



LENTEN
Devotions

If

I

Be

Lifted

Up

A devotional for Lent and Holy Week

Dedications

This is dedicated to our God and Father who blesses daily when we spend a portion of each day with in quiet devotion. This is also dedicated to all those who will take the time to read each daily devotion, to all of those who have nurtured me in my growth as a follower of Jesus the Christ.

Thank You

I want to thank, Larry, Irene, the Lieutenant, and Sassenach for taking their time to edit this work.

Acknowledgements/Sources

I cannot begin to acknowledge all the authors I have read over the forty-five years I have walked among some of the giants of our faith. Their names may not be written about in history, but they are written in the Lambs Book of Life. To only name some would be a disservice to the ones I fail to mention.

Then there is the internet and the countless websites I have visited and read. There are the good and then the not so good.

Lastly, and most important I want to acknowledge that my source was, is and will always be our Father who guides my thoughts. Thank you.

Foreword

You hold in your hands a labor of love provided by our member Fr. Doug Mussey. As a brother in Jesus Christ, Doug has become more and more dear to me as I get to know him better. What I love most about him is his heart for Jesus. There is no questioning what Doug is all about: He is all about Jesus. Many have been the times when he and I have sat in my office, not to talk about “church” or the necessary politic of institution, but to simply remember and talk about God’s Word in all its beauty and depth, and to praise God for being incomprehensibly more than anything we could imagine.

When Doug suggested that he would like to write a devotional booklet for Lent and Holy Week to share with our congregation, I was intrigued. As you’ll read in the devotions, Doug approaches God’s Word in a very unique way, and his thought process leads him to observations that you may not have had. As you read these devotions, you’ll learn a lot about the history surrounding Lent and Easter, as well as church traditions through the centuries.

But learning facts and figures is not Doug’s intention. By sharing these bits of information, he hopes to deepen your understanding of what’s really important. As he closes each devotion, he brings his point home and challenges you to answer the questions that the facts demand. There may be a time or two when you do not completely agree with Doug’s observations; don’t let that get in your way. The important thing, as Doug emphasizes, is that you let the wondrous events of these seasons wash over you and cause you to reflect on what it means for *your* life.

We are truly blessed to have a man of God like Doug in our midst. Enjoy the fruits of his work. May these devotions lead you to a deeper, more profound and more infinite relationship with our Brother and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Pastor Dan

Lent 2021- Introduction

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.
And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was hungry.
Matthew 4:1-2

Just as we set aside time to spiritually prepare for Christmas Day during Advent, it makes sense to set aside time to prepare for the other most important day during Lent. Lent is a time that offers us an opportunity to come to terms with the human condition that we may spend the rest of the year running from, and it brings our need for a Savior to the forefront. Like Advent, Lent is a time to open the doors of our hearts a little wider and understand our Lord a little more deeply, so that when Good Friday and eventually Easter comes, it is not just another day at church, but an opportunity to receive the overflowing of grace God has to offer.

According to 40acts.org, "While Advent is a celebration and a time of great anticipation, Lent is more frequently seen as a time of solemn observance and preparation for the celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus at Easter. From its start on Ash Wednesday until its conclusion on Palm Sunday, Lent has been a traditional time for fasting or giving something up or abstinence. Just as we carefully prepare for events in our personal lives, as a wedding, birthday, or a commencement; Lent invites us to make our minds and hearts ready for remembering Jesus' life, death, and bodily resurrection."

But unlike the childlike joy associated with the season of Advent, with its eager anticipation of the precious baby Jesus, Lent is an intensely penitential time as we examine our sinful natures and return to the God we have, through our own rebelliousness, hurt time and again. Lent is also an opportunity to contemplate what our Lord really did for us on the Cross - and it wasn't pretty. But ultimately, the purpose of Lent does not stop at sadness and despair - it points us to the hope of the Resurrection and the day when every tear will be dried.

Although the nature of suffering is not one that offers itself to easy explanations or pat answers, the answers we seek seem to make the most sense in light of the Cross. There is nothing in the world - no religion, philosophy, or material comfort - that offers such a powerful answer to life's toughest questions as the two slabs of wood on which our Savior died. Although I was drawn to Christianity in search of joy, it's the Cross that keeps me coming back day after day, year after year. It is in this time of year that I am reminded of what Jesus did for me.

When I look into the eyes of our suffering God, I'm in awe - suddenly the complexity of our Lord, the love of our Lord, the humanity of our Lord shows through. I realize God is not just some nebulous energy source or a grandfather sitting in the clouds - He is so much more. The Cross is where our faith stands when all else fails. Christ's sacrifice and his subsequent resurrection are the true "cruxes" of the Christian faith. Without one, there would be no salvation, without the other, no hope. This is why, Good Friday and the following Easter Sunday, are the most important dates on the Christian calendar - even more so than Christmas.

So where does Lent come from, and how do we "do" Lent? The Lenten season developed as part of the historical Christian calendar and is typically celebrated by Catholics and some mainline Protestant churches that follow a liturgical calendar. Although its format has varied throughout the centuries and throughout different cultures, the basic concept remains the same: to open our hearts to God's refining grace through prayer, confession, fasting, and almsgiving as we anticipate Holy Week. Lent traditionally lasts forty days, modeled after Christ's forty-day fast in the desert, and ends on Palm Sunday. In the Western Church, Lent officially begins with a reminder of our mortality on Ash Wednesday.

Ash Wednesday begins Lent; the day gets its name from the traditional blessing of the ashes takes from the burning of Palm branches from the previous year's Palm Sunday celebrations. In liturgical churches the ashes are used to draw a cross on the head of people to mark the beginning of the Lent fast. The drawing of a cross is often done while repeating the words; "Remember that from dust you came, and from dust you shall return (Genesis 3:19)

As Holy week draws to a close and Easter approaches, we have Holy Wednesday, commemorating the betrayal of Jesus by Judas; Maundy Thursday, commemorating the last meal Jesus would share with His disciples before His death, the denial by Peter; and Good Friday, the day of His crucifixion and burial.

With Good Friday over, Christians look forward to Easter Sunday, the day on which Jesus rose from the tomb and defeated death for ever. It is the day when the halleluah, once again, can be heard through the kingdom.

Almighty and ever living God
You invite us deeper into your world, your people, your Lent.
May this time be one of outward focus;
seeking you in those we often ignore.
Help us live a Lent focused on freedom, generosity, and encounter.
Give us hearts hungry to serve you
and those who need what we have to give.

- Author Unknown

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February 17th - A Two to One Ratio

Ken Boa is the teaching elder at Christ Church Atlanta and the President of Reflections Ministry. I have had the pleasure of sitting and learning from him on many occasions. One of the more memorable statements he made that has remained implanted my mind was, "I have bragged about myself long enough, now it is your time to brag about me." Now I do not know if that falls under the category of humility or not, but I rather doubt it. The second memorable statement is, "we have two ears and one mouth, and we need to learn to use them proportionally."

I have taken many speaking classes in my life and one of the most important things they stress is to listen to each and every word of the person speaking. There is a saying that goes, "I know you think you heard what I said, but I'm not too sure you understood what I was saying." Or something like that. If you have ever been in a relationship, I know you know what I mean. Sometimes, in trying to come to an understanding with someone who has misinterpreted our intentions, we end up in a deadlock, reduced to childlike conversations such as: "You said so." "I said no such thing." "Yes you did! I heard you." "Don't tell me what I said."

The fact is, both parties in the conversation are sincere. Both may be correct. One recalls what they meant, and the other recalls what they heard. But what the first intended was not what the second understood, which was what the first would have meant if they had said what the second said in the way they said it. Are we clear as mud on this issue? Let's hope so.

A lot of times prayer is the same. We go to God with a Christmas wish list expecting Him to grant everything on the list. We may evoke scripture to remind God of His Word, "we have not because we ask not." We may recall the words of Jeremiah when God said, "call upon me and I will answer and show you great and marvelous things." Isaiah wrote, "before they speak I will hear them, while they are speaking I will answer." So we ask and expect God to deliver on His promises.

Prayer is much more than asking God to bless mommy and daddy. It has been said that man is at his highest when he kneels before God in prayer. Prayer is the highest form of communication that we are offered with our heavenly Father. But prayer is much more than coming to God with our list. Prayer is also listening. In fact, if Ken Boa is correct, then time spent in prayer should be 66 2/3 percent listening to God and 33 1/3 percent responding to what God has spoken. How do your prayers measure up to the recommended ratio? I know I struggle a whole lot to keep the correct balance and that will always be something I need to work on.

According to many prayer models, prayer consists of these elements: praise, confession, asking and then yielding. If the models are correct, only about 25 percent of our in prayer is devoted to asking God for the desires of our heart. Twenty five percent is spent on giving God praise for who He is, what He has done in the past, and for what He will do in the future. An additional twenty five percent is spent confessing our sins. (I did not know I had so many.) And the remainder of our time in prayer, yielding our will to God's will. With so many items on our prayer list, we will either have to pray longer or give up asking for so many desires of our heart. In order to cut through all the red tape, may I suggest a prayer that Jesus prayed? That being, unto you I commit all requests to answer as you deem fitting and necessary. A hard thing to do, but remember, Father knows best.

February 18th - What or Who Defines Us

We are constantly in danger of letting the world instead of God define us. That is so easy to do. It is only human nature to see ourselves and shape our view of ourselves by the attitudes and opinions of our parents, our peers, our friends and the world around us. Nobody is immune to the distortions and effects of a performance based society. We can falsely conclude that we are worthless and must try to earn the acceptance of our heavenly Father. Only when we define ourselves not by the thinking and experiences of the world, but by the truth of the Word of God, can and will we discover our true identity, and our worth as a child of the living God.

What does it mean to look at yourself as God looks at you? Contrary to what culture says, the biblical doctrine of grace humbles us without degrading us, and elevates us without inflating us. It tells us that we are a part of the body of Christ. It also tells us that apart from Christ we have nothing and can do nothing of eternal value. Pretty sobering when you stop to think about it. Spiritually we are impotent and inadequate without the power of our Lord. Grace tells us that we have been made new creatures in Christ, the old has passed away and we are spiritually born again. In Christ, we have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light, love and life. In Him, we enjoy complete forgiveness for all the sins we have ever committed or will ever commit. Our past has been changed and so has our future, because of our new heredity in Christ. Our future is secure because of our new destiny as members of the body Christ and the family of God.

The biblical understanding of grace covers both human depravity and human dignity. It avoids the extreme theology of worthlessness. That is, "I'm no good," "I'll never amount to anything," "I'm nothing but a rotten sinner," and so on and so on. I know you could provide a list of your own. Grace teaches us that the most important thing about us is not what we do, but whose we are in Christ. In scripture, doing (our actions) should flow out of our being (our identity); the better we grasp our identity in Christ, the more our actions should reflect the character of Christ.

Who am I in Christ? Let's take a look and see what scripture has to say: I am a child of God; I am a branch of the true vine; I am a friend of Jesus; I have been justified and redeemed; as a child of God, I am a fellow heir to the kingdom of God; I have been called a saint; I will not be condemned by God; my body is a temple of the living God; I have been set free from the law of sin and death; I am blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realm; I was chosen before the foundation of the world; I will be raised up with Christ; I have boldness and confidence; I am a partaker of the promise of God; I am a citizen of heaven; I am God's workmanship; I am blameless; I am seated in the heavenly realm.

The question is, "who has defined you." Or better yet, "how do you define yourself." When you look in the mirror each morning do you say, "hello you handsome/gorgeous thing." If not, what is stopping you? Please remember, God made you in His image, and God does not make junk. There are no seconds that come out of His factories. However, what you do with His perfect gift is up to you. Just something to think about.

February 19th - My Father's Child

There is an old saying that goes; "like father, like son." More often than not, I have heard this statement placed in a negative context. Maybe that is why I shudder each time I hear my mother say that she can see a whole lot of my father in me. I dare to believe that I am nothing like my biological father.

My father's parents divorced when he was quite young. This left him without a father figure and a role model. He was raised by his mother, who only knew harsh discipline, non-forgiveness and unloving remarks. Living on a farm in North Dakota, he did his morning chores before school and his evening chores after school. Being the only son, he was solely responsible for the support of his mother and his two sisters.

When the depression hit, he left the farm and joined the Civilian Conservation Corp. For those of you who do not know the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), it was one of the earliest New Deal programs, established to relieve unemployment during the Great Depression by providing conservation work, primarily for young unmarried men. Projects included planting trees, building flood barriers, fighting forest fires, and maintaining forest roads and trails. During his life he would recount how most of his earnings were sent to his mother.

At the age of twenty-three and the onset of World War II, he joined the Navy. Here he spent the next thirty years of his life earning the well-deserved nickname of "Hardrock," a characteristic which served him well in the military, but did not, however, serve him well in family life.

As I grew older, I was able to see moments in time when he was the father that he so longed to be. I remember him consoling my younger sister when she and her boyfriend parted ways. He held fast to a rebellious younger son who dropped out of school, ran away from home on two occasions and landed in jail for drug possession charges. He financially and emotionally supported his oldest daughter through a bout with cancer and the breakup of her marriage.

Over the years, our relationship changed from a father and son to that of respect. There came a point when I could ask him anything, and he would supply the answers. Sometime they were what I wanted to hear, and other times they were not. But, I believe he honestly answered all of the hard questions the best he could.

My father was not a religious man, and when he died, I asked my mother about his faith. All she told me was that he made his peace with God. I did not press her for a meaning. Over the years, I have counselled many a parishioner after the death of a parent, who wants to know whether they will ever see their loved one again. My best answer is that they are in the hands of a loving and merciful God. Unfortunately, I have to leave it at that. What I do know for sure is that all of us will stand before the throne of God to give account of what we have said and what we have done. As it states in Second Corinthians the fifth chapter, we will all receive our rewards, whether good or evil. The only sure way I know of to avoid eternal punishment is to ask for and receive God's forgiveness through Jesus Christ, His Son. I hope that means making peace with God. Have you made peace with Him?

February 20th -This Pilgrim's Progress

I do not have all the truth. I do not even have an understanding of all the truth I have. Some of it, I am not ready to vocalize; I do have some of the truth. The truth that I do have has been up lifting and liberating. I do have all The Person of Truth, which is Jesus the Christ Himself. He who is the Living Truth is always imparting Himself to me through His written word in the Bible and with His spoken word. With the living truth in my heart and in my head, I can through the eye-gate and the ear-gate see and hear and thus come to a vital relationship with God through Jesus the Christ and by the Holy Spirit.

Each and every active pendulum swings from one side to the other. It hangs for the slightest part of a second at one extreme and then swings to the farthest opposite side and then returns again. This seems to be the principle under which we learn much of the truth that becomes part of our lives.

