

# Edit-O-Earl

## 2002-2003 Series B - Christmas Season

### Christmas Season

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## First Sunday in Advent – December 1, 2002

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**"ATTENTION! Or as we often hear this time of year: 'Hark!'"**

- [Isaiah 63:16-17](#)
- [I Corinthians 1:3-9](#)
- [Mark 13:33-37](#)

I like Advent! I have used an illustration from William Braden before...here is a variation of it: In three or four weeks, you will be able to turn on a radio and, perhaps with a slight tuning of the dial, hear Christmas carols and other Christmas music. That music would be in the room even if the radio were not. But, without the radio, without turning it on and tuning it in, you would never hear it. Advent is a season for tuning our ears and hearts to the music and message of Him who came as a helpless infant, who comes to us continually in Word and Sacrament and who will come again as all-powerful Judge and King.

These three comings are interestingly paralleled by the fable of the three little devils who compare techniques. The first says, "I tell people there is no God, but it doesn't work. Too many of them look around at His intricate and marvelous universe and know He exists." The second said, "I tell them that there is a God, but that the Bible is not from Him. That doesn't work either, because too many of them read it and He reveals Himself to them." The third said, "Well, I tell them that there is a God and that the Bible is from Him, but what's the rush? There is plenty of time to be concerned with that stuff. Sit back, relax, there's always tomorrow. And that works just fine."

In contrast, the season of Advent is filled with words and phrases like: "Watch!" "Be on guard!" "Be alert!" "Hark!" "Behold." "Listen." In the military, a word that may be variously pronounced, but always seems to get results is "Attention!" God's grace is always a surprise! Now and then He manages to bring it to our attention and we are richly blessed!

In, "Do You Care? Compassion in the Sunday School," Duane Ewers tells a delightful story that illustrates how we can fail to pay attention to even the things and people that matter most to us. The mother of a 5-year-old let her mind wander while her son was talking to her. He climbed up on her leg and announced, "Mommy, listen to me! You're not inside your eyes." In Advent, God comes to us. He speaks to us. Are we "inside our eyes"?

In this Sunday's Gospel lesson, Jesus' message about His return could be summed up with His first five words, "Be on guard! Be alert!" It could also be summed up with His last word: "Watch!"

There is a difference between watching and just waiting. If you have friends coming by "around 6:00," the chances are you'll be puttering around the kitchen or watching TV when the doorbell rings. If the President of the United States is coming by "around 6:00," I'll bet the door will be opened for him before he has a chance to reach for the bell...even if he arrives at 5:00 or 7:00. That is the essence of Jesus' parable in Sunday's Gospel lesson.

He says that a man goes away and leaves his servants in charge of his house, each with an assigned task. One is stationed at the door and told to keep watch. Jesus doesn't elaborate on it, but think about it for a minute. This one can't take a nap, run to McDonald's, or even go to the bathroom without getting someone else to stand watch. The master will expect the door to be opened when he walks up. Since no one knows when he will return, the watcher must be alert every minute.

We humans are not very comfortable with not knowing. No one really knows the date of Jesus' birth. Most scholars place it several months from December 25. That date was chosen for several reasons, but "A" date was chosen for just two: First of all, as I said, we're not comfortable with not knowing when it was. It's like not knowing when Jesus will return. You can bet the third little devil's trick wouldn't work if everybody knew Jesus was coming this Sunday! Second, and most important of all, a date was chosen because the people of faith have an inescapable desire to celebrate the fact, if not the moment, that God Almighty chose to come to us, to be with us, to be one of us!

Over the years, I have observed that it may be best that we don't know the exact date of Christ's birth. The best, highest and most meaningful moment of Christmas often does not come on December 25. For me, it often comes when we go caroling to shut-ins and I see the face of one who has suffered much or perhaps is nearing death or maybe just has seen more Christmases than the rest of us. Suddenly, in that face I will see a light that brings home to me once again all the power and reality of Emmanuel...God with us.

Often, that special moment comes again when little children present the old, old story all anew at a Sunday school program. It almost always comes again for me at a Candlelight Carol Service. In 1968, and again in 1971, after I had thought that Christmas was all over, it came again--first on December 27, then on March 24. On each of those dates, a child was born that was part of me and part of another. On each I could not escape remembering the birth of One who is someho part of me and The Other.

God surprised me at the births of both of my sons. I had an eye out for Him, because I believe children are gifts from our continually creating Father, but just as I was watching out for Gwen, or watching for Dan or Joel...suddenly God also came to be with us!

I love Advent because I start right now to watch for it to happen again and, because I am watching for it, I know it will. For some people, Christmas will not come. They won't be watching for Him. They will be whooping it up in the brightly lighted inn. There will be feasting and music and dancing, but they will be unaware that God is out back in the quiet stable. The "silent stars" will "go by," and those who have failed to watch for them will miss the mystery and the message.

Last Sunday, I watched the televised story of nine coal miners who were saved from a flooded mine in Somerset, Pennsylvania. Glendon Harris once wrote that coal miners who are trapped deep beneath the earth experience a terror that cannot be imagined by the rest of us. Their only hope is rescue from above. They usually sit in total darkness, even if they have lights, so that they can watch for any glimmer of hope. They also sit in silence and listen for any sound that might indicate help is on the way. Harris wrote, "Coal miners all are we in this dark world of sin. Advent—which falls at the darkest time of year during the winter solstice—is our time of watching and listening. Do you hear what I hear?"

It is a sad and wonderful fact that children grow up. Mary and Joseph had to face that about Jesus as well. Joseph's notable absence at Jesus' crucifixion indicates that Mary had faced the terror of grief before. Joseph may have been much older than she and his death may not have been a surprise. The thought of Jesus dying was a shock to her and to everyone who knew Him. He had told them to watch for it, but God's unfathomable, loving grace still surprised them.

Jesus' excruciating and humiliating death on the cross is the greatest surprise of all. That horrible Friday is indeed good...not for Him, certainly...but good for us. It was all for us.

On Golgotha, Mary faced grief all alone until Jesus re-introduced her to John. The Gospel writers do not hint that anyone, not even Jesus' mother or her new "son," was watching for Christ to return on Sunday. He again surprised them all. He had told them, however, to watch. Just think how the resurrection might have been different for them if they had watched! Instead of being afraid when He appeared, they would have rejoiced...without delay...with overwhelming joy. He is coming again. Are you watching?

## Second Sunday in Advent – December 8, 2002

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### "What do you want to be for Christmas?"

- [Isaiah 40:1-11](#)
- [Second Peter 3:8-14](#)
- [Mark 1:1-8](#)

Plato said that when you begin a speech, you should flatter your hearers. Let your listeners know that you are on their side. John the Baptist did not study preaching under Plato.

The Evangelist Mark wrote his Gospel as if he, his Subject (Jesus) and his readers were all in a hurry. The book is the shortest of all the Gospels. Mark's favorite word has been variously translated as: "immediately," "straightaway," "quickly," "just then," or "at once." It is interesting that he doesn't call his work, "The Good News (Gospel) about Jesus Christ," but "The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

I say that's interesting because Mark does not, then, begin with anything we would normally think of as a beginning, nor does he begin with any kind of "good tidings of great joy." He credits the next words to Isaiah, but he actually combines some words from Exodus, Malachi and Isaiah. Those words set the stage for "a voice of one calling in the desert" and Mark immediately introduces the locust eating, camel's hair and leather belt wearing owner of that voice.

Mark boils John the Baptizer's years of preaching down to their very essence: "After me will come One more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Then Jesus comes and is baptized, and by verse 14 of the first chapter, John has already been arrested by Herod and is out of the picture. The next time he is mentioned, it is posthumously.

Terse and to the point and yet, like all the Evangelists, Mark will not let us hear Jesus until we first hear John. The "Good News" begins with the strange man and his powerful preaching of repentance. We are told that crowds thronged to hear John. Mark wrote, "The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him." Contrary to the impressions of a few young children when they first hear about John, people did not go out to be amused by the sideshow antics of some bug-and-honey-eating freak.

People went to him because he promised good news and good things. At the same time, his words didn't sound much like "good" news. Mark didn't record them, but I'm sure that few of John's listeners ever forgot the verbal hurricanes and hand grenades he hurled at them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" and "Even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." Matthew and Luke even include John's burning promise that the One to come will baptize, not only with the Holy Spirit, but also "with fire!"

The Epistle of James condemns a common practice in many churches, organizations and institutions. James notes that when poor people dressed in shabby clothing come in, they are ignored, but when the rich come in all their finery, they are given special welcome and escorted to seats of honor. We didn't learn that little trick from John the Baptizer. When the elite came to him in their furs, fine linens and purples, John told them to repent and rip off those coats and give them to the poor. After quoting these and many other politically incorrect bombasts from John, William Willimon once asked a question that many thinking observers want to ask: "Why would people have trotted out into the wilderness to hear that?"

In an article in Pulpit Resource, Willimon answered his own question: "Weird John had a simple message...You can change."

It is important, no, it is essential that we realize that John did not promise that people could change on their own or that he would change them. He baptized with water. The "Spirit-baptizer" was still coming. Water is a symbol of purifying and new life, but the Spirit of holiness is a symbol of purity and power. The Spirit is the very power of God--enabling us--He can and will change us...if we want Him to. But remember the sage advice to be careful what you pray for. If, as the kids say, you "really, truly" want God to change you, get ready for a shocker!

