

ONLY HUMAN

Psalm 8

“But I am only human,” we complain, “how much can you expect?” Do you know what it means to be human? It means to be created in the image of God himself. It means that we have his own breath within our lungs. It means in the words of the Psalmist that we were created a little less than the angels. The Psalmist exclaims about man:

[Thou] hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet; All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field; The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas.

You may remember the play “Green Pastures.” In that play, Noah said to the Lord, “I ain’t very much, but I’m all I’ve got.”

Noah was wrong about his own worth. That is why he fell into sin as soon as he got off the ark. Albert Camus once said that man is the only animal that refuses to be what he is. Camus is right – we forget who we are. We are unique creatures fashioned in the image of the Creator.

In his book Living the Responsible Life Cecil Ray says: “Man’s responsibility is to ‘image’ – that is, to reflect God . . . That is, man’s life, attitudes, and actions are to reflect God and his purpose in action . . . Man is to go around ‘imaging God.’ He is to mirror God’s love, character, and purpose. What God is like, man is to demonstrate in action. What God wants done – man is to perform.”¹

Only human – what a marvelous thing to say about us. In many ways we are like God himself.

For example, we have the capacity to dream great dreams. Have you ever thought what a great gift the ability to dream is? Researchers at Harvard’s Pre-School Project reported that the children they observed whom adults reported as the “brightest, happiest, and most charming” had spent as much as twenty percent of their preschool time “staring” – simply staring – with absorption at some object or another, the largest amount of time the children had allotted to any single activity.

Why were they staring? They were dreaming, of course. And dreaming is a peculiarly human activity.

As B. N. Mills puts it:

Dreamers and doers – the world generally divides men into these two general classifications, but the world is often wrong . . . Dreaming is just another name for thinking, planning, devising – another way of saying that a man exercises his soul. A steadfast soul, holding steadily to a dream ideal, plus a sturdy will determined to succeed in any venture, can make any dream come true. Use your mind and your will. They work together for you beautifully if you'll only give them a chance.

The ability to dream. The ability to imagine. John Masefield said, "Man's body is faulty, his mind is untrustworthy, but his imagination has made him remarkable."

Man's imagination is remarkable. Every worthwhile step forward has begun with a dream, a vision, a bright idea. Remember the story of Archimedes. According to the story, Archimedes was commissioned by his ruler to discover whether a crown was truly of pure gold as it had been represented by the goldsmith. Archimedes was furthermore instructed that he must not harm the crown in the process of his investigations. This was a difficult problem and Archimedes wrestled with it for days trying to discover a solution, but to no avail. Finally, after long efforts he gave up the search. Then, suddenly, while he was relaxing in his bath, the solution to the problem came to him. He noticed that his body displaced a certain amount of water when he sank into the tub. There was his answer – he could weigh the crown in water and measure the amount of water it displaced! Archimedes had discovered the principle of determining specific gravity. When Archimedes discovered the solution to his problem, the story goes on to tell us, he was so excited he jumped from his bath and ran naked through the streets crying, "Eureka" (I have found it!).

He was obviously pretty excited. It is exciting to have a new idea – a new insight – a new solution to an age-old problem.

Creativeness often consists of merely turning up what is already there. Did you know that right and left shoes were thought up only a little more than a century ago?² Somebody made a fortune by simply being aware of the obvious.

The French physician Rene Laennec remembered how he signaled to his childhood friends by tapping on a hollow log. From this memory he conceived and eventually invented the stethoscope.

During a trip to Canada, Clarence Birdseye ate some fish that had been naturally frozen and thawed. He borrowed the idea from nature and the frozen-food industry was born.

Ben Franklin got tired of changing from one pair of glasses to another. Why not combine them? The result was the invention of bifocals.³

Imagination – how wonderful it is!

Sometimes a great idea comes from someone else. Wilbur Wright read the story of Lilenthal who had flown a glider. That inspiration carried him over the long, hard road of experimentation, handicapped by poverty, until that memorable day at Kitty Hawk when man flew for the first time in his long history in a power-driven vehicle.

To dream dreams – what a marvelous gift God has given. Man is the only creature with that capacity. But there is another joyous part to being human – that is the freedom to determine our own destiny.

Joseph Wood Krutch notes wisely that nine-tenths of the people of the world think they are what they are and do what they do because of circumstances and social pressures. He observes that Henry Thoreau, discouraged, frustrated, and dissatisfied with himself, went away to Walden Pond and found himself with two basic questions that concern you as much as they concerned him. He asked himself: Am I the way I am because of circumstances? Or are circumstances my master because of me? These two questions are by no means academic: your destiny depends upon the answer you give. If you rest your life on the alibi that you are what you are because of circumstances, you will excuse yourself for everything and stay the way you are. On the other hand, if you conclude you have become the victim of circumstances because of some inadequacy in yourself, then you are faced with the disturbing idea that you had better take command of yourself.⁴

We can choose the attitude with which we deal with life. Robert Southey tells about a man who always put on his spectacles when about to eat cherries, in order that the fruit might look larger and more tempting. He exercised the freedom to choose.

B. A. Botkin tells about a man from the Tennessee mountains who was walking down the street

near a draft board during the Vietnam war. A neighbor said, "You had better stay away – you are liable to get drafted." The man, who actually had not even heard of the war, was unable to understand. The neighbor explained the situation. The hillbilly said, "Well, I always figure I have got two chances: I might get drafted and I might not. And even if I'm drafted, I still have two chances: I might pass and I might not. And if I pass, I still have two chances: I might go across and I might not. And even if I go across, I still have two chances: I might get shot and I might not. And even if I get shot, I still have two chances: I might die, and I might not. And even if I die, I still have got two chances!"⁵

That hillbilly may not have been too smart, but he knew enough not to let fear and negative thoughts defeat him.

Robert A. Russell writes:

How did man get out of the Kingdom of God? How did he lose his place in it? By his negative thinking. How does he return to it? How can he find expression in a Kingdom of Good only? By using the Mind of Christ, by allying his thoughts with the Divinity within him.

The ability to dream dreams – the freedom to choose our own meaning, our own happiness, our own destiny. That's what it means to be only human –but there is one thing more. To be human is to have a Father who cares about us deeply. That is the crowning glory of it all.

Edward A. Bauman tells about a news story that appeared in a popular magazine sometime back. A large family arrived one morning at a campsite near a stream in a national forest. After telling the older children to watch the younger ones, the parents concentrated on unpacking the car. At mealtime they called the children together and everyone came but Cathy. The blond, blue-eyed little three-year-old was missing. They called her name and searched for her to no avail. In desperation the father dived in the stream and searched along the bottom, fearing she might have tumbled in. As the hours passed, other campers came to join the anguished parents in looking for Cathy. Finally they found her, frightened but unharmed, in the bottom of a ravine. Everyone rejoiced that she was safe, but little Cathy best expressed the mood of the hour when they had all returned home that evening. Her father tucked her into bed and was leaving the room when Cathy suddenly said, "Gee, Daddy, aren't you glad you found me!"⁶

In her own naive way, that child was expressing the very hope of humanity. We are crowned

with glory because of the love that God has for us.

John Bunyan depicts the truth about humanity in his image of a man with a muckrake. Here is a stooped figure of a man, preoccupied with raking through the muck and mire at his feet so that he might perhaps find a morsel to sustain life or a trinket to brighten it. All the time, poised over his head is a glittering crown, the symbol of a nobler life for which he was intended. But he never sees the crown because he's too busy raking the muck.⁷

A loving father did not create us for mere muck and mire. Jesus, particularly, saw people not as they were but as they could be.

Remember the disciple who was impetuous, mercurial and rash? Peer pressure molded him like putty. What did Jesus name him? Just the opposite: Petros, Peter; the Rock. Not what he was but what he could become.⁸

Dr. Leslie Weatherhead has said, "If we have in our minds a picture of ourselves as fear haunted and defeated nobodies we must get rid of that picture at once and hold up our heads. That is a false picture and the false must go. God sees us as men and women in whom and through whom He can do a great work. He sees us as already serene, confident and cheerful. He sees us not as pathetic victims of life, but masters of the art of living; not wanting sympathy, but imparting help to others and therefore thinking less and less of ourselves and full, not of self-concern, but of love and laughter and a desire to serve."

I'm only human. Yes, but isn't that wonderful? The ability to dream dreams, the freedom to choose our own destiny, the knowledge that we have a loving father who has crowned us with majesty and glory. Only human. Yes, and thank God for it.

¹ Cecil A. Ray, Living the Responsible Life (Nashville: Convention Press, 1974), pp. 8-9.

² Bernice Fitz-Gibbon.

³ Michael LeBoeuf, The Productivity Challenge (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1982).

⁴ Harold Blake Walker, Power to Manage Yourself (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1955).

⁵ B. A. Botkin, A Treasury of American Anecdotes (New York: Bonanza Books, 1958).

⁶ Edward A. Bauman, Beyond Belief (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964).

⁷ James D. Mallory, The Kink and I (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1982).

⁸ Howard Butt, The Velvet Covered Brick (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973).

THE JOY OF BEING A CHRISTIAN

Psalm 16

This morning we want to talk about the Joy of being a Christian. In recent years we have had books on the joy of sex, the joy of cooking, and the joy of making a million dollars, but the one area that has been vastly undersold is the joy of Christian commitment. And yet, the testimony of the Scriptures and of human experience is that that is where the only real joy is to be found.

You will agree with me that the world today is desperate for happiness, for pleasure, for fun. Many people in our society are bored and thus they mope around fantasizing some secret joy that lies out there somewhere, somehow.

"I'm looking for adventure, excitement, beautiful women," said the young man to his father as he prepared to leave home. "Don't try to stop me, I'm on my way."

"Who's trying to stop you?" shouted his father. "I'm going with you!"

The ironic thing about seeking such pleasure, however, is how little joy it really brings. Indeed those who seek it hardest are often the unhappiest of persons.

We have a great illustration in the book of Ecclesiastes (chapter 2) of a wise man's attempt to define and achieve pleasure. Here we see Solomon's experiments with various means of pleasure. He set out to enjoy himself, trying to find meaning to his life by making pleasure his goal. He has left a record of his frustrations for us all to read. He begins, "I said to myself, 'come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself.'" First he thought the answer to be in intellectual pursuits, but this brought him no satisfaction: "I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow." Then he tried the path of alcohol: "I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine." This produced additional frustration, as he noted in the Proverbs "Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise." Then we see that he turned to more constructive activities: "I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees." He built these great monuments to himself but neither did they produce lasting satisfaction. From that Solomon turned to

the accumulation of wealth but neither did that satisfy: "I bought male and female slaves . . . I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasures of kings and provinces." Then he tried sex: "I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, man's delight." You know that women were high on Solomon's pleasure list but a thousand wives and concubines left him still unfulfilled. From sensual pursuit he turned to worldly fame: "So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem." Even the Queen of Sheba came to observe his glory, but here too he found no permanent happiness. His pleasure seeking experiments were all summed up in these plaintive words: "Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them: I kept my heart from no pleasure . . . Then I considered all that my hands had done and all the toil I had spent in doing it, and behold, all was vanity."¹

Solomon was not the first man or the last man to discover that a life devoted to sensual pleasures is not the path that leads to joy.

Contrast Solomon's plight to the pleasures described by his father David:

"I have set the Lord always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest in hope. For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. Thou wilt show me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore." (Psalm 16: 8-11)

David has found the secret of life. And he has shared that secret with us. "I have set the Lord always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved." Is he not describing a dynamic, living relationship with God in which he can live boldly, confidently, creatively, freely in the knowledge that he is a child of the King. There is no identity crisis here.

At an army boxing tournament in France, between two of the bouts, they led around the ring a soldier from a hospital who had lost his memory through some traumatic experience in battle. The hope was that from the spectators of army men with whom he had served, one man might be able to recognize him and to assist him in his cure. None, however, did. As the man, frustrated, was led down from the ring he threw out his arms and cried, "Will nobody tell me who I am?"²

We hear that pathetic cry from every direction today: "Will nobody tell me who I am." We see it dramatized in such heartrendering dramas as "Kramer vs. Kramer" in which a young mother leaves her husband and small son to discover her identity.

David knew who he was. He walked in daily fellowship with God. He was not perfect by any means, but he knew the sweet forgiveness of a loving and compassionate God.

"The Lord is at my right hand, I shall not be moved."

Do you have that inner peace and certainty that can liberate you from your fears and anxieties and give you joy?

In the second place, David had a direction for his life. "Thou will show me the path of life"

The story is told of Dwight Morrow. He was traveling on a train. The conductor came along and asked him for his ticket. He searched all of his pockets in vain. Finally, the conductor spoke up and said, "It's all right, send it in to the company when you find it. Answered Morrow, "That part's all right, but what bothers me is, where in the world am I going?"

No wonder so many people seem so insecure and uncertain about life. Their life has no direction, no goal, no divine purpose. Track star Jim Ryun made the truth quite apparent when he suddenly dropped out of a race in Florida a few years ago. Jim Ryun was the first high schooler to break the four-minute mile. Next, he set a goal to break the existing U. S. A. mile record. After accomplishing this, he raised his goal to be the fastest man in the world. After he succeeded, reporters bombarded him with the question, "What are you going to do now?" He replied, "I'm going to try different distance events." He again reached his objective. Subsequently, in the famous race in Florida, Ryun stopped abruptly in the middle of the race, and retired from track for many months. He commented, "I just lost interest. I couldn't make myself run." It might well have been that the activity was becoming too boring for Ryun. But since he quit for many months, he greatly lowered his chance of success and raised the challenge in running. Accordingly, he started competing again.³

All of us need a challenge, a goal, a direction, a reason for being. Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote, "Hold a picture of yourself long and steadily enough in your mind's eye and you will be drawn toward it . . . Great living starts with a picture held in your imagination of what you would like to do or be."