We view and believe a vital part of truth, and hang on to it, almost oblivious to any other truth, and then swing to the opposite position to embrace truth that is not imposing but implementing. Then we discover that this is precisely how truth goes on, embracing all that is included from pole to pole of spiritual truth. In such a situation, we have the pendulum of believing faith swinging in perfect symmetry over the whole spectrum of truth.

It must be remembered, however, that if the process is to continue, the pendulum cannot stop at either extreme or its purpose will be distorted. Neither can it stop in the middle, for then its purpose would be dead. Thus we need to know both sides of the truth. We need to know the atoning work of Christ as well as the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. We need to know the love of God and the justice of God. To refuse to swing is death to truth. To insist on a swing too far and staying in one place is distorting the truth.

I confess to you that I am rather simple. I have had my fling. I want to give equal time to all areas of truth that are vital but not undue time to one area. It's back to basics for me. The law is complicated. That was part of the penalty of sin. The law is the schoolmaster which brought us Christ; complex and demanding! But once we are brought to Christ it is simple.

What are the basics? Christ died for sinners! All individuals are sinners. Christ died for all. We are responsible to tell the story of His redeeming love. Christ died for all of us on the cross, wants to live in us, and manifest Himself through us in a vital ministry. He, living in us, is the hope of glory, and becoming all that in the plan of God, we were made to become. The lifestyle of the Christ-like person is characterized by a loving and living and victorious life.

We were made to be born of the Spirit, indwelt by the Spirit and filled by the Spirit. We, as God's called-out ones, must remember that we are also called the Church of Christ. The church's main business and our business is to tell men and women about Christ, teach them of Christ, and train them for Christ. These are the basics. How are you doing with the basics and on your pilgrimage? I know I could use help with mine. How about you?

February 21st - Significant

“give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” Luke 6:33

How significant is my life? Do I really matter? In 1963 Edward Lorenz presented a hypothesis to the New York Academy of Science. His theory stated simply, was that: A butterfly could flap its wings and set in motion a molecule of air, which would then move other molecules of air, in turn moving more molecules of air, which would eventually have the capability of starting a hurricane on the other side of the planet. Lorenz and his idea were literally laughed out of the conference. What he proposed was ridiculous if not preposterous. But it was fascinating to say the least.

Because the idea was charming and intriguing the so-called “butterfly effect” became a staple of science fiction, remaining for decades a combination of myth and legend spread only by comic books and bad “B” rated movies. So imagine the scientific community’s shock and surprise when, more than thirty years after the theory was introduced, physics professors worldwide came to the same conclusion that the “butterfly effect” was accurate, viable and authentic. Soon after, the theory was awarded the status of a “law.” It is now known as “The Law of Sensitive Dependence Upon Initial Conditions.” This theory has shown to be correct not just for butterfly wings.

Science has shown that the butterfly effect engages with the first movement of any form of matter, even people. Yes, that means you, and how far are you willing to go in your life to make a difference in the lives of others. There are generations yet unborn whose very lives will be affected and shaped by the moves that we make today, tomorrow and the next day. Every single thing we do matters. We have been created as one of a kind. On this planet called earth, there has never been anyone else like you and never will be again. The rarities that make you unique are more than a mere accident or quirk of fate. We have been created in order to make a difference. The very beating of your heart has meaning and purpose and your actions have value. Your life has value and what you do with it today will matter today.

So you think your life here on planet earth does not matter. All life matters. In the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew starting in the thirty-first verse Jesus tries to tell us how significant we are. He declares, we as His creation are responsible for taking care of our brothers and sisters. We are to visit them when they are sick and take care of them. We are to cloth them when they are in need of clothes. We are to feed them when they are hungry. We are to give a drink of cold water to those who are dry and thirsty. Are we our brother’s keeper? Yes, we are.

The amount of the resources that are under our control does not matter, each of us can do something. You might use the excuse, if I give them money they will just spend on smokes or booze. That is on them. What is on us is a command to treat each person as if they were Christ. How many angels have we turned away by looking the other way? Remember if you want to receive, give. It’s the law of the farm. We reap what we sow, give nothing, get nothing. That’s it.

February 22nd - Forgiveness Part 1

Lewis B. Smedes argues in his book Forgive and Forget, "When you release the wrongdoer from the wrong, you cut a malignant tumor out of your inner life. You set a prisoner free, but you discover that the real prisoner was yourself."

Andy Andrews in his book "Island of Saints" writes that "Forgiveness does not erase history. What has happened ... has happened, and nothing can erase the memory of it, or its consequences. Forgiveness means relinquishment. It is that simple. "Relinquishment, means giving something up. To relinquish something means to give up whatever power it holds over us. If you forgive somebody for something he did to you, it means you choose to never again to allow that event to determine how you feel, or how you act, or even how you treat that person. You may remember the wrong, but by choosing to forgive, you have disarmed it. Then it can no longer determine what you think, what you say, or what you do." "Forgiveness allows you to lead your own life and choose a joyful existence rather than giving it over to the control of others less qualified. Forgiveness is about letting go of the past."

Andrews also states that "trust has to do with future behavior." Plus, "For you to forgive another person, it is not required that he ask for your forgiveness." "For you to forgive another person, it is not required that he deserve your forgiveness." "For you to forgive another person, it is not even required that he is aware he has been forgiven." "Forgiveness, as it turns out, is a gift that means more to the giver than it does to the receiver."

We pray, "forgive us our sins or trespasses (your choice) as we forgive those who have sinned against us." I do not want to alarm you, but the text is (in the opinion of many Greek scholars) not exactly correct. I am not saying that the Bible contains errors, what I am saying is that the text is better understood when the verb (forgive) is placed in the proper tense. Many Biblical scholars render the reading as, "forgive us our sins as we have already forgiven those who have sinned against us." This would mean that coming to God and asking forgiveness has a prerequisite which is consistent with other scripture.

In Matthew 5:23, Jesus states, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." Jesus also stated, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matthew 6: 14-15).

Why are you a prisoner to the sickness of unforgiveness? Is now the time to let go of all the bitterness you have inside? Is it time to feel free? Isn't it time to lay that burden at the foot of the cross where it belongs? I leave you with three suggestions. Drop it. Leave it. And let it go. It works. I know.

February 23rd - Forgiveness Part 2

Mary Chapin Carpenter wrote and sang the song; "I'll take my chances." In the song, she states a prophetic truth that "forgiveness does not come with a debt." How true. Forgiveness is canceling of a debt or a wrongdoing, and as I have heard many times, "it is letting go and letting God."

Abe Lincoln wrote, "For too long, every ounce of forgiveness I owned was locked away, hidden from view, waiting for me to bestow its precious presence upon some worthy person. Alas, I found most people to be singularly unworthy of my valuable forgiveness, and since they never asked for any, I kept it all myself. Now, the forgiveness that I hoarded has sprouted inside my heart like a crippled seed yielding bitter fruit.

No more! At this very moment, my life has taken on new hope and assurance. Of all the world's population, I am one of the few possessors of the secret of dissipating anger and resentment. I now understand that forgiveness has value only when it is given away. By the simple act of granting forgiveness, I release the demons of the past about which I can do nothing, and I create a new heart, a new beginning.

Many are the times when I have seethed in anger at a word or deed thrown into my life by an unthinking or uncaring person. I have wasted valuable hours imagining revenge or confrontation. Now I see the truth revealed about this psychological rock inside my shoe. The rage I nurture is often one-sided, for my offender seldom gives thought to his offense.

I will now and forevermore silently offer my forgiveness even to those who do not see that they need it. By the act of forgiving, I am no longer consumed by unproductive thoughts. I give up my bitterness. I am content in my soul and effective again with my fellow man.

Knowing that slavery in any form is wrong, I also know that the person who lives a life according to the opinions of others is a slave. I am not a slave. I have chosen my council. I know the difference between right and wrong. I know what is best for the future of my family, and neither misguided opinions nor unjust criticism will alter my course.

Those who are critical of my goals and dreams simply do not understand the higher purpose to which I have been called. Therefore, their scorn does not affect my attitude or action. I forgive their lack of vision, and I forge ahead. I now know that criticism is part of the price paid for leaping past mediocrity. This may sound extremely harsh and it is, but there is only one opinion of you and me that counts. It is the one who has forgiven us and who paid our debt."

Peter came to Jesus asking, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus answered by saying, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. How many times have you been forgiven by our Father; seven, seventy-seven, seventy times seven or countless? We are supposed to represent our Father in all things. Forgiveness is just one. What are you waiting for? A medal?"

February 24th - Forgiveness Part 3

For many years, my greatest enemy has been myself. Every mistake, every miscalculation, every stumble I ever made has been replayed again and again in my mind. Every broken promise, every day wasted, every goal not reached has compounded the disgust I feel for the lack of achievement in my life. Although, I have not let my dismay develop a paralyzing grip on my life, when I disappoint myself, I respond with inaction and become disappointed.

I realize that it is impossible to fight an enemy living in my head. By forgiving myself, I erase the doubts, fears, and frustration that have kept my past in the present. From this day forward, my history will cease to control my destiny. I have forgiven myself. My life has just begun.

I will forgive those who do not ask for forgiveness. I will forgive those who have criticized me unjustly and more important, I will forgive myself. I will greet each and every new day with a forgiving spirit and count my blessings that I have been forgiven.

Oprah Winfrey, said, "Forgiveness is giving up the hope that the past could be any different." Some people can forgive at the drop of a dime, while others need their time. The act of forgiving is one of realizing that holding onto the anger and resentment no longer carries the same weight on us. Instead of seeing something as good or bad, we begin to see things with full acceptance, as they are.

There are a few things each and every one of us needs to know about forgiveness. Whether it is forgiving ourselves or forgiving others. They are; (1) Forgiveness makes you happier and healthier. (2) A lack of forgiveness can erode a sense of worth (either self-worth or the value of another person). (3) Emotions can get in the way of forgiveness. (4) Choosing to forgive can be an act of empowerment. (5) When you forgive someone, you forgive yourself. (6) Forgiveness frees you. (7) Forgiveness helps you move forward in life. The list could go on and on.

Unfortunately, there are those who subscribe to the theory that forgiveness should not be given at all. Some of the reasons they list are; (1) It could make you a door mat, letting others think you are weak and letting them walk all over you. (2) The saying, "to err is human, to forgive divine" may not be universally accepted. (3) Do you know what forgiveness really is, and are you sincere with the forgiveness you are giving. And, (4) there are those who would say that forgiveness is an evolutionary step backwards. I say hogwash to it all.

If you want to know if an apology is real, do what I did with my grandchildren. If they did something wrong, their mother would always tell them to say they were sorry. Nice gesture, but was it meaningful? Then, I would always ask them if they are really sorry, what are they going to do to make sure that it never happens again? Something for which they were never ready. I thank God He does not ask me that question when I ask forgiveness for my sins. Are you as thankful as I am?

February 25th - God's Love for Us

God's love for us is the wellspring of biblical faith and hope. Consider these truths about the love of God from Paul's epistle to the Romans. In the book of nature (1:20), God reveals His eternal power and divine nature. In the book of human conscience, he reveals our imperfections and guilt (2:14-16). But only in the book of Scripture does God reveal His limitless love that can overcome our guilt and transform us into new creatures in Christ. God's loyal love for us is causeless, measureless, and ceaseless. Nothing in us merits or evokes His love; indeed, Christ died for us when we were ungodly and His enemies. God's love is spontaneous and never ending. He loved us because He chose to love us, and if we have responded to Christ's offer of forgiveness and desire a relationship with Him, nothing can separate us from that love or diminish it. This means that we are secure today and forever more.

Over the years, I have come to appreciate the prayer of St. Richard of Chichester (1197-1253). It reads; "Thanks be to thee, O Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits which thou hast given us; for all the pain and insults which thou hast borne for us. O most precious Redeemer, Friend, and Brother may we know thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly; for thine own sake."

When we say that we want to know God more clearly, it means in the deepest sense, Christianity is not a religion but a relationship that is born out of the Trinitarian love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. What does it take to know God more clearly? It takes two essential components, they are time and obedience. It takes time to cultivate a relationship. Unless we set aside the time for communication with the Father and reading His word, praying and listening in silence, we will never be intimate with our Lord. Obedience is the proper response to communication. The more we are impressed by Him, the more we will be less impressed by people, power and things.

What about loving God more dearly? To know God is to love Him. The more we grasp, not merely in our minds but also in our experiences, who He is and what He has done for us, the more our hearts will respond in love and gratitude. As we expand our understanding of our acceptance and security in Christ who loved us and gave Himself up for us, we will realize that God is not the enemy of our joy, but the cause and the source of our joy.

How do we follow Him more nearly? As we live and grow in our love for God, we will learn that we can trust Him more and more. Radical obedience to God sometimes flies in the face of human logic, but in time of trials and testing, God reveals the quality of His faith and trust in us. If we love the Father, we keep His commandments. Our greatest test in this human life will be to do the will of Him who loves us, to make His will our will and to choose the things He has set before us to be for our good and our benefit.

Is it hard to do all these things? Yes it is, but I will say that a cost benefit analysis will show that our return on investment is well worth it. Guaranteed.

February 26th - Paradigms

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 6:19-21

A paradigm is a way of seeing based on implicit or explicit rules that shape one's perspective. A paradigm shift takes place when the rules or boundaries change, so that we no longer see things from the same perspective. When the rules change, our way of seeing is altered. The most celebrated paradigm shift is the Copernican revolution in astronomy. Until the time of Copernicus, the reigning paradigm was Ptolemy's geometric system. The sun and planets were thought to orbit the earth. For centuries, astronomers held this Ptolemaic way of viewing the solar system in spite of the fact that a number of observations did not fit the model. Instead of questioning the paradigm, astronomers invented theories of epicycles to explain why planets appear to stop, go backward for a while, and then resume their original direction. Copernicus's breakthrough was the realization that all of these observations made perfect sense by switching from a geocentric to a heliocentric view of the sun and planets. In other words, we do not live in a terrestrial system but a solar system.

In the same way, the temporal and the eternal perspectives are competing paradigms of life. We can live as if the world is all there is, or we can view our earthly existence as a brief pilgrimage designed to prepare us for eternity. Marcel Proust observed that, “the real act of discovery consists not in finding new lands but in seeing with new eyes.” The problem is that we live in a temporal world that has a temporal agenda. It takes great risk to shift from a temporal paradigm to a biblical paradigm, because it challenges everything our culture reinforces. Only when we renew our minds with biblical truth and reinforce this truth through relationships with others of the family of faith do we begin to see that we are on a brief pilgrimage. When we see this, we discover that we must pursue the things that will last rather than the things that will pass away. This is an ongoing struggle that we will face all of our days as we sojourn through our worldly existence.