Most of us don't "really, truly" want change. Like Herod, we find John's message disturbing, rather than "good" news. We moan and groan about the status quo, we blame others for what is wrong and we even blame somebody else for our lack of faithfulness and meanness. We backbite and criticize and find fault and then complain because "everybody" is unhappy and nobody likes us, but we don't really want anything to change because, inevitably, we have to change.

Repentance demands change and change demands repentance. Ultimately, and this may be the toughest part, we must humble ourselves and seek freedom from and forgiveness for the past. And that will not come unless we are ready to free and forgive those who are part of it.

The theologian Hans Kung urged preachers to follow in the footsteps of John and Jesus--their preaching had repentance as a common theme. Kung said: "We must entice people from the world to God...to live in the everyday world inspired by the radical obedience that is demanded by the love of God. The church must be reformed again and again, converted again and again each day, in order that it may fulfill its task." There is no better time for this than our annual preparation for Christmas. Weird John comes barging into our lessons every year at this time and, if we will let him, he will barge into our lives and promise that when God's Messiah comes, stands at the door and knocks, calls our names and is born among us, we can change!

With the beauty of the decorations, the nostalgia, sweetness and wonder of the music, the awesome reality of Christmas can escape us. The God who whistles galaxies into being simply because He wants to becomes a finite, dependent and fragile human infant. The audacity of it sometimes fails to smack us between the eyes. The sheer immensity and inestimable magnificence of the love behind such an astonishing act barely touches us. Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, once offered a prayer that has a place on all our lips at this gentle and sentimental time: "O Lord Jesus Christ...save us from the error of wishing to admire You instead of being willing to follow You and resemble You."

The most amazing thing at Christmas is, as always, the most amazing thing we can ever hear about-- God's amazing grace. The Word of God that shatters darkness into light and creates marvels out of nothing became incarnate and, of all things, was fleshed-out as a little baby, born in a barn and nestled into a feeding box for animals. Thousands of people can't bring themselves to believe that-- it's too outlandish, too fairytale-like, too silly. But believing that little piece of amazement is child's play in comparison to believing why He did it. He did it for the very people who can't believe it. He did it for you and me, the mumbling and bumbling creatures who are so afraid of letting Him change us into all that He can see and we can be.

Way back at the beginning of this devotion, I said it was interesting that Mark calls his work the "beginning" of the Gospel of Jesus. I even noted one of the interesting facts. It is most interesting, however, because it reminds us that the Gospel of Jesus has still only begun. We are still involved in being and bringing His Good News. Like John the Baptizer, it also reminds us that this time of year, which always seems to ask us what we want to get, is really a time to work on what we want to be.

## Third Sunday in Advent – December 15, 2002

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**Rejoice! Pray! Give Thanks!**

- [Isaiah 61:1-3](#)
- [1 Thessalonians 5:16-24](#)
- [John 1:6-8](#)

In an article for "The Clergy Journal," Ronald H. Love told a story about Ethel Bovey of Martinsburg, West Virginia. She had an experience one Christmas season that can enrich our spiritual preparation during this Holy time. She was turning out all the lights and extinguishing all the candles in her home, getting ready to retire for the night. Thinking she had completed the job when she switched off the hall light, she turned and looked back. Expecting the room to be dark, she was surprised to see the room illumined by a soft glow. She had forgotten to turn off one light...the tiny bulb inside the manger in the stable scene on her mantle.

Ethel stood there, thinking how she had always taken the trouble to turn it on and to turn it off again, but could hardly even see it when all the lights on the tree and those in the room were on. Now, she admired how that one tiny bulb lit up the entire room.

The incident became a kind of modern parable for Ethel. We are often distracted by the glitz and dazzle, as well as the necessities of life, and fail to see, or perhaps to stop and look for the guiding light of Jesus. It is an especially appropriate parable when we realize that in our darkest moments, the light, which is always there, begins to shine the brightest.

John the Baptizer is not one of the characters placed in our manger scenes. He would have been only a baby at the time of the Lord's birth. But, if we were to make a scene, from some assumed moment after the Lord's birth when Mary and her cousin Elizabeth were together, would we put a light in John's crib as well as in Jesus'? According to this Sunday's Gospel lesson, that would be thoroughly inappropriate: "He himself (John) was not the light. He came only as a witness to the light."

United States Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., once said, "The secret of my success is that at an early age I discovered I was not God." That was also the secret of John's success, but he hardly kept it a secret. His testimony was consistent: "I am not the Christ...I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'... But among you stands One you do not know. He is the One who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

When Queen Victoria lay dying, a member of the royal household wondered if she would be happy in heaven. Edward, the Prince of Wales, is reported to have said: "I don't know. She will have to walk behind the angels and she won't like that."

Are we willing to walk behind the angels and to say with John the Baptizer that we are not even worthy to be the lowliest of servants at the feet of Jesus? John's humility is a powerful contrast to the uppity attitude of the priests, Levites and Pharisees who question him in Sunday's Gospel lesson. They want to know who he is and by what authority he speaks and acts. They ask if he is someone of note--the

Messiah, Elijah or "the prophet" (an anticipated successor to Moses). Answering each case specifically, John said he was none of these. The haughty attitude of the questioners is revealed when they imply that, if he is none of these and, therefore, no one of importance, what earthly good is his baptism and preaching?

Many scholars suggest that Sunday's Epistle lesson is a summary statement of the entire First Letter to the Thessalonians. It opens with three imperatives, but Paul clearly sees them not as a set of requirements, but as possibilities with the power of God's Spirit. He says, "Rejoice always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." Confirmation students and other young people might find fault with Paul saying we should do one thing "always" and something else "continually." I can hear them now, saying, "If we are always rejoicing, we can't also be continually praying or giving thanks." Some would joke: "When are we supposed to eat, or go to the bathroom?"

It is obvious that Paul is talking about developing an air of prayer and an attitude of gratitude. He urges us to let the Spirit fill us with the joy of our salvation, so much so that it runs over and pours out in a rejoicing, praying and thanking attitude and life. It becomes clear that Paul sees this way of living to be something quite different from, and far more fulfilling than the narrow religious activity that was so prevalent in his day and remains in our own.

We do not rejoice only on cue, like little dogs trained to bark in time with music. We do not pray only on certain days and at certain times, or when the pastor intones the magical words, "Let us pray." We do not give thanks simply because it is the fourth Thursday in November and the President of the United States declared we should do so.

Far from being required religious activities, these fruits of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives give a special ring to our thoughts, melody to our voices and rhythm to our steps. When spirits of rejoicing, praying and thanksgiving are present, the imps of carping, quibbling and bragging are absent. There is no such thing as a joyful crab or a prayerful braggart. Thankfulness requires humility and precludes both extremes of egocentricity--self-abasement and self-aggrandizement.

John the Baptizer openly confessed what he was not--not the Messiah, not Elijah, not the prophet. But he also joyfully acknowledged what he was--a voice of one calling in the desert, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" There is an aridity of good news, a dearth of joy and an abundance of sorrow and evil in our day. In this desert, voices of rejoicing and thanksgiving are desperately needed.

We need voices like John's--intruding, disrupting, but ultimately joy-eliciting prophetic voices. We need voices to remind us that God Almighty has come to repossess this world and all its inhabitants, enthralled as they might be with idols and lost in sin and death.

It is one thing to be aware of evil. It is another to be obsessed with it. Malevolence has become so common in television and movie making, to say nothing of every newspaper and newscast, that we are becoming numb to it, if not accepting of it. Voices of rejoicing, prayer and thanksgiving are too-long silent. Let us raise them! Let's delete the negatives that lurk in our own hearts and minds, waiting to jump to our lips, and fill our lips and lives with the love of God and the joy of the Lord! Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you!

Like the tiny bulb in Ethel Bovey's crèche, the Light is there and it is sufficient to fill our thoughts and lives, homes and communities--especially if, one by one, we start shutting off the distractions that surround it and us. The darkness of the world sought to overcome and snuff out Jesus' light from the moment He came. Just as the religious leaders--the very people who should have known--could not figure out or accept who John was, so they could not understand or accept Jesus.

They did everything they could to confuse and renounce His teaching, and eventually resorted to murder in order to extinguish His Light. But that Light could not be held and hidden in a grave. It burst out in resurrected brilliance and it continues to shine both on and through you and me and all who believe. Can you see it? Can your neighbor? Can you hear the voice of rejoicing and thanksgiving? Can anyone else?

The priests, Levites and Pharisees had literally dogmatized God. They had overly understood, flattened and reduced Him to their own size until, when He came into their midst, they couldn't recognize Him. Perhaps we, too, are unaware and ignorant of the One right within our midst--One, as John says, we do not know. It is Advent--time to abandon conditioned expectations and conventional categories--time to watch and get ready for the One we do not know, but Who knows us and loves us with an everlasting love. "Rejoice always! Pray continually! Give thanks in all circumstances!"

