . ,” and I remember Pastor Tom Garnhart’s sermon to the congregation at University United Methodist Church when the Bishop ordered an end to an important ministry of our congregation, the blessing of same-gender unions.

From the lectionary he read, *“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”* (I Peter 4:12) At once he acknowledged the power of our denomination to attack our identity and ministry, and our congregation’s shock and grief at this assault, which, in retrospect, marked the beginning of a new wave of homophobic repression in the United Methodist Church--a growing struggle that continues to this day.

Paul also describes bringing the word of God to the Thessalonians as one who *“dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you . . .”* I think of Pastor Dianne Reistroffer who encouraged me in my mid 40’s to begin work on a Master of Arts degree in Religious Studies that I finally completed at age 51. It was the fulfillment of a dream frustrated decades earlier, and has equipped and emboldened me in my work with the church.

“Do not despise the prophets, but test everything . . .”

Tuesday, December 13, 2005

Steve Webster

Tears at Seed-time, Joy at Harvest

Both the prophet Isaiah in chapter 61 and the author of Psalm 126 speak God's word to the people who have returned to Jerusalem from their exile, their captivity, in Babylon. It was both a promising and a frustrating time full of both tears and joy. They view the "ancient ruins" and "former devastations" with "faint spirits," but the prophet promises them "*a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning.*" The psalmist sings her song of praise for the God who "restored the fortunes of Zion (Jerusalem)," but she is remembering this blessing for her hearers at a time of difficulty and shares this prophetic hope with them: "*Those who go out with weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.*"

I sensed the call of God to preach the Gospel in the United Methodist Church at a young age. I was inspired by the pastor who baptized and confirmed me and gave me my first communion. He was a kind, intelligent man who got me excited about the scriptures, the hymnal, the history and mission of the church. During High School, I remember many a Sunday in worship at that small, rural church where I had been confirmed. Every Sunday I sat gazing upon Warner Sallman's "Good Shepherd" that hangs above that altar to this day. This Nordic Jesus (it was a Norwegian-Danish Methodist congregation, after all) stood in the midst of a flock of sheep, not unlike my grandfather's sheep up the hill a little way from the church. Jesus is lovingly holding a lamb as the older sheep crowd around. In the midst of this flock of white sheep, and partially hidden by Jesus' white robe is a single black sheep. I knew the expression "black sheep" which is defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary* as "a person considered undesirable or disgraceful by a respectable group." I identified with the black sheep standing faithfully beside Jesus,

Sunday after Sunday for now over half-a-century. A guidance counselor at a University of Wisconsin program for gifted High School students recorded that I spoke at that time of feeling that I was different from my High School peers--a common report by gay and lesbian people about their feelings during childhood and adolescence.

I "came out" while a student at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and an active member of University United Methodist Church. It was 1971, and I was 20 years old. I came to an awareness of my sexual orientation in the broad wake of the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion, an act of resistance by gay, lesbian and transgender persons in the face of police oppression in Greenwich Village in New York. I joined the Madison Gay Liberation Front, and I viewed this work as Christian ministry in the light of Liberation Theology. A couple of years later, I faced a young woman in the admissions office at a nearby United Methodist Theological Seminary who tearfully informed me that my application to study for an M.Div. degree would be rejected because of a new policy specifically barring gay and lesbian students. I later received a letter to that effect. Shortly after that, it was reported that this same school expelled two gay seminarians.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons often find themselves exiled from the beloved churches of their youth. Observers suggest that many LGBT persons are specially gifted with spiritual callings--and so this exile from their spiritual homes is particularly difficult. Such exiles can be like tearfully sown seeds.

I live in the hope that the church will yet rejoice in the harvest her LGBT members bring in.

Steve Webster

John comes to “testify to the light . . . the true light which enlightens everyone, [that] was coming into the world” John 1:7-9 May God keep sending to us (unordained!) prophets like John who fearlessly bring light in the darkness and water in the desert.

John is a man of prophetic acts--he dunks people in water. When the authorities from Jerusalem send investigators to challenge him, John denies being anyone of importance, “*I just dunk people in water,*” he tells them three different times (John 1: 24, 31 and 33). But his dunking in water is a prophetic act foreshadowing the day when the world will be immersed in God’s spirit.

Paul also spoke of baptism as a prophetic act. As we are immersed in the water and rise up again from it, so we imitate Jesus’ descent into death and his resurrection from it. Indeed, Jesus’ death and resurrection is itself the ultimate prophetic act remembered in our baptism (Romans 6: 3-4) because it foreshadows the ultimate redemption of all God’s creation (Romans 8: 18-25).

Having been rejected by a United Methodist Theological Seminary because of my sexual orientation in the mid-1970’s, it was ironic that I was admitted to a Master of Arts program in Religious Studies twenty years later by a Roman Catholic school. The Sister who interviewed me for admissions offered nothing but encouragement when she heard that I wanted to learn more about the Wesleyan roots of the United Methodist Church, as well as explore the current controversial issues dividing the churches including fundamentalism and the movement for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) equality. She knew my call to ordained ministry in the United Methodist Church had been frustrated by policies barring LGBT persons, but shared my hope that there were signs of change in the air.

Imagine my surprise when I attended my first class and recognized at once (through that special faculty LGBT people call “Gaydar”) that

the professor who would teach me church history was a gay man. Not very long after that semester, the College held a campus wide vigil after Matthew Shepard, a young, gay University of Wyoming student was brutally “gay-bashed” and murdered. On that occasion, my church history professor “came out” in a very public way to the entire assembly. It was a very dark time in a dark season, but that act of “coming out” brought light to many of the LGBT students of the college on that evening.

In the MA in Religious Studies program we covered the same areas of study required at United Methodist Seminaries (I even studied United Methodist polity in a class on ecclesiology!) My college emphasized academic quality but with a focus on ministry. Though a small program, my fellow students were a diverse lot, ranging from Unitarians to Charismatic Evangelicals. We received much individual attention and had the freedom to pursue many projects informed by our unique interests. Much of my work focused on the religious and ministry concerns of LGBT people. During my studies, the Pacific School of Religion began the first Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry--another sign of God’s light shining in the darkness!

