

December 07

December 3

Hi, Christian here! Opa visited me last week. Opa said he had a "Come to Jesus day." "What's that, Opa?" "Christian, it's when big people face the truth about something." Huh? In the morning Opa was at Aunt Katie and Uncle Charlie's house. They have Riley. Riley is a puppy. Riley has energy. Opa said he doesn't have energy anymore for a puppy.

After Opa got me from day care, we went to eat. Mommy too. I had fun. I stood on my seat and charmed the people in the next booth. Wonderful me! I spilled my milk on Mommy. I spilled the salt shaker. I slid off my chair and explored the place. I played with things. When Mommy said, "No, Christian," I cried. I want my way. Opa said he doesn't have energy anymore for a toddler.

"Opa, you are so old." "No, Christian, there are many people much older than your Opa. Opa is just realizing that life moves on. Energy goes to puppies and toddlers." Opa says tired with wisdom is ok. "What's wisdom, Opa?" "Christian, wisdom is knowing that as your energies grow less, the real "Come to Jesus meeting" is getting closer."

December 4

Today the Christian church remembers a saint of the eighth century, John of Damascus.

John wrote, "I do not worship matter. I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter.... I salute...matter with reverence, because God has filled it with His grace and power. Through it my salvation has come to me. Was not the thrice-happy and thrice-blessed wood of the cross matter?" Is not the ink in the most holy Gospel-book matter? Is not the life-giving altar made of matter? From it we receive the bread of life! Are not gold and silver matter? From them we make crosses, patens, chalices! And over and above all these things, is not the Body and Blood of our Lord matter?" (For All the Saints, III , 486f.)

Most Americans enjoy material prosperity. Even those who aren't sharing in abundant prosperity have more than their Depression era forbears did and certainly more than billions of people in underdeveloped countries. If the plan is for us to esteem matter because God uses matter to come, what about all those who have almost nothing? If our premium is on Christmas capitalism more than Christ-like charity, how will the desperately poor hear the incarnate Gospel message?

December 5

Ever feel 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 offensive 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 eight days of festival

declared. But there was only enough pure oil to burn candle for one of the eight days. Even so, the priests took the little oil they had and lit the first candle. The first miracle of Hanukah: that little oil lasted for the full eight days.

But a great miracle, ancient commentators said, was that the priests trusted God to provide, even though it appeared they didn't have enough oil for the eight 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)

Our Jewish friends began their celebration of Hanukah yesterday at sundown.

December 6

In the dusty old calendar of the church, the centuries-old way the church remembers the life of Christ and His followers, today is the day of St. Nicholas, aka Santa Claus. Although we know little about him, a man named Nicolas did live during the fourth century in Asia Minor, modern Turkey. He took the Christian faith so seriously that he was sent into exile during the time of Emperor Diocletian. When Emperor Constantine declared Christianity a legitimate religion, Nicholas was set free. A bishop of the Christian church, he died around 350 A.D.

Perhaps you've seen the small ceramic sculpture of Santa kneeling at the Savior's crib. That gets it right. Legend has it that Nicholas gave gifts to the poor at night, not as some ancient prototype of our commercial Santa but as a person profoundly thankful for the coming of the Christ child. These days when you see a commercialized Santa, don't let yourself be deceived into buying just for the sake of buying or don't get yourself worked up because some people don't know the reason for the season. Have peace and remember the real Santa, St. Nicholas of the church's ancient memory. Ho, ho, ho! With St. Nicholas, come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.

December 7

"Good news and bad news. What do you want first?"

A man named Hanson said he would "hazard everything most dear" to fight against the war. Many agree with him, convinced this war is bad news. Of course, every anti-war group has a corresponding pro-war group, the good news group. Citizens for the war challenge their opponents asking, as one congressman put it, "Are you for your country or against it?"

Iraq? No, that comes from debate about the War of 1812. Almost 200 years ago our country was involved in a debate, a deep and divisive debate, about whether the second war against Great Britain was the right thing to do. Last Sunday's New York Times Book Review said this about American Creation, a new book by Joseph Ellis: "This history explores an underappreciated point: that this country was constructed to foster arguments, not to settle them." (December 2; 12) The War of 1812 turned out well, now called the "second war of independence." (A. J. Langguth, Union 1812, p. 200)

Today is Pearl Harbor Day. What began in 1941 as bad news, terrible news, ended up as good news, thanks to sacrifices we cannot adequately appreciate and to the blessing of God. Pray that our debated war in Iraq will also end up being good news. Dear God, help us!

December 10

When we provided a new and much better commons area for our students, some complained that the money could have been better used, like reducing tuition. The old, spartan commons was good enough.

Yesterday the church we attend dedicated a new, actually a rebuilt, pipe organ. That money could have been used better. Couldn't the congregation sing to a boom box?