Our culture bombards us with the message that this world is all there is and tells us that the goal of life is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, build a name for yourself and establish progeny. There are many variations, but the enticing wisdom of the world, as observed by the Preacher in Ecclesiastes, always derives from what is “under the sun.” The wisdom that comes from above, from beyond the sun, tells us that we are immortal creatures and that this brief moment on this planet is nothing compared with the eternal existence that awaits for us.

This is why Jesus tells us not to lay up treasures for ourselves here on earth. First, He tells us that thieves may steal them. Then He states that they may rust, and unless we line our closets with cedar or place smelly moth balls among our cloths, moths might devour them. So why do we spend our money on such? When God asked me that question, I literally did not have an answer. The most precious thing I could ever buy is free to me. It is a gift from God, purchased by His Son. Redemption.

February 27th - Gone Fishing

Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. Genesis 22:8

The darkness of a moonless night turned to a soft gray as the sun started to rise over the eastern hills. As morning comes, so does the gentle breeze that turns the stillness of a flat sea to gentle ripples rocking the fisherman's boat. As a lone sojourner walks along the shore, he calls to the men in the boat and inquires about the efforts of the night. Frustration resonates in the voice of the senior angler as he announces that the catch was nil. "Too bad," declares the passer by. "Have you tried the other side of the boat," he inquires. And the rest of the story is history. The nets are thrown on the other side of the boat, and so many fish are confined in such a small place that they need to call for help to haul in the bulging nets. At the end of the story, Jesus tells Peter that he no longer will be a fisher of fish, but a fisher of men. However, why so many fish and what happened to them?

If there is a reason and purpose for every action that God puts into motion, this included the fact that the experienced fisherman came home empty that night. It also explains the reason why so many fish were caught that morning. So what is the reason? One option would be to demonstrate that Jesus has control over all of nature. A second would be that they needed to see Jesus's power at work. What do you think would have happened if Jesus had walked up to them without demonstrating His power and control over creation and said, "Follow me." Do you really think they would have dropped everything and said, "Sure, let's go." I really think they would have looked at Him and said, "Yah, right." And followed up with the suggestion, "I suggest you leave while you still can."

But, there is a practical side to the question of the fish. Jesus has just extended a call to four individuals to follow him in an evangelistic ministry. This ministry was not confined to the local congregations. This was a call to take the message to the next town, the next town, and the next town. Unlike a modern crusade, this ministry did not have the luxury of an event planner to schedule dates, places, and to make travel plans. This would have been more like an old time tent revival traveling from town to town speaking to whomever would come and hear.

We know that Peter had a wife and perhaps children. The other three that were called that same day may also have had wives and children. If so, would Jesus ask these men to abandon their families with no means of support? Of course not. So how were the families of these men to be cared for? The fish. These fish were sold in the market place and provided the crucial funds to acquire the staples necessary to carry on the quality of life to which they were accustomed. This was the first missionary offering, the first bazaar for special fund raising.

When God calls us to a task, He will always provide the necessary provisions. Who knows what that might be? But we can be sure that He will provide. Paul tells us in Philippians that God will supply all our needs according to His riches in glory. To me, I believe it because God said it. That settles it in my mind. What about yours? Do you think God is capable of providing all we need or not? I'm sorry if you don't.

February 28th - F.O.D.

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD. Jonah 1:1-3

Just in case you are wondering, F.O.D. stands for favorite oldest daughter. Her name is Debra. She is not my biological daughter, but that does in no way alter the love, affection and admiration I have for her. She has an undergraduate degree in chemical engineering and two masters. She now works for G.E. and manages large sums of money. To say the least, I am very proud of her.

When I met Debra she was sixteen, a junior in high school, and had her own car. She took A.P. classes and was involved in the drama club at school. She also flipped burgers at McDonalds for a while, among other jobs. Unfortunately, she inherited a streak of stubbornness from her grandmother, but only a little from her mother, my wife. She had a curfew of ten each school night, and not a minute after. Somehow, she could never quite make it home by the appointed time. It was always a few minutes after; somewhere from one to fifteen. One night when she walked in the door, I informed her that ten o'clock meant nine fifty nine. She was informed that the next time she came home after ten, she would need to put her car keys on the table, because her driving privileges would be revoked.

Don't you just know it? The next night she wandered in a little late. She was instructed to put her keys on the table. She was allowed to drive to school and to work, nothing more. In anger, she looked at her mother and said, "Mom." I praise my wife because she remained silent. Now you might think that would strain our relationship. I believe it made it more workable. She learned that if she wanted to stay out longer, all she had to do was pick up the phone, call and ask permission.

On occasions, I have watched her interact with her own children. I am happy to report that her behavior with them is the same. If they are not home, or do not call, she will inquire as to why they could not make it home on time, or why they did not call. Good going, Deb.

There are times when God informs us of what we are to do, and how we are to act. He did this with Jonah. However, being wise in his own eyes, he decided he would go the other way. Jonah disobeyed and suffered the consequences. Newton's third law states that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. For Jonah, God's reaction was to make him fish food. He finally came to his senses and did what God had asked him to do.

How much pain and suffering is there in our lives because we have been asked to do something and thought better of it. Then we find ourselves in a situation of our own doing. I have had to learn many lessons the same way, and I can tell you from experience that they were not pleasant. There is an old saying, "don't do as I do, do as I say." I am speaking from experience; do as God asks you to do the first time. It will make your life a whole lot less painful. I guarantee it. I know from experience.

March 1st - F.O.G.

And they came and said to him,
"Teacher, we know that you are sincere,
and show deference to no one;
for you do not regard people with partiality,
but teach the **way** of God in accordance with truth.

Mark 16:14

FOG is the daughter of FOD. FOG stands for Favorite Oldest Granddaughter. For FOD's tenth wedding anniversary, Joyce and I sent the couple on a weekend getaway to a resort some miles away. We then baby sat their two kids. FOG was about six and her brother about four. When we arrived on Friday to assume custody of the children, we were informed that Alexandra (FOG) had pink eye and needed to have an ointment placed her eyes every so often. Saturday morning, when it came time to place the medicine in FOG's eyes, she flat out refused.

Alexandra was asked politely to lie down on the couch so that her grandmother could place the salve in her eyes. Alexandra shook her head from right to left and said; "NO." Once again, she was asked to lie down on the couch and allow her grandmother to place the salve in her eyes. This time she was a little more defiant. She crossed her arms, shook her head and said with ever increasing authority, "NO." For the third time she was asked to lie on the couch; however, this time it came with a warning of the consequences of not performing the required action. This time she stood there like an immovable pillar of stone and stated in no uncertain terms that she would not comply. Big mistake.

In my younger days, I took Judo classes and learned several holds that will render your opponent unable to move any part of their body. I walked over to Alexandra, picked her up and placed her on the ground, allowing her grandmother to place the medicine in her eyes. When that event was over, I announced to her that she was to sit on the floor. Her brother, who had been mouthing off the entire time was told to sit on the stairs. He responded rather quickly. When they were both in their respective places I educated them on the penalties for their actions. They were in time out. Lucas, the brother, then declared that that is not where they did time out. My response was, you will do time out where I tell you to do time out, and they did. They were not very happy.

There are times when God places us in time out because we have need of discipline or because we are not ready for the next stage of our training. Our time out may take place in the desert, but it may not take forty days or forty years. Either way, it is a time, if we use it properly, of preparation. A time for God to train and instruct us so that we are equipped for what lies ahead. It is not a time to sit and pout because we did not get our way. Remember, we are children of the way, and occasionally, we lose our way, and when we are ready, God will always make a way. I do not believe I have ever lost my way; although, I have strayed many times. Each time, with the help of my Father, I, like the prodigal, come to my senses and come home. Have you lost your way or have you strayed? Like the song says; "Come home, come home, ye who are weary, come home. Earnestly and tenderly, Jesus is calling, come home." He is waiting at the door.

March 2nd - Does God Still Sing the Blues?

Way back in the beginning, Long before God gave the law
He looked down on us from heaven, Sin was all He saw.

Cause everyone was evil, The whole race had gone insane,
The Bible says it grieved Him. And His heart was filled with pain.

Before Jesus raised up Lazarus, When all his friends were standin' 'round
Jesus hurt inside so badly, When all the tears were comin' down

Lookin' out over Jerusalem, Was just days before He died
The pain kept gettin' deeper, Until He broke down and cried

And sometimes I wonder, When I think of all the sin we choose,
He looks down on all this twisted world, Does God still get the blues?

Even when we break His heart, I believe He keeps it to Himself
He knows most of us are so full o' guilt He won't add on somethin' else

He just keeps on, keeps on givin', All His blessings from above
Waiting for the moment, We'll return some of His love

And sometimes I wonder, Think of all the gifts we refuse
When He looked down on us from heaven, Does God still get the blues?

Jesus gave His life, His word and His name, To me and you
Restin' in the Holy Spirit is really what we need to do, But instead we prefer our
traditions, And we all tell Him that He lied, And we blaim Him for our misery, Our
blindness and our pride

And sometimes I wonder, When I see, I see the God-less lives we choose, Just how
much we grieve the Spirit, Does God still get the blues?

By Don Francisco

Is Don Francisco correct? Does God still sing the blues? When He looks down from heaven is He pleased, or does He shake His head and wonder if we will ever get it right? Will we humble ourselves and turn from our wicked ways so that we may be blessed beyond measure? Sometimes I wonder.

Now I do not want to come across as a righteous saint who never sins. I do each and every day. On the days when I have to drive the circles, I sin even more. There are those who say that God made me the way I am. I do not subscribe to that theory. If God knitted me together in my mother's womb, then isn't He responsible for all my sins? I think not. I am the one who brings grief to His heart and tears to His eyes. When I finally stand before Him, I will not be able to pull a Flip Wilson and say that; "The devil made me do it." I may want to, but it will not fly. I am responsible for my actions and every time I listen to the song, it makes me wonder how many times I have given God cause to sing the blues. Please do not be like me and bring tears to God's eyes. I know you are better than that, and so does He. How much better it is to hear God sing the Hallelujah Chorus. Agree?

March 3rd - Confederated

Like many words in the New Testament, confederated is a compound word. The word is a combination of confused and perplexed. The word origin is Taylor Gaffney. When she was two years old, she was standing on the countertop next to the bathroom sink watching her father shave. It seems Glen was having a difficult time getting his beard trimmed just the way he wanted. His daughter looked up and asked the question, "Daddy, are you confederated?" Glen looked at his daughter and said, "Yes, I am."

Like Glen, I too get confederated at times. Take for example the question asked so often, what nationality are you? I always check, "other." Why? Because my country of heritage is Scotland, and that is never a choice, so I choose "other." But here is the real kicker. One of the choices is African American. Now, I think I know what that is supposed to imply. But, then again, I may be wrong. I think they are trying to determine the color of a person's skin. If that is the case, then why is white a choice. The only white people I know are those who never go out in the sun, or if they are albino.

The term African American covers a wide range of people. If you are white, born in South Africa, and now live in the United States are you an African American? I hope you see my problem. The same is true with the word doctor. My oldest granddaughter is studying to be a medical doctor (M.D.). Twice a year I go to see my Doctor of Dentistry (D.D.S.). When my dog needed medical help, I would take her to a Doctor of Veterinarian Medicine (D.V.M.). I once thought about going to Arizona State University in Tempe to study to become a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph. D.). And then there are those who receive a Th.D. (A Doctorate in Divinity). So what does the term doctor imply? Can you help me in my confederation?

Here is more confusion and perplexity. What does the world say about Christians? According to Keith Plummer, non-Christians and even Christians believe that the God of the Bible is not a part of the natural world, but its Creator and Preserver. As theologian James Dolezal says, "God isn't the greatest thing in the world—because God isn't a thing in the world. God is the reason there is a world." Really?

Do you understand my confederation? If a theologian, who is supposed to know all about God, states that the God of the Bible is not in this world, he is totally absurd. Do you mean to tell me that God made the world, man and everything in it, and then just left us to our own devices? If that is true, no wonder the world is so messed up. Not only that, but we as believers are to be pitied most of all. As the Apostle Paul stated, if God does not exist and Christ did not rise from the dead, we have placed our hope in a fictional fantasy that will never come true. Hogwash! According to the hymn, my hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus' name. And I do! What about you? Where is your God, and what does He mean to you? Think about it. There may come a time when you will need clear thinking. Being confederated will only make you more confused and perplexed. That is not a good place to be.

March 4th - But if Not

And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. Heb 11:6

Jack R. Taylor writes, "There is apparently a law operating in the spiritual realm that guarantees that when the Spirit of God moves to initiate and implement the plans of God, the enemy will come to oppose it. This opposition may be subtle or gradual or fierce and violent. However it is, you can be sure that if you set your face to follow the Spirit you will need a faith for the fiery furnace."

Do not expect a reception in your honor when you decide to follow and walk with the Spirit of God. The exact opposite may occur. This devotion is for all those who have cast their lot with our Father no matter what will happen or the cost. It is for all those who one day soon will know about the fires and the furnaces in a personal experience. It is true that every believer who really means business with God will know the hard places, the trials and the testing time. For Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego it was a literal furnace and a literal fire. However, they stand in a long line of believers who have suffered for their faith only to reveal to the world a clear view of the power of our God and Father. Honorable mention is given to these men in Hebrews eleven. It simply says, "quenched the violence of fire."

There is no more thrilling story in literature than the story of these three Hebrew children and their experience with the fire and the furnace. If the saints of God ever found themselves in need of a patron saint or role model, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego would have my vote as prime candidates. Here were three men, along with Daniel, experiencing continuous revival. Though they were in a foreign land, they were not controlled by its rules. They listened to another voice and ate of the fare of heaven. Their persistence under pressure should at once be a challenge and a comfort to us all.

You more than likely know the story. The three high up cabinet officials refused to bow to any idol made by man. However, they would bow to and worship the God of Israel. So off to the furnace they went, but before leaving they told the king that their God was able to protect them, and here is the kicker, they told the king "but if not" we still will not bow before your idols. So into the furnace they went, and out they came unharmed by the fire.

The lessons we can learn from the three are; (1) furnace experiences are bound to happen. God has not promised that we will not be spared from trouble. In fact, He said, we can expect it. (2) Trouble does not have to be tragic, although it is typical for us to think that way. What matters is how we react to trouble. We have a choice of how we look at it, as either trouble, or we can look at it as a way for God to triumph. I prefer the latter. (3) Loyalty in the face of trouble brings positive results. Our conduct under pressure may be the best witness we ever have. And (4) need is necessary. We must remember that in our weakness God's strength is revealed.