"Thou will show me the path of life . . ." Let God help you discover your reason for being. Discover that divine plan for your life and you will discover another important element of Christian joy.

But there is one more element in Christian joy and that is in learning "to smell the roses along the way." David writes, ". . . at thy right hand are pleasures for evermore." The Christian faith is not anti-pleasure. God placed us in a pleasurable world. Christian joy comes from discovering the right pleasures.

For example, the mother of Goethe once wrote these simple but meaningful lines:

I rejoice in my life because the lamp still glows;
I seek no thorny ways;
I love the small pleasures of life,
If the doors are too low, I bend.
If I can remove a stone from the path, I do so;
If it is too heavy, I go around it.
I find something in every day that pleases me.
The cornerstone, my belief in God,
Makes my heart glad and my face shining.

Who could put it any better than that. Christian joy comes from the simple and beautiful and good pleasures in life. It comes from loving and being loved. It comes from walking daily with God. It comes from believing that God has a plan for our life, and that the path on which He leads us, leads to pleasures evermore.

¹ C. Paul Walker, Community Presbyterian Church of the Sand Hills, Kendall Park, New Jersey.

² C. Thomas Hilton, Irvington Presbyterian Church, Indianapolis, Indiana.

³ Gerald D. Bell, The Achievers (Chapel Hill: Preston-Hill, Inc., 1973), p. 120.

YOU WILL NOT LEAVE MY SOUL IN HELL

Psalm 16
Daniel 12: 1-13
Hebrews 10: 11-18; 31-39

There are some people who never let anything get them down. They are like the little boy who kept bragging to his father about what a great hitter he was. Finally the father said, "All right, son, show me!"

So the little boy got his softball and his bat and they went out in the back yard. The father stood over to the side while the boy tossed the ball up into the air and then swung the bat with all his might. "Strike one," said the little fellow after he had missed the ball completely. "Strike two," he said as he missed the ball again. "Strike three," he said as he missed a third time. Then he turned to his father with a determined glow on his face. "Boy, am I a great pitcher!"

Some people can deal with life like that. Many of us, however, need to hear the words of the Psalmist: "You will not leave my soul in hell."

The people of Israel knew what it was to have their soul in hell. Throughout the Old Testament, first Moses, and later the prophets, were forced constantly to remind the people that God had not forgotten nor forsaken them. In our Old Testament lesson, Daniel counsels us that God's people will have to suffer but that they will be redeemed.

The writer of Hebrews in the New Testament acknowledges the same painful and yet hopeful truth. He writes in the thirty-fifth verse of the eleventh chapter: "Do not lose your courage, then, because it brings with it a great reward." In other words, "Keep on keeping on. He will not leave you in hell."

It was that hope that kept the Jews looking for the Messiah and the early Christians looking for Christ's return. God does not turn his back on his children. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," wrote David, "Thou art with me." The much-afflicted Job cries out: "I know that my Redeemer liveth," and we who hurt this day with an almost unspeakable emptiness take comfort with the Psalmist, "You will not leave my soul in hell."

We know what hell is. There is a character in one of Gabriel Marcel's plays who describes hell

like this: Don't you feel sometimes that we are living . . . if you call it living . . . in a broken world? Yes, broken like a broken watch. The mainspring has stopped working. Just to look at it, nothing has changed. Everything is in place. But put the watch to your ear and you don't hear any ticking.

There may be some of us who feel like a watch with a broken mainspring, a body in which the heart has quit beating, an empty shell of a person with no hope for the future and a heavy load of regret for the past. "You will not leave my soul in hell."

Obviously the Psalmist is saying to us that God is aware of our situation. Bruce Larson tells about seeing Jack Benny on the Johnny Carson show shortly before Benny's death. During the interview, he turned to Johnny and in his unique way said, "You know the other night I dreamed about God. He said to me 'Jack' . . . (and Benny stopped with that characteristic long pause) You know, God knows practically everybody."

Larson goes on to say, "It is mind boggling to realize that we have a God who is on a first-name basis with each one of us. Beyond that, He wants to spend time with us and talk to us." ¹

God knows our situation. A visiting psychiatrist, wandering through the wards of a state asylum, was particularly intrigued by a patient who sat huddled in a corner all by himself, scratching himself for hours on end.

"My good man," the doctor addressed the patient gently, "why do you stay huddled in a corner all by yourself, scratching yourself?"

"Because," replied the man wearily, "I'm the only person in the world who knows where I itch."

God knows where we itch. And he never forgets or forsakes us.

Elizabeth Harrison illustrates this truth with a story from her kindergarten. John loved his teacher so much that he always wanted to be near her. One day a new child entered kindergarten. Mary Helen was a timid little girl. When the circle time came, Miss Harrison suggested that John allow Mary Helen to sit next to her and that he sit across the circle. "No," said John, "I love you so much I want to be near you!" Miss Harrison inquired, "Can't your love for me stretch across the room?" Finally, John consented. After a little while he raised his hand and said, "Miss Harrison, it stretches!" ²

God's love for us stretches. In another place the Psalmist writes those beautiful words:

“Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in Sheol, behold thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.” (139: 8-11)

God's love stretches. You will not leave my soul in hell. God cares. That is the first thing we need to note. The second is this: He will be there to help us. He doesn't merely observe us impassively from afar. He reaches out to rescue us.

That is the function of prayer. Said James Gilmour, missionary to Mongolia: “Unprayed for, I feel like a diver at the bottom of a river with no connecting airline to the surface, or like a fireman wielding an empty hose on a burning building. With prayer, I feel like David facing Goliath.”

God will help us face our Goliaths as well if we will let him. Unfortunately too many of us come to God only when we are already at the end of our rope. Dale Evans Rogers uses this analogy in one of her books:

“Ships coming into port slow down to ‘pick up the pilot’ – to take aboard a man who knows every rock and sand bar in the harbor and who can steer the ship safely through them to the dock. When the ship leaves the harbor, the same pilot comes aboard to take her out to deep water and the open sea, and then they ‘drop the pilot.’

“ ‘Dropping the pilot’ has always made me sad,” she writes, “whether it happens on a ship or in a human life, but ‘picking up the pilot’ always thrills me. ‘Jesus, Saviour, Pilot me,’ I sang as a child, and it means more to me now that I have put away childish things. I suppose I picked up and dropped a dozen pilots for my life's voyage, before He came to guide me. Don't we all? When the boy is six he wants to be a fireman; at ten he would be either a cowpuncher or president; at fifteen an astronaut, then a lawyer, doctor or minister. We all pick out our heroes and worship and imitate them – dream that we may be like them when we grow up. We'd save a lot of trouble and frustration if we would pick up Christ as our Pilot while we are still young.”³

The chief problem in our lives is that we want to “pick up the pilot” only when our lives are about to go on the rocks. We will experience his presence more surely if we have made a lifetime habit of having him guide us through the storms of life.

Without a pilot we are like the hero of a poem by an anonymous bard:

There was once an old sailor
my grandfather knew
Who had so many things
which he wanted to do
That, whenever he thought
it was time to begin,
He couldn't because of the state
he was in.

You see, one reason that many of us are drowning in a sea of despair and depression is that we have lost contact with the ultimate meaning of our lives. We have lost our sense of direction and purpose. We feel tired and listless. We wonder how we ever got into this state and yet are unwilling to take the steps to extricate ourselves from our self-defeating attitudes and anxieties.

God can give us reason to go on. In one of George Moore's novels he tells of Irish laborers in the great depression. They were put to work by the Irish government on a make-work project to build roads. At first, the men worked well, sang their Irish songs, glad to be back at work again. Gradually, the men discovered that the roads they were building didn't go anywhere; they just ran off into the dreary bogs and stopped. As this truth dawned upon them, the men grew listless and stopped their singing. Their work quality slipped. Commenting, the author said: “The roads to nowhere are difficult to make. For a man to work well and sing, there must be an end in view.”⁴

Victor Frankl discovered in the Nazi concentration camps that those who survived and even thrived by prison standards were those who clung to finishing a book, returning to their children, or to helping others bear suffering.

Robert Schuller tells about a hopeless old drunk who was brought into a New York City hospital. “You know, this is your fiftieth visit,” said the admitting doctor. The old man considered that information for a moment and replied, “I think that calls for a celebration.” The doctor shook his head in

despair, and said, "I can't give you a drink. You know that." The old drunk muttered, "I'm hopeless; right, doc?" The doctor said, "I'll tell you what I will do. We have just brought a young man in, nineteen or twenty years old. This is his first time. I want you to go and pay him a visit. Take a good look at him, and have him take a good look at you. Maybe he won't take the road you have taken."

The old alcoholic was shocked at this and exclaimed, "You mean you will give me a drink if I do that!" "Sure," said the doctor. "You do that and I'll get you a drink." So the old man went down the hall and found a clean-cut young man who was at the turning point of his own life. "You know, boy," said the old man, "you don't want to turn out the way I did. I was young like you once. I had a mother who had dreams for me. And I had dreams. Now look at me."

Then something happened inside the old man. The more he talked to the young fellow, the more he discovered that he had a mission in life. He had to save that boy! They talked all morning, and finally they made a promise. The old man said, "I'll tell you what I will do. If you ever need a drink, you call me, okay?" And the boy said, "I'll do the same for you."

That was the turning point for the old man. He went on to become the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, all because he shared his life to save another. ⁵

You will not leave my soul in hell. God knows our situation. He reaches out to rescue us and to give us new reason for being. Come on now, let him be the pilot of your life. Lift your eyes beyond the gloom of your despair. Let him give you a new purpose – a new direction for your life.

¹ Bruce Larson, Believe and Belong (Old Tappan, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1982).

² Source Unknown

³ Dale Evans Rogers, No Two Ways About it (Westwood, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1963).

⁴ G. Avery Lee, I Want That Mountain (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1974).

⁵ Robert H. Schuller, Reach Out for New Life (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1977).

THE GOODNESS OF GOD
Psalm 23

A cartoon in "The New Yorker" shows two women who have met at a restaurant. One woman says, "Lately I've been very happy, but I don't know if it's me or vitamins." ¹

Most of us know why we are happy. "The Lord is our Shepherd." I suppose that no chapter in the Bible has provided so many spiritual vitamins to so many people as the twenty-third Psalm.

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. . ."

If we could but allow that confidence to live in our hearts, our faces would glow with an assurance that the world cannot know.

A Japanese lady asked the headmistress of a mission school, "Do you take only beautiful girls in your school?" "Why, no; we welcome all girls," was the reply. "But I've noticed that all your girls are beautiful." "Well," said the missionary, "we teach them to love our Saviour, Jesus Christ, and He gives them a look of beauty." "I myself am a Buddhist, and I do not desire my daughter to become a Christian; yet, I should like her to attend your school to get that look on her face," was the reply.

That look comes from knowing the goodness of God. After all, that is our greatest need, is it not?

F. W. Meyers, when asked what question he would put to the Sphinx, if he were given only one chance, replied that he would ask, "Is the universe friendly?" The Bible's answer is unequivocal. Yes, the universe is friendly. God is a good and loving Shepherd. Where else does our hope lie? Any place else is a dangerous place to put our hope.

During the early part of the Vietnam War we heard reports of "light at the end of the tunnel." That hope never materialized. Another cartoon in "The New Yorker" shows a dejected man emerging from a tunnel. Why is he downcast? The caption reads, "DISCOVERING THAT THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL IS NEW JERSEY." ²

Human leaders and human institutions offer only limited and fragile hope. But when we put our hope in God, we look beyond the realm of human limitations.

Two goldfish were swimming around and around in a glass bowl. One announced crankily that

he had become an atheist.

“Fine, fine,” scoffed the other. “Now just explain to me who changes the water in this bowl?”

That goldfish was wiser than many people. Charles A. Trentham entitled his book **Shepherd of the Stars**. That is where our hope lies.

There is a humorous bit of dialogue in the book **Christ Is God's Middle Name** that is very instructive:

“Who's God, Helen?”

“My father.”

“Your father?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you think your father is God, Helen?”

“Because.”

“Because what?”

“He's in Heaven.”

“Your father is in Heaven?”

“Yes.”

“I didn't know, Helen. I'm sorry.”

“He was killed in the war.”

“The Vietnam war?”

“I think so.”

“And he went to Heaven and became God?”

“Yes.”

“Why are you so sure, Helen?”

“It says so in the prayer my brother and I say every night before we go to bed.”

“What prayer is that?”

“God's prayer.”

“What does it say in the prayer about your father being God, Helen?”

“Our Father who art in Heaven.”

“The ‘Our Father’ in the prayer is your own Father?”

“Of course.”

“And so he must be God?”

“Of course.”³

Little Helen may have misunderstood when she thought her father was God. But how grand the truth is that the God of all the heavens is a father to each of us.