## Fourth Sunday in Advent – December 22, 2002

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### "With a Body from Mary and a Heart from Heaven"

- [Second Samuel 7:1-11](#)
- [Romans 16:25-27](#)
- [Luke 1:26-38](#)

In "Signposts in a Strange Land," Walker Percy wrote: "Life is a mystery; love is a delight. Therefore, I take it as axiomatic that one should settle for nothing less than infinite mystery and infinite delight, i.e., God." In last week's Gospel lesson, John the Baptizer was quoted as referring to "One you do not know." He was talking about Jesus. We must be very careful--especially at this time of year, when we are so familiar with the Bible stories of Christmas--not to think we know everything there is to know about Jesus. As a matter of fact, we are well advised to clear our brains of conventional wisdom and get ready for the surprises of God--the mystery of the eternal, almighty and infinite, who is always showing up where He is least expected and doing the last thing anyone might think.

When God called the prophets of old, their response was almost always something like: "What? Who, me? There must be some mistake." In this Sunday's Gospel lesson, a poor woman from a backwater town in Galilee has a similar reaction when the angel Gabriel drops in with some good news. Nazareth was one of the poorest towns in a desperately poor region of the world. One of Jesus' disciples would later cast aspersions on it that ring of the kind of silly prejudice that is still common today: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" The woman who receives the message is surprised. The place is certainly unexpected and the time is when many had already given up on the promise ever being fulfilled.

William Willimon once described the time as follows: "God's people have been quivering with anticipation for the advent of God into their world. Scholars have been poring over the Scriptures for centuries, looking for cues. Wise men have been scouring the heavens for some sign, some signal that God is coming. Then at last, with a flutter of wings and a cloud of mystery, God's messenger, Gabriel, rushes earthward with a message, an announcement directly from God. And where does angel Gabriel go? 'To a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph.' We know Washington, we know Rome, but who knows Nazareth? We know Caesar. We've heard of Augustus. But who in the world is this Mary, this Joseph?"

Because of her station and her poverty, most people in her society, as well as our own, would consider Mary--the--ordinary to be disfavored--without power or influence. Yet, she is visited by one of only two angels in the entire Scriptures who are named, and that famous messenger greets her as, "highly favored!"

Mary is incredulous. She has a couple problems with the message. First, like the prophets of old, it seems incomprehensible that this should happen to her. She is no one of note. She is not deserving. She is a humble "handmaiden" of the Lord. Her description of herself is that of a female slave. The second problem is physical and moral: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Gabriel assures her that God's favor rests on her. This message is pure Gospel--Good News of the undeserved favor of God! Then the angel assures her that God is quite capable of fulfilling His promises: "The Holy Spirit will

come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

Leonard Sweet wrote that our typical manger scenes and pictorial images of the holy night, which came some nine months after this announcement, are pretty unrealistic and antiseptic: "It speaks to our lack of faith in the possibility of ordinary sacredness and ordinary miracles that we feel compelled to depict Mary on her knees worshiping the newborn Jesus as though He were some tiny deity that had magically materialized in her face. What we need to envision is an ordinary Mary looking pale and wan, disheveled and exhausted, but with her face transformed by joy and love as she snuggles the tiny baby Jesus tightly against her. Mary didn't gaze in respectful reverence at her newborn child. She cuddled Him, counted all His fingers and toes, chuckled at the hair He did or didn't have and wondered over the softness of His skin...Jesus was not some glow in the dark Christ-child. Jesus was the very God incarnate."

Sweet went on to say that Jesus was likewise a thoroughly ordinary child as all human children are. He was a living, crying, cooing, sleeping, eating, wetting, messing baby. And just as with all babies, His greatest need was to be held in human arms, touched by human hands, soothed by human words of love and reassurance. Then Sweet wrote something that may be the most important words any of us could read right now: "At Christmas we are all called to birth and cradle Christ in our own lives--to wrap our arms around our faith."

It was Christmas morning when a soldier finished his sentry duty. In years past, he had always gone to his home church on Christmas day. Now, in the outlying areas of London, that would not be possible. Lonely, and feeling the hollowness of holiday longings that would go unfulfilled, he and some buddies walked down the road leading to the city. They soon came to an old graystone building. Carved above the main entrance were the words, "Queen Anne's Orphanage." The soldiers decided to find out what the kids were doing for Christmas, so they knocked on the door. A matron came and, following greetings and the like, she explained that the children there were war orphans whose parents had been killed in the bombings.

As it was still early morning, the children were just tumbling out of their beds. The soldiers noticed immediately that there was no Christmas tree and there were no presents to be seen anywhere. They moved around the room wishing the children a Merry Christmas and offering whatever gifts they could find in their pockets: a stick of chewing gum, a Life Saver, a nickel or dime, a pencil, a pocket knife, a good luck charm. The soldier noticed a little fellow standing alone in the corner, who looked a lot like his own nephew back home. The soldier went to him and asked, "And you, little guy, what do you want for Christmas?" The lad replied without hesitation, "Will you hold me?" With tears brimming his eyes, the soldier picked up the boy, nestled him in his arms, and held him close.

What had begun, for that soldier, as his worst and most forgettable Christmas became one of the best and most memorable. There is a Nigerian Ibo proverb that says, "It is the heart that gives; the fingers just let go." Jesus entered our world with a body from Mary and a heart from heaven. From that heart would come all the self-giving love a world desperately needs and that body would not be spared the cost of giving it.

Gabriel's message began with Mary but it most assuredly did not end there. You and I and all who know and believe in the God who overflows His favor where it is least deserved and least expected

are also recipients of the phrase, "Greetings, you who are highly favored." With flesh still steeped in sin, but spirits being made over by God, we stand in awe of the mystery still being unlocked, the secret becoming disclosed. We worship a hands-on God, not one who holds us at arms length, but Emmanuel...God with us.

After Gabriel came to her, Mary-the-ordinary would never be ordinary again. Her life would be changed forever. Sometimes I look at myself in a kind of dismay, but when I look seriously at the people of the Bible I find we have much in common. Thomas Mann said we are tangles of ambiguity, sometimes good, sometimes bad, sometimes kind, sometimes mean, sometimes faithful, sometimes faithless, but the more amazing mystery is God. For it is precisely to be with us as imperfect men and women, that God has come in Christ.

In 1849, a musician in New England wrote the first Christmas carol with positive social implications. Richard Storrs Willis witnessed the exploiting of children in the industrial revolution. He was saddened by families who were deserted by fathers who left to prospect gold. He knew that the unrest between North and South was about to erupt in war. He wrote his hymn in the hope that those who took its message to heart would avert and turn around these disastrous trends:

"It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old,  
From angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold:  
'Peace on the earth, goodwill to men, from heaven's all gracious king!'  
The world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing.

And you, beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low,  
Who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow,  
Look now, for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing;  
Oh rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing!"

**First Sunday after Christmas - None Available**

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## First Sunday After the Epiphany – January 12, 2003

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### "I Am Well-Pleased With You"

- [Isaiah 42:1-7](#)
- [Acts 10:34-38](#)
- [Mark 1:4-11](#)

This Sunday in the Church Year is called, "The Baptism of Our Lord." Jesus was baptized by His cousin John. The Baptizer urged people to give up their old ways and turn over a new leaf. As a sign of that change, he urged them to wash away their past and greet the future with a fresh clean start. John's baptizing was not the same as the Baptism that his Cousin would institute. John knew that and said as much. John's baptism was an action of the one baptized--a visible sign or symbol of the inward repentance and change. John compelled, well, actually he ordered, his listeners to repent and change their ways.

Christian Baptism is different. In confirmation classes for both children and adults, I emphasized that the Sacrament of Holy Baptism is an act of God, not of the one baptized. It is a sacrament, not a sacrifice. I taught each confirmand to remember four acts of God in Baptism: "God begins or strengthens my faith. God forgives my sins. God makes me a member of His Church. God claims me as His child." I am not denying that God gave any or all of these things to those who submitted to John's baptism. In fact, in one of his baptisms, God definitely did the last of these four acts. When John baptized Jesus, a voice from heaven said, "You are my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Imagine for a moment, being in John's audience that day--listening to him preach, perhaps considering giving into his demands. When Jesus approached, John immediately identified Him as the One he had been proclaiming. Jesus wanted to be baptized. John at first refused, wanting instead to be baptized by Jesus. John knew that Jesus had no need of repentance, but Jesus saw John's baptism as a way of putting Himself completely under the law--a law He had every right to stand above. John eventually understood and did his part. Then, suddenly, a dove appeared and that voice startled everyone. What would you think? How would you feel? Can you imagine or fantasize the sound of the voice? Have you heard it before?

If you are baptized, then, in a very real sense, you have heard that voice. God said, "You are my daughter," or "You are my son." He said it to you. What is perhaps even more remarkable is the second part: "I am well-pleased with you." That may seem hard to believe but it's true. In your Baptism, God did all those things for you, even declaring His great pleasure with you. What has happened since then? Do you suppose He is still "well-pleased?"

Some of the early Christians almost feared Baptism. Emperor Constantine was so afraid that he couldn't live up to being a child of God that he postponed being baptized until his deathbed. He and many others were worried. They knew that sinners could be reconcile and brought into the Church through Baptism, but since no one could be baptized more than once, what if Christians themselves fell away?

We are all aware that it happens. Thomas Huxley, the British essayist, said that his wife looked upon their children's Baptism "as a kind of spiritual vaccination without which the youngsters might catch sin in worse forms as they grow up." It doesn't work that way. Baptism is not an anti-delinquency insurance policy. As a matter of fact, Adolf Hitler and Al Capone were both baptized. Joseph Stalin was baptized in the Russian Orthodox Church—he attended school in a seminary.