One thing I am sure of, I will never know how strong my faith is unless I face the fire and the furnace. When I do, I hope I will say, my God is able, but if not... Will you?

March 5th - R.A.T.S.

From 1987 to 1996, I was the Executive Minister at one of the most famous churches in Washington, D.C. In my position, I was responsible for the office staff, the maintenance, all financial data, the kitchen staff and all the volunteers. That amounted to twenty five individuals. The budget for the church was somewhere in the neighborhood of just a little over a million and a half. On one occasion the leaders of the church decided to hire a fund raiser. Her responsibility was to meet with members and try to persuade them to leave part of their estate to the church upon their passing. The burden of training this person fell on me.

Now I will not say that this person was the easiest to train, and that she was not demanding. Nor will I say that she was not stubborn. Trying to train her was like trying to train a deaf dog to sit without showing the four footed animal what is expected of them. It did not matter what I had trained her on, she would always call me on the phone demanding that I come to her office, and show her what to do. I would leave and travel to her third floor office and once again try to explain what she needed to do. One day I got so frustrated that I made up a sign for her. It read; "READ ALL THE SCREENS." I also informed her that all the information she was looking for could be found by reading the screen in front of her. I also informed her that I was not going to do her work for her any more as I had my own duties to perform. If my memory is correct, she left our employment shortly thereafter.

After leaving the above church in 1996, I started my own consulting firm, I called it Partners. The design was to help churches with their administration and accounting challenges. During that time, I also did corporate training for a church software company, which I totally enjoyed. In training church staff, I employed the same slogan I have mentioned in the above paragraph. It caught on with other company trainers who found the saying very useful.

I also find that Reading All the Pages works well when someone is trying to assemble the Christmas present that they bought for one of their children. However, there are those who prefer to only look at the pictures, believing they are smarter than the engineers who designed whatever.

For Christians, it should read; "Read All the Signs." What do I mean by that? Well, first of all, a recent survey stated the eighty percent of Americans call themselves Christians. The signs say something different. If indeed eighty percent are Christians, where are they on Saturday night or Sunday morning (excluding Easter and Christmas)? According to the I.R.S., if all the charitable donations were given that are claimed, churches and other ministries would be swimming in money. There are many who call themselves believers, but their tongue betrays them. There are many whose actions reveal otherwise. Psalm 19:14 reads; "Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer." God "Reads All the Signs" of our hearts, mind and souls each and every moment of each and every day. May they be as the writer of Proverbs says; "like apples of gold in a setting of silver." Father, if they are not, please, do not let my mouth, my mind and my heart lead me into sin. Thank you. Amen.

March 6th - All Knowing

I wrote in the previous devotional of one church where I worked, where I had a staff of about twenty five to manage. I had three departments for which I was responsible. They were the office staff, the maintenance staff, the kitchen staff and all the volunteers. The office staff took care of all the administrative stuff such as scheduling meetings, room usage, the preparation of the Sunday bulletin, and its printing. The maintenance staff was responsible for maintaining the cleanliness of the five story building and seeing that all the systems remained in working order. The kitchen staff prepared meals for about two hundred and fifty people per day. The church ran three feeding programs, a meals-on-wheels, a feeding program for the underprivileged and one for the mentally challenged.

I do not mind saying that when I came to the church, the office staff ran OK, while the kitchen staff and the maintenance staff were in shambles. In addition, the finances were a mess. My first order was to provide financial statements that were meaningful and concise. My second order was to replace the maintenance supervisor, and the third was to find a person who knew how to run a kitchen. At the end of my first year, I had a staff that I could count on to get their duties performed in a timely and correct manner. Oh what a relief it was.

My only problem was that after I had a great staff in place, I still wanted to know everything. We met each Monday and planned for the week. On Friday, we would meet to discuss how things went. Let's be clear about one thing, I did not micromanage. I did not tell them what do or how to do it, I just wanted to keep informed about everything. Then one day I woke up. I had this wonderful staff and I should just let them do their jobs. At our next Monday morning meeting, I told them this would be the last and if I needed to know something just to let me know.

There is a phrase that refers to someone who thinks they know it all. The term is a "know it all." I am happy that I do not know it all. In fact, although I have three undergraduate degrees and three master's degrees I know very little. As I watch Jeopardy, I am affirmed of this fact. I have a whole lot to learn.

Religious leaders, scientists, and even a hen (or so it seemed) have been making predictions for the end of the world almost as long as the world has been around. They've predicted the destruction of the world through floods, fires, and comets—luckily for us, none of it has come to pass.

December 21, 2012, marked the end of the first "Great Cycle" of the Maya Long Count calendar. Many misinterpreted this to mean an absolute end to the calendar, which had tracked time continuously from a date 5,125 years earlier, and doomsday predictions emerged. End-of-the-world scenarios included the Earth colliding with an imaginary planet called Nibiru, giant solar flares, a planetary alignment that would cause massive tidal catastrophes, and a realignment of Earth's axis. Preparations for the end of the world as we know it included a modern-day Noah's ark built by a man in China and extensive sales of survival kits.

Many have claimed to know when the end will occur, and Christ will return. I do not and if I did, I would probably mess it up. I am told that no one knows that exact date and time except the Father. All I am required to do is be ready. I am, are you? I certainly hope so.

March 7th - Over the Shoulder

I believe it was 2014 when I was introduced to George Seldon. He was a spokesperson for a ministry called Momentum Europe. This ministry was started to regain Europe for Christ. Their goal was to reach leaders of influence in finance, business, the arts and politics. The reason they chose the leaders was that they have influence over those who serve under them, who are not unimportant, but in Europe the people at the top are looked to and their influence carries more weight. My wife and I became partners of the ministry.

At a partners planning retreat later that year, I met Bill and Critty Fairback. For the past 27 years, Bill and Critty have been a part of CRU and have a ministry to the political influencers in Washington, D.C. Critty tells the story of how individuals in the D.C. area are forever looking over other's shoulders. They may be having a conversation with you, but their eyes are constantly scanning the room for individuals who are higher up on the food chain, and can help their upward mobility. They are looking out for number one, themselves. They are no different than a whole lot that are not part of the political scene in the D.C. area.

Sometime before I went to the planning retreat, I read a book about people of influence. Unfortunately, I do not remember the author or the title of the book; however, I do remember the content and the context. The content, in my opinion was the most important part. The content stated that we are all people of influence. Yes, believe it or not, you are a person of influence. If you are a mother or father, you have influence over you children. If you work or worked with people, you have influence over them. Your influence is what you say, how you say it, what you do and how you do it. If you are in a position of management and you do your job in an upstanding way, hopefully your co-workers will respond the same way. If you do your job in a haphazard way, those around you will think they can do the same. The old saying, "actions speak louder than words" is so true. What we do needs to match what we say. No ifs, ands, or buts.

What I find amazing is that somehow over the past two thousand years things have flipped flopped. My hero, Jesus by name, let His actions speak for Him. His words are important, but His actions more. What do I mean by that? Consider that fact of who Jesus chose to hang with. They were not the religious leaders of the day. They were not the High Priest, the Sadducees or the Pharisees. One of His most endearing statements was, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." He came that all of us might have the abundant life, not just the few. Jesus knew that He had no influence over those who claimed to have authority. But the one who had all authority, chose to hang with those who for all intent and purpose had no influence. Big difference.

Are you a person of influence? Yes, you are. By what you say and by what you do. Do you feed the poor, visit the sick, clothe the naked, volunteer at the food bank or any other ministry? Do you greet the person who comes to your door in the name of Christ? What do you do to influence people? Before answering that question; remember, there is both positive and negative influencers. Which one are you? Hope it's the right kind.

March 8th - The Circle of Life

Sometime in 1917, my grandmother and my grandfather on my mother's side boarded a ship in Hamilton, Scotland, and headed for a new life in the United States of America. The couple arrived at Ellis Island, then headed east, and settled in Rhode Island, where my mother was born. That makes my mother 100% Scottish. Although she never traveled to Scotland until her sixties, she learned well the ways of a Scottish lass. She, like her mother is opinionated and stubborn. She is also very loving, kind and loyal to those who are in her favor. That said, I am 50% Scottish, and have inherited none of my mother's questionable characteristics. (It's true and don't you dare laugh. Just ask my wife.)

If you have ever been to England or Scotland, and driven on the left side of the road, you might remember that there are very few stop signs. However, there are a whole lot of roundabouts or circles. For us who have that blood in our veins, circles come naturally. For those of you who do not, The Villages has kindly erected signs leading into each roundabout. If you look to the right as you enter the circle, a sign will inform you as to the proper etiquette while in the circle. (What! You have not seen them!) And, in addition, the highway department has placed a YIELD sign to let you know who has the right-of-away. I believe that these are self-explanatory, but I might be wrong. The signs are placed there for our protection.

If the signs are there for our protection, I, for the life of me do not understand why so many people disregard them. I cannot tell you how many times I have had to slam on my brakes to avoid an accident. I used to joke about buying an old clunker and just driving around all day. I figured I could make about five to six thousand a day just in car repairs. Then there is bodily injury. Wow. I could retire to my own island in the Caribbean within a month. My wife said, "no."

Now to the serious stuff. We are bombarded by signs everywhere. Some are there to sell us a product, some to announce a service someone is selling. Others are there to tell us the address of a building, and some to tell us who and what is in the building. We see billboards that provide information about real estate opportunities, for restaurants that are available on the next highway exit, and signs telling the price of fuel, if we need to fill up. All of which can be helpful.

Then there are signs that we feel in our bodies, when things are not as they should be. Good examples are my knees. They have both been replaced, but before the operations, there was constant pain. It is hard to deny bone on bone pain. Like when a disc goes bad in your back, and is lying on the nerve. No fun. But, due to modern medicine, replacements are available and non-invasive surgery is now available.

Lastly, there are signs God sends our way to inform us that we are not living according to His standards. What signs you might ask? I will tell you that I do not know how God deals with you individually, but as for me, well, I have been sent to God's waiting room on more than one occasion. Why? Because I missed the warning signs God had placed on my path, let alone the ones I never saw because I strayed. However, when I walk in His ways I can see all the signs warning of danger that I can avoid. What signs do you follow? Don't get lost.

March 9th - White Faced English Cows

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.

John 10:11 & 27

I first met Glen Holloway in Heidelberg, Germany some years ago. He is a retired United States Army officer who is married to Pam. Joyce, my wife, was in Germany as part of her job. I was there because she was there. I do not remember what time of year it was, but I do remember that it was cold; there was snow on the ground and ice on the roads. One Saturday, our two families went for a drive though the German countryside. You could not see much except snow and the Neckar River a tributary of the Rhine River. Every once in a while you could see the remains of a broken down medieval castle. We had lunch, visited a few shops and had dinner that evening.

When Glen retired, he and Pam bought a farm some fifty miles south of Washington, D.C. Joyce and I became good friends with them, and every so often we would make our way down to visit them for the weekend. When Obama became president both their lives changed. Both Glen and Pam worked for beltway bandits (The term given to government contractors.) and with the reduction in military spending, they both lost their livelihood. Without many prospects, they sold the farm, packed their household belongings and moved to Idaho to manage an organic farm.

In the summer of 2017, Joyce and I decided to purchase a travel trailer and see the United States. One of our stops was to visit the Holloways in Idaho. They live on a farm and to make ends meet they raise organic chicken, pork and beef. They also sell eggs to the locals. I do not recall how many cows they had, but each night Glen would load up a five hundred gallon tank and take it where the cows were pastured. He would empty the water into a large trough to give the cows accessibility. On several occasions, I went with him to water the herd. Most of the time, Glen would have to go looking for the cows as they had wandered off. As we strolled through the pastures Glen would start calling out names. You see, Glen had named each cow and would speak to them individually. I found it strange, but each cow would respond when Glen called its name. Here I had always thought that cows were only a little smarter than sheep. Boy was I wrong.

When Elijah had defeated four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, he took off scared for his life. Jezebel had made threats on his life. He found himself in a cave asking God to take his life. Of course, God did not answer his request. However, God did come and have a conversation. The King James version states that "in a still small voice" God spoke with Elijah. But in reality, the best rendering is "in total silence" God spoke to Elijah. Maybe that is why we are told to go into our inner room or quiet space to commune with the Father. When we block out the noise and distraction of this world, we will be able to hear the voice of our Master. It takes time to learn the voice of another, the sooner we start listening to His voice the better we will be able to hear it when He calls. And He will call you by name. The question is, are you listening. I certainly hope we are all as smart as Glen's cows.

March 10th - Words of Wisdom

Though the fig tree does not blossom and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation

Habakkuk 3:17-18

Dan Yeary is the Pastor Emeritus at both University Church in Coral Gables, Florida and North Phoenix Baptist Church in Phoenix, Arizona. Dan tells the story about how his father was in an automobile accident, and wound up in the hospital being hooked up to all kinds of machines and tubes running everywhere. His eyes were black and blue, his ribs were broken along with many other problems. Once he was allowed to see his father, he sat by his bed side and held his hand while his father slept. Upon awaking, his father gave Dan a great bit of advice. Dan said that his father spoke in a soft voice and said, "Things are never so bad that they cannot get worse." True words of wisdom.

Another outlook on life can be summed up by how you look at the glass. Is it either half empty, or is it half full? Are you an optimist or a pessimist? But there is another way of looking at the glass; that is, I am happy just to have a glass. That way of thinking is neither pessimistic nor optimistic but reflecting an attitude of joy.

The prophet Habakkuk looked at life this way. Habakkuk provides us one of the most remarkable sections in all of Scripture, as it contains an extended dialogue between Habakkuk and God. The prophet initiated this conversation based on his distress about God's "inaction" in the world. He wanted to see God do something more, particularly in the area of justice for evildoers. The book of Habakkuk pictures a frustrated prophet, much like Jonah, though Habakkuk channeled his frustration into prayers and eventually praise to God, rather than trying to run from the Lord as Jonah did.

The book of Habakkuk offers us a picture of a prideful people being humbled, while the righteous live by faith in God (2:4). It reminds us that while God may seem silent and uninvolved in our world, He always has a plan to deal with evil and always works out justice . . . eventually. The example of the prophet Habakkuk encourages believers to wait on the Lord, expecting that He will indeed work out all things for our good.

Habakkuk asked God the kind of questions that so many of us have pondered, "Why do you force me to look at evil, stare trouble in the face day after day?" We have all seen the evidence of evil in our lives. We've all been touched by it. And we bear scars at various stages of healing. Surrounded by evil as if we are trapped in a dark prison cell of our own making, we are often downtrodden by our poor choices and our fallen world. However, the book of Habakkuk reminds us that no place is too dark, and no wall too thick for God's grace to penetrate in a powerful and life-affirming way.