We take such knowledge for granted. But suppose we had been brought up in a religion that saw the world as being hostile. The great Asian Christian, Toyohiko Kagawa was brought up in such a religion. That is why the Gospel brought him so much joy. He writes:

“I lived in lonesome fright up to the age of eleven, in the country of Awa Province. There I was told that we would be cursed for such an act as spitting on the soil, that evil spirits inhabiting mountains, rivers and deep wells would damn us for slight misdeeds. There were supposed to be devils in ponds, water imps in streams, and ghosts in solitary places. Thus I spent my boyhood in the midst of fear and terror. Nowhere in the universe was there love or affection, nor any friend that would sustain me. It was the greatest joy for me to learn finally that the essence of the universe is love and that God is a merciful Father.

The good tidings of Jesus lie in the belief that the essence of the universe is an affectionate Creator, however dark the night may be and however fiercely the tempest may roar. Here is the infallible remedy for moral madness. And this is the power of Christianity that has completely refashioned one-third of this world’s history.”⁴

That is good news, is it not? The Lord is our Shepherd. . .What power there is in that knowledge. The universe is friendly. I can live my life today confident in ‘Star Wars’ terminology that the “force is with me.” But more than an impersonal force – a shepherd, a counselor, comforter, father and friend.

C. S. Lewis insists that our biggest surprise when we see God is that He will not look strange to us. We’ll have no faintest conception till that very hour how He will look, but when we see Him we’ll know we’ve always known Him, and we’ll realize with a start what part He has played at many an hour in our lives when we have thought ourselves alone. That fleeting sense we’ve often had of Some-

one friendly nearby will be explained. That central music that sings through every moment of happiness, and then evades our memory, will be recovered, for we won't say to God, when we see Him, "Who are you?" We'll say, "So it was You all the time!"⁵

God is so good!

"The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;

He leadeth me beside still waters; He restoreth my soul.

He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me; they rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:

Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

-Psalm 23

FOOTNOTES

¹ We are grateful to David W. Richardson, Portageville, Missouri for this illustration.

² Ibid.

³ Edward S. and Elizabeth H. Fox, *Christ Is God's Middle Name*, (Doubleday & Co., Inc., Garden City, N. Y. 1971).

⁴ Toyohiko Kagawa, *Meditations*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1950).

⁵ Frederick B. Speakman, *Love Is Something You Do*, (Tappan, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell Co.).

A CURE FOR COMPLAINERS

Psalm 78: 1-3; Exodus 16: 2-15

It is comforting to know, I suppose, that 3000 years ago, Moses had to deal with complainers. I like the story of a lady who was an entire Sears Roebuck catalogue full of miseries. Her pastor came by to see her one day and she began her litany: "The neighbor's children are so noisy...People at the church never come to see me...my arthritis is getting worse...the weather has been so terrible..." On and on she went with one complaint after the other. Finally she said, "But do you know, Pastor, I have had the worst headache all week, but suddenly it is gone." The pastor sighed and said, "Oh, no. Your headache didn't disappear. I have it now."

Of course pastors are not the only persons who have to put up with complainers. I have always felt sorry for football coaches. They have to put up with an amazing amount of grumbling from alumni, sportswriters and even the average man in the street. I like what former Wake Forest football coach Chuck Mills once said. He defined a spectator as a person "who sits forty rows up in the stands and wonders why a 17 year old kid can't hit another 17 year old kid with a football from forty yards away...and then (that same spectator) goes out to the parking lot and can't find his car."

Married people have to put up with complainers. One man had inscribed on his wife's tombstone: "HERE LIES MY WIFE IN EARTHY MOULD, WHO WHEN SHE LIVED DID NAUGHT BUT SCOLD; GOOD FRIENDS GO SOFTLY IN YOUR WALKING... LEST SHE SHOULD WAKE AND RISE UP TALKING. Of course women have no corner on the complaint market. I dare say that a survey would show at least as many grouchy men as women. Many of you would say more!

Moses had to put up with a whole nation of complainers. The Bible says the people were "murmuring." Have you ever heard people murmuring? We all have. John Galsworthy once described complainers like this: they are "always building dungeons in the air." THE IRONIC THING IS THAT OFTEN IT IS PEOPLE WHO HAVE THE LEAST TO COMPLAIN ABOUT WHO ARE THE WORST MURMURERS. There is something about having much that makes us feel we deserve more. True, the children of Israel were out in the wilderness, but at least they were free. At least they were headed toward their own homeland. Even more importantly, consider the mighty acts of God that they had witnessed—the parting of the Red Sea and the Passover experience that had melted Pharaoh's hardened heart. Still they grumbled, "What has God done for us today?" I have

known people like that, haven't you? I have been like that myself, I confess. What hope is there for us murmurers? Is there any cure for complainers?

FIRST OF ALL IT WOULD HELP US IF WE CONFESSED OUR PETTINESS. Many of us simply do not have grounds for murmuring. We have been blessed far beyond what we could ever deserve.

Eddie Rickenbacker was once asked what was the biggest lesson he learned after a crash at sea from drifting about with his companions in life rafts for 21 days in the Pacific. "The biggest lesson I learned," he said, "was that if you have all the fresh water you want to drink and all the food you need to eat, you ought never to complain about anything."

Many of us know that. Deep in our hearts we are aware of our good fortune. Intellectually we know that there are millions of persons who would gladly trade places with us. Our mothers taught us the little line, "I cried because I had no shoes until I saw a man who had no feet..." We look at our lives and all that we have and we know that every day we ought to offer a testimony of thanksgiving and praise. But still we complain. Still we murmur.

This is not to say that things always go our way. In a PEANUTS cartoon Charlie Brown is complaining that his ball team always loses. Lucy tries to console him by saying, "Remember, Charlie Brown, you learn more from your defeats than you do from your victories." Charlie Brown replies, "That makes me the smartest man in the world." I don't know about you but I am tired of learning from my mistakes. I am ready to graduate! Life is filled with frustrations, aggravations, trials and tribulations. Life has many downers. We would not try to minimize that fact. Sometimes, however, we need to step back and put our lives into perspective. We need to count our many blessings, as the old hymn says. We need to confess our pettiness.

WE ALSO NEED TO ACKNOWLEDGE GOD'S PROVISIONS. The greatness of God is shown in his response to the people's murmurings. Sometimes when our children seem ungrateful, we respond defensively. We are angered by their attitude. We want them to see and appreciate all that we have done for them. Something boils within us when they shrug off our sacrifices as if we really should have done more. That is a human response to ingratitude, it is not God's response.

God heard the people murmuring and he provided for their needs. He provided manna—a sugary substance ranging from the size of a pinhead to the size of a pea. They gathered the manna each morning and when it dried in the sun they had a sticky solid food which was both edible and nutritious. He also provided quails. Every spring, we are

told, flocks of birds cross the Red Sea on their way to the Sinai peninsula, where they land exhausted near the coast and are easily caught. This is exactly how the Bible describes God's provision of meat for the wilderness wandering.

God also provided water. Scholars tell us that many porous rocks in the desert contain water. God led Moses to such a rock at Rephidim. Moses struck the rock and out poured water adequate for the whole company.

God heard the murmuring of the people and provided for their needs. Of course, he would have provided for their needs even if they had not murmured. God is a giving God. If you cannot see that, you will probably never change your outlook on life – you will never have the gratitude attitude.

I am certain that there were cynics among the Hebrews who explained away the quails, the manna, the water from the rock, the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. God has placed us in a world that must be seen through the eyes of faith, and it is possible to explain away every miracle of God if that is your desire.

When that great Scotsman Robert Bruce was fleeing from his enemies, he took refuge in a cave. By the time his pursuers reached his hideout a tiny spider had spun a web over the mouth of the cave, so his pursuers concluded that Robert Bruce could not be hiding there. After they left, Robert Bruce got down on his knees and thanked God for that spider. Now, was the spider the consequence of coincidence or providence? Did it simply happen along to build its web or was it guided by a Divine impulse? Each of us must decide for himself or herself. When you had that bad accident and walked away, did you say, "Thank God!" or did you say, "Wow, I was lucky that time?" Life is a matter of interpretation, but the person who sees the gracious hand of God at work is in far less danger of becoming a murmurer than is the cynic who sees only random chance with no plan or purpose.

A CURE FOR COMPLAINING WILL BEGIN WITH A CONFESSION OF OUR OWN PETTINESS AND AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF GOD'S PROVISION. THE THIRD INGREDIENT IN OUR CURE FOR COMPLAINING OR OUR MEDICINE FOR MURMURING, HOWEVER, IS MORE DEMANDING. IT IS THAT WE DISCOVER GOD'S PURPOSE FOR OUR LIVES. God's purpose for our lives is that we are to serve others. Dr. Karl Menninger's famous prescription to a lady who was depressed was that she go out and find someone who needed her and help that person. That is also the best prescription for chronic complainers. Complainers are invariably

centered on themselves – not upon God and his goodness, not upon their neighbors and their needs – but upon themselves.

The Hebrews knew themselves to be a chosen people. The Exodus experience confirmed that. They were God's own people – a holy race. What they sometimes forgot was that they were chosen for a purpose – to be a witness for God to the nations. It has been suggested that the reason that Adolph Hitler sought to eliminate the Jews was that he was a disciple of that mad philosopher Nietzsche who taught that God was dead. Hitler took that teaching to its extreme. In order to eliminate God from society, he felt that it would be necessary to eliminate God's witness, the children of Israel. Hitler failed, of course, though the carnage that accompanied his effort haunts the world to this day.

Israel was God's own beloved. God brought them out of Egypt not to live a life of privilege, but of purpose – not to be served but to serve. We who are the new Israel have that same summons.

Have you ever known anyone who truly, unreservedly gave his or her life for others who was a complainer, a grumbler, a murmurer? Dr. Tom Dooley once wrote: "Dedicate some of your life to others. Your dedication will not be sacrifice. It will be an exhilarating experience because it is intense effort applied toward a meaningful end."

A story from the life of the English poet George Herbert is instructive at this point. Herbert was a member of a small group of friends who met together to play musical instruments like a small orchestra. One night on the way to a meeting of this group Herbert passed a man whose cart was stuck in a muddy ditch. Herbert put his instrument aside and went to help the man. When the cart was finally out of the mud, Herbert was covered with the sticky clay. When he arrived at the meeting, he explained his tardiness and his slovenly appearance. One man said, "You have missed all the music." George Herbert smiled. "Yes," he said, "But I will have songs at midnight." People don't complain when they have "songs at midnight." People don't grumble as much when gratefully and joyfully they give their lives to serving God and other people.

Someone once said that the most dangerous place to complain is the front steps of a church. I would like to overhear your conversations as you leave this place today. We could find out in a hurry whether this message has had any effect. Are you a complainer, a grumbler, a murmurer? Isn't it time you confessed your pettiness? You have so much for which to give thanks. Isn't it time you acknowledged God's bounteous provision? Isn't it time you quit thinking about yourself and considered the purpose for which you were created?

The children of Israel murmured just as you and I sometimes murmur. But God provided for their needs, just as He provides for our needs. God was at work in their lives. God is at work in our lives. Why are we murmuring? Why are we complaining? Isn't it time we say, "Thank you"? Isn't it time we began sharing those blessings with others?

BONUS

HOW TO SURVIVE LIFE'S GREATEST TEMPTATION

A Message by Dr. C. Thomas Hilton

Senior Minister

First Presbyterian Church
Pompano Beach, Florida

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 (NIV)

TEXT: "For men will be lovers of self (in the last days), . . . lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion but denying the power of it."
II Timothy 3:2ff

Jerry knows this morning's subject very well. He owns a seventy-foot Infinity sport yacht called "Purely Pleasure." It has three jacuzzis on board a Nautilus fitness gym, hatches that open and close at the push of a button, and a number of other electronic miracles. Jerry said in an interview at dockside at the Fort Lauderdale Boat Show that he has dedicated his life to the pursuit of pleasure. He has named his home back in Maryland the "Valley of Pleasure."

Jerry probably never read much of Martin Luther. Luther once said "Both pleasure and pain are temptations, but the greater temptation is pleasure." I see where Princess Di and Prince Charles are going to visit a Penney's store in a Washington suburb as Penney's opens its \$50 million "best of Britain" line. J. C. Penney was once asked what the two greatest motivators were in his life. Without hesitation he said, "I can tell you in four words: Jesus Christ and adversity." He went on to explain that adversity taught him never to give up, to always start over again, and to keep his faith strong. In a kind of negative way, Penney was endorsing what Luther said. It wasn't pleasure that gave him a stronger faith, it wasn't his money, it wasn't his nationwide chain of stores, or his power. It was his adversity. If adversity makes your faith stronger, what will the absence of adversity do to you? What will pleasure do to you?

An interesting question. Lemar Parrish played first string football at the old Kennedy High School in Riviera Beach. He went on to star in college and play for thirteen years in the National Football League. During those years playing in the Pro Bowl was the rule rather than the exception. Unfortunately, it also became a rule to take cocaine until most of his six-figure salary was gone and he was out of football. He is now thirty-seven and has returned to Riviera Beach, where he mows lawns and trims shrubs. He is quoted as saying that "I never had any problems until I started

making money.” Martin Luther said it another way. “The greatest temptation is pleasure.”

In the second chapter of Ecclesiastes that was read this morning as our Scripture Lesson, we heard about how the author, who tradition says was Solomon, was wrestling with the meaning of life. It was probably 900 B.C. I think sometimes we Americans feel that we are the first people who ever wrestled with why we are here. Everywhere I look today I see twenty, thirty, sometimes forty year old people saying that they are “trying to get their heads together.” We would expect such confusions from a teenager, or maybe someone in their early twenties, but really, it is a little discomfoting when you see grown men and women dressing like hippies, behaving like transients and rationalizing it with the comment, “I’m trying to get my head together.” Have you ever noticed when they claim that they are still trying to get it all together, everybody in the room nods and says, “Yes, a person must be given time to get his head together.”