In his book, *Remember Who You Are*, William Willimon told the following story and added an observation: "The other day I helped a minister baptize two people. One person was a man about 30 years old. He had been converted to the faith a short time before and was now being baptized. The other person was a 3-month-old baby girl, child of parents active in the church. First the minister baptized the baby. After he baptized her, he took her in his arms and said to her, 'Mary, we have baptized you and have received you into the church. God loves you and has great plans for your life. But you will need the rest of us to tell you the Story and, from time to time, to remind you who you are, and to keep you in God's family. We are going to specially appoint some of our members to guide you and watch over you as you grow in faith. And all of us promise to adopt you as a sister in Christ.'

"Then the minister baptized the man. After he baptized him, he had him stand before the church and said to him, 'Tom, we have baptized you and have received you into the church. God loves you and has great plans for your life. But you will need the rest of us to tell you the Story and, from time to time, to remind you who you are, and to keep you in God's family. We are going to specially appoint some of our members to guide you and watch over you as you grow in faith. And all of us promise to adopt you as a brother in Christ.'

"The promises of Baptism, the burdens placed upon the baptizers, the evangelistic Word of grace, the loving action of God, the demand for lifelong response are the same for all--no matter what the age of the one who is baptized. So, at whatever age we enter those graceful waters, we emerge rising from darkness to light, from loneliness to community, as fragile and dependent as a newborn baby, needing the love and warmth of God's human family."

Did you know that in some countries if children disown or publicly disclaim their parents, they cannot receive an inheritance even if the parents want to leave it to them? The fear of the early Christians was unwarranted--while it is always possible for us to refuse our relationship with God and any inheritance from Him, it is not God who disinherits us. He has a place in His Kingdom for any child who returns home--it doesn't matter how far we have wandered. God did not disinherit Jesus when He was found guilty of insurrection and, worse yet, blasphemy. He will not disinherit us either.

(My mother has gone on to greener pastures, but if she were still alive I know the following would be true of her as well as I'm certain it is true for my father.) If I were to disown my father, it would not mean that he is not my father. I know, beyond any doubt, that it would not mean he no longer would love me. It would mean that I had cut myself off from that love. But that love would always be there for me if I returned to it! In Baptism God says definitively, clearly, eternally, "You are my child--I am well-pleased with you."

A variant reading in the accounts of Jesus' Baptism reads, "You are my beloved Son on whom my favor rests." It all makes sense that God would be pleased with His own Son. In addition, Jesus' contemporaries would recognize Him as a man among men--obedient to God in all respects, one of

those rare people you can describe as genuinely good, thoroughly loving God and others. It only makes sense that God would speak approval of Him.

The word "favor," however, introduces a completely different point of reference. It is perhaps the most heavily freighted theological expression in the Bible. It does not refer to the qualifications of the receiver, but to an all-encompassing attitude of the Giver. God's favor--often translated "grace"--is a totally undeserved, totally free gift of His love. That is how we are equally qualified with Jesus for the good pleasure of our Father. Our recognition of that approval is a life-changing event!

The true story is told of a school principal who highly commended a new teacher for the incredible progress her class was making. She replied that this was hardly surprising, considering the high IQ numbers of the children. The numbers turned out to be those of their storage lockers! She had thought of the students and treated them as having exceptional intelligence. They responded accordingly.

Because Jesus took our place...because He took our punishment...because He died for us, we can now, by faith, stand before God dressed in His righteousness. In other words, God looks at us and, seeing the righteousness of His own Son, He literally is well-pleased with us! This is God's gift to us. We may foolishly push it away, but it will still be His gift to us anytime we stop pushing and believe.

Paul Tillich said, "Accept the fact that you are accepted." Christian Baptism is the seal of God's approval. You don't have to qualify for this course. You don't need some prerequisite. You don't have to earn, beg, borrow or steal your way in. You're in! You've received the gift! With this recognition, one of the most renowned interpreters of the amazing favor of God, St. Augustine, said that when you love God you can fully do what you please.

## Second Sunday After the Epiphany – January 19, 2003

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### "Come And See"

- [1 Samuel 3: 1-10](#)
- [1 Corinthians 6:12-20](#)
- [John 1:43-51](#)

On my way home one evening, I heard a fascinating news report. A man on a motorcycle was driving recklessly, perhaps showing off, and ran his bike directly into the front of a new Porsche. Apparently, he was uninjured because he jumped up from the ground and immediately ran away, with the police and the owner of the Porsche in hot pursuit. The disc jockey making the report quickly added, "I'll bet he hopes that the police catch up with him first!"

The story reminded me of another Porsche owner in California. He owned a 1961 Porsche, a collector's item. Old Porsches appreciate in value rather than depreciate. The man had his old Porsche restored at considerable cost. It took seven months because some parts came from Germany and some even had to be retooled. When the great day came with word from the garage that his '61 Porsche was finished, the man decided to pick it up at lunch time and drive it home to surprise his wife.

After lunch he was anxious to get back to the office and show his colleagues his beautiful classic car. But as he was backing out of his driveway, his neighbor across the street was backing out in his El Cortez motor home. They met in the middle of the street with a horrible sound of crunching metal. He called a tow truck to take the car back to the garage for several thousand dollars more repairs and four more months of waiting.

When he retrieved the car the second time he was more cautious. He resisted the temptation to take the car on an overnight trip he and his wife had planned. Instead, they took the family station wagon and left the Porsche safely in the driveway. While they were gone, their daughter's boyfriend came over, saw the restored car and wanted to inspect it. He lifted up the front hood, which was actually a luggage compartment housing the battery, spare tire and, in this case, some tire chains. Nosing around, he thoughtlessly placed the chains where they touched the battery, causing a short and heating up the chains.

When the parents returned, they saw smoke coming from the front end of the Porsche. The man ran over and lifted the hood, thus allowing oxygen to ignite the smoldering tire. It burst into flames and ruined the front end of the car. He called the tow truck to get it back to the garage.

He got the car back the third time and was driving along the freeway when the hood, which had been removed, repaired, repainted and improperly reinstalled, flew open. It demolished the windshield before it went sailing over the top of the car onto the freeway. This time he did not have to call the tow truck. He simply drove to the garage.

Shortly after getting it out of the garage for the fourth time, the man drove the Porsche home and noticed that his daughter's friend had his Volkswagen van parked in the driveway. He pulled

behind, stopped and was getting out to ask the boy to move so he could enter the garage when the boy put the van into reverse and backed into the front end of the Porsche.

There are some people to whom things seem bound to happen—people who always seem to be in the direct line of fantastic "happenings"—some humorous, some poignant, some trivial, some decisive.

In the New Testament, Peter seemed to be that kind of person. If it was going to happen, it was going to happen to Peter. Perhaps Peter's genuine openness brought that on. He was usually open to new things and possibilities. If he were not, he would, with similar openness, tell you. Most of all, he was open about himself—his beliefs, ideals, even his faults. Most of the disciples seem to have had at least a little of that openness.

In John's account of the calling of the disciples, most of them seem ready to follow. They also jump into action. Andrew met Jesus and immediately went to tell Peter. Philip was called and immediately went to find Nathanael. Nathanael, on the other hand, had a little of Peter's bluntness. He asked, "What good can come from Nazareth?"

Philip's response is one of the greatest short sentences ever spoken. But before I go into that, let's take a look at another person to whom great things seemed to happen. Sunday's Old Testament lesson is the story of a young boy who heard the voice of God. The historian, Josephus, estimated Samuel's age as 12 when it first happened. A priest named Eli was raising Samuel. The boy slept in the tabernacle near a box that was made famous again by a Steven Spielberg movie. Many people believed God sort of lived in that box. Some would think that, at his impressionable age, and in regular proximity to the Ark of the Covenant, Samuel would have been open to anything God might do.

The Bible tells us, however, "In those days the Word of the Lord was seldom heard, and no vision was granted." Alexander Pope once made a brilliant observation that some of us never learn anything because we understand too soon. When God first called out to Samuel and awoke him from his sleep near the Ark, the boy assumed the obvious. He went immediately to Eli to see what the old priest wanted. Eli said he had not called the boy and sent him back to bed.

It takes some of us a long time to catch on to what is happening. We often speak without thinking, wish without acting, hear without listening. Maybe you recall the story about the guide who escorted a group on a tour of the British Museum. He pointed at a sarcophagus and said, "That Egyptian mummy is over 5,000 years old. It is possible that Moses saw it." One of the tourists blurted out, "I never knew Moses was ever in London!"

God called to Samuel two more times, and both times he went immediately to Eli. The third time was the charm for Eli. He was open to the possibility that God was calling young Samuel. He told the boy to go and lie down again and, "If He calls again, say, 'Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening.'"

Samuel was the right person, in the right place, at the right time. You don't have to be in church to hear God speak, but it helps. Samuel went on to become one of the greatest prophets in Israel's history. Whenever he spoke a Word from God, you could count on it. It is interesting that God would start right out with a 12-year-old boy. Why not start with Eli, a well-known and reputable priest, and then have him pass the mantle on to Samuel when the boy had become a man?

