

December 2006

December 4

There's not enough time to think as some prayers are rattled off in church. For example, yesterday was the first Sunday in Advent and many churches used a prayer that begins with these words: *Stir up, we implore You, your power, O Lord, and come.* Whoa! Stir up your power and come? Millions of Americans experienced the stirred up power of nature in last week's wintry storms. Do you really want the almighty Lord to come with His power? Brace yourself if that's what you really want.

The prayer goes on, *that by your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins.* More here than asking that His power protect you from...storms, accidents, poor health, and what have you. *The threatening perils of our sins* means that you and I are our own worst enemy. What's programmed imperceptibly deep into us, our inherited sin, is a *threatening peril.* *And be saved by your mighty deliverance;* His power is forgiveness to meet the scare of our sin. Are you serious enough about sin to pray for the deliverance that comes through faith?

Yesterday's prayer concludes, *for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.* If you think about all that, and still pray yesterday's prayer today, you'd better hang on. *Amen!*

December 5

Keep in mind that a half a million of us were without power; some still are.

I sat down Friday night in my favorite easy chair, favorite because it swivels. That's what I did, swivel toward the TV. Duh, looking at that blank screen, I slowly processed the obvious: There's no power, no purpose looking in that direction. So I swiveled toward the fire place, which was working. What if we didn't have that little heat, I wondered? Many times Diane and I were forced to realize how dependent we are upon electricity and our many modern conveniences.

What lessons do you take from your times of physical hardship, or at least inconvenience? Here's mine: The Creator made His creatures to depend upon some creature comforts, and when they are withdrawn...or He withdraws them...we are called to remember our fragile little place in the great scheme of things. "He gives snow like wool; he scatters hoarfrost like ashes. He hurls down His crystals of ice like crumbs; **who can stand before His cold?**" (Psalm 147:16-17)

Here's Paul's answer: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us! " (Romans 8:35, 37)

December 6

"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 bough 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 7

I was having lunch with a friend at Applebee's and asked about the southern accent of our server. A young woman, early twenties I guess, she told me her home was Georgia. Knowing that some southerners refer to the Civil War as "the War of Northern Aggression," I asked, "What do you call the war between 1861 and 1865?" Morphing into a little schoolgirl, she sheepishly guessed, "World War II?"

Is that typical of most young people? If so, there may be an interesting correlation to their relationship with God. Except for Jesus' disciples, God did not appear on a daily basis to people in the Bible. Even to Abraham, Moses, and David, God's appearance was not a daily routine. So the people of Israel were taught to remember what God had done for them, to remember history (for example, Psalms 105 and 106).

In my morning sitting room, the "Red Room" we call it, a glass case displays the folded American flag from my father-in-law's funeral. Jim was a World War II vet, serving in the Pacific. That's where it began 65 years ago today, December 7th, and that's where it ended in 1945. The correlation will work for you, I hope: Remembering history on this important day, we believe that God has been especially good to us in the United States of America.

December 8

"I'll be home for Christmas; you can count on me," promises the popular song. Who'll be coming to your home in a couple weeks, hauling in suitcases, hugging you and embracing your heart?

Guilt promises to come. "Remember how you hurt that family member? Don't imagine that you can ever repair the damage you've done!" "Your husband, your wife, your child, died this year, not home for the holidays. Don't you feel guilty for the times you weren't loving?" "So dedicated to your career, to your corporate climb, you've shut others out, Mr. Scrooge!"

Not all bad! It's a naïve preacher who imagines that guilt leaves when he preaches about Christ's forgiveness for our sins. True, God does forgive when you're sorry you've disobeyed Him and messed up in life, but any honest believer can't forget some things he or she has done. Guilt gets hard-wired into our feelings...and only an outside word from God is able to deal with guilty feelings, take the edge off it, and sometimes remove it all together. "If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts" (1 John 3:20).