Life is an ongoing experience of light and darkness, immersion and emergence, life and death and new birth. My heart aches to hear the young Rev. Beth Stroud express the hope that she will live to see the United Methodist Church restore the ordination credentials stripped from her by the church court that found her “guilty” of being a “practicing” lesbian. I had shared a similar hope thirty years ago, but I no longer expect to see the day when I might be ordained to the ministry of the United Methodist Church.

Thursday, December 15, 2005

Steve Webster

“...keep on keeping on”

The prophets, in their words and acts proclaim hope in difficult times, urging us to *“keep on keeping on.”* My partner of twenty five years, Jim Dietrich, and I stood with nearly 200 Soulforce volunteers outside the 2000 General Conference in Cleveland. With a grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, a daughter of Martin Luther King, Jr. and some of the leaders from the Civil Rights movement of the 1950’s and 60’s, we stood our ground nonviolently and were arrested rather than passively acquiesce to the Conference’s official homophobia.

As a prophetic act we accepted the shame and defeat of arrest. We allowed ourselves to be stripped of our freedom, our personal effects, our shoelaces, belts and eyeglasses. We lay locked in smelly, noisy cells. But we were not stripped of our dignity and we reemerged renewed in hope. However imperceptibly, we were changed and the church was changed.

The struggle continues. There will be other seasons of sowing and weeping (and rejoicing!) before we bring the harvest in. As I write this Jim and I are about to go to the Reconciling Ministries Network Convocation called “Hearts

on Fire” at United Methodism’s Lake Junaluska Assembly grounds as guests of the Southeastern Jurisdiction of the church. Even though we are “paying guests,” this is causing great wailing and gnashing of teeth, not unlike the day a generation or two ago when Junaluska accepted racial integration.

In fact, as we prepare to go, we hear the news that the KKK will be there to greet us with signs that read “Queers on Fire” and that quote the verse from scripture (Leviticus 20:13) that supposedly condemns gay people--*“they shall surely be put to death.”*

But Bishops and other leaders of the Southeastern Jurisdiction are insisting on United Methodism’s commitment to inclusiveness.

This is another “teaching moment,” a prophetic moment in the Church. The prophetic word of God is still at work among us.

May it always be so!

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Sandra Herman

“Who are you?” the Pharisees demand. Not that they’re anxious for an answer, unless that answer produces silence instead of the fiery preaching of this man whom many, even Herod, thought might be Elijah come back.

They need not have worried. John is not just about to announce that he is the Messiah. That role is to be fulfilled by his cousin, not him. John “knows his place” it seems. He is the one who cries out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the LORD.”

The only problem with this is that the reference to the Old Testament establishes *exactly* that John *is* the Messiah. When we look at the reference in Isaiah 40:3, it is clear that the one who does this “crying out” is “the One whom we are to expect.” So what’s going on?

I think that the evangelist’s point is *precisely* that John the Baptizer is announcing, not the coming of the Messiah, but the coming of GOD. To prepare the way of the LORD in Isaiah is the announcement of the “end times,” the time when God will come to judge all the people.

The announcement is for the “great and terrible Day of the LORD.” John – both the evangelist and the baptizer – is making his case that Jesus is not simply the Son of God, not merely a human being who is adopted by God, much as Moses was. His argument is not, as Paul says in the first chapter of Romans, that Jesus *became* the Son of God.

No, his argument is that Jesus of Nazareth is the costume God wears to go out among his people, as many mythical kings are

reported to have done, so as to see how the kingdom is really doing, rather than taking the reports of advisors who so often have an ax to grind. Jesus is the Word of God, begotten, not

made, through whom: all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

But that information is “buried on page 2” as it were. The Pharisees ask their question, and John answers it, but they have not the eyes to see that in this answer Jesus is elevated, and John at one and the same times denies that he is the expected Messiah (which is true – he is nothing of what they expect) and admits that he is indeed that Prophet who comes before God’s return to earth.

In our post-modern world, this is not an easy idea to preach. We are too aware of all the mystery religions of past and present, who extol a God who dies and rises again so that we might live, our crops prosper, and we have many children to care for us in our old age so we don’t wind up in the nursing home. We ignore Jesus’ own words, that John was “if you will accept it, Elijah come back.” But the Pharisees were in no mood for the world to meet God. They were too busy trying to see to it that the religion of their ancestors survived for their children to inherit it.

You and I, who are we in this story?

Are we of the Pharisees, trying to preserve church as we have always known it, fending off the entry of the Mystery into our lives? Are we the Prophet, aware of our own magnificent role in the transmission of the Story? Or are we really trying to shrug off the pain and the glory of our assigned role in the world?

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10, Romans 12:2

Dong Su Lee

Women's Faithful Dedication to God

The people of Egypt were not afraid of the presence of the Hebrews because the Hebrews were not a political group but an alternative religious community. Their code of ethics was that later expressed by Paul, *“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”* (Romans 12:2)

A new political environment was created when *“... a king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.”* (Exodus 1: 8) Out of his racial prejudice and unverifiable fear, this king changed Egypt's policy toward the Hebrews. Now they were prevented returning to their homeland and forced to become slaves working day and night without a Sabbath building pyramids for the Pharaoh.

But a hard-labor policy for the Hebrews could not control the growth of their population. So frightened was Pharaoh and his cabinet of a possible revolt, they decided to order newborn Jewish boys killed at their birth stools and thrown into the Nile. Did it work? Yes and no!

Who dared to rebel against this most powerful, god-figure Pharaoh and his ruthless law? Two Hebrew midwives and one of Pharaoh's own daughters. Shiphrah and Puah feared God. They may have tried to think of ways to find to satisfy both Pharaoh and God. It is likely they spent many days and nights in fear and doubt.

Which command should they obey: The command of God not to kill or the

command of Pharaoh to kill any male child. Their decision? *“At the risk of any punishment like rape and torture and even my life, I will listen to the Lord.”* They let the newborn boys live.

And they experienced God's hand of salvation. God led them to save the life of a baby named Moses instead of listening to the arrogant and ruthless command of Pharaoh.

Pharaoh had the keys to bind people on earth but God didn't give Pharaoh the keys of the kingdom of heaven; these were given to Shiphrah and Puah and the princess.