It is conceivable, no matter how unlikely we might think it, that God would call out to us one day. To whom would we run and, like Samuel, say, "Yes, what did you want?" As a matter of fact, I firmly believe that God calls each of us to accomplish some part of His work in the world. Many of us don't hear. Many times we hear but don't listen. In 2003, make it a point to regularly turn down or off the buzz of your life and say, "Speak, Lord, Your servant is listening." You don't have to be in church to find out what He has to say or wants you to do, but it might help.

Begin by actively seeking God's Word and will. I am convinced that the biggest hindrances to hearing God's Word today are: not being where we can hear it; not actively listening for it; and assuming He couldn't mean us when we do hear it. If you are convinced that you are the most unlikely person in the world that God would ever call for something, then you are probably at the top of His list.

The British Prime Minister Disraeli once said about his rival Gladstone: "He has not one redeeming defect." What a nifty turn of a phrase, and what truth it reveals! That's why God chooses a 12-year-old Samuel, a blundering Simon Peter, a quiet Andrew, a questioning Philip, a blunt Nathanael, rather than some righteous Pharisee. The insufferable Pharisees wouldn't admit any defects. The disciples were open about their imperfections and shortcomings. They didn't waste time going through Pharisaical denial, using time and energy on the hamster-wheel of getting nowhere.

How many lost persons do you believe you could find for Christ this year? Do you think none, because you don't know what to say to them or because of a dozen other reasons?

Let's go back to Philip and Nathanael. When Nathanael shot back with his slur on Nazareth and anyone who might come from there, Philip gave him the invitation of a lifetime. Philip was no great speaker. He had no convincing arguments. He didn't even know the Gospel yet himself! He just said, "Come and see." That much you and I can do--over and over and over again. Bring someone else to Jesus. Let Jesus take it from there.

## Third Sunday After the Epiphany – January 26, 2003

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### "Here's Hoping..."

- [Jonah 3:1–5, 10](#)
- [First Corinthians 7:29–31](#)
- [Mark 1:14–20](#)

People who know me will not be surprised to hear that I have many failings. Perhaps the largest of these is my tendency to do what should be done only when it has to be done. I actually do most of my work early, but I can put off unpleasant things almost indefinitely. I thought about joining a "Procrastinators' Club" one time, but I never got around to it.

Once or twice a year I clean an unbelievable pile of stuff off my desk. It is not that I am a sloppy person (at least I don't think so). It is that I keep finding something I want to do or read or follow-up. I can't take the time right then, because I already have a deadline for something else, so I "put it on my desk" where I can get to it later. The strange thing is that it still pains me months later to give up on the idea or throw it away, because it still looks like it would have been good or interesting or even important.

Like most people, much of my life is regimented. I have to be in this place at this time and that place at that time. All too often, I should be in two places at the same time. I need a double so that someone will do this while I go on vacation or even take a work-related trip. I'll be taking a little trip soon...here's hoping all goes well this time.

"Here's hoping"--that is an interesting phrase. Apart from not having time to get things done, not having hope is probably the biggest hindrance to progress. With the exception of those hoped-for accomplishments that we simply neglect because of "squeakier wheels," few hopes are not actively sought. More people suffer from no hope than from hopes that are too high.

Jacque Ellul, French theologian and social critic, wrote a book that, for a time, became something of a classic in some church circles. His premise in "Hope in Time of Abandonment" was that the agenda of the church today should be to preach hope. While Ellul agreed with Paul that the three primary thrusts of Christianity are faith, hope and (the greatest) love, he contended that the church has concentrated on faith and love, while largely neglecting hope.

The Frenchman believed that the world is suffering today because of this neglect. He saw the first symptoms in the "beat" generation of the sixties and seventies, particularly in their lifestyle of futility and noninvolvement. He saw it in the "Death of God" movement...the hopeless theology that God was no longer interested in the world. Evidences of despair continued into the drug culture with its code of shoot-it-up today--why wait for nuclear annihilation!

In his preface, Jacques Ellul said that for years, he had wanted to write a book on "The Age of Abandonment." It seemed to him that both society and the church had reached the point described in Scripture when God turns His back and is silent. But when he came to elaborate this theme, Ellul found

himself inexplicably writing on the theme of hope, despite the fact that his analysis of society remained unchanged. Like many of the psalmists, Jacques Ellul saw that in the greatest silence we hear God's voice of hope.

Hal Lindsey is not one of my favorite authors, but now and then every prospector finds a gem. In his book, "The Terminal Generation," Lindsey shared this one: "We can live about 40 days without food, about three days without water, about eight minutes without air...but only about a second without hope. Nothing is more essential to life than hope; without it we may be breathing, but we're dead."

Erich Fromm, shared this gem in "The Revolution of Hope":

"Hope is paradoxical. It is neither passive waiting nor is it unrealistic forcing of circumstances that cannot occur. It's like a crouched tiger, which will jump only when the moment for jumping has come.... To hope means to be ready at every moment for that which is not yet born, and yet not become desperate if there is no birth in our lifetime. There is no sense in hoping for that which already exists or for that which cannot be. Those whose hope is weak settle for comfort or for violence; those whose hope is strong see and cherish all signs of new life and are ready every moment to help the birth of that which is ready to be born."

In Sunday's Gospel lesson, Mark tells us that after John the Baptizer was arrested, Jesus began preaching the Gospel in Galilee by saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the Gospel." According to Mark, Jesus then invited Simon and Andrew to join Him on His men-fishing expedition, and "at once" they followed Him. Down the line a bit, "without delay" He extended a similar invitation to James and John. They, too, drop everything and follow Him.

In all honesty, Mark seems to have a real love for the word translated "immediately," "at once," "without delay" or, as it is in the King James translation, "straightaway," but doesn't it sound a little like the leaping of Fromm's hopeful tiger?

I know that fishermen are by nature hopeful sorts, but the hope that makes these four tigers pounce on Jesus' invitation is a hope born of God. When Jesus said the kingdom of God was at hand, they were apparently ready to be part of it.

They had no way of knowing that their hopes would be dashed to pieces on the rocks of Golgotha. They could not understand that the Hope of all mankind would hang on a cross and die. They could not even guess that Jesus would suffer in innocence so that they would be forgiven all guilt. They had no way to prepare for the surprise of God that Jesus would not only die in disgrace and indignity, but also rise in triumphant victory. But they put their hope in God and that hope is never in vain.

If I differ with Jacques Ellul, it is not with his observation that our generation is short on hope. It is rather with his conclusion that faith, hope and love can be separated like breakfast, lunch and supper...that you can seek one or the other depending on the time of the day or the era of history. For the Christian all three are bound together in a dependent relationship.

The Christian life starts with God's love. With sufficient exposure to it, we come to trust Him. That faith results again in our love for Him and each other. With sufficient faith in God's goodness and an

appropriate amount of love to motivate us, we have hope in the present and for the future. As a result of our hope that things can and will be better, we act to make it happen (or is it that we pounce).

Many years ago a barge sank in New York harbor. It settled to the Hudson River bottom and became embedded in the mud. The owners wanted to retrieve the expensive piece of equipment, so they brought in gigantic floating cranes. The monstrous cranes pulled until their power failed, but the mud sucked on the barge, clung to it like glue and held it...stuck in the muck. No man-made device could provide the power to pull it free.

Then a tugboat captain came up with an idea. Deep-sea divers attached cables to the sunken vessel. The other ends of the lines were fastened to a number of boats and empty barges and at low tide all the slack was taken in. When the tide started to rise, the bulging power of the Atlantic Ocean began relentlessly to buoy up those vessels until the sunken barge was pulled free and could be raised to the surface.

Our lives can become embedded in the mire of depression, despair and hopelessness. If it is deep and sticky enough, human efforts will likely be useless. Only hope inspired by faith, motivated by love and empowered with the irrepressible strength of God can pull us loose and bring us to the surface of life. One Psalmist said it this way:

"I waited patiently for the Lord; He inclined to me and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay; He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. And He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God" (Psalm 40:1-3).

## Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany – February 2, 2003

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### "The people were amazed at His teaching"

- [Deuteronomy 18:15-20](#)
- [1 Corinthians 8:1-13](#)
- [Mark 1:21-28](#)

Abraham Lincoln, whose birth we soon celebrate, is supposed to have said, "There is only one way to bring up a child in the way he should go, and that is to travel the way yourself." The Old Testament lesson for Sunday is the account of Moses relating to Israel God's promise to raise up a prophet to follow him. God told Moses, "I will raise up for them a prophet like you, one of their own race, and I will put my words into his mouth." Joshua was the prophet who followed Moses. "Joshua" is a Hebrew name for Jesus. More than a thousand years later another Jesus fulfilled the prophecy in the extreme-- God traveled the way Himself.

Sunday's Gospel lesson contains a very common narrative about Jesus' earthly activities: "He went to the synagogue and began to teach." Jesus taught truth--God's very Word--life-altering reality. His manner of teaching made a deep impression on His hearers and people came great distances to hear Him. Jesus' words were backed up with His example, deeds and whole personality. He did not simply interpret what others said, but spoke with authority. Even as regards our knowledge of the journey into death, Jesus traveled the way before us...and for us.