Are you thankful that you have a glass? Even when the glass is empty, we like Habakkuk need to be thankful. Why? Although God may be silent, He is still there watching over us. Hard to believe sometimes, but it is true.

March 11th - Teach Us to Pray

No doubt, one of the hardest things to do is to learn how to pray. It seems the disciples, who should have known how to pray, did not. If they were good devout Jews they would be found in the Synagogue praying daily. A devout Jew prayed at least five times a day. There was a morning prayer called the "Shema" taken from Deuteronomy 6; "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, The Lord is One." There was an evening prayer or twilight prayer that started out "Creator of evening twilight, blessed are You, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who created day and night." Then there was the bedtime Shema, and of course blessings were said before and after each meal. One would think that the disciples would have known how to pray.

The problem wasn't that they did not know the prayers, they did, and more than likely, could have recited them in their sleep. But that is not praying. That is just like reciting a line in a play. The disciples knew that there had to be something more to prayer than the memorization and reciting of words. That can also be a trap for us today. We read and memorize prayers that then roll out of our minds and off our lips, but do not come from the heart.

The Greek word for teach is "*didasko*" and it means "to instruct." Jesus instructed them by giving them either a model prayer or a model for prayer, your choice. The prayer has been separated into seven sections and there are those who suggest that all prayer should contain these seven elements. The elements are; (1) Recognizing God as Father, (2) Honoring Him as Holy, (3) Honoring His will, (4) Asking for our needs to be met, (5) Asking forgiveness, (6) Forgiving the offenses of others, and (7) Asking for protection. However, others have developed their models of prayer. One such model is "ACTS" and its elements are (1) Adoration, (2) Confession, (3) Thanksgiving, and (4) Supplication/Intercession.

There are two other models that should be mentioned. The first is the PRAY model. The elements of this model are (1) Praise, (2) Repent, (3) Ask, and (4) Yield. The first three should be self-explanatory; however, number four is another story. How often do we conclude our prayers with "thy will be done?"

The last model is best told in the form of a story. It seems that somewhere long ago in the middle-ages, a farmer would come to church each morning, make his way down to the altar, kneel, fold his hands, and just stare at the cross. Eventually, the farmer would cross himself, rise, and leave the church. The farmer who was a peasant, could not read or write, of course he did not understand Latin, and did not have a clue to what was being said in the mass. The parish priest would often kneel beside the man to say his own prayers. The priest noticed that he never heard the farmer speak a word. Curious, the priest asked the farmer one day what he did while praying. The farmer looked at the priest and with a wide grin simply said, "I smiles at Him and He smiles at me."

Whatever model you choose for prayer, be it ACTS or PRAY, or a model you develop on your own, just remember one thing, keep smiling at Him and He will keep smiling at you. You do smile when you pray, don't you? You should, you know.

March 12th - Prayer

Dwight D. Eisenhower once said, "things are never more like today than they have been." If he was speaking of prayer, he hit the nail on the head. It seems the disciples, like many today, had trouble understanding what prayer is. To many, prayer is a last-ditch effort to find an answer to the problems which plague their lives. To others, it is a parachute or safety net only to be used in times of disaster. Still others see prayer as a way of informing God of what they think He does not know.

To better understand what prayer is and how it should affect our lives, Jesus gives his disciples and us a pattern for prayer. He gives an illustration for prayer, or a model prayer, or the design of an outline on which prayers are framed and formed. His structure is taken from the original framework for all Jewish prayers that includes eight components. They are:

(1) The elements of love and praise. There needs to be a sense of God's worthiness. This they received from the Psalms. (2) The element of gratitude, prayer is an attitude of thanksgiving. (3) It identifies the holiness of God, His reverence, and places man in the proper place. (4) The desire to obey and please God and not try to bend the will of God to the will of man. (5) Prayer incorporates a recognition of our uncleanness and a confession of sins. (6) Prayer is unselfish and a remembrance that the needs of the family of faith are far greater than the needs of the individual. It is a recognition that prayer should encompass the requirements of the whole, not isolate the necessities of one. (7) Prayer preserves and embodies the thought of never giving in and never giving up. And, (8) Prayer reflects humility and a willingness to submit to the will of God. Prayer is not asking God to do my will but bring ourselves into conformity with His will. It is asking God to do his will and giving us the grace to enjoy and accept it.

The Greek word for pray is "euchomai." The word appears to be a combination of the words "eucharisteo" which means "to thank" and "aiteomai" which means "to ask." The meaning of the word "euchomai" then is "to thank," "to ask," or to "beseech." However; in this case the letters "pros" are added which indicates that the communication is directed at God. Hence, the word "proseuchomai" which has a literal meaning that embraces all the legitimate ideas of prayer. This is the word that is used in Matthew 6:9.

Martin Lloyd Jones had it correct when he said, "man is at his highest when he is on his knees and comes face to face with God." Next time you are down there communicating with God, count how many of the eight components your prayer contains before it turns to the personal needs of prayer. Not getting results from your prayers? Maybe it is time to reassess what our prayer life really needs. Now is just as good as time as any to start. What do you think?

March 13th - Worship

"The soldiers led Jesus away into the place (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. They put a purple robe on him, then wove a crown of thorns and set it on him. And they began to call to him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they worshipped him. And when they mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him" (Mk 15:16-20 NIV)

Stop for a second and think about the word worship. What do we do when we worship? Is it giving praise? Is it singing songs which extol the divine virtues of God? Is it a quiet time of prayer? Is it confession? Is it showing reverence? Can worship include dance? Ask one hundred people to define worship, and chances are you will get one hundred different answers, although some of the characteristics might be the same. On the contrary, there would be little doubt as to what worship was not. (i.e. going to church at the appointed time, warming a pew, placing loose change in the offering plate as it passes by, saying, "Amen," or "Praise the Lord," or "Hallelujah" in order to appear as if the sermon or music has lifted your soul to the highest heavenly realms). Nor would it be following a set of precepts or rules or readings or liturgical processes which are meaningless and worthless.

One of the reasons why worship cannot be precisely defined is that the Greek words from which worship is translated do not provide clear instructions. The word which Mark used here is the word "proskuneo." It is a compound word from the words "pros" meaning "towards" and "kuneo" meaning "to kiss." Its literal meaning is "to stoop to kiss the ring" and draws the word picture of a servant or subject or someone showing respect, stooping to kiss the ring of a person of high influence and power, such as a king. It is showing respect, reverence, and paying homage to one in authority.

It is hard to believe that the soldiers who knelt down did so to worship Jesus in the truest sense of the word. It is harder still to conceive that these soldiers who struck him in the head with a staff and spat upon him are kneeling down to show respect, reverence, or to pay homage to the King of Kings. What the soldiers do teach us is a lesson regarding complacency, and a warning about an outward manifestation which has no inward structure to sustain its appearance, and carries with it the possibility of making void both the worshipper and the object of worship.

Stop and think for another minute or two about your worship. What do you do when you worship? Do you give praise, sing songs, and dance? Is worship a quiet time of prayer and confession? Is it bowing down before the King of Kings and giving Him the adoration, respect, and tribute which is His due. Or is worship an act of piety carried on by ritualistic memories from the tomb of an indifferent heart. Pray that it is not the final act of mockery before Jesus is taken out to be crucified.

March 14th - Equality vs Equity

Social equality is a state of affairs in which all people within a specific society have the equal rights, liberties, and status, possibly including civil rights, freedom of speech, property rights, and equal access to certain social goods and social services. Social equality requires the absence of legally enforced social class or caste boundaries and the absence of discrimination motivated by an inalienable part of a person's identity. For example, advocates of social equality believe in equal justice under law for all people regardless of sex, gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, origin, caste or class, income or property, language, religion, convictions, opinions, health, or disability. Social equality is related to equal opportunity.

The standard of equality that states everyone is created equal at birth is called ontological equality. This type of equality can be seen in many different places like the United States Declaration of Independence. This early document, which states many of the values of the United States of America, has this idea of equality embedded in it. It clearly states that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights". The statement reflects the philosophy of John Locke and his idea that we are all equal in certain natural rights. Another standard of equality is equality of opportunity, "the idea that everyone has an equal chance to achieve wealth, social prestige, and power because the rules of the game, so to speak, are the same for everyone." This means that, for any social equality issue dealing with wealth, social prestige, power, or any of that sort, the equality of opportunity standard can defend the idea that everyone had the same start.

The term "equity" describes a type of ownership in old English because it was regulated through the system of equity law that developed in England during the Late Middle Ages to meet the growing demands of commercial activity. Today, equity is defined as "the state, quality or ideal of being just, impartial and fair." The concept of equity is synonymous with fairness and justice. It is helpful to think of equity as not simply a desired state of affairs or a lofty value. To be achieved and sustained, equity needs to be thought of as a structural and systemic concept.

Equity involves trying to understand and give people what they need to enjoy full, healthy lives. Equality, in contrast, aims to ensure that everyone gets the same things in order to enjoy full, healthy lives. Like equity, equality aims to promote fairness and justice, but it can only work if everyone starts from the same place and needs the same things.

In biblical terms, equality means we are all the same in God's eyes, we are sinners and are in need of redemption. We are all equal, because we have all chosen to sin. Equity in biblical terms means, we all have the opportunity to choose life over death. This is given to us by God to determine where we want to spend eternity. We all start out in the same place, and we all have the opportunity to arrive at the same place. In the end, what will make the difference is how by God's power we choose and what we choose to do with our God given life. Did we choose Him and work for Him, or did we choose self and work for our own benefit? That is why the first command to humanity was to choose life. What did you choose? Eternity awaits.

March 15th - One

We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord.
We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord.
And we pray that our unity will one day be restored.
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.
Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love

I like the idea that the Catholic Church has about the reciting of prayers on Sunday. It was conveyed to me by a Catholic priest that although there are many Catholic churches having mass at different times and in different places, their belief is that they are offering one prayer at one time to the one true God. I like that. When we say as a congregation the collect or prayer of the day, we are offering our prayer in unison as one voice with one assurance that it will be heard by our Father.

We are told in the book of Ephesians the fourth chapter that we are made to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

It may be that the Apostle Paul took the germ of an idea from the Stoics. The Stoics believed that God was a fire purer than any earthly fire, and they also believed that is what gave human beings life. It was the spark from the fire of God which came to dwell in their bodies.

There is evidence that the statement was a baptismal credo of the early church. It enshrined the chief elements of a confession of faith made in the rite of initiation. If so, the force of the appeal is to invoke what Christians have shared as their common heritage in the faith: one God, one Lord and one baptism by which all are engrafted into the body. This may be called a rudimentary Trinitarian confession of faith. However, it is still undeveloped and not yet elaborated upon as in the classical creeds. Its simplicity is its strength and may be the focal point for which the modern church is still searching. When Christians come together across the divide of denominational allegiances, we may find they have more in common than we suspect. We need to meet not to create unity, but to express it

It has become common in wedding ceremonies for a couple to light a unity candle. Two smaller candle stands are placed either side of the one larger candle. The smaller candles represent the two individuals getting married. At the end of the service, the bride and groom each take a smaller candle and light the unity candle and then extinguish the smaller candles. This is to symbolize their unity. Although each retains their individuality, they are now one. It is the same way for us when we unify ourselves with God. We keep our individuality. The task that lies before us then is to make sure that our individual self does not overrule our unity with God. If that happens we must decide which we are. Always remember that a kingdom divided cannot stand. We will surely fall. But also remember that the Father will always be there to welcome us home once again. Be sure to wipe your feet first.

March 16th - The Dilemma of Choice

"It is not a tragedy to die for something you believe in, but it is a tragedy to find at the end of your life that what you believed in betrayed you." Joan of Arc

When my son was about eight years old I asked him one night what he wanted for dinner. His response was, "what is there to eat?" I went through the fridge, and we settled on chicken nuggets. I put them in the oven, and set the timer while my son went down stairs and to watch television. When dinner was ready, I called him to come and fix his plate, which he did. He smothered his plate with catchup, placed the nuggets in the center, and headed back down stairs to continue watching television. I followed him downstairs.

After my son had finished eating, he had two nuggets left over. He asked me if he could give them to Shane, our Irish Setter. He reached down onto his plate, grabbed the first (dripping with catchup), and held out for the dog. She took it without hesitation, and then licked his fingers. He retrieved the second nugget from the plate (once again dripping with catchup), and Shane came to take the tasty bite. However this time, Shane only took the nugget, and did not lick his fingers. The dilemma begins. I watched him go through his thought process. He looks down at his shirt, he then looked at the dog and then the solution. He places his fingers into his mouth and licks off the remaining catchup. Not the best choice, and certainly not the one I would have chosen.

According to Andy Andrews, we are where we are in life because of the choices we have made. He adds that hopefully we have made them with our best thinking. Steven Covey in his book Seven Habits of Highly Effective People states that in order to be effective in life, we must be proactive. We cannot sit back and let life come at us. We must go out into the world and make things happen. Our only other choice is to be reactive. I am not a control freak, but I prefer to make decisions that will affect my future, rather than have someone else make them. So many times in a church setting, I have heard, "God will provide." My standard response is that God has provided the brain power to think and make the proper decision that will lead us out of our current situation. We will live and die by the choices we make, either good or bad.

I often will ask people why they get out of bed each and every morning. The answers vary from having to go to bathroom, going to work, or "I simply woke up." Too bad. The first choice we make in the morning may determine how the rest of our day goes. May I suggest your first choice is, "My choice is you, God, first and only" (Psalm 16, The Message). Choosing God first each and every morning does not mean everything will go the way we want. It does not mean bad things will not happen to the people we love. It does not mean that the world will be a better place to live in by the time we go to bed at night. It does mean that we are not alone when we walk through the valley or struggle to the mountain top. It means that when there is only one set of footprints in the sand, we were carried. It means having the assurance that there will always be someone there to hold our hand, who has gone through the bad times, even really bad times. It means that we can overcome the world just has God's Son did. What more reason do you need to choose Him first this day? You will won't you? (see Appendix A)

March 17th - Liberty

Broadly speaking, liberty is the ability to do as one pleases. It is a synonym for the word freedom. In modern politics, liberty is the state of being free, within society, from control or oppressive restrictions imposed by authority on one's way of life, behavior, or political views. In philosophy, liberty involves free will as contrasted with determinism. In theology, liberty is freedom from the effects of "sin, spiritual servitude, [or] worldly ties". Sometimes liberty is differentiated from freedom by using the word "freedom" primarily, if not exclusively, to mean the ability to do as one wills and what one has the power to do, while using the word "liberty" to mean the absence of arbitrary restraints, taking into account the rights of all involved. In this sense, the exercise of liberty is subject to capability and limited by the rights of others. Thus liberty entails the responsible use of freedom under the rule of law without depriving anyone else of their freedom. Freedom is broader in that it represents a total lack of restraint or the unrestrained ability to fulfill one's desires.