As we look the way we do business today, put our money into retirement plans, and fight wars against comparative weak nations, including Iraq and Afghanistan, we may find ourselves bogged down. Why? Because God listens now as in Exodus to prayers and supplication of people like Shiphrah, Puah and a princess. God's way of hearing and observing our situations differs from the policies of all “pharaohs” and their followers.

David Werner

“But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: ‘Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in?’” Samuel 7:4-5

Feeling secure is a continuing struggle for me. Like John Wesley, I often wonder how God could love me. I’m aware of many failings, and now and then someone points out a failing that appears new to me! There come moments of terror when I wonder if a particular crisis is the one that will break my faith, or I might wonder, given a set of circumstances, how my understanding of God could be even close to accurate. If I cannot imagine the God I trust, then how can I feel secure in my trusting?

Then there are the end-of-the-rope experiences in pastoral ministry. Being appointed as the second pastor of a new church is exciting right up until (for me at least) you realize that you are entering a parish with no church building, no parsonage, no committee structure, not many persons with local church leadership experience, and no recognition in the community.

It was not enough to realize that I had long dreamed of a storefront church setting. That dream took on nightmarish qualities as Barb and I watched two squirrels scamper in and out of the corner of the warehouse as we waited while the Staff Parish Relations Committee met with the Superintendent!

I suppose that King David thought it only fair that God have a house, now

that the King has been presented with one. A roof over your head and space enough to rest secure! Nathan thought it was fine, so why not?

Yet God didn’t feel the need for the security of a house. “Tenting Tonight” was more than a theme song. What God did feel the need for was promising something big to David, who could be quite small at times. God promised a house and kingdom forever (v. 16), a pledge to David has taken on immense importance over the generations.

I need periodic reminding that God is God, after all, and I am not. I take courage in God’s divine sense of security, being and doing as Great Lover ought. My place is to express my joy and gratitude for life by the way I respond to God’s word. My sense of security has less to do with house and kingdom and more to do with the journeying with God that lies at the base of my relationship with God.

I am challenged and comforted by the realization that David and countless others have lived life to its fullest because they have trusted God’s promise, God’s continuing willingness to be in connection with humanity.

I must admit, however, that I still don’t care to sleep in a tent.

2 Samuel 7:8a

David Werner

“Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David....”

Nathan the Prophet assumed too much ... or too little. In God’s name, he gave David freedom to build the temple and then found out in the dark dreaminess of night that God really wasn’t granting a building permit to the King.

Elsewhere (1 Chronicles 22:8-10) there is a suggestion that God wanted a person of peace to build the temple, not a warrior king. Maybe God understood the gifts and graces of father and son to be different. In any event, Nathan had to issue a retraction.

In addition to feeling insecure in my faith and daily life, there’s also the sense of insecurity in my prophetic ministry. *What if what I preach or speak in conversation misinterprets the signs of the times? What if I’m just plain ugly wrong? What recourse do I have, and what recourse do those persons have who listened to me and heeded my words?*

Scripture gives Nathan cover. How many of us preacher creatures can point to a text in which God plainly tells us how to correct a sermonic error? Even if I were embarrassed, I would have the satisfaction of knowing that the mistake had been corrected.

I take comfort (I am strengthened, in the sense of “comfort” as “with strength”) in the sense that my security lies in the

journey of trusting God. The pleasure of the journey is the point of the journey in part; the destination provides the excuse for the trip. Years ago on an auto trip out West, the sight of the snow-capped Colorado mountains sustained us on the long day ride through the hot desert. The overnight stay in the cool higher elevation was a bonus that only enhanced the memory of the desert journey.

I’ve always been the sort of person who hates to be wrong or mistaken or embarrassed by my words or actions. That makes for a narrow and confining life! Within the past few years I’ve been learning in the inside of me that life does not require that I be right even most of the time. A big part of maturing is coming to terms with the reality that **life is characterized by a whole lot of ambiguity.** Trusting God is surely an excellent, though challenging, way to live.

Trusting God gives me permission to be open to growth in me and in others. Trusting God invites me to find beauty and meaning in all sorts of things in daily life. Trusting God offers me a clue to the pattern within the seemingly chaotic. God is love. Love matters.

Security is claiming the ongoing, kaleidoscopic grace of God. Security is being on the way in the Way of Jesus by way of loving God, neighbor, and, yes, even myself.

Psalm 72

Sandra Herman

How many times recently have you cursed the American government? How many failures of will, of vision, of understanding of the problems our people face have sent you into despair? Not to mention our inability to mobilize government agencies to handle the crises we face, individually and nationally.

But Psalm 72 encourages us to a positive attitude. Not a Pollyanna response. Not to be “cockeyed optimists.” But to take the power that the Holy Spirit gives us to change the world around us so that the Reign of Heaven is realized. *We begin by praying for Bush, Cheney, et al....*

I know that this is a hard first step. I remember back in the first days after 9/11, when I said that this is where the Jesus program begins, when we have a clearly defined enemy who seeks to do us harm, who has in fact been able to afflict us. That this is the moment when our faith is most severely tested. We begin by doing what we do not understand: *by praying for our enemies.*

People were flocking to churches in those days, but not for that message. I was supposed to tell them that God was on our side, that Yahweh of Armies would fight with us against the Godless heathen. I was not supposed to say that if we could pray for our enemies in those moments of horror and fear, that the Kingdom of God could be realized, at least in part.

But here that message is again, and hundreds of years before Jesus. The Psalmist begins by praying for the king:

*Endow the king with your justice, O God,
the royal son with your righteousness.
May he judge your people in righteousness,
your afflicted ones with justice.*

The people of the Old Testament were fully familiar with tyranny, greed and the corruption that power creates. But they hoped for better. The Psalmist leads them in this prayer. Perhaps in his words, we can take heart, for we may find that he, too, recognizes the dichotomy between what is – a ruler who knows nothing of the concerns of the poor and struggling – and what we hope God will bring about for our nation, and the world.