Some of those who came to see and hear Jesus were only curious. Because they only sampled God's Word, they never acquired a taste for it. On the other hand, many were moved to faith--their lives were changed and, as they fed on Jesus' teachings, they hungered for more and more. At the top of this list were the disciples. They seldom left Jesus' side. Three of them were with Him at nearly every significant moment of His adult life. Almost nothing could keep them away.

We are Jesus' disciples today. In contrast to the inner circle of the Twelve and the mass of folks who followed Him faithfully, most Christians today are satisfied to be samplers. Calling themselves Christians and church members, most are absent from worship more Sundays than they are present. A great majority never attends Sunday school or Bible class. Of those who do attend, some are still only samplers.

We are not in a position to change the behavior of the mass of Christians in the world, not even in America, let alone another country and culture. It will be difficult enough to change ourselves, but that is a change we must pursue. Christian education has deteriorated in our time to be something we do to children until they have been confirmed. Even the responsibility for that has been dumped on a committee and staff of the church.

The people who are the strongest influence in the lives of children, their parents, often teach their children the opposite values of those they are taught in Sunday school and Confirmation class. They want to bring their kids up in the "way they should go," but they don't travel it themselves. They drop the kids at Sunday school or Confirmation class, but do not attend worship or Bible class themselves.

The following is also attributed to Abraham Lincoln:

"Children are going to carry on what you have started. They are going to sit where you are sitting and, when you are gone, attend to those things that you think are important. You may adopt all the policies you please, but how they are carried out depends on them.

"They will assume control of your cities, states and nations. They are going to move in and take over your churches, schools, universities and corporations. All your books are going to be judged, praised or condemned by them. The fate of humanity is in their hands."

The fate of the church is similarly in their hands. We cannot ease up for a moment on our emphasis on Christian education for children. At the same time, the life of the church depends not on the children but on the adults. If there is going to be a church worth handing on to the next generation, then we adults had better get involved in our own Christian education. How can we teach what we do not know? How can we disciple others if we are only half-disciples, tasters? How can we live the Christian life and be examples to others if we only know a smattering of what that life is about.

In the Epistle lesson for Sunday, St. Paul says, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." The context shows that he is basically saying the same thing as that famous quote: "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing."

Many adults in the church have only a little knowledge of the Bible and theology. Years ago someone observed that 90 percent of the children in America between ages six and sixteen could recite a McDonald's jingle listing all the ingredients in a Big Mac. At the same time, less than 10 percent could recite the Lord's prayer or Ten Commandments. I wondered then, and still do, how the folks over 16 would fare in the same examples.

St. Paul's lesson is about idolatry and food offered to idols. The idols of our day are food, fame, fortune and fun. The soldiers of the kingdom are nearly as "4-F" as those who are not. The average American spends more than four times as much money at eating and drinking establishments than at churches. I wonder if any children go to Sunday school with as much money as they need to go to McDonald's?

Two of the greatest people in American history, Helen Keller and Abraham Lincoln were avid learners and superb teachers. Helen Keller tells of the most important day in her life:

"The most important day I remember in all my life is the one on which my teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, came to see me. I am filled with wonder when I consider the immeasurable contrasts between the two lives that it connects. It was the third of March 1887, three months before I was seven years old.

"On the afternoon of that eventful day, I stood on the porch, dumb, expectant. I guessed vaguely from my mother's signs and from the hurrying to and fro in the house that something unusual was about to happen, so I went to the door and waited on the steps.... I did not know what the future held of marvel or surprise for me. Anger and bitterness had preyed upon me continually for weeks and a deep languor had succeeded this passionate struggle.

"Have you ever been at sea in a dense fog, when it seemed as if a tangible white darkness shut you in, and the great ship, tense and anxious, groped her way toward the shore with plummet and sounding-line, and you waited with beating heart for something to happen? I was like that ship before my education began, only I was without compass and had no way of knowing how near the harbor was." I felt approaching footsteps. I held out my hand. Someone took it, and I was caught and held close in the arms of her who was to reveal all things to me, and, above all things else, to love me."

Abraham Lincoln's great, tall stature was never so gigantic as when he stooped down. He seemingly never let himself be too busy to care and his example teaches us as much as his many marvelous words. The struggling lawyer in Springfield once walked by a sobbing little girl on his way to the office. She told him that she was going to take her first train ride to visit relatives, but the expressman had not come for her trunk. Lincoln put the trunk on his shoulder and managed to get passenger and cargo to the train on time.

It seemed less important that the struggling young lawyer was late for work. Years later as President, he went frequently to visit young Civil War casualties in the hospitals. One 16-year-old was mortally wounded. The President took the boy's small, thin hand into his own massive palm and asked, "Is there anything I can do for you?" The boy asked, "Would you write my mother for me?"

Promptly, the President of the United States of America took dictation from a 16-year-old boy. When he had finished, he asked if there was anything else he could do. The boy said, "Won't you stay with me till it's over? It won't be long and I want to hold your hand." Tears streamed down Lincoln's long, homely, but warm face, and it was nearly three hours later that the greathearted President finally went to his office. Over the years, the idols of fame and fortune could not seduce him. If you want some interesting research, learn how Abraham Lincoln continued his education while in the White House and see if you can learn the time of the day he accepted his first appointments.

It may be hard to identify with Helen and Abraham. It is too easy to dismiss their examples because they seem larger than life--too hard an act to follow. Here is a story that illustrates how you and I, average Christian people, can teach and provide examples for others. Faith nurtured in knowledge is a powerful and moving force.

An older lady left Buffalo by boat for Cleveland to visit her daughter. Soon a dreadful storm hit and many of the passengers, fearing death, gathered for prayer. Only the aged lady seemed unconcerned about the tempest as she sat with her hands folded in prayer. After the storm had subsided, some of the passengers were eager to know the secret of her calmness.

They gathered around her and asked her the reason. "Well, it's like this," she said, "I have two daughters. One died and went home to heaven. The other lives in Cleveland. When the storm arose, I wondered which of them I might visit first, and I just left it to the Lord...for I would be glad to see either."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT--"It's no use trying to shine unless you take time to fill your lamp."

## Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany – February 9, 2003

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### "Don't mess with Mr. In-Between"

- [Deuteronomy 18:15-20](#)
- [1 Corinthians 8:1-13](#)
- [Mark 1:21-28](#)

In two years, my oldest grandson will be in third grade. If he wants to play little league basketball and his father wants my help, I may be coaching again. I used to do it all the time. Sometimes I would wonder why a reasonably intelligent and well-educated man would actually choose to add something that time-consuming to an already impossible pastor's time schedule. But I knew why--I love it! I love teaching the boys; I love watching them develop, improve and accomplish. I love molding their minds and attitudes with positive expectations. I love kids.

I remember one time when we played on both Saturday and Sunday, and then had practice Monday. The boys were tired and crabby. They were bickering at each other and demonstrating most of those qualities that clearly identify us, at any age, with sinful and selfish humanity. Talking about sportsmanship, fair play and teamwork at a time like that is a lot like trying to teach a cat to bark.

Individually, any of us can have a bad day, but it is interesting, if not upsetting, that groups of us can at times turn negative. Sadly enough, it sometimes takes very little to get it started. I mentioned being tired that time, but weather can also affect us. When it is cold, gray and dreary day after day, many people are also cold, gray and dreary. Some get downright mean.

Our negative feelings and attitudes may be mostly irrational--motivated primarily by ugly weather, but we never think so at the time. On that Monday night, the kids were complaining and criticizing about things that were true: "You didn't throw me the ball and I was open!"..."Well, you didn't throw it to me the last time!"..."C'mon, you call that defense?"..."For cryin' out loud, you should know the plays by now!"..."You call that a shot?"..."Don't be so stupid; you threw the ball right out of bounds!"

Some of these things happened at every practice and game, but I was usually the only one saying anything critical: "Always pass the ball ahead to an open man."..."Keep your head up--you can't see your teammates when you're looking at the ball."..."Always play defense between your man and the basket."..."Don't get caught out of position."..."Remember now, on play one you go to the right; it's on three that you go the left."..."It's a matter of physics guys--the ball has to be higher than the rim in order to go through it."..."See him out of the corner of your eye before you pass."..."Don't assume he'll be where you last saw him." The players would usually encourage each other, apologize for not seeing an open man, etc.

Do you remember the old song that goes, "You've got to accentuate the positive, Eliminate the negative; Latch on to the affirmative, And don't mess with Mr. In-Between." It is a cute little ditty, with an upbeat rhythm, melody and attitude. The song implies that we can be positive, if we just think positively. There is an element of truth to it, but it simply doesn't work that way. I'm confident that the demons of negativity can possess a meeting of the Optimists as readily as the practice of a fifth grade basketball team.

In this Sunday's Gospel lesson, as in last week's, we find a reference to Jesus casting out demons. We have no way of knowing exactly what was meant in each reference to demonic possession. It is described in various ways. All in all, it seems so distant, ancient and mysterious, that it usually comes off as irrelevant to us. The demons of negativity, however, are not foreign to us at all. Neither is that other demon mentioned in the old song. "Mr. In-Between" possesses too many of us, too often. In fact, some people seem to live their whole lives riding on a line of maybe-so...maybe-not.