Aristotle put it this way; "This, then, is one note of liberty which all democrats affirm to be the principle of their state. Another is that a man should live as he likes. This, they say, is the privilege of a freeman, since, on the other hand, not to live as a man likes is the mark of a slave. This is the second characteristic of democracy, whence has arisen the claim of men to be ruled by none, if possible, or, if this is impossible, to rule and be ruled in turns; and so it contributes to the freedom based upon equality."

For James Orr, a Christian prospective of liberty is summed up this way. "The opposite of servitude or bondage, hence, applicable to captives or slaves set free from oppression. Morally, the power which enslaves is sin, and liberty consists, not simply in external freedom, or in possession of the formal power of choice, but in deliverance from the darkening of the mind, the tyranny of sinful lusts and the enthrallment of the will, induced by a morally corrupt state. In a positive respect, it consists in the possession of holiness, with the will and ability to do what is right and good. Such liberty is possible only in a renewed condition of soul, and cannot exist apart from godliness. Even under the Old Testament, godly men could boast of a measure of such liberty, but it is the gospel of Christ which bestows it in its fullness, in giving a full and clear knowledge of God, discovering the way of forgiveness, supplying the highest motives to holiness and giving the Holy Spirit to destroy the power of sin and to quicken to righteousness. In implanting a new life in the soul, the gospel lifts the believer out of the sphere of external law, and gives him a sense of freedom in his new filial relation to God." Hence liberty results from the possession of the Spirit, "the perfect law of liberty." The instrument through which this liberty is imparted is "the truth." Christians are earnestly warned not to presume upon, or abuse their liberty in Christ.

It has been said that liberty is the absence of restrictions. St. Thomas Aquinas describes liberty as our capacity to do good. He states that; "there is no true liberty except in the service of what is good and just." (CCC, 1733) I agree. I also believe that the practice of true liberty results in our fulfillment and ultimate happiness. Do you believe that liberty and happiness go hand and hand? If so, good for you. If not, why not?

March 18th - Darkness

To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him. Ps 22:29

Traditional thought holds that the darkness experienced at the cross from the 3rd hour until the 6th hour is due to the understanding that a Holy God could not look upon sin. Since all sins; past, present and future were placed on Christ as he hung on the cross, God had to turn away and not look upon the sufferings of his son. I hold a very different point of view. My position, maintains that the opposite is true. The darkness was due, not in part, but in total, to the fact that God wrapped His arms of love around his son and humanity cannot look on God.

Consider, if your son were to be executed, whether guilty or not, where would you be? The answer is quite simple; you would be by the side of your son. Well, where do you think God was? He was at the side of his son giving assurance that the only way to restore koinonia between Himself and His creation was through the suffering and pain inflicted by both ill meaning and loving individuals.

Those who say that God cannot look upon sin need to read the passage in Genesis chapter six. Verse five states, "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on earth had become." In the book of Jonah, chapter one, verse two, God stated that the wickedness of the city of Nineveh had come upon Him. Now we are not told how it came upon Him, but I can assume if He saw wickedness once, He can see it every time. There are more verses that state that God was aware of the evil inflicted on humanity by humanity.

Stop for a second and think, when you are in need of a father, I believe that most of us would want one who does not turn his back upon us and refuse to suffer by your side, but one who chooses to take his stance alongside of you. For me the answer is simple. That is "tough love." Humanity would think that tough love lets the child suffer for the consequences of their actions. A loving father sends His Son into a battle that will take His life but will save the eternal lives of others. That is my God and I hope He is yours.

Barney Campbell has a theory. He believes that when Jesus started reciting the twenty-second Psalm He did not stop at the second verse, but continued to the end. The Psalmist in the early verses feels that God has left him out to dry. However, such is not the case and never will be. If you read the Psalm, you will find that it is a lament. Jesus is recounting His whole life. For that is what this Psalm does. It provides a picture in words of the life of the one who came to bring us salvation and redemption. It is not a Psalm of abandonment, but a Psalm of celebration.

When it is your time to sing your last song, what will it be, a lament of how bad life was, or a hymn of glorious praise to Him who came to bring to you the abundant life, not only on this side of the vale but on the other as well? Mine will sound like this; through it all, through it all, my eyes are on you. Through it all, through it all, it is well, it is well with me. With God my soul can trust in Him, waves and wind still know his name, and it is well with my soul. You may join if you want.

March 19th - Opened

"They said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?'" (Lk 24:32 RSV).

Cleopas and his acquaintance were walking home to Emmaus discussing the events of the last few days in Jerusalem. Saddened by these events, their hearts and minds were somewhere else, although their speech was focused on the present. Their hearts were broken, feeling the pain of loss, of unfulfilled expectations, their trust vanquished at the cross, and wondering who would now provide the hope that was so desperately needed. Their minds were confused. Had they misunderstood the words of the prophets? Had they not seen with their own eyes the miracles of healing and feeding? Their speech lamented the brokenness of their souls as they walked head down and hopeless toward home.

It would probably not be too much of a stretch to say that Cleopas and his companion were, like the rest of the Jewish nation, looking for the earthly king, one who would loosen the chains of bondage of their foreign invaders and restore Israel to its former greatness. They looked for someone to set right the wrongs of this world, to bring prosperity to a land devastated by war and poverty, gather a scattered nation and instill national pride once more. Were their expectations wrong?

From the day of its occurrence until now, the story of Cleopas and his fellow traveler is one that has been told countless times. It is a story which can be told and retold, and only the names need to be changed. It is a story of how men and women listen with their ears, talk with their mouth, and see with eyes, but remain deaf, mute, and blind to the reality of truth. It is a story about human expectation, the authenticity of God, and the devastation caused by the misunderstanding between the two. It is a story told today of how our expectations are far different from the realities of God.

The word used for opened is "dionixo." It is from the word "dia" that means through, and "anoigo," which means to open. The word's literal meaning is "to open up completely" or "to open that which was closed before."

When Jesus taught our two travelers, he started at the beginning with Moses and proceeded through the prophets and explained their intended meaning about his ministry. It is at this point where the travelers come to a clear understanding of who Jesus was. It required getting alone with Jesus and putting away all their preconceived notions and expectations. The same thing is required today. If we are going to understand who Jesus is, we must spend time with him. We must empty ourselves of our preconceived notions and expectations. We must let him take us by the hand and walk us through the scriptures to explain to us who he is. Then and only then can we be truly free. If we are to have minds and hearts completely opened, to discover for ourselves a Christ who is real, we must allow him to replace what we have learned from others, we must be ready to receive new insights, formulate new understandings, jettison old expectations, and allow him to open doors that we did not even realize were closed.

March 20th - Unity

So many times, we think or believe that in order for a person to be truly spiritual, they must have the same experiences we have had. Not so. Our God, I am told and believe, works in each of us differently. Why? Although each of us was made in the image of God, each one of us has a different set of DNA and RNA.

Just as God has given each one of us different gifts to edify the body, so also has He allowed each of us to experience His healing touch in variety of different ways. While touring the peaks and valleys on His earthly ministry, we are told that the Son of Man healed three blind individuals, each in a diverse manner. I describe these healing processes as the "one-touch," the "two-touch," and the "mud in the eye" method. However, the end result was the same. Simple, each of these individuals passed from darkness into light or from an inadequate state of seeing to an adequate state. In these cases, as well as spiritual healing, the emphasis should not be placed on the procedure, but on the outcome.

I do not marvel in the knowledge that God chose to make me adequate in a variety of ways, but rather that He chose to make me, like the blind individuals, inadequate in so many others. If I accept that fact, and I do, I am free to express my gratitude to God for His adequacy in me. I have found that my inadequacies and deficiencies are the grounds on which His sufficiency can be demonstrated; that my ignorance is the stage on which His wisdom can be demonstrated; and that He is the positive for all my negatives.

Unfortunately for me, there are times when God has, because of my lack of attention, chosen to heal one of my inadequacies by the healing process which I will call the 2X4 method. On the other hand, I am glad to say, there are times when a tender touch and a gentle push in the right direction has done the job. Whatever the method, I am sure that God knows the best way to remedy all my inadequacies and deficiencies and yours.

As long as the world turns and there is life on this planet, two things will remain constant. They are: (1) that God will heal all infirmities and (2) that there will be differences in the way God heals and deals with each of His children. There will always be different interpretations and terminology. However, we can rest secure on the fact that we can all find common ground when we gather at the foot of the cross and sing,

Saved, by His power divine,
Saved to new life sublime!
Life now is sweet and my joy is complete,
For I'm saved, saved, saved.

Will you join me there and sing with me? Are you willing to put away your differences for the cause of Christ? I am. Let's agree that we are all sinners and it is through Christ alone that we have redemption. Thanks be to the Father, and our Brother and the Breath of God. Amen.

March 21st - Overstocked

For three years, my wife and I spent three to five months volunteering at the National Key Deer Refuge on Big Pine Key, Florida. Our primary job was to welcome visitors to the refuge's Visitors' Nature Center, and provide them information about the deer, the habitat they live in, and how they came to be there. After our time ended each year, we would pack up our twenty four foot travel trailer and head for California, or as Harry Truman called it, "The land of fruits and nuts." However, one day things were slow, and very few people came into the center. While I had little or nothing to do, I started researching other refuges that had Nature Centers, and who could possibly use our help.

I found out that there are three refuges in Alaska that had Visitors' Centers and needed volunteers to help. Since we had always wanted to go there, I called the three refuges and spoke with their volunteer coordinators. One did not have any positions open for the next year, but two did. I collected all the information I could, and we made the decision to apply to the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Center in of all places, Kenai, Alaska.

Since we had about five months to plan, we met with friends who had made the trip in campers, so we could get some idea of what to expect. We compiled a list of what we thought we would need based on the recommendations of others. We watched videos on You Tube to acquire more information. This added to the list of things. About a month before we left, we started purchasing and gathering the items on our list. We had so much "stuff" that it filled all the empty spaces in the camper, the bed of the truck, and the back seat of the truck. I mean we were prepared for every contingency. (Of course, nothing happened.) We had backups for the backups. Two spare fuel containers, two spare tires, and only one spare propane tank. We did have one incident, and of course we had a spare for that.

Since I was a Boy Scout when I was much younger, and having reached the rank of Life, their motto; "be prepared" has stayed with me all my life. That is probably why I had way too much stuff on our Alaskan trip.

There is a story in the Bible about ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five were foolish, and five were wise. The foolish took no oil with them, but the five wise took an extra flask of oil. As is the case with many weddings, the bridegroom was somehow delayed. The story does not tell us why or for what reason. (Use your own imagination.) The story assumes that the reader will understand that this story takes place at night. The bridesmaids all fall asleep and fail to trim their lamps. The bridegroom came and the young ladies all woke up. The foolish ones discovered that they were low on oil, while the wise ones had plenty. To make a long story short, the five foolish ones, who failed to plan for contingencies were not able to make the party. The five wise ones did.

According to Pastor Blair Clark, the moral of the story is "be prepared." He also suggests that complacency is not an option in the Christian life. We are always to be ready, for we do not know the hour or day when the Groom (Christ) will come. We are told in 1 Corinthians 16:13 to, "Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong." Good advice. If you want to come to the wedding feast; "be prepared" or you will surely miss the good times.

March 22nd - Greatness

Toward the end of the ministry of Jesus, His disciples were fighting among themselves over who would occupy the best positions in His kingdom. They were not listening to the increasingly frequent words about His coming crucifixion, and focused instead on the part they wanted to hear. When James and his brother John approached Jesus and asked for the best two positions of power in the coming age, the other disciples became rather put off. Why? Because they wanted those two positions, and they were beaten to the punch. Their motives were not any better than those of James and John. The reply they received was probably not what they expected. Jesus told them that if they wanted to be great among them, they must be their servant, and whoever wished to be first must be the servant of all. Then He said to them that the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to be a servant to man. Imagine their astonishment.

Weeks later when they were celebrating the Passover for the last time, the dispute erupted again. Christ's response to their quest for recognition was that true greatness is found in those who are willing to serve. The book of John, chapter 13 records a visual parable that communicates this precise issue to the disciples and to us with poignancy and clarity. It was evident that there was no servant to wash the feet of either Jesus or His disciples before they reclined at the table. This must have been an embarrassment. Foot washing was a customary part of the hospitality in the ancient Near East. However, the disciples were not in a state of mind to become the lowest of the low servant and wash the feet of their master or anybody else. None of them volunteered to become a servant to all.

Their embarrassment became acute when Jesus rose from supper, laid aside His garment, tied a towel around His waist, and began washing their feet, then drying them with the towel. His lesson was self-explanatory. If the Teacher and Lord became a servant to them, they should become a servant to one another.

Robert K. Greenleaf in his book Servant Leadership writes, "Servants, by definition, are fully human. Servant-leaders are functionally superior because they are closer to the ground. They hear things, see things, know things, and their intuitive insight is exceptional. Because of this, they are dependable and trusted. They know the meaning of the line from Shakespeare's sonnet: 'they that have power to hurt and will do none.'" What I take from this is that servant-leaders do not have their head in the clouds, but are closer to reality and the people they serve. Being closer to the people, they hear, understand and know more than those who are leaders, but have no real inclination of what is really going on. They think they do, but in reality they are only listening to people tell them what they want to hear. Very dangerous.

If we are to be leaders in the family of God, we must be servants first. There are plenty who would come and sit at the table of plenty and expect to be waited on, never knowing or caring about the ones doing their job providing the service. When I entered the priesthood my one prayer was that God keep me as a support staff, in other words a servant, and He has. I enjoy being a servant, and I believe you just might also. Give it a try, you will find you will receive a better place at the table.

March 23rd - Pass Interference

I write this because I get so angry with officials who will call cheap, ticky tacky fouls on one team and not on the other. I do not like it when officials determine the out-come of a game. And I see it happen so often.

In 1989, the University Michigan Wolverines beat Seaton Hall; 80-79 to win the NCAA division one National Basket Ball Championship. I remember that game very clearly. I was spending the night in a friend's home. He, like me, did not watch a whole lot of college basketball, but when it came to March Madness, he was a super fan. I remember that the game was tied at the end of regulation and went into overtime. In overtime, Seaton Hall was ahead 79-78 with only a few seconds left. A Michigan player drove to the basket and missed a layup. Then, a referee's whistle blew. A Seaton Hall player had committed a foul, and the Michigan player would get to shoot two foul shots with a chance to win the game.

