

December 2003

December 1

The Medicare reform bill was passed last week, the biggest reform since that program began. Where I live in Illinois it's estimated 100 doctors will leave their practices because of the high cost of malpractice insurance from outrageous lawsuits.

Long, long ago a man named Naaman had health problems. When the prophet Elisha told him to wash in the Jordan River, Naaman balked. This treatment based on the prophet's word made no sense, but his servants persuaded him and Naaman was healed. (2 Kings 5)

Trusting the promises of God as you face medical problems offers a hope that outshines any legislation or lawsuit. "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day...We groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling" (2 Corinthians 4: 16; 5:3).

I take one blood pressure pill each morning, only one. Last week I say with my parents as they filled their pill boxes for the week. You know, those seven-day containers with a letter standing for each day? I suggest we people of faith see the "S" at the end of the week and think of heaven. "A Sabbath rest remains for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9).

December 2

Patricia VanLester wanted to do her part to help rev up the economy. So early last Friday morning she was first in line at the Wal-Mart Supercenter in Orange City, Florida. Associated Press reported that when the store opened, "A mob of shoppers rushing for a sale on DVD players trampled (VanLester) and knocked her unconscious as they scrambled for the shelves at a Wal-Mart Supercenter." (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, November 30, 2003; A4). The rush is on, like the running of the bulls in Pamplona.

Compare this holiday rush that threatens to trample you to a verse from one of my favorite Advent hymns, "Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates." "Fling wide the portals of your heart; make it a temple set apart from earthly use for heaven's employ, adorned with prayer and love and joy. So shall your Sovereign enter in and new and nobler life begin. To Thee, O God, be praise for word and deed and grace!"

We can't control stampeding shoppers but we can open the doors of our hearts to calm in the midst of the holiday rush. "You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You" (Isaiah 26:3).

December 3

A new reality show debuted last night; the second episode will be on FOX this evening. "The Simple Life" shows rich, urban party girls Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie out of their element on a farm in Altus, Arkansas. For example, Paris asks

about Wal-Mart, "It's like they sell wall stuff?" That wasn't scripted. This is a reality show.

After the tapings, Paris Hilton said, "I met some people there, and they're so much happier than people I see in L.A, who have so much money. Like, people who didn't have anything were happier than people I've met out here, because it's just all about your family."

A new discovery for her but it's an old theme. The Roman poet Horace wrote about a country mouse who visited a city mouse. The country mouse concluded, "I don't need this life! Farewell, the woods and cave, safe from danger, will comfort me" (Satire II, VI, 115).

From the Bible: "Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that" (1 Timothy 6:6).

December 4

After a 9-3 season and a 58-19 record over 6 years, Frank Solich was fired as coach of the Nebraska Cornhuskers. Here's my theological take on the firing, which I hope will help you with disappointments in your life.

Like Mr. Solich, you often do something well but still get dumped on. You're disappointed, hurt, angry, whatever. That's because God put into our hearts an instinct that says, "If you do well, you'll be rewarded." See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse-the blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the Lord your God and turn from the way that I command you today...(Deuteronomy 11:26-28)

That's a formula for fairness. Do good and be rewarded. Unfortunately it breaks down in many areas of life, football included. When the "fairness formula" breaks down, as it inevitably must in a sinful world, go to the grace place. Whoever comes to me I will never drive away (John 6:37). The Good News from God doesn't depend upon our performance. It's waiting to pick us up when circumstances fire us.

December 5

How it happens I have no clue, but there is hidden heavenly knowledge revealed only to my wife, who in turn lays it on me. It has been revealed to her that today we must buy the Christmas tree.

My mom let my Dad buy the tree all by himself. Great tree he got. You could see right through it. He probably liked the price. Mom was not happy and when Mom's not happy...

In my own marriage there were some years when I wanted a big tree. Great trees...but no space left in the living room. Now the divine revelation has taught me to say, "Oh, Diane, I like that tree you've picked."

There are sacraments, ways God gives and strengthens faith. There are also sacramentals, human rites that point us to the grace God gives sinners in the sacraments. I think Christmas trees serve that function. As a kid growing up, I stood with mouth-open wonder at the huge Christmas trees in church. Those great trees made an impression. There's something bigger than normal life here, something that puts even grown-ups in awe.

That's still true today. God's grace is coming down in Jesus. Happy tree-hunting!