*He will defend the afflicted among the
people
and save the children of the needy;
he will crush the oppressor.*

*In his days the righteous will flourish;
prosperity will abound till the
moon is no more.*

*He will rule from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of
the earth.*

We, like the Psalmist, can pray for and so help establish the truly righteous kingdom of God. Not to establish an empire, but to fulfill the hopes of all those who, throughout history, longed for a place where freedom might be realized, and the land – even “to the ends of the earth” might enjoy prosperity **because** “the righteous flourish” under an honest and truly compassionate government.

Julie McNaughton

Luke 1:47-55: *“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.”*

I had a dream. I dreamt that it was raining, I dreamt that I saw a man, woman, and child who looked very dirty and ragged, huddling under the rabbit cages in my yard. But, I didn't invite them in my house; I thought they would dirty it up. Instead, I got in my car, rolled up the window and drove away.

When I woke up I realized that the man, woman, and child represented Joseph, Mary and Jesus – and that they represented all the hungry people in the world. I felt guilty for ignoring Joseph, Mary and Jesus in my dream and for ignoring all the hungry people in the

world (I had recently learned that there were 800 million of them.)

I felt terrible. I didn't think I could eat another meal. I called my pastor and told him about my dream and my feelings. He had an answer for my anguish. He said, “Remember your dream but find joy in helping those who are hungry.”

That happened 30 years ago. I **have** found joy in helping those who are hungry! Are you part of God's plan to “fill the hungry with good things?” Can you find joy in helping those who are hungry?

Prayer: *God, please help us to care for your hungry children.*

Romans 16:25-27

Julie McNaughton

“Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel...to bring about the obedience of faith.”

Through the last 30 years God has asked me to: organize Menomonie Area Bread for the World (25 years), generate thousands of letters to Members of Congress on behalf of hungry people (28 years), coordinate Dunn County CROP Hunger Walks (22 years), be mission chair of my church – promote 11 Advance Special Missions (20 years), be a member of the Conference Hunger Task Force (25 years – chair for 3 years), encourage missions through United Methodist Women (30 years), raise funds to provide child care for low-income women (14 years), and lead a weekly ministry for

the poor and elderly in two nursing homes (25 years).

Sometimes I am afraid. I think that I won't find the people needed to help in the projects. But, I have learned to make the phone calls, to make the visits, and to respect and appreciate all God's children. God continues to strengthen me and give me joy for the tasks God calls me to do.

Are you afraid of doing the tasks God is asking you to do? Have you found that God strengthens you as you move ahead with faith?

Prayer: God, please help us obey you and find strength as we do the tasks you call us to do. Amen.

Friday, December 23, 2005

Marianne Cotter

Mothers as Spiritual Leaders

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

Mary's authority and stature in the Christian faith is rooted in her role as the 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. Scripture tells us Mary is praised for her great faith. 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 mother she was, 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's 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, cloths 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, raised 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 and 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 emotion-ally 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 she 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.

Sunday, December 25, 2005

Luke 1:42 NSRV

Marianne Cotter

Mary for the Pagans*"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."*

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 thousand 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, the 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 once was a "pagan". I was a "pagan" in my twenties, 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 before 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. The work was very stressful however. 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 -- **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 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.

Isaiah 61:10 -- 62:3

Sandra Foley Gaylord

Finding God In A Strange Land

When I graduated from college, I became a short-term missionary, assigned to (then) West Pakistan. I taught for six months in Lahore at Kinnaird College for Women. One fine April day the Bishop invited me for tea and informed me that he was transferring me to Karachi to teach at the brand-new Trinity Methodist Girls' High School, which would be opening in July. I could have two months at language school before I went south to the seacoast.

Lahore then was drastically different from Karachi. Lahore was historic, settled, cultured. Karachi, a mere fishing village at the time of partition from India in 1947, was a bustling metropolis of three million in 1959, a major commercial center, and the capital of the young country.

I arrived there on an overcast, hot, muggy day, and was greeted by the much older woman who would be my "boss" and my roommate. Three weeks after I arrived, Mary left for home, permanently, due to health concerns. I was left in charge of seven small elementary schools and a new high school just opening but not yet completed. My language skills were minimal to non-existent, and I was not supposed to live alone. In addition, I encountered poverty and suffering of a kind and extent that I had never before experienced.

The cultural shock was overwhelming. In those weeks I read Psalms and wondered myself if God had forsaken *me*.

I learned that God *is* present with us in all circumstances, and that there really *are* angels. They came in the forms of a driver who was well-acquainted with the city, missionaries offered me a room for several weeks, another

missionary who shepherded me through the intricacies of finances and how to "get things done" with government agencies, a marvelous principal of the new school, and other new friends.

In a few short months, I was back in my own apartment with new missionaries from the U.S. to share the work load, and the new school was fully operational.

I thought of this chapter in my life in connection to the theme of this booklet: our struggles and the gifts and affirmations which come to us in, through, in spite of them. I have never felt so alone as I did the night I watched Mary's plane take off for New York that July night. Through it all I gained confidence in myself, and started to develop a *global* worldview. Most importantly, I developed a new, stronger relationship with God. I *know* that God is with me, even in the dark times, the strange times, the tired-as-a-dog times.

The writer of this Isaiah passage reminds us that those who are righteous servants of God, are ones who work to bring about peace and justice will prevail. We who believe that the prophecy of a Savior was fulfilled in and through Jesus Christ must be agents of making his vision of peace and justice evident in the world.

*Jesus said, "I am with you always."
Amen.*

Luke 16:19-25, 26-31

Sandra Foley Gaylord

Encountering the Real World

Two blocks from where I lived in Karachi was one of the many *mohalla* sections that pocketed the sprawling city. These were shanty-towns that housed the thousands of people who crowded into the city each year, victims of floods or drought in their former homes who were hoping to find work, to become factory workers rather than farmers. This particular one was home to more than a thousand people who lived in shelters cobbled from scavenged sheet metal, wood, cardboard. There was no plumbing or electricity. We passed it every day.

Downtown the streets were filled with beggars of every description – blind, crippled, deformed, needy. They were a stark contrast to storefronts and shops that catered to the Westerners with their luxurious carpets, gleaming brass and intricate wood carvings. The further back into the market you went, the more pathetic the beggars seemed.