"I'll be home for Christmas; you can count on me." Advent means coming. When guilt comes, welcome some Bible reading at the same time, like Psalms 32 and 130. It'll stop guilt from dominating your holidays.

P.S. In these cold winter days, think about next August. I'll lead a tour to Prague and Germany , the lands of reformers Jan Huss and Martin Luther. Reply if you'd like more information.

December 11

Churches that worship according to some form of the traditional liturgy often use a prayer called the "collect," pronounced kAH-lect. It's a prayer that gathers together, collects, the major themes for the Sunday. Yesterday's collect said, "Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of your only-begotten Son that at His second coming we may worship Him in purity...."

So here's the deal. If you take the Bible seriously, sometime you're going to come before God like you've never come before Him before. When you die and when Christ returns to judge each one of us, your life will be laid bare. No public face then to hide your secrets, no excuses, no negotiating a second chance. Everyone will acknowledge "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Philippians 2:11), some compelled by the overwhelming power of His appearing but others will "worship Him in purity." They'll greet that day with the Christmas faith of a little child waiting for December 25th.

So the prayer asks God to get us ready right now, to collect, to get our spiritual life together right now. "Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready...." "Then cleansed be every life from sin; Make straight the way for God within" (Charles Coffin). All this, of course, is based on the assumption you take the Bible seriously.

December 12

Can you find a thread through these tidbits?

The new Democratic leadership promises the House of Representatives will meet for business five days a week. Remembering when the House used to be in session most of the week, Republican member Jo Ann Emerson said, "The Congress got along a whole lot better when people socialized better as well as worked together" (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, December 10; B4).

When I spoke last week to some seminary workers about the Christmas message calling us to declare a truce in our dislike and nastiness toward one another, I could see in some faces that the words had prompted some reflecting on less-than-peace-making conduct.

A woman battling ovarian cancer, who had feuded with her mother for years, finally said, "I'll try this for an afternoon. I'll focus on acceptance." Surprise! From that moment on everything began to improve."

The thread through those tidbits is getting together to socialize and with a willingness to forgive. "How often do we need to forgive?" asks cancer survivor Greg Anderson. "Always. Don't drag the memories of past hurts and mistakes into your present moments. Nothing from the past is important enough to allow it to pollute your present.... Forgive. You'll change your life!" (50 Essential Things To Do When The Doctor Says It's Cancer, p. 135)

December 13

Ten Cultural Commandments for the Season:

I. Thou shalt put God on the periphery of thy pursuits, devoted only to making it to the 26th. II. Thou shalt feel obligated to blanket the world with thy Christmas cards, just as the snow covereth the earth. III. Thou shalt deny the simplicity of Christ's stable by striving to impress guests with thy holiday house. IV. Thou shalt not be like the shepherds and show up in last year's clothes. V. Thou shalt think thyself a wise man or woman by searching afar for gifts. VI. Thou shalt live beyond thy means, imagining that thus it will go well with thee and ruining January. VII. Thou shalt not lay aside old grudges, even while singing of peace and good will for all. VIII. Thou shalt so stress thyself that thy family calleth thee Scrooge. IX. Thou shalt be so busy that thou sittest not by the Christmas tree with family and friends. X. Thou shalt forget the Reason for the season.

Lord, in this last week before Christmas, give us the courage to leave some things undone and to seek the One thing needful. Amen.

December 14

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 15

"Firearms prohibited." You've probably seen that posted at some entrances but this weekend several Chicago churches are putting out the opposite word, "Firearms welcome." Reports Michael Keller, "Fifteen churches will serve as drop-off points for the campaign, sponsored by the Clergy for Safer Streets..." "Owners will be able to trade guns for prepaid credit cards or discounts on refurbished computers" (Chicago Tribune, December 13; Section 2, page 6).

It demonstrates the "Now but not yet" tension of the Christian life. Now we have Christ's forgiveness. Now we have the hope of heavenly glory. Now we have the Prince of Peace. BUT... Not yet is peace the order of the day in our world, our communities and our lives. So some worshippers will get a glimpse this weekend of a better time to come. Now but not yet.