Well, Solomon was trying to “get his head together.” He was trying to discover what the meaning of life was. Maybe the meaning of life was to seek pleasure all the time. Perhaps, he thought, pleasure seeking would give him a reason for living. So, he decided to do whatever felt good. He had all the money and power he needed, so that was no problem. Visitors came from all over the world just to gawk at all he had and to stand in awe of it. Dr. Rankin has written that “wine, women and song, the gathering of riches, the enjoyment of luxury, the acquisition of rare and special products derived from foreign countries, the prosperity fostered by successful agriculture, the magnificence of his buildings, of his gardens and parks and vineyards--all this Solomon used to find out by test and trial whether pleasure provided a soul-satisfying purpose of life.” I guess there were no seventy-foot Infinity yachts in those days.

Well, you can’t fault him for giving it a try. Unfortunately, the Bible says that it too proved to be meaningless. “I denied myself nothing my eyes desired,” said Solomon. “I refused my heart no pleasure . . . Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after wind; nothing was gained under the sun.”

Someone should have told Lemar Parrish that before six figure salaries and cocaine came along, Solomon had already tried to find the meaning of life in pleasure-seeking and found that it was like chasing the wind. Someone should have told him that the Bible already dealt with this issue thousands of years ago, and the conclusion is that “men will be lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.” We will serve either God or mammon, but not both.

As a matter of fact, the Bible is pretty hard on pleasure-seekers. Proverbs (21:17) says that "He who loves pleasure will be a poor man." Hebrews (11:25) refers to the "fleeting pleasure of sin." Isaiah (47:8) continually uses the phrase, "lovers of pleasure" as a disgraceful word. Jesus, Himself, was tempted in the wilderness to be the kind of Saviour that would only satisfy all of our physical needs, all of our earthly pleasures. He considered it, but then He rejected it. He would not be a Saviour who just provided food for the hungry, or power for the powerless. He was tempted to take the easy way and to use His heavenly influence in order to detour around the cross. Being tempted, He refused.

Some of us pleasure seekers, when we are tempted, do not refuse. In the August issue of Presbyterian Survey, there is an article on the two zany cartoon characters named Frank and Ernest. In one cartoon Frank says to his sidekick, Ernest, after they had attended church, "I'm willing to flee temptation, if I can leave a forwarding address."

That's about as adamant as most of us get about fleeing the temptation of pleasure. We feel, well if we must sin, let it be in pleasure seeking. I mean we might as well enjoy it as we go down. (Interesting expression, isn't it? "Going down.")

I'm convinced that sometimes we don't even recognize this temptation when it occurs. Many of us were reared with so much that we don't even identify it as a temptation. The former Superintendent of Schools for the state of Idaho was testifying about television's impact on viewers. He said that "there is a theology of television that is developing. The ads constantly tell us to seek greater pleasure through more consumption. Philosophers down through the ages, since Aristotle, have rejected this theology as a way of life. But, somehow, the ads make us feel that to have nothing less than too much is un-American." Commenting on this situation, an editor of Campus Life wrote that "ring around the collar, bitter coffee, and dingy kitchen floors replace the list of cardinal sins. Water-spotted crystal, baggy pantyhose and the threat of embarrassing foot odor produce fear and trembling among TV's true believers. The danger for Christian viewers is that our emotional and spiritual concern can be channeled away from pressing human needs."

Well, friends, how are we going to survive life's greatest temptation—the desire for pleasure? I mean, we are all tempted by it. We have the testimony of ancient people and modern people that it surely does not satisfy the God hunger that is in us. It does not give us a meaning that will last. It is like the wind. Our trouble is that pleasure feels so good. Pleasure-seeking is so much fun. We are ambivalent. We flee, but we leave an address.

I'm going to suggest that the way to survive life's greatest temptation is to continue to seek pleasure. That's right! (Now you know I'm not going to quit here). I'm going to suggest that you find pleasure in glorifying God. The first question of the Shorter Catechism (that I had to memorize when I was in Confirmation Classes when I was 13) was "What is man's chief end?" The answer, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." "Enjoy God?" You bet! Find pleasure in serving Him? Yes sir! There is nothing inherently wrong then in seeking pleasure. It all depends on what pleasure you are seeking.

One of the most distinguished, affluent and powerful people in his day was Sir John Bowring (1792 to 1972). He was the English representative to France, and later to Hong Kong, and still later he became the governor of Hong Kong. He was a major factor in the political development of the Orient. Twice he was a member of the British Parliament and was knighted in 1854.

Besides his distinctions in statecraft, he won high literacy honors and was master of thirteen different languages, having translated books into English from all thirteen. He has written a biography of the theologian, Jeremy Bentham and books of travel on the Philippine Islands and Siam, a book of morals for young people and published a book of Russian, Spanish, Dutch, Polish, Hungarian and Bohemian poetry.

In spite of his great earthly success, John Bowring found his greatest pleasure before the cross of Jesus Christ. He is the humble author of the hymn, "In the cross of Christ I glory, towering over the wrecks of time."

In the fourth verse he wrote:

Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure,
By the cross are sanctified,
Peace is there that knows no measure,
Joys that through all time abide.

Would you like this peace that knows no measure? Would you like this joy that abides through all times? Then sanctify your pleasure-seeking by finding your pleasure in seeking God, for any other kind of pleasure-seeking is chasing after the wind.

BENEDICTION: Go forth knowing the reality of life . . . its pain . . . its joy . . . its death . . . its resurrection. Out of that knowledge, live as people freed, loving and serving all humankind. Peace be with you. Amen!

LIGHT
Isaiah 2:1-5
Romans 13: 11-14

A man was sitting at the breakfast table reading his newspaper when his wife breezed through the kitchen, gave him a light kiss on the cheek and said matter-of-factly, "I'll bet you've forgotten what day this is." The husband answered defensively, "I have not!" He went back to reading the paper while she rushed upstairs to finish getting ready.

All the way to work it bugged him, "What day is this?" He knew she was very sensitive about his forgetting Valentine's Day, anniversaries, etc. But for the life of him he could not think what day this was. He decided he better not take any chances. Driving home he stopped and purchased a box of candy, a dozen roses and a gift-wrapped bottle of her favorite perfume. Opening the door he rushed on back into the kitchen where she was preparing the evening meal. "Surprise!" he said. She replied, "Oh, Sweetheart. This is the best Groundhog's Day I've ever had."

As we begin the season of Advent together there is always the danger that we will get so busy with all that must be done that it will become a meaningless flurry of activity. That is one reason you will want to be in worship each of the four Sundays leading up to Christmas--to help you keep this holy season in perspective.

The theme for this first Sunday in Advent is light. Isaiah the prophet writes: "It shall come in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord."

In Paul's letter to the Romans we read, "For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light...."

Robert Caro wrote a book on that very complex former President of the United States, Lyndon Baines Johnson. Some of us may remember Johnson for his War on Poverty. Others of us may remember him for his conduct of the Vietnam War. Younger members of our congregation may simply remember him as the man who became president when John Fitzgerald Kennedy was assassinated. Caro found, however, that the people in the Hill Country of Texas where Johnson first began his career as a congressman remember him for something else.

Caro notes that when he was interviewing in the Hill Country, no matter what he was talking to people about, he found that one phrase was repeated over and over again concerning Johnson. The phrase was, "He brought the lights. No matter what Lyndon was like, we loved him because he brought the lights." They were talking about the fact that when Johnson became congressman from the Hill Country in 1937, at the age of twenty-eight, there was no electricity there. And by 1948, when he was elected to the Senate, most of the district had electricity. "He brought the lights." (1)

When the writers of our Bible sought to express the inexpressible--to communicate to our finite minds what the coming of the Christ child meant to humankind, they compared it to light coming into a world of darkness. St. John expressed it best: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." (1:5) He brought light! More than that--he is light!

HE IS WHAT THE WORLD HAS BEEN SEEKING. That is the message we need to communicate to a world careening out of control. Look to Bethlehem. Stop for a moment before the manger. That is what life is all about. It is not about greed and lust and hatred and revenge. It is about concern for the least and the lowest. It is about simplicity and beauty and love. It is about nations beating their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. It is about lives of righteousness, harmony and peace.

Jack Jones was a Welsh coal miner's son. In his autobiography, UNFINISHED JOURNEY, he tells about a terrifying incident that occurred when as a boy, he was in a mine shaft when something went wrong, and the men were obliged to find their way out another way.

They struggled through a labyrinth of old workings and a stagnant pond. Jack's father, one of the best miners and a devoted parent, took Jack on his back and led his fellow miners over dangerous ground.

In the foul air, the flames of their open lamps began to weaken.

"Careful, Son, you hold fast round Dad's neck," he said as they reached the dark water. Slowly he was tracing his way through the murky water which was almost up to his chest.

Across the water, they started up a steep incline.

"Won't be long now," he said. After they had climbed for some time, he stopped, knelt and pointed. "Look, son."

And there seemed to be a bright disc, about the size of a half dollar, on top of what appeared to be a distant mountain.

"That's what we've been looking for, son--the light of the world. Come on!" And the light grew in size as they climbed their way to the world's surface. (2)

What a beautiful analogy of the world's situation even today. The greenhouse effect, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, world terrorism, the mushrooming specter of crime--the list seems to go on forever. But it need not be that way. There is hope for this world. That hope is found in love for God and for our fellow human beings. We don't have to give in to the forces of darkness in this world. Light has penetrated that darkness in the babe of Bethlehem. He is what the world has been seeking.

HE IS ALSO WHERE THE WORLD IS HEADING. General Douglas MacArthur was a student of history. As his troops were being evacuated from the Philippines he wanted to say something that could be translated into the many Filipino dialects--words that would give them hope in the midst of impending doom. MacArthur chose three simple words, "I shall return." Two and one-half years passed. Then, on October 20, 1944, MacArthur waded ashore at Leyte. He declared, "I have returned!" When Christ left behind his disciples and entrusted to them the enterprise of telling the world the Good News of God's love and mercy, he made those disciples a promise: "I shall return."

Notice that Isaiah does not say that nations **COULD** beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. He says they **SHALL** beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. The light that has penetrated the darkness will one day expel the darkness.

Advent is that season when we look both backward and forward. We look back to Christ's coming into the world in the manger of Bethlehem, but we also look forward to that final victory of light over darkness, love over hatred, peace

over war, when Christ shall reign over all. They are part of the same package. If you believe that God has intervened in human history to reveal Himself and His plan for creation, then you also believe that the world as we know it is not God's last word. History has direction and purpose. There is a Kingdom that is alive and well and shall one day extend its sovereignty over everything that lives and moves and has its being. It is the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. The anticipation of that kingdom gives us hope in the midst of our deepest despair.

A remarkable lady was being interviewed on television sometime back--a lady who all by herself managed to feed, clothe, and educate eight children in a tarpaper shack in Louisiana. What kept her going in spite of the odds? "I seen," she said, "I seen a new world coming." What a powerful message of hope that is. He is what the world is looking for. He is where the world is headed. One thing more.

HE IS ALSO THE ONE WHO BRINGS LIGHT INTO OUR LIVES AS INDIVIDUALS. The message of Christmas is not only "Joy to the World." It also is a very personal message of hope and encouragement.

Jo Carr and Donna Cash tell an amusing story of a family out in Texas which had the custom of putting large plywood letters bordered with Christmas tree lights on their roof each year. The letters spelled out the word "NOEL!" But one year the father, who usually did the job, had been especially busy. It was almost mid-December, and he had not yet put up the word "NOEL." The family had been after him to get it done, for the letters were big and clumsy, and only he could manage them. So he decided one Saturday that he would get it done that day, regardless. Well, that day was a windy day, and the struggle was great. He fought the West Texas wind and muttered some rather unChristmasy comments under his breath as he wrestled the gigantic plywood letters up onto the roof. It was nearly dark when he finished, and he clambered down the ladder triumphantly to tell the kids to plug in the lights. They did, and the letters blazed forth against the darkening sky the name, "LEON!" (3)

Talk about personalizing the Christmas story. Some little fellow named Leon passing by that home that night would have been delighted to see his name in lights.

We dare not forget that the story of the babe in the manger is ultimately a very personal story. That's why it claims a very special place in our hearts. We sense the love of that young family. We know what it is like to be shut out--to see

the sign flashing, "No Room!" There is something very appealing about those unsophisticated shepherds kneeling before his crib and something very regal about the three wise men from the East who bear him gifts. Thus we begin once again the pilgrimage to Bethlehem, for we too have seen his star. He is the light of the world. He is the one who lightens up our lives.

A little boy was playing out on the sidewalk one night after supper and he lost his jackknife. He went sobbing into the house and his mother came out to help him look for it. It was dark everywhere except right beneath the streetlight. As she walked out with him, she put her arm about him and said, "Darling, let's begin where the light is brightest!" They did, and they found the knife.

Where in this dark world is light to be found? In a stable in Bethlehem--a stable that serves as a nursery for the King of Kings. He is what the world has been seeking. He is where the world is headed. He is the One who brings light into your life and mine.

1. William Zinsser, Editor, EXTRAORDINARY LIVES, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company).
2. From a sermon by Norm Lawson
3. From an Advent "Calendar of Devotions" by Jo Carr and Donna Cash, Abingdon Press, 1980, p.29.