Everywhere there were the children. Their distended stomachs, discolored hair, and malformed limbs were testaments to malnutrition. Their puss-filled eyes and open sores were evidence of diseases undiagnosed and untreated. It was a crying shame, and I did. I once wrote a friend, “you see with your eyes but you cannot let your heart see or you would go insane.” However, those tummies, those eyes with their blank stares still haunt me.

Recently I saw a page of the St. John’s Bible, a one-of-a-kind project initiated by St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, MN. It is hand-lettered by a British calligrapher on calfskin parchment and wonderfully illuminated by various artists. The Abbot of St. John’s was asked if the money used for the project couldn’t have been better used to care for the poor. His reply, as quoted in *Christian Century* (8/09/05), was “God’s commitment to the poor is embedded in scripture...The deeper we are drawn into scripture, the more we will be driven to address these issues in our lives.” Read the Gospels and see this truth.

Poverty is a justice issue and economic justice is one of the concerns of MFSA. Usually when we think “poverty”, we think in the aggregate – the issue overwhelms us both on a local level and on a global scale. **The issue is one, not of eradicating it, but of seeing poor people as God’s people** – not as “untouchables” to be dealt with by government agencies or mission societies, but as people like us who happen to not have the same resources we have (money, education, opportunity), people whom God loves equally as much. How can we share our wealth?

We have just celebrated Christmas, the fulfillment of God’s promise to send a Savior. Let us read the Gospels and learn how to use our riches.

Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Matthew 6:21

Matthew 25:35-40

Sandra Foley Gaylord

The Gospel Now

Brenda was one of the many “poor souls” who found their way into our downtown church. She was crying because she had just been evicted from her small apartment for non-payment of rent, and she didn’t know what to do.

Her story was, indeed sad. She worked as an aide in a nursing home, working the odd hours that others could or would not. She was glad to have a job, but getting housing was a problem. She had no car, so could only work somewhere near a bus line. Bus schedules don’t necessarily coincide with work hours, especially late at night. She sometimes lost jobs because of lateness, so her job history was spotty. Landlords like to be paid so will rent only to those with a job. Rent schedules don’t always coincide with paydays. So sometimes she got behind, never to really catch up. Some landlords were willing to give her a little leeway in exchange for “favors”. When she couldn’t or wouldn’t comply, she was out on her ear. Any court would understand “non-payment of rent.” She had no defense.

People at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder in our country have few choices. Almost as much as lack of food, shelter or clothing, a lack of choices is a killer of the spirit. Our system is set up for the “haves”. Even our social service systems are set up that way. Our food pantries help a client temporarily – they are limited in use per month.

Our agencies that give rent help do so on a limited-term basis. Even the homeless shelters have limits on how long a guest can stay. But the world is full of Brendas, people with mental and emotional conditions that make independent living more of a challenge than they can manage. Everyone needs a support system in order to make it – someone to sympathize when things go wrong, have a couch to crash on when evicted, offer a bite to eat when the cash runs out; someone to offer encouragement or to celebrate with when things go right. People like Brenda are easy prey for thieves, drug pushers, and other unscrupulous characters.

“For I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty and gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” This is the fleshed-out vision of Isaiah 61:10-62:3.

The birth of Jesus, the hoped for Messiah, did not usher in a golden age of peace, prosperity and love. Instead, Jesus gave us a vision to live and work for, a vision that includes all the children of the world having enough to eat, and people like Brenda having a place where they are cared for, protected and have choices. Let’s dedicate ourselves to that vision for Jesus’ sake.

Jesus said, “Just as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.”

Sue D'Alessio

Galatians 4:4-7 *“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.”*

Chaos and turmoil seemed to surround me the year I turned eighteen.

Wherever I turned I was faced with broken, hurtful relationships among family and friends. I was trying to figure out who I was, the normal task of every teen, made complex by the churning chaos around me. That summer, my parents took our family on a two week camping vacation, hoping to give me respite from some broken friendships and distract me from my moodiness.

One day, we were the only campers on the shores of a pristine lake. The sky darkened with accumulating clouds and wind blew from every direction. The weather reflected my mood.

I took my flute, saying I was going to practice (the only excuse to be alone that my parents accepted), and headed off to walk around the lake. I scrambled through the wild flowers, reeds, and rocks along the lake shore until I felt truly alone. The wind whipped and eddied, teased and pushed me whichever way I turned. It was a completely satisfying experience to walk in a world that seemed to be playing out my own inner turmoil. Taking out my flute, I tried to play, only to have my breath blown back into me. The only way I could play anything was to stand with my back to the primary direction of the wind, but then, whatever music I made was whisked away in the wind. I could hardly hear myself. Finally I stopped trying to do anything and just stood, wind whirling around me, blowing my breath away, bending the reeds nearly to the ground, and churning the dark waters of the lake. I felt totally alone, abandoned even by God, a frail bit of humanity blown and tossed about carelessly by the vagaries of life.

Imperceptibly at first, the wind seemed to sing a melody, a wisp blown here, a few more notes sung there. Though pieces of the melody sounded familiar, I didn't recognize it at first. I leaned into the wind, listening attentively, trying to hear the whole song. Slowly, as the melody became clear, words began to appear. 'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free, 'tis the gift to come down where we ought to be. And when we find ourselves in the place just right, 'twill be in the valley of love and delight. When true simplicity is gained, to bow and to bend, we shan't be ashamed. To turn, turn, will be our delight, 'till by turning, turning, we come 'round right."

The words and melody whipped and eddied, teased and pushed at me until I released all my inner chaos and turmoil and allowed the meaning of the words to blow through me. I slowly realized that life is God's gift – relationships, breath, hope, all of life – and that in receiving that gift, I would eventually discover the freedom and simplicity that accompany God's gifts. Though my life was "turning, turning" in often tight and furious circles, I realized that if I would search for the delight in the turning, my life would eventually, in God's time, "come 'round right." Life keeps turning, turmoil continues to blow, and I continue to discover God's love and delight in the gifts of simplicity, freedom, and living in the places where I ought to be.

What does it mean to be adopted as a child of God? Where and how does the Spirit blow into our hearts and lives so that we can cry out in recognition of God's presence? How can we discover the gifts of simplicity, freedom, love and delight, even in the chaotic turnings of our lives?