"In the last days...Many nations will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us His ways, so that we may walk in His paths.' Nations far and wide...will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore." (from Micah 4)

Do you use the "now but not yet" tension to help understand life?

December 18

Yesterday afternoon I was walking out of prison with the chaplain. I've known him for a long time and respect him immensely for his long years of ministry to the incarcerated. He is, after all, dealing with men who know how to "con" you. The chaplain told me about a pastor who was thankful because his internship in prison ministry had taught him to recognize when he was being manipulated. That's a people skill I don't have.

Yesterday I spoke in that prison to about a hundred men, an experience I've had many times in various correctional facilities. When the men say, "Amen, brother," when they come up and compliment what I've said, I always wonder if I'm getting, well, a "con job." It reminds me of debates about infant baptism. "How can you know a baby has faith?" You can't. How can you know that an adult has faith? Only God knows.

I had to wear an "Official Visitor" badge in jail. That's what everyone saw. My left hand was stamped with invisible ink that only a special light revealed. When all is said and done, the invisible soul is known only to God. So yesterday I preached the Christmas story and today you deal with people in Christian love. If we're being conned, that's finally for God to expose.

December 19

Hi! Christian here. I am eight and a half months old. I am upset. Who is this baby Jesus? Everybody's talking about baby Jesus. Waaahhh! Baby Jesus has had 2000 Christmases. 2000! This is my first Christmas. Why is this baby Jesus mooching in on my first Christmas?

All day long I am with other babies in day care. Then I leave them and come home. But this baby Jesus is with me all the time! Mommy puts me to bed and sings, "Away in the manger." Can you believe that? Putting me to bed, me, the center of the universe! And she sings about another baby. "Away in the manger, no room for a bed, the little Lord Jesus lays down His sweet head. The stars in the bright sky looked down where He lay, the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay."

Jesus must be some baby! 2000 Christmases and He wants to get into my life. Does baby Jesus get into the lives of you big people? Do you let Him in?

"Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask Thee to stay close by me forever and love me, I pray. Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care, and take us to heaven to live with Thee there."

December 20

I've got to make this quick. The end is near. Things really have to get done soon. Pick up a few more gifts. Still need something for people at the office. Get to the grocery store and fight the crowds. Ham or turkey? You think you've got things to do? We're all way behind.

"Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10)

Our busy-ness is good. It's the set up, the preparation for flopping down in a few days and doing nothing. It's the contrasts of life that raise our awareness of the things most important. Contrast...like the noise of our busy-ness doing the things we must do today contrasted to the silence of receiving the coming of God.

"Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord; for He has roused Himself from His Holy dwelling." (Zechariah 2:13)

"How silently, how silently, the wondrous Gift is given!

So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven.

No ear may hear His coming but in this world of sin

Where meek souls will receive Him still,

The dear Christ enters in."

December 21

When comes the perfect Christmas? In a few days?

For some we know this Christmas will be spent in a hospital bed, hopefully with some family sitting close by. For some we know this Christmas will be spent in the loneliness of a nursing home. For some we know the circle has been broken because death has robbed the family circle of a dear one. For some we know the absence around the tree is because of love, the family member offering himself, herself in

defense of our country, perhaps laying it on the line in Iraq . For some there are other circumstances, less spectacular, that prevent the whole family from gathering. And even if all will gather and things appear well outwardly, worries and fears and angers within make the holiday less than perfect.

When comes the perfect Christmas? If conditions are all well for you and yours, I hope you will not judge the celebration as perfect. See the good days ahead through the lens of passing years and coming eternity.

"Now through His Son doth shine The Father's grace divine,

Death was reigning o'er us Through sin and vanity

Till He opened for us A bright eternity,

May we praise Him there! May we praise Him there!"

(Lutheran Service Book, 386)

December 22

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."