I think we are all possessed by this at one time or another. We are not really negative, but we are not really positive either. We will proclaim with Paul, "With God nothing is impossible." Then, perhaps even silently, we add, "But not for me." The answer is not just some change in thinking, like accentuating the positive. One preacher said that, apart from Christ, the old phrase, "Attitude determines altitude" is only a cliché.

Jesus is still casting out demons of negative and in-between thinking and living today. After you have had the flu or a cold and fever, when someone asks how you are doing, do you go into the gory details of being weak, tired, etc.? I've caught myself doing that. It's kind of like wanting to squeak out just a little more negative feeling, or perhaps receive one more cup of tea and sympathy before getting back to the business of living.

At the beginning of Sunday's Gospel lesson, Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law of a fever. This woman could make the "All Madden Team," John Madden's annual selection of 22 tough guys that could play every position on a football team. Peter's mother-in-law got up from her sick bed and, "boom-bam-zap," she was bustling about the house serving Jesus and His disciples. In one of his "Letters And Papers From Prison," Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that Jesus did not call us into a sense of sin, guilt, sickness and shame, but out of it.

The French word "sabot" is the name for the crude wooden shoes worn by French workers. When factory workers were abused more than usual by the owners, they would retaliate by throwing their sabots into the machinery. Voila--a word is born! "Sabotage" stopped the machinery. Minds and lives are sabotaged by the dead wood of negativism and Mr. In-Between.

At the beginning of Mark's Gospel, we find frequent messages from Jesus, hushing those who had been helped or healed, or who had begun to recognize Him. In Sunday's lesson, Jesus silences the released demons because they knew Him. Before the Spirit came, people's minds were sabotaged by misunderstandings and false expectations. Some people still seem to have some of those today. They want to follow Jesus like groupies, pointing to their superstar and claiming a special friendship with Him. The crowds and even the disciples had that problem at the beginning.

Jesus didn't want to be known as a great healer. He shunned the glory of the expected warrior king. His was not the glory of a pharaoh, majestic prince or emperor. His was the glory of the cross--the glory of passionate, seeking, saving and suffering love. He first calls us from the despair of sin and death, but the lives of the redeemed are not suddenly spared any further onslaught of sin, sickness, negative and in-between thinking, or ugly weather. He is still calling us into action--out of defeat and off the fence.

In a sense, we must deny falsehood in order to affirm the truth, we must reject and repent the way of sin if we are to assert the way of faith, but Peter's mother-in-law had the best idea. She got up and went to work. Michelangelo said, "I criticize by creating." The best way for us to criticize unchristian and unproductive lives of negativism and mediocrity is to demonstrate the superior worth of lives guided and empowered by the Spirit.

A little sign has become popular that reads, "I'm not perfect, just forgiven." I love the idea of the statement, but the word "just" annoys me. The horror, beauty and power of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection deny any use of a word like "just," "simply" or "merely." The blood-bought forgiveness that frees us to live in joyful service and love for God and neighbor ought never be described with words that make it seem simple, bland, tepid or mediocre. We are forgiven, redeemed, reconciled and called to live victoriously! Goodbye Mr. In-Between.

## Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany – February 16, 2003

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### "Jesus can make us clean"

- [Second Kings 5:1-14](#)
- [First Corinthians 9:24-27](#)
- [Mark 1:40-45](#)

During His early ministry, preaching and healing people in the villages of Galilee, a man with leprosy or a similar disease of the skin came to Jesus and begged Him on his knees: "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus was moved with compassion and He reached out His hand, touched the man and answered: "I am willing. Be clean!"

The disease immediately left the man and Jesus told him not to tell anyone about it. He added: "Go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing." The man disobeyed Jesus...he told everybody he met. People came flocking to Jesus from everywhere.

The problem was that Jesus wanted to teach and preach. The crowds wanted Him to heal, cast out demons and impress them with miracles.

The man who came to Jesus did not come for a show. He came out of desperation. The Greek word that describes his disease could refer to a number of diseases including leprosy. Whatever it was, a word that implies leprosy strikes terror in even those of us who do not have the problem. Any illness that degenerates and destroys parts of the body is frightening. Jesus was the man's only hope.

I can understand his exuberance after he was healed. Jesus told him not to tell anyone, but he couldn't help himself. He got up that morning being eaten away...for want of a better description...by his disease. Then, suddenly, he was whole, healed, clean.

Have you ever felt like you were being eaten away? Maybe it was not something external. Perhaps guilt, resentment or hatred burned at your insides, eating away at your happiness and well-being. Interestingly, that makes us the very kind of people Jesus was trying to reach. He is still trying to reach them...and us.

Do you suppose it was easier for the man to approach Jesus with his physical ailment than it is for people to come to Jesus with their spiritual flaws and the sickness of sin? In my experience

Few people believe they can overcome cancer, leprosy or the like with their own determination and willpower. But many seem to think they can battle sin, guilt, grudges and all that go with them entirely by their own intestinal fortitude.

The Greek word for Jesus' compassion toward the leper is a word that implies being moved from the intestines. I am sure He has the same compassion for us when we turn to our intestinal fortitude instead of to Him.

I think our comparative reluctance to come to Jesus with the sickness of our sin stems from the fact that we don't have to "come clean" with physical illness in order for Jesus to make us clean. We do need to "come clean" with our sin.

Do we think that Jesus may be so ashamed of us that He won't want to help us? Are we afraid that He will refuse our plea to make us clean? Do we think that He might not be able to handle it? Can it be that our wickedness is greater than His goodness? Is our weakness greater than His power?

Surprisingly, that man in the first century of our Lord openly came to Jesus even though he had no way of knowing whether or not Jesus would help or could help. He came even though he had no idea whatsoever what Jesus might think of him or do to him. He was totally unaware of how much Jesus loved him. He was in the dark.

We live in the light of the Gospel. We know that Jesus' love for us has no limits. We know that there is no expense He would not meet for us, no road He would not travel for us, no cross He would not bear for us. Jesus paid His life for us. He traveled the way from heaven to earth to become one of us and He traveled the road to Golgotha to die for us. He bore the cross and He was nailed to it and died on it...all for us.

The diseased man had nowhere else to turn. Imagine his amazement and delight when Jesus reached out and touched him! How long do you suppose it had been since anyone dared to touch him? Imagine His joy when Jesus did not reject him, but said, "I am willing. Be clean!" Imagine his astonishment when he was immediately healed. It is no wonder he couldn't keep quiet.

We also have nowhere else to turn. On our own, we cannot overcome one sin, let alone our total sinfulness. But Jesus reaches out and touches us in His Word. He reaches out and cleanses us in Holy Baptism. He reaches out and touches us in a piece of bread and a sip of wine, His body and blood broken and shed into death for us.

When we pray, as did that man, "Jesus, if You are willing, You can make me clean," we know even before we ask that He is willing...and able. Now what? Now, do we keep it all to ourselves? Do we soak up faith, forgiveness, salvation and eternal life and tell no one? How can we not tell the Good News about Jesus? How can we keep it to ourselves?

By the way, Jesus doesn't want you to be quiet anymore. He wants you to tell! He may have told the healed leper not to tell, but He tells us: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

## Seventh Sunday After the Epiphany – February 23, 2003

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**"My child, your sins are forgiven"**

- [Isaiah 43:18-25](#)
- [2Corinthians 1:18-22](#)
- [Mark 2:1-12](#)

One Good Friday evening, many years back, our congregation developed a worship service we called "Confessional Communion." We combined the Confessional Service and the Order of Holy Communion with one significant change. I did not speak the Absolution after the Confession. Instead, I absolved each worshiper individually when the congregation came forward single-file for Holy Communion.

We invited everyone to come forward for the individual Absolution, whether or not they were receiving Holy Communion. While a steady line of worshipers came forward, the congregation sang hymns like "Just as I Am, Without One Plea," "Jesus Sinners Doth Receive" and "I Come to Thee, O Blessed Lord."

It was a powerful and moving moment. Many people had tears in their eyes and I remember having difficulty keeping my own composure.

That night, we left in silence, but over the next few days several people urged that we do a similar service for Good Friday the next year. We did.

We had only a usual Good Friday crowd the first year. About twice as many people came the next time. I don't recall the exact words that I used for the absolution the first year. I probably said something like, "In the name and for the sake of Jesus, I forgive you." I know what words I used the next year.

For the second "Confessional Communion," I chose this Sunday's Gospel lesson as the text for my sermon. One version translates Jesus' words to the paralytic as, "Friend, your sins are forgiven." Those were also the words I spoke to each worshiper that night.

The Greek word, "Teknon," is actually more intimate. It means, as most translations say, "My son" or "My child." I have often urged people to listen with their hearts for the voice of Jesus when a pastor says, "I forgive you." We believe that when the pastor speaks Absolution, so does God.

It is as true with a general Absolution as with individual Absolution, but it may not feel the same. Imagine what that young man felt when his friends removed enough of the roof of the building where Jesus was teaching to lower their crippled friend before Him. Imagine how he felt when Jesus said, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Mark doesn't tell us how he felt, but he does tell us about some others who were there. Some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

Immediately Jesus knew in His spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts and He said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...." He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all.

Jesus knew how to make a point! We may not know how the young man felt about Jesus forgiving His sins, but I doubt that any of us have trouble imagining his joy and amazement after he got up, picked up the mat and walked out!