Galatians 4:4-7

Sue D'Alessio

“Oh, you people all look alike – and your names all sound the same! I can’t keep track of who is who and who is what name with any of you!” So exclaimed an exasperated Korean pastor who kept mixing up names as he tried to tell a group of clergy about a situation he had experienced while serving in an Anglo church. In other contexts we hear, “Those _____ (fill in the blank with the identity of those who are “other”) all look alike! I can’t tell one from the other!”

After worship in a suburban congregation, one European American woman walked up to the only regularly attending African American woman and asked, “Did you just have your hair style changed? I like it!” She responded, “Thank you for noticing! Most don’t. To most people around here, I am just a shadow, recognized only by the color of my skin.”

As three teens walked in to church, blue hair, black clothes, with tatoos and multiple piercings on each of them, two adults watched and commented. “Kids these days! Who knows what they’re going to do with their hair next! Look at all their piercings! Makes me wonder what else they’ve pierced! Look at his pants, underwear showing – wonder how he keeps them on! Well, look at the girls! They don’t leave much to the imagination!”

We separate ourselves from one another into “us” and “them” far more readily than we like to admit. Of course, those who are “us” are the ones who are on the inside, the favored ones — those with whom we are comfortable, with whom we identify.” “They” are different from us, by age, gender, life-choices, economic circumstances, nationality, sexuality, even religion.

”They” are outsiders and out of favor. We are so uncomfortable with our differences.

Why do we consider our differences to be dangerous and threatening? Why are we so negative and critical about our differences? Why do we love conformity to our own way so much? This isn’t what our faith teaches us! We worship the Creator of difference and imagination.

We worship God of open adoption — God who files adoption papers for each and every human one of us. God in Christ Jesus redeems us all, and through the Spirit, welcomes each and every one of us into this wondrous, diverse household of life. God not only loves us all equally abundantly, but God delights in our differences. God pays attention to us and sees us as unique individuals, noticing us for who we are, not for our physical differences, recognizing us in our ways of living and loving, not for how we dress or for our superficial behavior. God loves us — just because God loves naturally and abundantly and has adopted us as direct heirs of this love.

It is this God that our hearts recognize and cry out to in the joy of being adopted.

It is in this household of faith that we look around us and learn to delight in our differences and to recognize in each other, the sisters and brothers God has given us to live and love with, together in our earth-home.

In faith, we look to God and cry, “Abba! Father! Amma! Mother! Redeemer! Beloved!”

In faith, we look to others and cry, “Sister! Brother! Friend! Companion! Beloved!”

Luke 2:22-40

Frank Kuhlman

Two special residents of Jerusalem saw the Christ child and made some predictions about him and how his life would affect his parents and many other people.

Simeon, identified as a good, God-fearing man, lived for many years in hopes of seeing the Christ, of seeing Israel saved. Despite assurances by the Holy Spirit, Simeon almost certainly struggled with doubts: "Can I possibly live long enough to realize my hopes?"

Led by the Holy Spirit into the Temple, Simeon sees the Christ child.

Epiphany! Hope becomes reality! He embraces Jesus, recognizing him as the Christ, the one who will reveal God's will to the nations and bring glory to Israel.

Now for Simeon any struggle with doubt is gone. He gives thanks to God.

Turning to Jesus' startled parents, Simeon blesses them and then to Mary speaks words that must have been very unsettling. Yes, there is good news of salvation for many people in Israel: their experience of epiphany. But Simeon also warns that many people will oppose Jesus and his message, bringing destruction. Further, Simeon predicts that Mary will be heart-broken, the victim of a great sorrow.

What does the story of Simeon teach me? Our appointment in Japan was to

Palmore Institute, an English language night school for young adult Japanese. Palmore has provided its students both English language skills and Christian education since 1886. We found the work challenging and fulfilling. But from the mid-1970s enrollment fell steadily because Japanese schools hired native speakers of English, making study at Palmore unnecessary. Further, Palmore students living in an affluent culture did not attend worship services or Bible classes as earlier students had. Our hopes of being Christian witnesses to hundreds of students were fading--so in 1987 we left Japan.

Living and working in Wisconsin has brought us new challenges, satisfactions and hopes. Charge, district, and conference activities have provided a renewal of our hope to be witnesses to Christ Jesus, to lead as many people as possible to an epiphany experience during a worship service, on a Volunteers in Mission team, in a local peace group, in an environmental preservation project, at a food pantry, in a jail ministry.

What does the story of Simeon teach you? How did he keep faith through many years of waiting for a promised blessing, an encounter with the history-changing Christ? How can all of us anticipate and experience epiphany almost 2000 years after the time of Simeon?

May we take time and open our hearts to ponder these questions.

Luke 2:22-40

Frank Kuhlman

Mary and Joseph took their baby, Jesus, to the Temple, presenting him to the Lord and offering the prescribed animal sacrifice. First they heard surprising predictions from a godly man named Simeon. Next they were met by an 84-year-old prophet named **Anna**.

Part of the description of Anna includes the words "*married for only seven years.*" What is the significance of these words? They suggest a struggle in her being widowed for many years. They hint at the problems of a woman trying to cope without a husband in a time and culture when the married relationship was crucial both to a woman's sense of place in community and to many of her satisfactions in life.

The further description of Anna as 84 years old personalizes the struggle of a nation to hold onto the promise of God, spoken by some Hebrew prophets: the coming of the Christ. Who? This long-awaited, God-inspired, God-empowered, people-saving, Jerusalem-freeing Christ (see Luke 4:16-20). Anna recognized the baby Jesus as that Christ. **Epiphany!** She thanked God for that experience of enlightenment.

Then she shared her wonder with people who waited for God to set free Jerusalem (symbolizing the ruling powers (just as we say "Washington, London, Tokyo")).

What does the story of Anna teach me?
It reminds me of a Quaker peace activist, Barbara Reynolds, who lived near us one year in Kobe, Japan, writing articles to

make people around the world more aware of the dangers of nuclear weapons

With her family, Barbara had sailed courageously into the weapons test zone in the Pacific Ocean to protest the dangers of radioactivity to many people.

Like Anna in the Temple, Barbara made her Christian witness to the God of peace who wants Jerusalem and the whole human family to be free of all nuclear weapons. She has helped me in my mission talks about Japan to emphasize Japan's commitment to never make, store, or use nuclear weapons.