During a television time-out, the announcers played and replayed the drive that resulted in the foul. Each one of the two announcers proclaimed that they did not see a foul. The defender did not touch his opponent with any part of his body. Of course, there was no instant replay back then, and a challenge could not be called. The Michigan player made both free throws, and his team won the game. I cannot imagine the emotions that were felt throughout the Seaton Hall community.

Likewise, I sat and watched the first half of Super Bowl fifty-five. What a disaster. There were two pass interference calls against the Chiefs. Both in my mind were totally uncalled for. The first was when a defender fell and by falling he hit the heel of the receiver, and he fell down. This is what may be called incidental contact and not pass interference. The second happened when the receiver ran into the defender, pushed him aside and continued to run his route. In my book that is offence pass interference. But what makes it worse is that both passes were not catchable, which in and of itself negates the pass interference call. Come on refs.

In 2018, the Saints played the Rams in the NFL championship game. There was a flagrant pass interference that was not called. It was seen by everybody in the stadium, and everybody watching on television at home saw it, but somehow all the referees missed the call. I do not know if it affected the final score of the game, but it was a terrible no call that could have affected the outcome. There have been so many missed calls, so many bogus calls and so many "are you kidding me" calls, it has been unbelievable. If you watch sports on television you know what I mean.

Then there is my favorite. An offensive player may lower his head and make contact with a defensive player, but a defensive player cannot lower his head and make contact with an offensive player. Who makes up these rules?

One thing I am sure of, God has given us a set of rules of conduct, and we are to follow them. We can rest assured that they are fair and to be followed. If God says we have committed a foul, it is true. We will not be able to throw the challenge flag and have the officials watch the play by play to determine if God's call is right. It will be. But I do have a referee that will stand by my side and proclaim me not guilty. He is the one who never makes a wrong call, Jesus my Lord.

March 24th - The Pursuit of Happiness

According to Google "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" is a well-known phrase in the United States Declaration of Independence. The phrase gives three examples of the unalienable rights which the Declaration says have been given to all humans by their creator, and which governments are created to protect.

American society in the twenty-first century has little in common with the era when the founding fathers crafted plans for the founding republic. Ever changing demographics, cultural mores, values, technologies and understanding raise the important questions of our nation. Are our rights, endowments from the Creator as the founders believed? Or are they best understood as positive rights, as bestowed upon us by government? What are the costs and benefits of the freedom our democracy affords? How do we balance majority rule with individual rights? What are the limits of free speech, of religious liberty, and of other rights we enjoy? What are the causes of political and social apathy? How have partisan politics impacted the conduct of our government? To what extent does government promote, or impede economic equality? How does technology influence our understanding of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? Should the United States seek to export democracy of foreign nations? Is the way America practices democracy the best way, or can we learn lessons from other democracies around the world? Is access to health care an unalienable right?

Our contemporary understanding of "pursuit of happiness" is a thinner, less meaningful shadow of what the Declaration's authors intended, according to Brent Strawn, who teaches religion and theology in Emory's Candler School of Theology and Graduate Division of Religion.

A thick understanding of "happiness" means we need to think beyond only pleasurable sensations, or think about redefining "happiness" altogether if "pleasure" is the only thing it means. If that's the only thing "happiness" means anymore, then we have a case of "word pollution," and we need to reclaim or redefine the word, or perhaps use a different one altogether, at least for a while.

A thick understanding of "happiness" means that we have to think beyond only the pleasurable. Redefining simplistic, thin definitions of "happiness" means that we come to terms with the fact that the happy life does not mean a life devoid of real problems and real pain. Those, too, are part of life and can even contribute to human growth and flourishing, which means they can and must be incorporated into a thick notion of happiness. As one positive psychologist has said: "The only people who don't feel normal negative feelings are the pathologically psychotic, and the dead." Or, according to the biblical book of Psalms, the only people who live lives of constant comfort and pleasure are the wicked!

If you truly want to define what "happiness" is, please read the beginning of the Sermon of the Mount. It tells us how to find true "happiness." It is not what the world offers, but begins by recognizing that we are as destitute as a beggar holding a sign hoping someone will give him his daily bread. By placing our sole source of "happiness" in our Father, all our needs will be met according to His riches. I guarantee it and so does my Father, my Brother and the Breath of Life.

March 25th - Realism and Hope

Scripture reminds us that our stay on planet earth will be less than we are inclined to believe. This may seem a pessimistic and morbid way of viewing life, but it turns out to be a realistic and hopeful approach. It is realistic because it is better to know things as they are than to believe a dream of things as you wish them. It does not require divine revelation to know that, as George Bernard Shaw stated; "The statistics on death are impressive. One out of one dies." Our few years of life on earth will last no longer than the flower of the field in relation to the many generations that have come and gone.

It comes as no surprise that this perspective is realistic, but it is surprising to see that it contains hope. It is hopeful, because it contains the announcement that there is more to life than we can presently see. It also assures us that our longing for more than this world can offer is not a mere dream, but a reality. The biblical vision of God's invitation to us is not only forgiveness but of newness of life in Christ, a new quality of life that will never change.

Three dominant world views are vying for our allegiance. The first claims that ultimately reality is material and that everything in the universe is the impersonal product of time and chance. There are variations of this view, the best known are naturalism, atheism and humanism.

The second world view claims that ultimate reality is not material but spiritual. However, the spiritual agent is not a personal being, but the all that is. Variations of this view are monism, pantheism, transcendentalism and the New Age movement.

Theism, the third world view, distinguishes between the creation and the Creator and declares that ultimate reality is an intelligent, infinite and personal Being. Christian theism affirms that this personal God has decisively revealed himself in the person and work of Jesus who is the Christ.

Only the third world view offers a realistic vision of hope that there is life after life. The first predicts annihilation and the second, reincarnation. Instead of annihilation and reincarnation, scripture offers us resurrection into an eternally new existence of light and life. It is also characterized by love and an intimate relationship with the triune God and with one another. Everything we go through on this side will be more than worth it in the end, because the divine architect of the universe, The God and Father of our Lord Christ, never built a staircase that leads to nowhere.

I have a favorite morning prayer that I begin each of my days with (it is found in Appendix A). However, during my life as a working priest, I would begin my day with a personal devotion. At the end, I would always say the following prayer. "Lord God, almighty and everlasting Father, you have brought us in safety to this new day. Preserve us with your mighty power that we may not fall into sin, nor be overcome by adversity; and in all we do, direct us to the fulfillment of your purpose; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen." Why? Because I need and desire God's guidance each and every day. Don't you?

March 26th - Made

And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. (Jn 2:15 RSV)

The word used for making is "poiema." It is not a religious word and holds no religious connotations. Its meaning is to make something, "to work," "a master piece," or "workmanship." It represents the end product of time spent performing a task.

The significance of the word is that it draws a picture of the emotional state of Jesus and his physical activity at the time just prior to his entering or while he was walking through the temple. His emotional state was boiling. His physical activity was to perform a task. The end product of that task was a whip. The intended use of the whip was to clear the temple of those who were involved in a for profit business venture; which he did. When it was all over, his emotions went from boiling down to warm. If you do not catch this detail, you miss one of the most important points of the whole story and overlook the forcefulness of the moment.

It has been said many times that Christ never got angry, never lost his temper, was in complete control at all times, and showed righteous indignation in clearing the temple. This may be true; however, there are a couple of elements to consider and contemplate.

One of the missing ingredients in most of the writings of scripture and in the interpretation of scripture is the dimension of the depth of emotions which Jesus felt.

First, consider the act of clearing the temple as premeditated. Jesus made a whip. He collected the reeds, wove the reeds into the size and shape he desired, and more than likely gave it a trial run to determine its strength and flexibility. He knew exactly what he was going to do before he even picked up the first reed.

Secondly, consider the emotions of the man. What do you think he felt when he saw his Father's house of worship being turned into the local market place? Love for his fellow man! Maybe, maybe not. What do you think he was doing while he collected the reeds? Whistling, "Whistle While You Work." Don't you believe it. What do you think he was doing while he was weaving the whip? Singing, "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah." Not in this lifetime, or better yet, his lifetime. And what do you think he said as he drove the sellers and moneychangers from the temple? "You all just get out of here." Oh no. With sparks flying from his eyes, he told them precisely how he felt, no holds barred.

If you miss the emotions of the man, or far worse, if you disallow his emotions, you have missed or denied a large part of his humanness. If you miss the emotions you miss the dynamics of his ministry. If you miss the dynamics of his ministry, you just might miss out on his love. And, what an emotional loss that would be!!!

March 27th - Communication

Dear Father, take this day's life into your own keeping. Control all my thoughts and feelings. Direct all my energies. Instruct my mind. Sustain my will. Take my hands and make them skillful to serve you. Take my feet and make them swift to do your bidding. Take my eyes and keep them fixed on your everlasting beauty. Take my mouth and make it eloquent in the testimony of your love. Make this day a day of obedience, a day of joy and peace. Make this day's work a little part of the work of the kingdom of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ in whose name my prayers are said. Amen

May the Lord accept the surrender of my mind, the words of my mouth, the meditations of my heart, the vision of my eyes, the work of my hands, and the places where my feet tread as an offering for the praise and glory of his name, for my good, and the good of all your Church. Amen.

Each day we must choose to follow God and His Word. As the Psalmist wrote; "they are a lamp for my feet and a light for my path." After we have chosen to follow, the next important step is to inform God of our decision. Why? Because He wants to hear our commitment. He wants to know how committed we are. Are we fully committed, half way committed, or are we only here to receive any of the benefits that come with being a halfhearted follower?

Commitment means communication in marriage and any meaningful relationship. In both cases we find two kinds of talk, verbal and non-verbal. And then there is the inflection and tonal quality of the voice. I may tell my wife I love her, but can she hear it in my voice? I can also tell my wife I love her by bringing her flowers which she deeply appreciates. Either way, I communicate with her. It is the same when we communicate with our heavenly Father. I may use my words, but my actions speak louder. Therefore, I must choose the words very carefully. I must say what I mean, and not beat around the bush. My articulation does not have to be perfect, but my intent does.

The two prayers I wrote at the top took an incredible amount of time to write. Why? Because I want the "words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart to be acceptable" (Ps 46). I do not want God to misconstrue in any way what I am trying to say. When I come to Him in the morning I want Him to know what I am asking for, what I will need that day, that only He can provide. Am I asking too much? I do not think so.

God asked Solomon what he would like to have. Being a wise man, he did not ask for the things of this world. Maybe because he had all of that, or maybe because he already knew that the things of earth will never bring everlasting happiness and contentment. So he asked for wisdom, and God granted it to him. As a bonus, He gave him earthly treasures also.

When I wrote the above prayers, I used Solomon as a model for my prayers. Now, each morning in my quiet time I read them to remind myself of what I desperately need to get through the day. I, like Solomon, have all the earthly goods I need. What I need is what I pray for. For those of you who are like me, and need to pray as I do each morning, you are welcome to use either prayer. Or both, like I do.

March 28th - Currency

Years ago, a minister waited in line to have his automobile filled with gas just before a long holiday getaway with his family. The station attendant worked as fast as he could, but there were a whole lot of cars ahead of the minister. Finally the attendant waived him forward toward a vacant pump. "Reverend," the man said, "Sorry about the delay. It seems like everybody waits until the last minute to get ready for a trip." The minister laughed and said, "I know, it's the same in my business."

If ours is an eternal perspective, we will be gripped by the biblical truth that our brief stay on this planet is designed to prepare us for our heavenly citizenship. The more we align ourselves with this way of thinking, the more it will have an impact on our short and long term viewpoints and in our priorities.

Gordon Adams uses the analogy of life as a stay in a hotel. In some cases, the hotel is a fleabag; in other cases, the hotel is posh with mints on the pillow each night. However, since we know that it is not our home, we do not concern ourselves with the color of paint on the walls, or even if the wallpaper is peeling off the wall. It does not matter what we think of the décor. God never intended room service to replace home cooking. It is a mistake to confuse hotel life with home life. (Home life here means the glorious dwelling place our Father has prepared for us.)

Part of our problem is that the promises of God are vague and distant. We have no memories of heaven. However, He has given us His word that He will more than make it worth our while. If we remember that we are sojourners, strangers and aliens in exile, our priorities will begin to reflect those of Abraham who was looking for a city whose foundation and builder is God.

Max Anders, wrote The Good Life. His book is a practical exposition of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. In it, he draws a sharp contrast between the offerings of the world and those of God's word. While the former touts money, ambition, sex and clout, the latter promises wealth, purpose, love and true power. Too often, however, our priorities reveal that we are chasing shadows when God offers real substance.

What will endure to the end? Is there anything we can take with us, or do we leave everything behind? When we travel to another country, we must exchange our currency. The currencies of this world do not do us any good in the next, unless we have previously invested them for the sake of Christ in the lives of others. Other centered relationships that express the love of Christ are the currency of heaven.

Maybe that is why Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." What Peter offered that man is what the Father is offering us, healing and a sense of wholeness that nothing in this world can provide. He offers us a clean slate when we stand before the throne of grace. He offers forgiveness, and He promises to put our sins in the middle of His back where He cannot see or remember them. And finally, He promises to wipe away all our tears. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. I know I am not supposed to say that word during Lent, but I just cannot help it. Care to join me?

March 29th - Hosanna

Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." (Mk 11:7-9 NIV)

The Feast of Tabernacles, held from the fifteenth until the twenty-second day of the seventh month, was one of the three major pilgrimages-festivals of the Jewish year. Its initial importance was to remember the long years of wanderings in the desert after their departure from Egypt. On the last day of the feast, also called The Great Day, the people would bring the bough of a thick tree, palm branches, and willows from the brook to the temple when called by the priest. The priest carried a vessel to the Pool of Siloam, filled the vessel and proceeded through the Watergate back to the temple. All the while the people were forming a mock temple with the palm branches and reciting "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (Isa 12:3). When the priest arrived at the temple, he poured the water over the altar. Meanwhile, the Levitical choir, accompanied by flutes began to sing the Hallel (Ps 113 - 118). The whole ceremony was to celebrate how God had provided the water at Meribah.

When the choir sang Psalms 118:25, it voiced the words "O Lord, save us; O Lord, grant us success." Although the word seems to carry an utterance of praise, in actuality the word "Hosanna" is a transliteration from a Hebrew word which means a cry for help. It later progressed into a greeting carrying a wish for safety and prosperity.

When the Jewish nation was wandering through the sands of the Sinai, they cried out for help. Their cry was for water, and God provided. For this they celebrated. God met their expectation. When they cried out for a savior to relieve the pain and sorrow of life, God again provided. And again they celebrated. Their conqueror was riding into town. The army was ready and willing to follow their commander-in-chief into battle to alleviate the chains of oppression. The only thing wrong, God did not meet their expectations. What God wanted and sent was one who would "preach good news to the poor...bind up the brokenhearted ...proclaim freedom for the captives and release for the prisoners." What they needed, they received. What they wanted was safety and prosperity. They believed all would be well if only a king would come and restore an earthly throne. The concept of a heavenly king was not in their paradigm.