LOVE
Isaiah 7: 10-14

When one little fellow was told about his new baby sister, he was not impressed. When he went to school the following day, his teacher remarked, "I hear you have a new member of your family." "Oh, yeah," he replied. "What's the matter?" his teacher asked. "Aren't you happy to have a new sister?" He answered, "Yes, I guess. But there were a lot of things we needed more."

I am certain that when people hear the Christmas story for the first time, their initial reaction is that what the world needs most is not another baby. How wrong they are! Someone has said that when God wants something done in this world he has a baby born. We know that was true of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. The prophet had spoken of old, "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called, 'Emmanuel' (which means, God is with us)." We have gathered this day to acknowledge the fulfillment of that prophecy. The Messiah has been born to Mary and Joseph in the little town of Bethlehem.

It was in a stable that he was born. What a strange place for the nativity of the King of Kings. What plain and shabby surroundings for the birth of the Messiah. I was reading sometime back about a South Africa diamond miner who found one of the world's largest diamonds. It was the size of a small lemon. The miner needed to get the diamond safely to the company's office in London, so he sent it in a small steel box and hired four men to carry it. Even when it was in the ship's safe en route, it was guarded day and night by at least two armed men. But when the package arrived at the company's office in London and was carefully opened, it contained no diamond. Rather it contained a lump of black coal. Three days later, the diamond arrived by ordinary parcel post in a plain package. The owner had assumed correctly that most people would not pay attention to an ordinary cardboard box. (1)

Something like that took place that first Christmas. Who would think to look in a stable for the incarnate God? Only a few star-struck shepherds and some travel weary astrologers took note of what was happening in the tiny town of Beth-

lehem that night. Why should the world take note? As far as we know, no one else heard the angels, no one else saw the star. The rest of the world saw only a plain, cardboard box. They could not know that box contained the advent of love into this strife-torn world.

Joseph knew. An angel had appeared to him in a dream: "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Mary knew, too. In her amazement and adoration she sang, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the lowly estate of his handmaiden...." (Luke 1: 46-48b) No wonder that the blessed virgin has captured the imagination of so many of the world's people.

There is an old story about a skeptic, who, on meeting the local priest, greeted him as follows: "Hello, Father. Tell me this. What is the difference between Christ's mother and my mother?" "I don't know, Doctor," replied the priest, "but there is a very great difference between the sons."

Mary is venerated by millions of Christians because of the uniqueness of her son. She knew that within the plain brown wrappings of a stable and a manger and shepherds and lowing cattle, that the world had been forever changed. How? Christina Rossetti put it most memorably, "Love came down at Christmas, Love so lovely, so divine. Love came down at Christmas, Star and angel gave the sign."

LOVE CAME DOWN AT CHRISTMAS. That is the message for the morning. Love was born in the manger in Bethlehem. What kind of love? All kinds.

LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER, FOR ONE THING. That is why many of us are weary from shopping this time of year. We are trying to find just the right gift to say, I love you. There was a cartoon not long ago picturing three little boys coming to the manger scene bearing gifts. The first two boys brought traditional gifts representing the gold and frankincense. The third little boy, however, came to the baby Jesus with a very large box of disposable diapers! Mary could only have wished! Someone, though, in that cartoon had captured love made practical.

Christmas is that time of year when we try to say to our family and friends how much they mean to us. A gift may not be the best way. And certainly gifts are given with many motivations in mind. But for most of us there is more joy in giving than receiving. We need this opportunity to express our feelings in a concrete way.

Hopefully, though, our love is not a narrow and exclusive thing. Christmas usually causes us to be more thoughtful about the needs of people we don't even know. It causes us to be more mindful of the needs of those less fortunate.

A baby was left on the doorstep many years ago of a home in Georgetown, Pennsylvania. A widow was the head of that home--a widow with several children to look after. But she took in that baby and loved it like her own. In the evenings she would read great books to her children, and one of them, at least, developed a great taste for literature. Today that baby abandoned on a doorstep is America's most prolific writer--James Michener.

James Michener's life is a triumph of the unselfish love of that widowed mother. That is the kind of love we celebrate this day--love for one another--love for those less fortunate.

BUT WE ALSO CELEBRATE ANOTHER KIND OF LOVE--OUR LOVE FOR THE CHRIST CHILD. A young family was going home for Christmas. The car was all packed. The mail and the newspaper delivery had been stopped. A neighbor would keep an eye on the house and feed the dog. All the gifts for parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles were somehow fitted into the trunk of the car. They had plenty of anti-freeze in the radiator. Their suitcases and hanging clothes were in place. They were finally ready to go. The husband started out of the driveway, when all of a sudden the wife gasped, "Honey, we've forgotten the baby." It was true. In all the excitement and the grabbing up of luggage and Christmas gifts, they had forgotten their most precious cargo--their baby. We can forget the baby, too, if we are not careful. That's easy to do this time of year.

We see visual reminders, "Don't leave Christ out of Christmas." And we try to keep that from happening. He IS the reason for the season.

Brennan Manning tells a beautiful story that is recounted every Christmas in the forests of Provence in southern France. It's about the four shepherds who came to Bethlehem to see the child. According to this story one of the shepherds brought eggs, another brought bread and cheese, the third brought wine. And the

fourth brought nothing at all. People called him L'Enchant. The first three shepherds chatted with Mary and Joseph, commenting on how well Mary looked, how cozy was the cave and how handsomely Joseph had appointed it, what a beautiful starlit night it was. They congratulated the proud parents, presented them with their gifts and assured them that if they needed anything else, they had only to ask. Finally someone asked, "Where is L'Enchant?" They searched high and low, up and down, inside and out. Finally, someone peeked through the blanket hung against the draft, into the creche. There, kneeling at the crib, was L'Enchant--the Enchanted One. Through the entire night, he stayed in adoration, whispering, "Jesu, Jesu, Jesu--Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." (2)

That is where you and I would be this morning, would we not? Kneeling beside the crib whispering, "Jesu, Jesu, Jesu." After all, what else can we offer him? He already reigns over all creation. What can we bring? Only our love and adoration. We do that gladly. We offer to Christ our love.

BUT THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN THIS WORLD THIS CHRISTMAS IS NOT OUR LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER, NOR EVEN OUR LOVE FOR CHRIST. THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN THIS WORLD IS GOD'S LOVE FOR US AS EXEMPLIFIED IN THE BIRTH OF HIS SON.

"In Edinburgh, Scotland, there is a place called The Museum of Childhood. It is filled with childhood treasures: teddy bears and puppets and rocking horses and model trains and books and games and doll houses. And cases and cases of dolls. Baby dolls, porcelain dolls, costumed dolls, walking-talking dolls, dolls that can turn somersaults, expensive dolls. The dolls of privileged children.

"Off in one corner is another case. Behind its glass pane, another doll sits alone. It's an old, raggedy doll, much the worse for wear. But then, it began its life raggedy.

"That this doll was loved, there is no doubt. Nor that it was born of love. For all its shabbiness--and it was shabby the day it was made--it had, and has, a value untold. [A sign on it says,] 'Doll belonging to London slum child, circa 1905.' ...The doll is unnamed. The child is unnamed.

"The doll's body is made of tattered brown socks, stuffed with rags. Its arms are two thin sticks of wood, covered in wool. Its hair is a sock. It wears a plain gingham dress and a rough linen apron. For all its simplicity, it was made with painstaking effort...

"...the head is the heel of a man's shoe. Only that. A worn-down, battered heel with the nail heads visible around the edges. For a face, the doll has small bits of paper pasted on. Paper eyes, paper nose, paper mouth. The mouth does not smile.

"Some might call it ugly. That would be wrong, very wrong...

"...It is possible the slum child made it for herself...perhaps, it was a gift. Created by a mother or a father who was poor in possessions...All they could give was love beyond measure...

"One does not need to have wealth to create something valuable. One need only reach deep within--where 'value' is defined. One need not have wealth to give a gift. One need only have the desire to give. To use whatever poor things are at hand and to make of them the best gift possible...

"In all the Western World, there were no slums bleaker than those of London, circa 1905. But somewhere in those slums, a sad and sorry doll was born. A doll that can bring tears to your eyes because it is so pitiful.

"And because it is so very, very beautiful. (3)

If you cannot appreciate the story of that raggedy doll, you cannot appreciate the story of Christmas. A diamond wrapped in a plain cardboard box--the Christ child. A pitiful doll loved into beauty--us. We are that doll. Look at us. Who are we that God should love us so? There is nothing to recommend us. Nothing but his love--love that came down at Christmas.

The world might cynically imagine that all it needs is one more baby. But that is its greatest need. For that baby has brought love into the world. We celebrate that love on this final Sunday in Advent. Love for one another. Love for the Christ child. And, most of all, the Source of that love--God's love for us.

1. Dr. William P. Barker, *TARBELL'S TEACHER'S GUIDE*, (Elgin, Illinois: David C. Cook Publishing Co., 1988).

2. *LION AND LAMB*, (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Chosen Books, Fleming H. Revell Company, 1986).

3. *NY DAILY NEWS*, 12-25-88.,p.39, Karen Zautyk: "Remember, It is Love That Makes Us Rich".

HE BRINGS LIGHT

Isaiah 9:1-4

There is an old vaudeville joke that goes like this. What is worse than a one-week vacation in Philadelphia? The answer--a two-week vacation in Philadelphia. The reason: Philadelphia rolls up its sidewalks after dark.

It's unfair, of course, to label Philadelphia in this way. In the years preceding and immediately following World War II, most American cities were like Philadelphia. Almost everything in them, from retail outlets to radio stations, was packed away for the night. The idea of stores and restaurants and food markets staying open through the night was relatively unheard of. (1)

Until recent times, the night has been viewed as somewhat hostile. Why? The absence of light. Walking in the dark is a fearful experience. At night thieves and murderers ply their trade. At night the drug dealers and the merchants in human flesh do their thing. "Early to bed and early to rise..." is the ancient wisdom. Why? Because the night is perilous and fraught with danger.

Nowadays we are surrounded by artificial light. It is difficult for us to appreciate the way night was perceived in earlier times. For centuries, people illuminated their dwellings and work places with fire. It was not until William Murdock invented the gaslight in 1803, however, that large areas could be lit up after dark. For centuries before that, people walked in darkness--literally.

In the centuries in which the Bible was written, people knew the meaning of darkness. Thus when Biblical writers proclaimed that the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, they were speaking of something vivid, dramatic, hopeful. When they spoke of Christ as the light of the world, they were ascribing to him the ability to transform their world from one of darkness and despair to one of hope and joy. You must understand the darkness of that world to appreciate the words of the Psalmist: "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?" (27:1) Or the words of St. John: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." (1:5)

Perhaps if we lived in Alaska, we could get a feel for darkness. Barrow, Alaska, on the Arctic Ocean, is the northernmost point in North

America. In winter, it is also one of the darkest. The sun set there this past November and won't be seen again until the end of this month. Getting through over two months of night isn't easy. In fact this tiny nondescript outpost--home to 3,000 hardy hunters, whalers, lawyers and public employees--has one of the highest attempted suicide rates in Alaska.

The people of Barrow understand the significance of light. In the last part of January, when the first feeble rays of sunlight peep back over the horizon, some Barrovians will take to the ice to fly brightly colored kites in a jubilant celebration. The darkness has been dispelled. Light is now here. (2)

It isn't easy to live in darkness. It isn't easy to live without Christ. Let's consider some ways in which Christ brings light into our lives.

FIRST OF ALL, CHRIST SHEDS LIGHT ON THE NATURE OF GOD. He shows us in his own life what God is all about. An officer in the National Council of Churches was invited to help lead worship in a service to be televised from Israel some years ago. The service was beamed from a very old, small church under the care of a community of monks. The church was a bit run-down. It hadn't been modernized with electrical power.

As the officer from the Council looked around, a fascinating scene played before her. The television crew was busy going about its work of setting up generators, stringing cables, mounting cameras to stands, placing microphones. Hushed and standing back against the walls, were the monks. They seemed like guests from another century.

Something extraordinary happened as the scene played on. The technicians began to test the lights. The whole dark chapel flamed to light. Some of the monks looked up, nudged their brothers. Soon they were all pointing upward. The monks then vanished. Presently they scurried back bringing the entire community to see what they had seen.

On the ceiling was a painting. A member of their order, in a forgotten century long ago, had erected a scaffold. High there above the small sanctuary he had quietly painted by candlelight an unseen masterpiece meant for the eyes of God only. (3) The lights of the television cameras had brought this ancient masterpiece into full view.

Light has the power to bring into full view that which has been hidden. Christ did that to our knowledge of God. Who can know the mind of God?

The wisest of minds among us have suggested that if we could capture God in our tiny brains, He could not be God. How then shall we know Him? Only one way. He has revealed Himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. What is God like? He is like Jesus. Loving, compassionate, merciful, forgiving. Jesus sheds light on the nature of God.

HE ALSO GIVES US THE LIGHT OF AN ETERNAL CERTAINTY.