Do you know someone who is an "Anna" today? What difference has she (or he) made in your life?

How much more good could be achieved if you asked God to help you to take that person's witness more seriously?

What do we need to do to prepare ourselves to really see Christ Jesus today? May God bless us with eyes of faith.

Isaiah 60:1-6:

Janet Ellinger

Our Light has Come

One of the things I wish I had from my childhood is that little white, plastic cross. It was the kind that glows in the dark and was about four inches tall. When the lights went out at night in the bedroom I shared with my sister, there it was. There's a sort of peace in remembering it...but I wish I could hold it in my hand.

Most of us have experiences of "being in the dark." It can be a frightening thing. The Isaiah text comes to us from a people who knew in the darkness of slavery in Pharaoh's Egypt. They knew the darkness of wilderness wandering. They fell into the darkness of idolatry and turning away from God's justice. They felt profoundly the darkness of God's abandonment of them at the hands of the Babylonians. **How could God let "the exile" happen? Where was God in this deep darkness?**

Their names are Ray and Pat. They have two living sons and two sons who died. The one was riding the handlebars of his brother's bike when a car hit them and he was killed. The other hung himself in the garage in his senior year of high school. Ray said to me once, "There

isn't a day that goes by that I don't think of those two boys." Asking Pat how they got through all of that, she said, "We wouldn't have made it without our church. People just held us up when we thought we couldn't stand. And we wouldn't have, if left to ourselves."

A faith community said to Ray and Pat, "your light has shined...and still shines." Even in the dark, God's steadfast presence shines. The faith community also said, "We'll be that light next to you now. We'll stand right here and walk with you as you find your way."

Where is God in the midst of our deep darkness? Hovering about us. Standing next to us and walking with us. Bringing life and healing next to us in ways we could not imagine.

Advent reminds us of this marvelous light that shines upon this world's deep darkness. Advent calls us to look up, to arise, to expect light to break through the darkness. Advent calls us to watch for signs that may be even as small as a star in the night. Following such a light can lead us to new life.

Isaiah 60:1-6

Janet Ellinger

A Light to the Nations

Verse 3 says to us, “*Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*” Can we imagine a light that bright? Can we picture a light so magnetic as to draw the nations into its brightness? Dare we believe there’s a light that can make tender the hearts and un-stiffen the necks of this world’s rulers?

Ernie Campbell was my Homiletics professor. There’s nothing lukewarm about Ernie. I liked that and I know it offended others. One of his statements I remember is this: “*We don’t know enough to be hopeless.*” Sometimes I think the grindstone has worn the spunk, the dreaming and the sizzle for life right out of us. We get to where life makes us feel hopeless. So the trick is to look for signs.

Jimmy Carter’s post-presidential life isn’t filled with playing golf and the like. It’s been about literally picking up hammer and nail for Habitat for Humanity. It’s been about negotiating for peace and fighting poverty. He’s been a sign of hope.

New York City Baptist preacher Gardner Taylor’s wife found her ministry in taking the church van at night to the neighborhood populated by prostitutes

and drug dealers. She’d open up the van and serve sandwiches and cocoa.

One night the police made a sweep, arrested the prostitutes and along with them, Mrs. Taylor. They were booked, fingerprinted and locked up. All Mrs. Taylor had to do was make a phone call or show an ID and she would have been sprung. But she stayed the night with the others. Another sign of hope.

The prophet spoke to a people who had lived through the Babylonian exile. He told them to look around, to look up. He proclaimed God’s bright presence in their midst.

He calls to us, too. **Dare we believe there’s a light that can make tender the hearts and un-stiffen the necks of this world’s rulers?**

This is surely a time to work for, pray for and live toward the gathering of the nations in peace and hope, in joy and compassion.

It’s a time to begin with oneself. That’s part of the Advent promise: in the unlikely place of your life or mine, peace can begin and grow.

And that’s a sign!

Isaiah 60:1-6:

Janet Ellinger

Look Around!

They say that hindsight is always 20-20. I suspect “they” may be right. We bumble through the task or circumstance and leave debris scattered in a wide path. Then the next week we take a look back. “Ah, now I see!” we say. Then we plan a different approach for the next encounter. At least we’ve “learned our lesson.” Too bad about the debris.

It seems we need to hear the call to look around NOW. We need to reduce the debris. Looking around NOW is a call to justice. We need to see who is without food, shelter, health care and education. We need to look NOW at our environment. The words of Psalm 8 call us to a place of responsibility in the creation. We need to look NOW and see who is left out, forgotten and invisible. We need to listen and discern whose voice is not being heard.

Whenever I have an eye exam, they always test my peripheral vision. “Look forward and tell me when you see the marker on the left...Now on the right.” When we’re plodding ahead with our eyes forward, how close does suffering and injustice have to get to us before we see it? Who is jumping up and down to

our left and right, trying to catch our eye, hoping we’ll stop and see and listen...and help?

Isaiah 60:5 tells us that when we see, we’ll be radiant! Our heart will rejoice! When the “glory of the Lord” has risen on us, we radiate compassion and justice.

We look around to God’s people left and right, ahead and behind. We can’t afford to look back later at a path littered with suffering, death and violence and see what we might have done. We’re called to LOOK AROUND NOW.

The world is waiting. Our neighbors are waiting. The poor are waiting. The children and our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered brothers and sisters are waiting. People torn apart by war are waiting.

If we’ll look around NOW, the waiting can be an Advent waiting rather than a “keep your fingers crossed” waiting.

Thanks be to God who yet comes to us that we might know life.

Matthew 2:1-12

Janet Ellinger

Who's Asking?

In this reading there are two people who ask the question, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" The question comes from the "wise men from the East" (notice there is no mention of the number three) and it comes from Herod. We can't tell by the text who the wise men ask. Herod, however, gathers the chief priests and scribes, all of them, and inquires of them where the Messiah was to be born.

I can't recall who said it but the statement was, "You tell the truth to the people who deserve to hear it." That's interesting to ponder. But this text can put us to thinking about who it is that is posing the questions that matter to our common life.