An ironic twist is that 2000 years later we still do not understand the saving help we need. We cry out for help with our expectations, believing that all will be well if only God would give us what we think we need. We, like the Jewish nations of the time of Jesus, know and understand the exact path that God should take, and how he should answer our cries for help. We too believe that all will be well if only God will grant us earthly peace and prosperity.

When we cry "Hosanna," we need to recognize it as a cry for help. It is an identification with the sojourners who found their last drop of water had evaporated, and the divining rod for locating a new source of refreshment was in the hands of someone else. It is an understanding that the one who loves us the most does not always give us what we want, but does always provide for what we need.

March 30th - Blessed

"And while they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after having a blessing, He broke it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.'" (MT 26:26 NASB).

The word which the writer uses for blessing is "eulogeo." This is one of the few words in the New Testament which does not take its meaning from secular Greek; rather it is a rendering of a Hebrew word which acquired religious significance in the Old Testament and other Jewish writings. Its literal meaning is "to speak well" and carries two meanings. The first is "to speak finely" as in fine or noble speech. The second meaning is "to speak well of someone," or "to praise or extol."

The King James Version of the Bible inserts the word "it" after the word blessed. The word does not belong in the text and would change the meaning. If the word "it" were inserted, it would imply that Jesus blessed the bread. Jesus did not speak of the fine texture of the bread, its golden crust, and its sweet aroma. This is not the case. The time is the Passover feast, the bread is unleavened, it contains no yeast, and it is flat, crispy on the outside, doughy inside, tasteless and chewy. It would be hard if not impossible to extol the virtues of such bread.

For the Jew, a blessing was given at each meal. The Jewish custom was that nothing should be eaten unless it was blessed. Behind the custom is the view that the whole world belongs to God and in order to enjoy the fruits of this world, there was the recognition of thanksgiving to God who is the provider. The head of the house would hold the bread in his hands, give thanks, then break the bread, and distribute it to those at the table.

What Jesus did was to fulfill what was required as the head of the house. He took the bread, then proceeded to give praise to the one who is responsible for the provision. He knew that the whole of life is in the hands of the Creator, and could not help but express gratitude and thanks for the substance of life. He gave thanks for the sun which shown by day, for the rain which watered the earth, for the time of deliverance from Egypt, when God lead His people by a cloud during the day and by fire at night, for the manna to sustain life, for the water at Meribah, the deliverance into the promised land, and finally for the covenant and the coming of the kingdom in its fullest sense. The one who will provide for the world, now gives thanksgiving to the provider of the world.

Today when we sit down, either by ourselves or with our families and friends, to break bread, we should never fail to follow the tradition which has been laid before us; to give praise to the one who has provided the essence of life. We must give thanks for the sun which shines by day and the rain which waters the earth, for the time of deliverance from the bondage of sin, for the light which lights our lives, for the Bread of Life who sustains life, for the living water who refreshes our soul, for our deliverance into the life abundant, and finally for the kingdom which has and will come. Let us never forget to give thanks to the one who has provided for all our needs as only He can do.

March 31st - Thirsty

"Later, knowing that all was now completed, and that the scriptures would be fulfilled, Jesus said, 'I am thirsty.' A jar of vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips" (Jn 19:28 & 29 NIV)

The word used for thirst is "dipaso." It has a literal meaning and a figurative meaning. The literal meaning is simply "I thirst" and relates to the physical. The second, figuratively, speaks of a "passionate longing for spiritual good" or to "Thirst for the water of life." The former seems to apply here.

The evening before, Jesus was dining with his disciples; he washed their feet; he took the bread and blessed it and told the disciples to eat; he took the cup and gave thanks and again passed it to his disciples.

After leaving the upper room Jesus went to the garden to pray. While in the garden he prayed so hard that his sweat was like drops of blood. Matthew indicates that the first time Jesus prayed for an hour, but does not indicate the length of time for the second and third round of prayers. Even though we are not told the time span from beginning to end, it is doubtful if the time or the intensity of his prayers diminished.

Next in the series of events came his arrest and trial before the Sanhedrin. At the time of his arrest, he was bound and brought before Caiaphas, the teachers of the law, and the elders. For the next few hours, he stands through a long drawn out miscarriage of justice. In the end, he is found guilty, spat upon, beaten, and mocked.

By the time the ordeal with the Sanhedrin comes to an end, it is early morning, and he is swept away to stand before Pilot. For the next few hours he stands before the Roman leader to be questioned, stands before an angry and rejecting crowd, stands before soldiers who humiliate and scourge him, carries his cross up a hill, is nailed to that cross, and in the end hangs on that cross for three hours. He has endured both physical and emotional pain.

Finally he says, "I am thirsty." Is it any wonder? From the time he took the cup with his disciples until now, no one has cared for his physical needs. What he hopes for is a sponge of cool water to be lifted and placed on his lips providing a momentary relief from his pain and suffering. Instead, what he received was wine vinegar meant to revive and stimulate his weary soul. Rather than soothe the pain, it only reminds him of his intense agony.

Jesus tells us that if we take the time to give a cup of cold water to one of his children, we have also performed this service to him. How many times has Jesus stood before us and asked for nothing more than a cup of cold water to refresh his weary soul, and in our haste we only provide the bitter disappointment of vinegar? How many times, when we are in a dry and thirsty land, has Jesus, in human form, come too and offered us a cup of cold water? Do you think it is time we do the same for Him? I do.

April 1st - Communion

Communion is God inviting us to come to His table and to share in the brokenness of Christ. It means we must be broken to become part of the corporate body. It means we are reconciled, fed, forgiven, and empowered to be His body in the world. We are to take his place in this world and to the work that he did, and to suffer the pain and brokenness that he suffered.

Communion is both simple and complex. There are two requirements to come to communion. First, we must be a sinner. This is the easy part, and we all qualify. Second, we must recognize that we are a sinner. This is the hard part of the simple part. The complex part begins when we ask ourselves the three questions that must be asked when we participate in communion.

The first question is what do we get out of communion? According to Martin Luther we receive (a) forgiveness of sin and the assurance that such forgiveness imparts (b) we receive life – not natural life but spiritual life through regeneration from the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and lastly, (c) we receive eternal salvation. Question number two is “what does communion get out of us?” If we eat of the bread and drink cup has it made a difference? Are we more committed to justice, ethical living, and social action? We call it Eucharist which means thanksgiving. Does communion bring out a spirit of thanksgiving in us? The last question is one that can only be answered by the celebrant. It is simple but profound. It is, “Now that I have Jesus Christ in me, how will it change my life?”

We are all forgiven sinners, who seek to maintain the clarity of the gospel and the tradition that salvation is only through Jesus Christ and him crucified. Communion draws out of us the desire to maintain our heritage, the faith once delivered, and to stand against those who choose to disregard the requirement of the gospel. Unlike God, who is changeless, we have been changed, and continue to be changed each and every day.

I was always a bit of a rogue priest. I would not stick to the written script, but I would write my own. One day the bishop surprised the congregation and just showed up. That Sunday, I did a Eucharist that I had written. The congregation was always impressed, but not the bishop. After the service he gave a little piece of advice. I am happy to say I ignored it, and continued to do my own thing. I am so glad I did, because it produced some very meaningful prayers. I found this prayer in my writings. I will not claim authorship, but it sounds like me.

Merciful Redeemer, you have fulfilled your promise: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” At your table I receive nourishment for my soul, the water of life in my weariness. By giving me, the bread and the cup, your body and your blood, you have again said to me: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” You have wiped out all my sins and have put on me a garment of your righteousness. Make me truly grateful for your abundant love. Let this symbol of your love produce in me a power overcoming unbelief and doubt, conquering temptation and evil desires, and producing good works and humble service. Having been a guest at your table, help me to share the bread of life with my neighbor, so that they may share my joy and happiness. To you and the Father and the Holy Spirit be glory now and forever and ever. Amen.

April 2nd - Finished

"When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." (Jn 19:30 NIV)

There can be no doubt that Jesus is physically exhausted by the time he is nailed to the cross. He has endured a mock trial, been physically beaten, scourged, and forced to carry his own means of execution to the place where he will be stripped naked and hung before the world as the king without a country to rule over.

For three hours, he has painfully felt his physical life coming to an end. The blood from the wounds in his wrists now flows inward filling his body with fluids causing a throbbing headache, traumatic fever, and as his lungs are starting to collapse, he begins to suffocate. He knows the end of his sojourn on earth is quickly becoming a reality as he says "it is finished."

The word used for finished is "teleo." Its biblical meanings are to bring "to an end," "to complete," "to carry out," and "to be finished." Culturally, it carries the meaning "to carry out a religious act," "to sacrifice," and "to consecrate."

The question that must be asked is, "What did Jesus finish with his death on the cross?" Biblically speaking, a few of the answers are quite simple. When Jesus died, it brought an end to his earthly ministry, it completed his work on earth, and he had carried out the desires of the One who had sent him. He had finished laying the ground work for the church. He had brought reconciliation from a loving God to the sinner who seeks forgiveness. He restored a broken relationship, and told us the porch light would be left on so we could find our way back home. In one sense, his work on earth was finished. However, in so many more ways, it was not.

The religious meanings come together at center stage on the cross. The religious act of sacrifice finds its conclusion as Jesus is offered as the sacrificial lamb to take away the sins of the world, and he is consecrated as the Savior of that world.

There is a parallel between the life of Jesus and the life of the Christian. Jesus was crucified, and each and every believer has been crucified with him (Gal 2:20). In essence, the life of a sinner has come "to an end." A life lived "to carry out" ones own gratification is now "completed." A life marred by open rebellion against God has changed direction, and a life which carried out the wishes of the Father of Lies now carries out the desires of the Father of Life.

Also, when we as believers make a profession of faith, proclaiming Jesus the Christ of and in our lives, we are, in effect, carrying out the act of climbing on the altar of self, to sacrifice our own authority to the lordship of Christ. A believer is then consecrated to the highest office in the kingdom of God, not to be waited on and served and have all our wants attended to; no, instead we are elevated to the position of the Servant of the Savior.

April 3rd - Bowed

"When Jesus had received the drink, he said, 'It is finished,' and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." (Jn 19:30 NIV)

A myriad has been written on the last few days in the earthly ministry of Jesus. These range from the triumphal entry, to the proclamation of the final victory with his last spoken words, "Into thy hands I commit my spirit." (Ps 31:5 & Lk 23:46) From his act of servitude of washing the disciples feet, to his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane asking the Father to remove his cup of impending death. From Peter's denial, to the recognition of Christ as the Son of God by the Roman centurion. From the institution of the Lord's Supper, to the agony suffered by Jesus in his atoning work. From the conversation with the thief on the adjacent cross, to the statement "it is finished," when Jesus knew that his work on earth had been completed.

Imagine if you can the physical pain that Jesus withstood at the hands of the Roman soldiers. Imagine the tearing of his flesh with the whip, the pounding blows of their fists, the anguish of the crown as its thorns penetrate the skin, and the ripping of the muscles and tendons as the nails are driven through his body and into the cross. And if you can, feel the whirl of pain as the cross is raised, dropped into its stand, and the weight of your body is supported only by the rusty spikes hammered into your feet and hands. If you can identify with the physical pain, add to it the emotional rejection, not only from his disciples, but from a whole nation who misunderstood what the kingdom of God was truly about, and rejected his kingship.

But through it all, there was the quiet assurance that the Father would be there to welcome him home with open arms. His work was now finished, his time was at hand, so his head bowed, and he give up his spirit.

The word John used for bowed is "klimas" which is the first aorist active principle of the root "klimo." It literally means "to pillow your head." It draws the word picture of a person gently placing one's head on a pillow while resting or before going to sleep.

Draw the picture in your mind of a man in total torture nailed to a cross about ready to die. How would his head react? Would it fall forward? Would he be moving it from side to side? If the person in your picture is Jesus, the answer is "no." His head did not slump forward, nor did he thrust it backwards or from side to side, he simply said, "it is finished," pillowed his head as if he were going to sleep, and gave up his spirit. Or, if you please, picture Jesus leaning his head to one side, gently resting it on one of his arms, closing his eyes, and going to be with the Creator.

The greatest promise we have as believers is that as we prepare for rest at night or at the end of our days, we too can pillow our heads and say, "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake. I pray the Lord my soul to take," and know it will be so.

April 4th - Listen

- Listen: can you hear the gentle calm of an early morning?
- Listen: can you hear the soft shuffle of someone's footsteps coming down the path? Listen again; do you hear the sound of sorrow in those steps?
- Listen: do you hear the sound of someone's tears? Listen again; do you hear the sound of sadness in those tears?
- Listen: do you hear the gasp of anguish as it breaks the silence of the morning turning pain and disbelief into utter turmoil?
- Listen: do you hear the sound of panic running for the safety and the comfort of loved ones?
- Listen: do you hear the host of footsteps running at a quickened pace—do you hear them?
- Listen: do you hear the choirs of mourners in their unbelief?
- Listen: do you hear the procession of broken hearts making their way back home?
- Listen: do you hear the parade of life returning to a hopeless situation?
- Listen: do you hear the sad tears of an earlier visitor?
- Listen: do you hear the sound of hope?
- Listen: do you hear the cries of joy?
- Listen: do you hear the sound of newness rushing by?
- Listen: do you hear the sound of a still small voice?
- Listen: do you hear the Master calling your name?
- Listen: do you hear the sound of a repentant heart?
- Listen: do you hear the sound of thankfulness crying out from that heart?
- Listen: do you hear the sound of praise to a loving God at the beginning and close of each day?
- Listen: do you hear the sound of God's love as two hearts beat as one?
- Listen: did you hear God smile.
- Listen: What did you hear?

Appendix A

A Confession of Faith

I call all heaven to witness today
That I have put on Christ

I choose no other Lord
Than the maker of heaven and earth

This day I walk with Him
And He will walk with me.

I fasten close to me this day
That same Jesus
Who came to us as flesh and blood
And was Himself baptized in the Jordan River.

He died upon a cross to rescue me,
Broke free from death, its conqueror.
He left us, to return the more certainly.
All these truths and their power
I fasten close to me this day.

Resisting my own selfishness and sin,
Refusing to live as a slave to riches,
Pleasure or reputation,
I call on heaven to witness today
That I have put on Christ.

From (Celtic Daily Prayer, Prayers and Readings from the Northumbria Community, pg 210-211)