December 8

What did the United States do on this day in 1941, the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor? The answer is obvious. We declared war and entered into years of battles, years of killing, years of mourning for loved ones lost. President Roosevelt didn't ask for a resolution of congress to send missionaries and Bibles to Japan. "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to kill and a time to heal" (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 3).

In current debates people ask what we're leaving our children and grandchildren. Are we leaving them an impossible debt? Oppressive taxes? A polluted environment? A smothering government bureaucracy?

Supreme Court Justice Sutherland wrote in a 1931 decision: "We are a nation with the duty to survive, a nation whose constitution contemplates war as well as peace." "Submission and obedience to the laws of the land, as well those made for war as those made for peace, are not inconsistent with the will of God." (in John Witte, Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment, p. 106).

St. Paul said it this way, the government "does not bear the sword for nothing" (Romans 13:4).

December 9

Last August South Dakota Congressman William Janklow sped through a rural intersection, hit and killed a man on a motorcycle. Yesterday he was found guilty. His lawyers had argued he blacked out in a diabetic reaction. Why didn't he eat to avoid the reaction? "I've asked myself that 10 million times," Janklow said. He wants to meet with the victim's family. "I have to meet with them," he said crying.

As little children we learned that Santa is "making his list, checking it twice, going to find out who's naughty or nice." As we get older most of us keep close to our hearts a list of things we feel guilty about. We'd like to think that the nice things we've done outweigh the naughty things, but not before God. "Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before You" (Psalm 143:2).

"God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him" (John 3:17). Some people are not sensitive to their guilt but most people you'll meet today secretly nurse their painful list of personal guilt. What will you put in their stocking, coal or a kind word?

December 10

"What is this life, if full of care,

We have no time to stand and stare?"

W.H. Davies' poem invites you to rescue this special season. In December we take all the normal activities of life and pile on the obligations of Christmas. Decorating the house, sending out the cards, shopping, parties with co-workers, family, friends...

Be busy all the time, if you want, but be prepared to pay a price. Spiritual blessing requires quiet private times when you lay aside works and rest in grace. Should you choose not to do that, the Bible promises, "the Lord will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread day and night" (Deuteronomy 28:65-66).

"No time to stand beneath the boughs

and stare as long as sheep or cows.

No time to see, when woods we pass,

Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.

No time to see, in broad daylight,

Streams full of stars, like skies at night.

"A poor life this if, full of care,

We have no time to stand and stare."

(W.H. Davies in A Pocket Book of Modern Verse, 1966; p. 217)

December 11

When Senator John F. Kennedy was running for president, concerns were raised about the Vatican dictating American policy.

Similar anti-clerical feeling has surfaced lately in St. Louis. Bishop Raymond Burke of LaCrosse, Wisconsin, has been appointed archbishop of St. Louis. Burke is a man who takes his church seriously and expects the same from members, politicians included. He has written to elected officials in Wisconsin who are Roman Catholic but don't uphold the church's teachings on abortion, euthanasia,, stem-cell research and other life issues. "I call upon you to consider the consequences for your own spiritual well-being, as well as the scandal you risk by leading others into serious sin," he wrote. (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, December 7, 2003; B1) Needless to say, some legislators howled in protest.

But what's the issue? Is it a minister threatening someone for not voting as the church wishes? Or is the bishop calling his people to integrity, calling individuals to

act consistently with the faith they have voluntarily professed? Which is worse, asking a person to be consistent with the profession that comes with their chosen church membership, or a person who picks and chooses church beliefs according to expediency?

December 12

Greeting people at the church door, I'm in the habit these days of stooping down and asking the little children if Santa is coming to their house. Their eyes light up, they beam a smile from ear to ear, and these little children, who are usually silent when the big old minister talks to them, now shake their heads and say "yes." Sometimes they'll tell me what they've asked Santa for, but the church line is long so old Scrooge moves them on. Their unbounded excitement for Christmas is one of the dearest memories I have of raising our children. When they were four, five, and six, God's great big universe was too small to contain their excitement.

Things change. You who are parents have seen your children get older and become more adult about Christmas. They become like us. Jesus once told adults, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). Thanks, little children, for reminding us. "Create in me a pure heart, O God...Restore to me the joy of Your salvation" (Psalm 51:10, 12). "Christmas was made for children, for children like you and me."

December 15

This week marks the 100th anniversary of flight. When we went to the moon, the astronauts got out, collected rocks, swung golf clubs...things boys do...and then got back in their spacecraft and took off. Sobering fact: There were no backup rockets.