In this world of so many changes, there is one thing that never changes. "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever." (Heb. 13:8)

One crisp winter evening, a pastor got an astronomy lesson from his teenage son. About forty-five degrees up from the horizon in the northern sky, the boy pointed to the North Star. He pointed out that the constellations--Taurus, Pegasus, Orion, and all the others--move during each hour of the night. They rotate like the hands of a clock around that one fixed light--the North Star. They move, but it never moves. That is why sailors in every century have used the North Star to steer in the right direction. It is always a reliable point of reference. It does raise or lower about twenty-three degrees in reference to the horizon between summer and winter. But while everything else in the heavens shuffles around, it basically stands still. (4)

Perhaps Abraham Lincoln had the North Star in mind. During the darkest days of the Civil War, Lincoln had the burden of sustaining the hopes of the Union. Once when a delegation called at the White House with a catalogue of crises facing America, Lincoln comforted them with this story:

"Years ago," said Lincoln, "a young friend and I were out one night when a shower of meteors fell from the clear November sky. The young man was frightened, but I told him to look up in the sky past the shooting stars to the fixed stars beyond shining serene in the firmament, and I said, 'Let us not mind the meteors, but let us keep our eyes on the stars.'"

There are some lights that shine as a fixed reminder of a permanent reality. I do not believe I am being presumptuous when I say that our own Statue of Liberty bears such a light. Watching those students in Tiananmen Square last summer build their goddess of liberty was a thrilling sight. Whatever our faults, and they are many, America was conceived with an eternal purpose--that all persons should be free. That is a light for the world that simply cannot be quenched. We see the effect of its witness throughout

the world.

The light of Christ is that kind of light. Indeed, the whole idea of liberty is impossible without the dignity Christ gives to the individual life. How can anyone count his or her life unworthy who can say, "The Son of God died for me?" He sheds light on the nature of God. He gives us the fixed light of an eternal certainty.

FINALLY, HE GIVES US A LIGHT TO CARRY TO A WORLD STILL LIVING IN DARKNESS. There is light that floods a room and reveals that which is hidden. There is light that shines as a fixed reminder of eternal verities. There is another kind of light, however. It is the search light of compassion and concern. It is the light that moves out into the darkness to seek the lost. This is the light of the shepherd who leaves the ninety and nine and goes out on the hillside to find the one sheep who is lost. It is the light a woman shines looking for a precious coin. It is the light of a loving God who will not let us go.

Halford Luccock asked his two granddaughters what they wanted for Christmas. "Give us a world," they responded. Soon he deduced that what they were asking for was a globe. So happily granddad went shopping for a nice large globe that would spin and would be an attractive addition to their room. Expectantly, he waited their pleasure on Christmas Day as they opened their gift from him. Somehow when the present was opened, however, he sensed they were disappointed. "What is the matter?" he asked. "I thought this is what you wanted for Christmas." "Well, yes," said one of them, "but we were kind of hoping for a lighted world." Immediately he understood that what they wanted was a globe with a light inside.

"I can fix that," he said. "Let me take it back and exchange it for a lighted one." Unfortunately the store where he bought the globe did not sell lighted ones. So he got his money back and set out to find a lighted world rather than a darkened one. Finally, he located a globe with a light in it, bought it and presented it to his granddaughters, who were delighted. Telling a colleague about this, he was asked if he had learned anything from this experience. He said, "Oh, yes. I learned one thing. I learned that a lighted world costs more."

A lighted world does cost more. It cost God His Son. If we are serious

about letting our light shine in today's world, it will cost us as well.

In London during the reign of Queen Anne in the eighteenth century there were few or no street lights. A law was passed requiring everyone whose property fronted on a street or alley to hang out a light from six to eleven in the evening during the months from September until March. It was declared that everyone was responsible for the safety of his neighbors from the dangers of the night. A man with a lantern went about the streets crying: "Hang out your lights. Hang out your lights." That's Christ's call to us today.

One believer used this analogy. He said that in his basement some potatoes had begun to sprout, even though they were in the darkest corner of the room. How had they obtained enough light? he wondered. Then he noticed a copper kettle hanging on a wall opposite a small window. Soon he deduced that sunshine coming in the window reflected just enough light over into the dark corner where the potatoes lay, to allow them to sprout. That's my job as a Christian, thought this believer. I may not be a great light in the world, but at least I can reflect enough light from God's Son that I can bring some cheer into the darkest corner.

"This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine...." says the little spiritual. Christ brings light into the world. He sheds light upon the nature of God. He gives us a fixed light that we can count on in this fast-changing world. And He has called us to be lights--to reflect His love, His compassion, His mercy, His forgiveness. "Hang out the lamps." That's your job and mine.

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1. Barry Schwartz
 2. PEOPLE
 3. Peter M Morgan, STORY WEAVING-USING STORIES TO TRANSFORM YOUR CONGREGATION, (St Louis, Missouri: CBP Press, 1986).
 4. Herb Miller, ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN VERBS, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

PEACE
Isaiah 11: 1-10

One of my favorite PEANUTS cartoons has Lucy coming to Charlie Brown and saying, "Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown. Since it's this time of the season, I think we ought to bury past differences and try to be kind." Charlie Brown asks, "Why does it just have to be this time of the season? Why can't it be all year long?" Lucy looks at him and exclaims, "What are you, some kind of fanatic?"

One more PEANUTS bit of wisdom. Lucy has a score to settle with Charlie Brown. She chases him, shouting, "I'll get you, Charlie Brown! I'll get you. I'll knock your block off!"

Charlie Brown, who has been running full speed, stops, turns around and says, "Wait a minute! Hold everything! We can't carry on like this! We have no right to act this way...The world is filled with problems...People hurting other people...People not understanding other people...Now, if we as children can't solve what are relatively minor problems, how can we ever expect to..."

Whereupon, Lucy interrupts Charlie Brown in mid-sentence, hitting him with a left to the jaw, knocking him out. Says Lucy, "I had to hit him QUICK! He was beginning to make sense!"

Our theme for this second Sunday in Advent is PEACE. Isaiah writes, "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them."

LET'S BEGIN THIS MORNING BY ACKNOWLEDGING THE HORROR OF WAR. It may be a sexist statement, but as soon as there were two young men on earth--two brothers--there was war--and death. War has always been with us. The pages of the Old Testament are drenched with blood as are the chronicles of nearly every culture on earth. We have the idea that war is deadly and awful because mankind now has such terribly destructive weapons. The truth is that war has always been deadly and awful. During the six bloodiest battles of The Civil War, an average of more than 30,000 men were killed or wounded in each of those battles. (1)

Brother still is fighting brother. Blood is still being shed. The hottest spot on earth, ironically, is the land of Jesus' birth. The more things change, says the cynic, the more they stay the same. Another cynic remarked that peace is a moment when nations take time to reload.

I hope that is not true. There does appear to be light at the end of the tunnel right now, however. With new leadership in Moscow people's hopes are soaring. Let's hope and pray that we will not be disappointed.

There also seems to be universal recognition that the stakes are higher than they have ever been before. Someone asked Albert Einstein one day what kind of weapons would be used in the third world war. "Well," he answered, "I don't know...but I can tell you what they'll use in the fourth world war. They'll use rocks." We would rather not even think about war at Christmas time, but we need to acknowledge the horror of war.

WE ALSO NEED TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT OFTEN IT IS THE YOUNG WHO SUFFER DISPROPORTIONATELY IN WAR. Look at your 17 or 18 year-old son or daughter. Can you even imagine that precious young person in combat? Someone here this morning may have lost a son in Vietnam or Korea or World War II. You take comfort in knowing he died for his country, but don't you long for the day when no young person ever goes off to war again?

Of course, sometimes even younger children are the unintended victims of the hell called war.

In 1955 a thirteen-year old Japanese girl died of "the atom bomb disease"-- radiation-induced leukemia. She was one of the many children to suffer the after-effects of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945.

During her illness, Sadako buoyed her spirits by folding paper cranes. In Japan, the old myths say that cranes live for a thousand years, and that the person who folds a thousand paper cranes will have a wish granted. With each paper crane, Sadako wished that she would recover from the fatal disease. She folded 644 cranes before she died.

In honor of her memory, Sadako's classmates folded 356 more cranes so that she could be buried with a thousand paper cranes. Friends collected money from children all over Japan to erect a monument to Sadako in Hiroshima's Peace Park. The inscription reads: "This is our cry, This is our prayer, Peace in the world."

Each year people place paper cranes at the base of the statue to recall the tragedy of war and to celebrate humanity's undying hope for peace. In some places in our world this Christmas there will be persons folding paper cranes to use as Christmas decorations in memory of Sadako and as a symbol of their commitment to peace. (2)

We acknowledge the horror of war. We acknowledge that often it is the young who suffer disproportionately in war.

IN THE THIRD PLACE, WE ACKNOWLEDGE THAT WAR WAS NEVER GOD'S PLAN FOR HUMANITY. War is the product of sin. It is the sickness of a fallen world--a world for which Christ died.

A nervous citizen asked a prominent scientist if it were possible for an atomic bomb to destroy the earth. "Suppose it does," replied the scientist, with a shrug. "It isn't as if the earth were a major planet."

Perhaps in cosmic terms, the earth is a tiny planet. But it is the planet to which God sent His Son! We are a God-visited planet, to use C. S. Lewis' words. He has paid us the ultimate compliment of His presence. Certainly there is no greater blasphemy than the slaughter of persons whom Christ came into the world to save. Who can forget at this special time of the year that at his birth the angels sang, "Peace on earth, good-will to men?" Christmas serves as an eternal reminder that war was never God's plan for humanity.

There was a famous incident amid the horrors of World War I that some of you may be familiar with. Christmas Eve, 1914. All was quiet on France's Western Front, from the English Channel to the Swiss Alps. The war was only five months old, and approximately 800,000 men had been wounded or killed. But on that Christmas eve something happened--something unique in man's bloody history. British soldiers raised "Merry Christmas" signs above their trenches. The hated Germans responded in kind. Soon carols were heard from German and British trenches alike.

Christmas Day found unarmed soldiers from both sides meeting the enemy in the middle of no-man's land for song and conversation. Exchanging small gifts, they passed Christmas Day peacefully. This unusual outbreak of peace occurred for miles along the battlefield. At one spot, the British played soccer with the Germans, who won 3-2.

In some places, the spontaneous truce continued the next day as neither side was willing to fire the first shot. Finally, fighting was resumed when fresh troops arrived, and the high command of both armies ordered that further "informal understandings" with the enemy would be punishable as treason.

Christmas--a small pocket of sanity in an insane world. War is horrible. The young seem to suffer most in war. War has never been part of God's plan for humanity.

One last thought for this Christmas season: YOU AND I ARE CALLED TO BE PEACE MAKERS. In II Corinthians 5:18, St. Paul tells us that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself and giving to us the ministry of reconciliation. Jesus says to us in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God." That is still our task.

Sometimes we encounter that dream in the most unlikely places. Those of you who are computer buffs will appreciate a piece that appeared in the comic, SHOE. Santa is sitting in front of his computer typing the following sentiments:

Twas the morning of Christmas, and all through his house.....

Not a creature was stirring, Except Santa's mouse.

For there at his screen, The old fat man designed

The ultimate gift for a tattered mankind.

He squirmed and he puzzled as all through the night,

He polished the concept to get it just right.

The formula worked!! The old guy was wired!!

At last, PEACE ON EARTH....!

(Then, a message comes on the screen:)

Step One. Some assembly required.

Peace will never come easily. For the motivations for war are etched deeply in humanity's soul. But it can happen. It can happen if we acknowledge that all the world's people have a right to be here. All the world's people are created in the image of God. By working together, and with God's help, the world can yet be saved from destruction.

Perhaps you know the legend about the big tower full of bells--there were 12 of them. And each of them thought that he must be more important than the rest, and so they had an argument on the subject.

Number One bell said, "Well, I'm Number One, of course, I'm the most important. I ring first, there can be no doubt about that."

Number Two interrupted, "No, no, no, One is nothing without Two."

Number Three chipped in rather angrily and said, "If you boys knew any theology, you would know that, of course, Three is the number that counts."

But before he had finished Number Four said, "With four bells you've got the perfect square. I must be the most important."

Then Five said, "But I'm one more than Four, so anything that Four claims, I can claim one extra."

Six, of course, had a great deal to say for himself because six means half-a-dozen. Nothing could be more important than Six.

Then Number Seven spoke, "Well, there are seven gifts of the Holy spirit, and seven cardinal virtues and seven vices and all the rest, so Number Seven has as good a claim as any to be the most important."

Number Eight came in to say, "Well, after all, if you know anything about rowing, it's an eight on the river that really matters."

And then Number Nine put in his claim because if three is important, three times three must be really important.

By the time Ten, Eleven and Twelve spoke up, the discussion had gotten so heated that the language used by Numbers, Ten, Eleven, and Twelve could not really bear repetition.

But they had not got the last word, because there was another character present, the Spirit of the Tower, and the Spirit of the Tower at last spoke and said: "My Children, stop. Be silent. You're all talking a great deal of nonsense, because the real point is that none of you is important at all by yourselves.

"We're only here to be used by God, and for God's glory. And it's only when we work all together that we do any good to God or man. So, stop talking and ring--all together, and strike all together, midnight, to the glory of God!" (3)

1. Lossing, J. Benson. MATHEW BRADY'S ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF THE CIVIL WAR, (New York: The Fairfax Press), pp.128,192,256,288,352.

2. Alternatives 1988

3. Archbishop Michael Ramsey quoted in At-One-Ment, 12-88, pp.2-3.

JOY
Isaiah 35: 1-10

Christmas is getting very near. For some of you it has already been very hectic. The cartoon character CATHY last year about this time expressed the anxiety many of us feel.