It seems clear that Jesus thought forgiving him was the most important or best thing He could do for the young man. Do you think so? Do you suppose the young man would have agreed? It's interesting that the young man may very well have agreed. It was common in his day to think that physical suffering was the result of either the sick person's sin or that of his parents. See the similar situation in the ninth chapter of John's Gospel.

The young man may also have thought, as I do, that forgiveness has eternal consequences while being paralyzed is temporal. In any event, Jesus didn't just stop with one thing, He went on to give the man both spiritual and physical wholeness.

When I wrote on this lesson three years ago, I marveled at the persistence of the man's friends. He had very good friends! And He had a very good Friend in Jesus. So do we, and so does everyone, including all those who don't know it.

I can just imagine that the paralytic's friends had to repair the roof when it was all over. They paid with their efforts before the man was healed and they paid again afterward. Jesus also paid...dearly. He laid down His life for His friends. He did it for this paralyzed man. He did it for those grumbling teachers of the law. He did it for me. He did it for you and for your friends and for all people everywhere.

Do you have friends who do not know the love and forgiveness of Jesus? We all need to be good enough friends to bring our friends to Jesus. Follow the example of the friends in the lesson. Don't let anything stand in your way. Jesus is waiting to say to our friends, "My child, your sins are forgiven."

To rephrase the words of Jesus..."Which is easier to say, 'Friend, join me at the ballgame this Saturday' or 'Friend, join me at church this Sunday'?" Which is more important to say?

Here is an additional opportunity to help a friend from another part of the world hear Jesus' words of forgiveness. Your gift to LCMS World Mission equips missionaries who are telling the Good News about Jesus in places and in languages you will never know. Go to the LCMS Giving Catalog at <http://lcms.org/> and give a gift today. It's fast. It's easy. And it's secure.

## The Transfiguration of Our Lord – March 2, 2003

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**"Let me inherit a double share of your spirit"**

- [Second Kings 2:1-12](#)
- [Second Corinthians 3:12-4:2](#)
- [Mark 9:2-9](#)

If my calculations are correct, we recently celebrated the 194<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth. Few people in human history and even fewer leaders of government have inspired the admiration that people all over the world have for this one man. I once read a quote from someone named Colton that reminded me of "Honest" Abe and his success in debates: "Nothing more completely baffles one who is full of tricks and duplicity than straightforward, simple integrity in another." I would guess that even with all his equally admirable qualities...Christian faith compassion, generosity, (you name it)...it is his integrity that leads most people to want to emulate Lincoln.

By contrast, many characters in history are prime examples of people not to imitate. Do you remember Nero, the infamous emperor of Rome? You probably remember him for his musical accomplishments on the fiddle.

In 67 A.D., the Roman emperor Nero entered the Olympics as a contestant. He weighed approximately 360 pounds and was accompanied by 5,000 attendants whose only job was to applaud him. He entered the chariot race. During the race he fell off his chariot and had to be helped back on. Despite the fact that he didn't even finish the race, the judges unanimously declared him the winner. Words like "reprobate" and "cad" fall short of my opinion of this man. I can't imagine why anyone would even name a dog after him.

Sunday's lesson from the Old Testament contains one of the finest compliments ever given to another person. The story is that of Elijah's last days on earth and the succession of his understudy, Elisha, as prophet in Israel. When Elijah was about to take his leave, he asked Elisha if there was anything he could do for the young man before he was taken away. Elisha said, "I pray you, let me inherit a double share of your spirit." What a flattering request...that someone would not only want to be like you, but doubly so!

Some parents, teachers, clergy, community leaders and others have known at least a part of what Elijah must have felt, because they, too, have heard that highest of compliments: "I want to be just like you." We all need ideals, principles and priorities to guide our lives...if we have models to give us patterns, so much the better. Fortunate are the children and youth that find an exemplar they want to be like today, especially one worthy of such emulation.

Political, social and religious figures are not held in the highest esteem today, not even those who are worthy of it. Today's popular figures seem to be the stars of movies, music and sports. Unfortunately, many of the most popular are more like Nero than Elijah. Some are openly evil. Even the finer folks have their most intimate secrets and indiscretions disclosed in the yellow rags for gossiping minds. No skeletons are left unveiled and if one can't be found, even the closet itself can be invented.

Many stars leave so much to be desired. We watch a television actor bust a drug ring at eight o'clock and see him arrested for cocaine traffic on the ten o'clock news. We watch baseball players make obscene gestures to the crowds, throw "bean balls" at each other and flood the field with fisticuffs. We settle down for a good basketball game and see a free-for-all instead.

As a little league coach, I saw some of the most poorly officiated basketball games imaginable. Occasionally, I questioned (to myself) a referee's eyesight or knowledge of the game. I actually did offer to buy one a rulebook. But these were almost always amateurs, volunteers.

At professional and college games, the way some fans and coaches openly and loudly question the marriage of a ref's parents or accuse them of incest is appalling to me. Some fans egg fights on. One hockey fan became so impatient, after watching almost three full periods of play without a fight, that he ran out onto the ice and punched a player himself! Two fans accosted a third base coach just to get on TV.

One of the problems with our times is that we have no universally accepted standard of right and wrong and no particular image of the ideal man or woman. In "Texts and Pretexts," Aldous Huxley wrote: "The Ideal Man of the eighteenth century was a Rationalist; of the seventeenth, the Christian Stoic; of the Renaissance, the Free Individual; of the Middle Ages, the Contemplative Spirit. And what is our Ideal Man? On what grand and luminous mythological figure does contemporary humanity attempt to model itself? The question is embarrassing. Nobody knows."

Almost everyone reading these words is a practicing or at least professing Christian. What kind of spiritual legacy will you leave behind? The question is not whether or not you will leave one...you will. If you are alive and have contact with other living persons, then others will experience both the "Elijah" and the "Nero" in you. If you are a parent, the responsibility for this is awesome.

Synthetic celebrities can sometimes have a powerful influence. Parents always do. The Rev. A. J. Fox wrote in his thoughtful book, "The Child's Approach to Religions": "The child will get a conception of goodness because you are good to him and to other people; of love because you and your mate increasingly love each other as well as him; of truth because you are truthful; of kindness in speech because your words and tones of speech are never harsh; of constancy because you have kept your promise; of consideration for others because he sees these things in you."

That's one side of the story. There are two others. First, all of the opposites are equally true...children learn from lack of love and wicked behavior also. Second, parenting has no guarantees, only odds. The best of parents occasionally raise the worst of kids. One of the students of the best Teacher and finest example who ever lived was named Judas.

Fortunately for us, Jesus was more than a teacher, more than an example. He is the one whose sacrifice removes the veil of sin that separates us from God. He is our atonement. By His death and resurrection, He has given us forgiveness and eternal life.

Society needs more Abraham Lincolns. Homes need parents with the spirit of Elijah, Elisha or Jesus Himself. A heartwarming poem by an unknown poet, in "A Boy's Message To His Dad," tells this thought-provoking story: "His little arms crept round my neck, and this I heard him say--four simple

words I shan't forget, four words that made me pray. They turned a mirror on my soul, on secrets no one knew they startled me, I hear them yet, he said, "I'll be like you!"

You don't have to be a parent, however, to influence others' lives. You may not even know when, how or that it ever happened. Another storyteller, O. Henry, describes a country boy, schooled in things of the spirit, who migrated to the city. In this strange and frustrating environment he became a professional pickpocket. One day, after he had taken an unusually fat purse, he noticed in the crowd a girl of his own age. He recognized her as a former classmate who had also gone with him to the village church. Although the girl did not see the frustrated young man, seeing her forced him to measure his present life against the higher standards she represented and to catch a glimpse of himself. Leaning against a lamppost he exclaimed, "God how I hate myself."

One last story, although involving a parent, reminds all of us that we already have a precious "double-spirit" legacy to which we can point others. Nels Ferre grew to the age of 13 in a poor family in Norway. His family could not afford to educate the children. A childless aunt and uncle in the United States wrote to Nels' parents and offered to raise him as their own and to give him a good education. His parents accepted their offer.

Needless to say, it was a wrenching experience for a boy of 13 to be taken from his native land and his own family, perhaps never to see them again, especially to go to live in an entirely different place with people who were virtual strangers. Nels was close to his mother and he longed for some word from her that would sustain him through the time to come.

The day before he was to go by cart down to the village to catch the train that would take him to the ship, his mother was silent. At supper, he yearned for a word from her, but still there was silence. After supper, it was the same. Finally he went to bed and cried himself to sleep.

The next morning, at breakfast, she still spoke no word at all. In the cart to the village there was not a sound from her. Finally, he was on the train and being taken away. As the train moved out, Nels Ferre's last glimpse of his mother was one he never forgot: with tears streaming down her checks she held a scrawled note for him to read: "Remember Jesus most of all."

I am reminded of the hymn verse:

If you cannot speak like angels,  
If you cannot preach like Paul,  
You can tell the love of Jesus,  
You can say He died for all.  
If you cannot rouse the wicked  
With the judgment's dread alarms,  
You can lead the little children  
To the Savior's waiting arms.

If you cannot travel to the far corners of the earth, you can help send missionaries to tell the Good News about Jesus to people who might otherwise never hear about Him. Go to the LCMS Giving Catalog at <http://lcms.org/> and give a gift today. It's fast. It's easy. And it's secure.