Backups are part of life. Savings accounts back up checking accounts. Second cars back up the first car. Freezers back up refrigerators. But for some things there is no backup. No backup for the sun. No backup for your heart. Oh, the doctors can tinker with it, even replace it, but that only buys time. No backup for life itself. Death is not a welcome option.

We tend to think of God as the ultimate backup. But when He says that we should love Him with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength, it's obvious God won't long tolerate being Plan B when our Plan A fails (Deuteronomy 6:5). The better part of wisdom is to let His Spirit and Word lead us to live, move and have our being in God (Acts 17:28). Then when backups fail, as they will, we won't be lost. Sun, heart, life. God alone is the great "I am" (Exodus 3:14).

December 16

If any of us had forgotten...or put on the edge of our attention the cruelty of Saddam's regime, his capture will bring it back to the fore. It's estimated 300,000 Iraqis were unjustly killed by Saddam's regime and tossed in mass graves. Our soldiers have died for the high principle of freedom from oppression.

In 1864 President Lincoln wrote to a Mrs. Bixby who had lost 2 sons in the civil war. "I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to

beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save.

"I pray that our heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours, to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of Freedom. Yours, very sincerely and respectfully, A. Lincoln."

The tyrant has been captured. The cost has been dear. "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

December 17

One hundred years since the first flight by the Wright brothers. Wow!

For me the greatest flight of all time, one not mentioned this week, is the ascension of Jesus Christ. After His death and resurrection, Jesus "was taken up before (His disciples') very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight" (Acts 1:9). Honestly, it does sound like a pious myth.

Jesus was taken into "heaven" (Acts 1:11), which refers to the unseen world, "the visible and the invisible." You and I live in the visible world but God dwells in light inaccessible. The cloud that hid Jesus was the same divine cloud that had led Israel through its desert wanderings. It was God receiving the man from Nazareth, His only-begotten Son, into the unseen glory to which His Spirit draws us still today.

I have no uncontestable proof that the body of Christ lifted off earth and ascended to that cloud. To believe that happened isn't based upon scientific proof but on faith in God's revelation. Can the God who made birds to fly, who lifted the prophet Elijah to heaven (2 Kings 2:11), raise a man from earth to heaven? I'm trusting He can because that's a flight I want to take.

December 18

Ten Commandments for this season:

- I. Thou shalt not pause to plan thy ways, so that thy only goal will be to make it to the 26th.
- II. Thou shalt feel obligated to blanket the world with thy Christmas cards, much as snow covereth the ground.
- III. Thou shalt deny the simplicity of Christ's stable by impressing guests with thy holiday house.
- IV. Thou shalt not be like the shepherds and show up in the same old clothes.
- V. Thou shalt think thyself a wise man or woman by searching far and wide for gifts.

- VI. Thou shalt blow the budget, imagining that thus it will go well with thee.
- VII. Thou shalt so stress thyself that thy family calleth thee Scrooge.
- VIII. Thou shalt be so busy that Thou sittest not by the Christmas tree to ponder thy need for this season.
- IX. Thou shalt not lay aside old grudges, even while singing of peace and good will for all.
- X. Thou shalt forget the reason for the season.

December 19

Ever feel that you don't have what it takes? That's when God is ready to do a miracle.

In the second century before Christ a foreign ruler named Antiochus Epiphanes attempted to eradicate the Jewish religion. To that end, he offered pagan sacrifices on the altar of the temple in Jerusalem.

Led by the Maccabees, the Jews rebelled. After a two-year struggle, the Syrians were driven out. The desecrated altar was destroyed, a new one built, and 8 days of festival declared. However there was only enough pure oil to burn candles for one of the 8 days. Even so, the priests took the little oil they had and lit the first candle. The celebrated miracle of Hanukah: that little oil lasted for the full 8 days.

A greater miracle, ancient commentators said, was that the priests trusted God to provide, even though they didn't have enough oil for the 8 days. Afraid you don't have what it takes? Trust God. "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Hanukah begins this Sunday. To our Jewish friends, "Happy Hanukah!"

December 22

We're tempted in these last days before Christmas to resent our circumstances. The rushing to get things done, the straining of the budget, personality clashes, perhaps a loved one sick...We easily resent these intrusions upon the peaceful spirit of Christmas. We would much rather have the circumstances of angels, flitting about, singing hymns, not a care, rather than our present circumstances.