She says to her boss: "My left brain is making lists of people I haven't sent cards to yet. My right brain is at the craft store, thinking up creative gifts I could make before (Christmas)..."

"My nerves are at the mall, worrying whether I should have gotten the other necktie for my Dad. My stomach is still at last night's party begging for more Christmas cookies.

"My heart is stuck in traffic somewhere between my mother's house, my boyfriend's house and the adorable man I saw at the post office."

Her boss asks: "What is it you want, Cathy?"

Cathy replies: "May what's left of me sneak home early and take a nap?" Some of us may be feeling about that frazzled. Isn't it wonderful to take a few moments to collect ourselves in God's house to center in on the majesty of the Christmas message? Our theme for this third Sunday in Advent is Joy.

Comedian Dom DeLuise tells about one of the best Christmas gifts he ever received. He says that there was a time when nothing made him laugh. "Everything was wrong--life was hopeless and I was feeling useless." When his son asked what he wanted for Christmas, DeLuise replied, "Happiness--and you can't give it to me." On Christmas day his son handed him a piece of cardboard with HAPPINESS written on it. "You see Dad," his son said, "I can give you happiness!" (1) For a moment at least, DeLuise' depression was shattered.

It is amazing how children can bring us happiness. That's what Christmas is really all about. We say that Christmas is for children. Untrue. A child opening with glee his or her new toy from Santa does not feel nearly the happiness Mom and Dad feel at that moment. Children bring us joy--whether they are ours or someone else's. But there is one child that has brought more joy into more people's lives than any other. He is the Christ child of Bethlehem. Isaiah the prophet anticipated what his coming would mean. He wrote, "The wilderness and

the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord."

We sing, "Joy to the World." But why? What is there about the coming of the Christ child that brings joy into our world?

FIRST OF ALL, CHRIST'S COMING REMINDS US THAT THERE IS A VERTICAL DIMENSION TO LIFE. Somewhere I saw a cartoon that pictured a middle-class husband lecturing to his wife. He was seated on the sofa with a blackboard. He had written an equation on the blackboard that read like this: "The mortgage is paid; we're fully insured; the kids are okay; we're healthy; and we have each other. It all equals happiness." With a confused look on her face his wife said, "Walter, would you run through that just one more time?"

In FOR BETTER OR WORSE, adolescent Michael looks at the tree with all of its presents around it and thinks, "I wonder what I'm gonna get. I asked for video tapes, a laser tag, track pants, a camera...."

Grandpa comes in with a huge smile. As Michael and he stand together in front of the tree he says, "You know, Mike. We've got it all! We've got our health, our home, a warm fire, good food and family. Only a fool could ask for more!"

We can agree with Grampa, but deep in our hearts we yearn to believe that there is something more. We could all list the things we are thankful for this Christmas--food, family, health, a nice home, all the blessings this world can afford, and they are still not enough. Many people possess these things, but still have a deep emptiness in their hearts. I believe that is why, even though they may ignore the church the rest of the year, they love to hum the carols at Christmas time. Those carols are the best reminder in this world that there is a vertical dimension to life--that though our health deserts us and though we lose our loved ones to death and even if our homes burn down, there is still reason to go on because, from out of the deepest recesses of eternity, God has sent His own son into the world.

Leslie Weatherhead, the great British pastor and preacher illustrates this beautifully.

He told of a postal clerk in his country who handled the mail to Santa Claus.

The clerk was called the "Nixie Clerk" because he handled all the mail that was "nixed" because of an insufficient, inaccurate, or illegible address.

Here is a letter sent to Weatherhead by the "Nixie Clerk." It reads:

"Last Christmas the letters began to pile in, as usual, addressed to Santa Claus. I suppose I get hundreds of letters every year.

"On Christmas Eve I was working late, and was very sad and lonely in my corner. There was a great rush at the windows and the office, and the malls were loaded with Christmas gifts and greetings. A merry crowd rushed through the corridors and laughter sounded all around, but a great shadow of sorrow rested over me and my eyes burned as I bent over my work. Finally the messenger brought me the last few "Nixies" of the day and laid them on my desk. I took up the first one mechanically. Attached to it was a note from Postman Number 34:

"This was given me by a little girl at 302 Walnut Street.'

"My body tingled when I read it, because that address was my own home! The envelope was a small one addressed to 'Santa Clause, North Pole.' I recognized my own little girl's cramped writing...This is what she wrote:

"Dear Santa Claus,

"We are very sad at home this year, and I don't want you to bring me anything. Little Charlie, my brother, went up to heaven last week, and all I want you to do when you come to my house is to take his toys to him. I will leave them in the corner by the chimney, his hobbyhorse and train and everything. He will be lost up in heaven without them, especially his horse. He always enjoyed riding it so much. So you just take them to him, and you needn't mind leaving me anything.

"If you could give Daddy something that would make him stop crying all the time, it would be the best thing you could do for me. I heard him tell mummy that only eternity could cure him. Could you give him some of that? Be sure to take the thing to Charlie and I will be your good little girl.

Marion'" (2)

Could you give him a little eternity? We need from time to time a reminder of eternity--that there is more than rocks and trees and houses and clothes and cars and even our physical bodies. Christmas is that reminder. Isaiah said people

would rejoice because the glory of the Lord would be revealed. The world hungers to see that glory. For a moment, at least, in the star shining and the carols being sung and the love being expressed the world catches a glimpse of that glory. Christmas reminds us that there is a vertical dimension to life.

IN THE SECOND PLACE, CHRISTMAS REMINDS US THAT THE JOY OF THE CHRIST CHILD IS JOY FOR ALL PEOPLE--EVEN THOSE WHO DON'T DESERVE IT. A disappointed first grader trudged up the front path. "I'm to be one of the children at the manger in the Christmas play," she announced glumly. "That's wonderful! Why so sad?" asked her mother. "I wanted to be an angel. They're the ones that sing the song of rejoicing." Then she added, "I can't rejoice unless I'm an angel." That little girl was suffering from a common misconception--that only angels rejoice. If so, it is only because the non-angelic do not know the good news. The coming of the Christ child is for those who know they haven't been all they ought to have been--who have sincere regrets over time misspent, values misplaced, actions misguided. He cares about us, too.

Now, that doesn't mean we can excuse our sinful behavior. In the cartoon MARVIN, the infant Marvin is writing a letter to Santa Claus. "And Santa," he writes, "Although I may not always be perfect, I think you would have to find me innocent of any wrong doing by virtue of the fact that I'm just a little baby.

"Unless, of course," he adds, "you are of the theological persuasion that believes in original sin."

Well, Marvin, most of us believe in original sin. We believe that sin is part and parcel of human nature. But because it is part of our nature does not allow us to evade responsibility for our actions. We do not get off the hook that easily. Still, sometimes we need to be reminded that God is not like Santa. God loves us naughty or nice. He hopes that we will be nice, but he loves us with a love that even sin cannot defeat.

Even more importantly, we understand that God's acceptance is not something we must earn. God sent Christ into the world as a helpless infant, and that is how we also come to God. None of us can measure up to the absolute perfection of a holy God, but we do not have to. He has sent the Christ child into the world as His free gift to any who would receive him. We find joy, first of all, in the truth that there is a vertical dimension to life, and secondly, in the miracle of grace--that God loves us all regardless of what we've done.

BUT, OF COURSE, THE GREATEST JOY COMES WHEN WE OPEN OUR HEARTS AND RECEIVE THE CHRIST CHILD AS THE LORD OF OUR LIFE. According to an old legend, when the Magi were following the star of Bethlehem, they came to the house of a certain woman. They said to her, "Come with us! We have seen his star in the east and we are going to worship him."

"Oh," she said, "I would love to go. I heard that he would be coming one day and I have been looking forward to it. But I can't come now. I must set my house in order; then I will follow you and find him."

But when her work was done, the wise men were out of sight, the star shone no more in the heavens, and she never saw Jesus. (3) That can happen. We can go through this whole busy Christmas season and miss the essential meaning of it all. It really makes no difference that a "No Vacancy" sign hung over an inn 2,000 years ago, but if a "No Vacancy" sign hangs over our hearts, it makes an enormous difference.

There IS a vertical dimension to life. He has come that all may have life and joy and peace. The gift is ours to receive freely, without condition. But accept it we must. If we do, then within our hearts we will sing, "Joy to the World," for we will understand what Christmas joy is all about.

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1. Allen Klein, THE HEALING POWER OF HUMOR, (Los Angeles, California: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., 1989).
 2. The British Weekly, Dec. 7, 1919, quoted in "Christmas, More Than A Season," Wilson Weldon, THE UPPER ROOM, 1980.
 3. W. Herschel Ford, SIMPLE SERMONS FROM THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, Zondervan.

GOOD NEWS FOR BAD TIMES

Isaiah 62:1-5

It has never been easy to be a prophet. Prophets speak for God. Since the things God would say to us, if we gave Him a chance, are probably not things we would want to hear, true prophets of the Lord have never been very popular.

I am reminded of a soldier who was trying to get a check cashed in the small town near the base to which he had been assigned.

"I'm sorry," said the merchant who was waiting on him, "but I can't cash your check without some kind of identification. Haven't you got any friends at the base who could vouch for you?"

"Not me," the soldier answered. "I'm the camp's bugler."

I can understand that. We wouldn't look too favorably on one who rousts us out of bed at an ungodly hour each day.

The prophets were buglers for God. Sometimes they were not too popular either.

There are two themes that dominate the writings of all the great prophets. They are Judgement and Hope. As far as the prophets were concerned, Israel's greatness as a nation did not depend on its prosperity or its military might. They knew that a nation's character was more important than its cash reserves. They did not buy the prosperity Gospel. Israel's wealthy elite might "have it all," but they dare not call it the blessing of God if their hearts and their lives were corrupt. Thus the prophets pronounced judgement on Israel's sinfulness. Without righteousness and justice there will be a day of reckoning, they thundered. Things will not continue like this forever.

Their pronouncements of judgement, however, must be balanced by their messages of hope. They were not all gloom and doom. When Israel was hurting, when its people were still trying to sing the Lord's song in a strange land, when there was famine and pestilence and war throughout the country, the prophets again spoke up. Things will not be like this forever, they said. Hang in there. God will not forsake His own. "The nations shall see your vindication," writes Isaiah, "... You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My delight is in her...." (RSV)

Judgement and hope. We probably need more of both as we begin this new year. Too much cheap grace abounds in our land. We need to hear a message of judgement from time to time. We need to know that there are consequences to a life mislived.

I enjoy the story of a man named Fred Abernathy who was a devoted reader of the obituary column of his local paper. All of Fred's friends knew of his habits, so one day they decided to play a trick on him by placing his name and picture in the obituaries.

The following morning Fred picked up his newspaper, turned to the obituary page, and there he saw his name, his biography and his photo.

Startled, he went to the telephone and rang up his pal, George. "Listen," he said. "Do you have the morning paper? You do? Please turn to the obituary page. You have? What do you see in the second column?"

There was a pause, then George said, "Holy smoke! It's you, Fred! It's you all right! Listen, where are you calling from?" (1)

We don't want to trivialize the fact of God's judgement. There is enough of that around.

There is a story about a little fellow named Johnny who was having a dispute with his mother about green beans. Johnny's mother was trying her best to persuade the boy to eat his green beans, but he wouldn't budge. Finally, in desperation, she said, "Johnny, if you don't eat your green beans, God will punish you."

Still, Johnny refused, and his mother sent him to bed. Before long, a great storm arose. Lightning flashed, great claps of thunder shook the house, and torrents of rain fell.

Johnny's mother rushed upstairs to comfort her son. "Johnny, are you okay?" she asked.

"I guess so," he replied, "but this sure is an awful fuss to make about a few green beans."

Johnny knew more about the heart of God than did his mother. The God of the prophets was no petty spoilsport as preachers of judgement would often have us believe. The matters to which the prophets addressed themselves were more than petty misdoings. They were violations of God's sacred covenant with His people. Thus the prophets declared the judgement of God. We need a message of judgement from time to time for we too have violated God's covenant. But there are also those of us much in need of a message of hope.

LIFE GETS HARD SOMETIMES AND IT IS HARD TO HOLD ON. Ed Meese, the former Attorney-General had a memorable way of putting it. The imagery will be especially meaningful to football fans. Meese recalled the advice of his predecessor, William French Smith. The outgoing attorney-general warned Meese that there would be many a day in his new position when he would feel like "the javelin competitor who won the toss of the coin and elected to receive." (2) Dare I add that I hope you got the point?

Life is filled with its disappointments and heartaches. Cartoonist Charles Shultz often expresses this truth in poignant ways in his PEANUTS cartoons. In one Charlie Brown was at the beach carefully building a castle in the sand. Standing back to admire his work, he was soon engulfed by a downpour which leveled the castle. Standing before the smooth place where his artwork had once stood, he said: "There must be a lesson here, but I don't know what it is."

We have all been there, have we not? There are those occasions when life seems to overwhelm us. Some boy scouts from the city were on a camping trip. The mosquitoes were so fierce, the boys had to hide under their blankets to avoid being bitten. One of them saw some lightning bugs and said to his friend, "We might as well give up. They're coming after us with flashlights."

Who of us have not tried to hide from our problems but discovered them coming after us carrying flashlights?

Life is hard and sometimes it is hard to hold on. One pastor remembers a boyhood exercise in which a class was asked to describe the height of the ridiculous. The winning answer was "an elephant dangling off the edge of a cliff suspended by its tail wrapped around a daisy." Sometimes it is hard to hold on.