When questions about health care are the topic, who is it that's behind the questions? When questions of faithful partnerships are asked, can we discern the heart of the one asking? Questions of war, questions of justice, questions of honesty, questions of life and faith: who's asking? Is it power and control asking the question? Is it bigotry or greed asking the question? Is it fear asking the question? Is it a brand of

imperialism or nationalism asking the question? Is it a question Jesus would ask?

Sharon Deloz Parks of the Whidby Leadership Institute has written a book entitled "Big Questions, Worthy Dreams." Some of her big questions are, "Why is the prison population highly African American?" "Why are an increasing number of our children on anti-depressants?" "Why do they hate us?"

Dr. Parks contends that when we ask the big enough questions, we become engaged by worthy dreams. We can't let our hearts be captured by "how much will I make?" "What kind of car can I get?" "Can we buy a cabin?" It's not that those are bad questions. But if we never get beyond them, we live unto ourselves "while all creation groans in travail."

Who's asking the questions, and are the questions big enough to raise up worthy dreams? Advent is surely a time of dreaming, born out of the big question, **"Is God with us?"**

Matthew 2:1-12

Janet Ellinger

Fear Weaves a Tangled Web

Parker Palmer says in his book *Let Your Life Speak* that we “don’t need to become the fear we carry.” Too bad Herod didn’t have Parker Palmer’s book. It can be tricky to pull off, no matter what Nike says (“No Fear”). To pursue the fearless life seems fraught with disappointment. Fear is an emotion we share with many creatures. It’s part of our emotional experience. The challenge is to not become fearful while carrying the fear.

When it’s the fear that gives energy to my words and actions, I’ll expend great energy and emotion and the life will be drained right out of me. The outcomes will be confusing, misunderstood and unfulfilling. Relationships will be strained and the drive to control will be elevated.

It seems that’s what had Herod by the throat: fear of losing power, fear of losing control. He became his fear and was woven into a tangled web of deceit (“bring me word so I may go and pay him homage.” Mt. 2:8), disappointment (“being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country

by another road.” Mt. 2:12), and anger that lead to unimaginable violence (“...Herod was infuriated and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two year old or under.” Mt. 2:16).

Throughout the birth narrative the angelic presence speaks “Fear not...do not be afraid.” It’s a challenge for us along the way. Sometimes we can so easily melt into a puddle of fear. In the Gospels Jesus names the demons and the demon is silenced, rendered powerless. Maybe if we are able to name the fear, to look it in the eye and call it by name, maybe then its hold on us will weaken and fall away.

To a world where interactions so often are motivated by the dangerous duo of fear and control, Advent says, “**Don’t be afraid.** There is a more excellent way. God is with us. We are not alone.” As disciples of Jesus Christ, we’re called to be transformed by this God who is love. Then we, too, bear this hopeful word to the world. We’re called to *be the love we carry*, not the fear.

Ephesians 3:1-12

Janet Ellinger

The Mystery Made Known

Do you remember when someone said to you, "I can't tell you the secret. If I do, it won't be a secret anymore!" We all (well, many of us) have tried to figure out the secret on the "I've Got A Secret" television show. I suspect most of us have a hard time letting someone else "have a secret." An ancient story captures that same urge we humans have as it tells about a tree and an apple in a beautiful garden. When it's something we can't have or can't know, we seem to have a tough time leaving it alone!

Yet, that mysterious part of Advent seems to be so powerful and profound. In the darkest of nights, the stars shine the brightest. When we can't feel God's presence is exactly when the truth of God's presence takes on immense dimensions. Advent lets us sit in the mystery and compels us to be quiet.

When I served the Hammond charge, the Hammond church decided to do a live nativity. It was quite a production, complete with a manger, sheep and a donkey. Members of the church took shifts, standing still in costume on one of the coldest nights of that December with a stiff wind out of the south, right into our faces. Christmas carols played in the background and right on highway 12 in

front of the Hammond church there was a traffic jam! Cars stopped and people looked and looked. Some folks parked their cars and came and looked. Neighbors just walked over and looked.

I remember one family who came with their two small children. They looked and talked with the kids and then they went home. About a half an hour later the dad came back. He was standing on the sidewalk looking when someone from church said to him, "Didn't I see you here earlier?" "Yes," he said, "but I just had to come back for another look." The mystery of it all had captured the man's heart and he came back for another look. He didn't come back to figure it out, to get the answer, to learn the secret. That's not what brought him back. He came to gaze upon the mystery.

The writer of Ephesians talks about "how the mystery was made known by revelation." The mystery isn't explained. Then it wouldn't be a mystery! What is revealed is that God among us is the mystery of the Gospel. And that is good news.

What a gift to just sit and gaze upon that!

Ephesians 3: 1-12

Janet Ellinger

An Accessible Gospel

We've been called over recent years to value having facilities accessible to all persons. Specifically, this has meant elevators, ramps, cutting out space in sanctuary pews, automatic doors, upgrading restrooms and more. Building codes in public buildings reflect this. It's important that everyone has access.

Verse 12 of our reading speaks about "our access to God." This access is spoken of as God's purpose through Jesus Christ. In this we can be bold and confident. What's this access about?

Some see our "access to God" coming through Jesus' death. It was the price paid and through that we have access to God's forgiveness and eternal presence.

Or, we might see our access to God through Jesus Christ inviting us to Christ-like living. When we live here and now in such a manner, God's purposes find expression in our lives as well. In Jesus we see this God-formed life lived out. **Is that God's "eternal purpose," that our lives are vessels of God's presence?**

We celebrate Jesus' birth because when his presence with people ended in his death, a community of people knew that presence with them even after Jesus' death. They knew God's presence that filled Jesus was still in their midst in such a way that they felt Jesus yet with them.

It was true! Death and sin were defeated. Love lasts. This love that is God is yet with us. And this love seeks a dwelling in us. This love transforms us and we become a sign of God's love with us yet.

As Christians, we have come to know this through Jesus the Christ. And his call to "follow and do likewise" reminds us that in Jesus we have access to Christ-like living now.

That's our call. Jesus didn't live it for us. He lived it among us and called us to follow and do likewise. To do that, we'll need to let Jesus out of the manger. It's an alright place to start but it's no place to stay