Joseph had been emotionally upset. His bride-to-be was pregnant and he wasn't the father. The big impersonal government forced them on a long trip to Bethlehem. Pregnancy isn't easy and there's nothing in the Bible saying Mary rode a donkey. The feelings you have battling the crowds are probably not unlike the feelings Joseph and Mary had. You need a last-minute gift. They needed a place to stay...and have that baby. These aren't the circumstances of angels but of humans. That's the way it is.

And that's why Christmas is. It's sinful to resent our circumstances. If things were just as we desire, the coming of God would be another nice ornament in a life that needs no salvation. The Savior didn't come for the angels but for us, just the way we are.

December 23

"Mom, Dad...uh...uh...I'm pregnant but don't worry, it's OK."

"You're WHAT? No, it's not OK, not by any stretch."

"No, it really is!"

"Who is it? Wait 'til I get my hands on that..."

"Dad, Mom, it's God. I haven't slept with anyone. God did it."

"Mary, are you crazy? How in the world do you expect us to believe that???"

I don't know if a conversation like that happened, but the Bible does give us hints that some folks in town didn't believe Mary's story. In fact, one anti-Christian tradition says she had made herself available to a Roman soldier. But no, the conception was miraculous and Mary did believe the angel's amazing announcement.

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the One to be born will be called the Son of God." (Luke 1:35)

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." (Luke 1:38)

Heavenly Father, help me this week before Christmas to follow the example of the virgin mother of our Savior and hear Your words and, even when they seem amazing, to believe Your words. Amen.

December 24

Like every kid, I wondered how Santa could get to all the homes in one night. I was especially puzzled that he always came to our house during that little hour Christmas Eve when we were in church. This guy, I thought, is really good!

Why couldn't my dad be so punctual? Every year we kids sat impatiently in the car with mom, waiting for him to come out and drive us to Christmas Eve church, after which we'd hurry home and open presents. Christmas Eve dad was always, always late.

Finally I figured it out. This guy really is good!

Today's a memory making day for you and your loved ones. Nature your traditions; let them reflect the radiance of God's love. "Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). Holy families treasure Christmas memories.

My wife Diane, who helps me so ably in putting out these minutes, joins me in wishing you and your loved ones a blessed Christmas.

From my home to yours, best wishes for a blessed celebration of the Savior's birth!

December 29

Quiet time.

After a 90 mile journey on foot or donkey while she was pregnant,

After giving birth in a strange place...

After unexpected visitors...

After Lord only knows what else...

After all that, Mary grabbed some quiet time.

"Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19)

Why don't you take some quiet time in these down days between the holidays? With the Book open, ponder the ultimate questions of life?

Jesus said, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice" (Luke 8:21).

Another time He said, "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (Luke 11:28).

So don't just do something! Sit there...and ponder.

Dear God! I don't have to work all the time. This quiet time between the holidays isn't wasted if I do what Mary did and ponder what You are doing in my life. Amen.

December 30

The numbers are staggering. 40,000 may have died in the earthquake in Iran. A backhoe digs a trench 5 feet deep. Nameless bodies are wrapped, given a quick Muslim ritual, and then comes a man with a video camera to record the faces of the dead. Perhaps some family member survived and will want to know what happened to a loved one. This is beyond our experience, we who gather around our loved ones in a personal way, with tears and memories and mark their resting place with their name.

Where's God in all this? That was Job's question. God answered, "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?" (Job 38:4) God laid the foundation; He shook the foundation. The Most High doesn't have to explain.

Every day we pass nameless faces of the living. It's no small thing to know who we are and Whose we are. It is a great thing to show kindness to another creature of the Most High. "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

P.S. My TV associates and I have prepared Bible studies on video for small group use. Topics: Stress, Communication in Marriage, and Miracles. For more information, reply to this Minute.

December 31

"Enquiring Minds Want to Know" says the tabloid. While too many people waste their time on vanities, you are inquisitive, spiritually inquisitive. "Seek the Lord while He may be found; call on Him while He is near" (Isaiah 55:6). You do.

To that end, a prayer for the New Year:

God of the ages, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him" (Psalm 103:13). We pray Your compassion be with us and all people in the new year.

For the poor, the unemployed, the sick and lonely, we beg Your mercy.

For the safety of our armed forces and for the leaders of nations, we beg Your mercy.

For public discourse that is civil, motivated not by personal or political gain but by the common good, we beg Your mercy.

And this we know is true: afflictions will come. "In this world you have trouble," Jesus says. When we are distressed, may Your Spirit attune our ears to His word, "Take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Of our many petitions, let this be the most earnest: "My heart says of You, 'Seek His face!' Your face, Lord will I seek" (Psalm 27:8). Amen.