The doctor emerges from the operating room. "It's malignant. There is nothing we can do." The boss at the factory where you have labored faithfully for 20 years calls you in and says, "We are now under new owners. We are sorry, but we must reduce our workforce. We appreciate your service to the company but we no longer have room for you."

Life is hard. It's hard to hold on. Of course some of us are better able to cope than others. I was reading the other day about someone who has learned to turn pain to profit. Many of you are familiar with the airlines' Frequent Flyer programs. The various bonus mileage programs that airlines devised in the 1980s to foster customer loyalty has had some strange fallout. Many companies have denied their employees private benefits from such programs, after discovering that they were

sometimes flying the most roundabout routes in order to get more mileage. A rather extreme example of going out of one's way to qualify for bonus coupons came when TWA flight 847 was hijacked in June, 1985, and was flown four times between Algeria and Beirut. Larry Hilliard, regional director of corporate communications for TWA, revealed that Deborah Toga, wife of one of the hostages, had inquired whether these hostage trips qualified under the airline's Frequent Flyer program. They did. (3) I guess if you are a hostage you might as well build up some bonus points. Some people have a remarkable ability to endure--even to turn pain into profit.

It is important never to lose perspective. A young man in a wheelchair, crippled by an accident, asked his friend, "Do I have a future?" The friend responded, "As a pole vaulter, no. As a man, yes." We all need to have that kind of perspective, that kind of determination, that kind of drive to beat the odds. But we need something more.

A certain pastor was posting a message using moveable letters on his church's sign out front. The message was to begin like this: GOOD NEWS FOR THE DAY.. Surveying the sign later, he saw that an "O" had fallen from the sign. It read, "GOD NEWS FOR THE DAY." Such a small, perhaps somewhat corny revelation, but it struck him that this is what both he and his people were needing desperately. They needed a fresh word from God.

Is that not what we also need when we are dangling from a cliff supported only by a fragile daisy? What hope is there for us if God turns His back on us? That was Israel's cry in its hour of need and that is ours as well. Isaiah said to them and he says to us, "That will never happen!" As he writes in our lesson for the day, "You shall no more be termed Forsaken...."

When young Peter Marshall--one of the most gifted and dedicated preachers America has ever known, and for many years chaplain of the United States Senate--first came to America, he had struggles. He had difficult times. He shared their impact in letters he wrote home to his mother in Scotland. He noted that people had spoken of his apparent courage since he was alone in a strange land, among strange people, and far from family and friends in his native Scotland. "They little know," said he to his mother, "that I am never alone, for I feel that my every action is guided by Him who ordains all things for His servants, and supplies all their needs." (4)

I like the way Charlie Shedd described it in one of his original promises to his tiny son, Peter. Listen to his sensitive and helpful words:

"I hope that I will be able to make religion natural to you. It is natural. In fact, I think this relationship with God is the only thing that is one hundred percent natural. We will pray together until it is easy for you to put your arms on the window sill of heaven and look into the face of God.

"Before I put you back in your crib, I want to tell you something [your brother] Philip said.

"We had been out in the country for a ride. It was evening and we ran out of gas. We were walking along after we had been to the farm house, and I was carrying a can of gas. Philip was only four. He was playing along, throwing rocks at the telephone poles, picking flowers, and then, all of a sudden it got dark. Philip came over, put his little hand in mine and said, 'Take my hand, Daddy. I might get lost.'

"Peter, there is a hand reaching to you from the heart of the universe. If you will lay your hand in the hand of God and walk with Him, you will never ever get lost." (5)

Someone else has put it like this:

"The vine clings to the oak tree even during the fiercest of storms. Although the violence of nature may uproot the oak, twining tendrils still cling to it for protection. If the vine is on the side of the tree opposite the wind, the great oak shelters it in protection; if it is on the exposed side, the tempest only presses the vine closer to the tree.

"In some of the storms of life, God intervenes and shelters us; while in others He allows us to be exposed, so that we will be all the more pressed to His side and know His great strength." (6)

God news for the day. Life is hard. But we can hold on. There is One who will never forsake us. "You shall no longer be called Forsaken...but you shall be called, My Delight is in her..."

1. PARADE.

2. CONSERVATIVE DIGEST.

3. Peter Hay, THE BOOK OF BUSINESS ANECDOTES (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1988).

4. Donald W. Morgan, HOW TO GET IT TOGETHER WHEN YOUR WORLD IS COMING APART (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1988).

5. Charlie W. Shedd, YOU CAN BE A GREAT PARENT, formerly titled PROMISES TO PETER (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1970), p. 16.

6. Don Emmitte.

WHY DON'T YOU COME DOWN?

Isaiah 64: 1-8

There is a humorous story about professional golfer Tommy Bolt. On the golf course Bolt was known for two things – his graceful swing and his terrible temper. Many stories are told about his quirky temperament. Once, after missing six straight putts, generally leaving them teetering on the very edge of the cup, Bolt shook his fist at the heavens and shouted, “Why don’t you come down and fight like a man!”

Every golfer has probably felt that emotion – as if all the powers of the universe had conspired just to foul up your game. That is true of non-golfers as well. I suspect that every deeply religious person who believes that God is at work in individual lives has felt like shaking a fist upward sometimes and asking, “Why don’t you come down and face me person to person?” We have many Biblical precedents for that. God understands our feelings of helplessness and frustration. We need not fear expressing our rage at such times.

There is a silly story about a man with a terrible temper who was playing a round of golf with his pastor. After leaving three straight putts on the edge of the cup the man exploded. “I missed,” he screamed. “How could I miss?” With that he heaved his putter in to a nearby lake, kicked a wheel on the golf cart and drove his fist into a nearby tree. His pastor was shocked. “I have never seen such a terrible display of anger,” he said to the poor man. “Don’t you know that God doesn’t like us when we are angry? You better watch out. I have heard that there is an angel whose one assignment is to search out people who express their anger so ferociously and to send a lightning bolt from the heaven to burn them to a crisp.” The man was embarrassed and better behaved the next few holes. However, on the last three holes his putter failed him again. When the last putt veered off to the right just in front of the hole the man went crazy. “I missed,” he screamed in despair. “How could I miss?” He broke his club across his knee and threw it as far as he could, he kicked up several large clumps of dirt on the edge of the green and once more drove his fist into a nearby tree. All of a sudden the sky grew dark as an ominous cloud passed over. There was a clap of thunder and an awesome burst of lightning – and the pastor was burned to a crisp. An eerie silence filled the golf course. All that could be heard was a quiet voice from heaven: “I missed. How could I miss?”

That’s a terrible story, I know. The point is that the pastor’s theology was as poor as the angel’s aim. God is big enough to love us when we cry out in anger, “Why don’t you come down?”

It was not anger, however, that caused Isaiah to cry out, "Oh that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down that the mountains might quake at thy presence..." Isaiah's desperate plea was the result of a great feeling of helplessness in the face of two troubling phenomena: the suffering of his people and the sinfulness of his people.

THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL HAVE KNOWN GREAT SUFFERING THROUGHOUT THEIR HISTORY. It was true in Isaiah's time and it has been even more true in our own century. On the one hand they knew themselves to be a peculiar people with a special relationship with God. Did you know, by the way, that Columbus took several Jews along on his historic voyages – as interpreters? He assumed that any Indians or Orientals he would encounter would probably be primitive, and would therefore speak God's language – Hebrew. The Jews had this very special relationship with God. How is it possible, however, to reconcile the notion "We are God's chosen people," with the reality of six million Jews slain under Hitler alone? We can appreciate the difficult dilemma faced by the devout Jew as he or she wrestles with what it means to be a descendant of Abraham in the face of such unmitigated tragedy.

Isaiah cries out "Oh that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down..." There is a story by that great writer Elie Wiesel, who often struggles with the pain of the Holocaust, about a Jewish official during the awful carnage under Hitler who would faithfully come to the synagogue each day and pray, "I have come to inform You, Master of the Universe, that we are here." As the toll of slain, deported, missing Jews increased, he still came faithfully and prayed, "You see, Lord, we are still here." Finally he is the only Jew left alive. With a heart that is numb with grief he comes to the synagogue once more and prays, "You see, I am still here." Then sadly he asks, "But You, where are You?"

Which of us in our time of personal grief has not asked that same question? Or, as we view the world's enormous problems, who has not asked, "Why doesn't God just come down and straighten the whole mess out? Then there would be no more starvation in Ethiopia, no war in Central America, no oppression behind the Iron Curtain. Why don't you come down?" That was Isaiah's first concern – the suffering of his people.

JUST AS TROUBLING, HOWEVER, WAS THE SINFULNESS OF HIS PEOPLE. Isaiah prays, "Behold, thou wast angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment..." More than any other faith on the face of the globe, the Jewish faith is one of doing right. The Jews were called together as a people to give witness to God's moral law. They had the Law before they had a temple or

a homeland. This was their mission, the reason for their election. In the beginning God created man and woman to live in perfect harmony with creation and with the Creator. But something was amiss in the very heart of humanity. Something there was that alienated man from his environment, from his fellow human beings, and even from the loving God who had created him. That something was man's sin. It was sin that dug a chasm between God and man. It was sin that made man unacceptable to God—for the very nature of God is holiness, righteousness. Thus the Psalmist wrote, "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord, And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart...?"

The Law was given to bring light to man's dark existence. But here were God's people who were to witness to His Law and they were people with dirty hands and impure hearts. That sounds like us, doesn't?

We are like three young men in the Bible Belt years ago who were caught red-handed breaking the sabbath. Guilt-ridden for their sins and fearful of the punishment they were likely to receive, they stood before their stern pastor. They shook with fear as he asked for an explanation of their behavior.

The first young man, feeling great guilt, said, "Sir, I was absentminded and forgot that yesterday was the sabbath."

"That could be," replied the pastor. "You are forgiven." Also very upset, the second young man said he too was absentminded. "I forgot that I was not allowed to gamble on the sabbath," was his excuse.

"Well, that could also be," said the pastor. "You are forgiven."

Finally the pastor turned to the young man in whose home these events occurred. "Well, what is your excuse? I suppose you were absentminded, too!"

"I sure was, sir," said the lad, a known troublemaker and the instigator of the card game.

"I forgot to pull the shades down!"

There is something about that young man's attitude that strikes me as being quite contemporary. There is a rule that is invoked in professional basketball—"no harm, no foul." If I don't get caught, it's all right. If no one gets hurt, what's the sweat? It's only myself that I'm hurting, so it is my business, isn't it? Somehow we, like ancient Israel, have deluded ourselves into thinking that sin is no big deal. We ignore its power to destroy health and home, to damage witness and impede growth. We disregard its power

to block our view of God and leave us slaves to our own passions. It was as a warning to us that Jesus taught, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God." In other words there is something about sin that coats the soul with grime and prevents us from seeing God. Rare are those who listen however, until it is too late.

A policeman watched as a young man backed his car around the block. Then he did it again, and again. Finally the policeman stopped him and asked him why he was driving backward. At first the youth didn't want to explain the reasons for his strange behavior, but eventually he admitted that he had borrowed his father's car for the evening and because he had driven farther than he had promised his father that he would drive, he was backing up to try to take some of the miles off the odometer.

Isaiah saw that there was no hope that Israel could save itself from the moral abyss into which it was drifting. The only hope was that God would come down and bring healing to his people. "Why don't you come down and save us not only from our suffering but also from our sin," Isaiah was pleading. It is in this context that he uses a very familiar image to us. "Yet, O Lord, thou art our Father; we are the clay, and thou art the potter..." Isaiah knew that only God could remove the flaw from the fragile clay of humanity. That is the second reason that Isaiah cried out for God to come down – the sinfulness of his people.

BUT THERE IS ONE MORE THING TO SAY. THAT IS THIS: GOD HAS COME DOWN. That of course is what Advent is all about. From beyond time and space, down past the galaxies and all the heavenly firmament, in an event that surpasses our grandest attempt to get our little brains around it, God has come down. In a little obscure town outside of Jerusalem, in a lowly stable, as a tiny babe born to a humble couple from a backward village called Nazareth, God has come down. That which Isaiah prayed for has happened. **HE HAS COME DOWN AND HE IS THE ANSWER TO MAN'S SUFFERING AND SIN.**

There would be no starving multitudes in Africa if the world understood that He has come down for we would share our resources with all mankind.

There would be no Iron Curtain if the world understood that He has come down for our practice would match our preaching. It is difficult now to believe that the Russian Orthodox Church was nearly as powerful as the Czar when the communists overthrew that oppressive government, but the church aligned itself with the haves and ignored the have-nots and thus the world stands tragically divided today.

There would be no killing in Central America if we understood what it means to say, "He has come down." It is amazing how many participants on both sides in that terrible conflict bear at least nominally the Christian label.

He has come down but the world has yet to receive him. For you see, what he offers us is himself alone. We want hope. He is hope. We want peace. He is peace. We want love. He is love. The problem is we want hope, but we don't want him. We want peace, but we don't want him. We want love, but we don't want him. We want to achieve a world without suffering or sin but we do not want to open our own lives so that he might begin his healing and reconciling work through us. There is no other way, however. Without him there is no hope, peace, no love available to this world.

"O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down..." Isaiah prayed. That prayer was answered. He has come down. Now all we have to do is to receive Him and to make him known to a sinfilled and suffering world. How about you? He has come down. Will you receive him now?