Diane was busy yesterday decorating the Christmas tree. Talk about time and dollars that could have been better spent! Wouldn't a miniature tree on the coffee table be enough? Review the tape of all that you hear day-in and day-out and some common themes emerge from different quarters, like "the money could have been spent better."

Last week our campus chaplain, Rev. Jonathon Stein, quoted Wayne Gretzky. When Gretzky was asked how he became the National Hockey League's leading scorer, he said something like this: "While others were chasing after the puck, I went to where the puck was going to be." That's what Advent is about, confessing our sinfulness, celebrating the forgiveness the Savior brings, and living life knowing where we're going to be, in heaven.

And that's why we do some things and spend some money that wouldn't have to be, because some of us know there's a grander dimension to life than plodding pragmatism.

December 11

Some names in the stratosphere of fame and fortune got jail time yesterday. Publishing tycoon Conrad Black and Michael Vick, Atlanta Falcons quarterback, were both sentenced yesterday. Uncaring me! No sympathy for them but I do feel for people of faith dealing with guilt.

You sometimes hear that Christianity is a simple thing. Since we sinners can't earn God's favor by all our good intentions and good works, just believe God forgives and presto! You're out of the prison house of guilt.

Yes, "The righteous will live by faith" (Habakkuk 2:4). God forgives the person who trusts in Him through Christ... that sin is off the book... but you still pay your dues to people. In an extreme case, God forgives but you still go to jail. In your life and mine, we trust God forgives us but we're still paying the consequences to others and our conscience pains us for what we've done wrong. No, I don't think living in forgiveness is so simple.

The upshot of this not-so-easy fact of life is that we need to keep hearing God's words of forgiveness so that people's words of judgment don't totally depress our souls. That applies to us all, not just stratospheric jail birds. So at least for here and now, "Be of good cheer. Your sin is forgiven."

December 12

Ten Commandments for this season:

1. Thou shalt not pause to plan thy ways, so that thy only goal will be to make it to the 26th.

2. Thou shalt feel obligated to blanket the world with thy Christmas cards, much as snow covereth the ground.
3. Thou shalt deny the simplicity of Christ's stable by impressing guests with thy holiday house.
4. Thou shalt not be like the shepherds and show up in the same old clothes.
5. Thou shalt think of thyself as a wise man or woman by searching far and wide for just the right gift.
6. Thou shalt blow the budget, imagining that thus it will go well with thee.
7. Thou shalt so stress thyself that thy family calleth thee Scrooge.
8. Thou shalt not lay aside old grudges, even while singing of peach and good will for all.
9. Thou shalt be so busy that thou sittest not by the Christmas tree to recall why this is more than "happy holidays."
10. Thou shalt forget the reason for the season.

December 13

"Christmas was made for children." Does that mean we humor ourselves by watching children enjoy the season?

When American paratroopers entered Karawaddin, villagers brought a ten-year-old boy named Hayatullah to medic Sgt. Nick Graham. "Can you help him?" an Afghan man asked. When Hayatullah was four years old, an eye disease left him blind. Sgt. Graham examined the boy and said there was nothing he could do.

The Taliban runs free in this remote part of Afghanistan . "We would like to support the coalition forces," one villager said, "but if we do, then the Taliban will come at night and cut off our heads." Coalition forces have tried to give aid but the Taliban swoops in, confiscates the aid, and destroys it.

Still the villagers "pushed forward sick children and pleaded for help." The same as in the Bible. "The people brought to Jesus all the sick" (Mark 1:32). Another Afghan child, this one with a congenital heart disease, is brought to the medic in a wheelbarrow. Sgt. Graham says he will die. A seven-year old girl named Baratbibbi is brought. She looks toward the sun without blinking, blinder than Hayatullah. (New York Times, December 12; A1) We are to be in the world for Jesus. "Christmas is made for children?" A recess from engaging evil...or your time to recommit?

December 14

The talk today is the Mitchell report about baseball players and performance-enhancing substances. The report names names and criticizes baseball for not taking the abuse seriously. Interestingly, the Mitchell report recommends no punishment for past abusers but says clean up the game for the future.

Marion Jones didn't get a pass. The winner of five gold medals at the 2000 Olympic Games, Ms. Jones admitted to using an illegal performance-enhancing drug. Wednesday the International Olympic Committee removed her name from the records book. IOC President Jacques Rogge said, "This is a good thing for the fight against doping. The more athletes

we can catch, the more credible we are, the more deterrent effect we will have and the more we are going to protect clean athletes." (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, December 13; D3)

You might be clean, and clean in many more ways than drug use. But consider what God said to the prophet Ezekiel: "Give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked, 'You will surely die, and you do not warn them or speak out to dissuade them from their evil ways in order to save their lives, those wicked people will die for their sins, and I will hold you accountable for their blood.'" (Ezekiel 3:18-19) Is the difference between right and wrong in your talk today?

December 17

Ponder the plow, the snow plow, be it the big monster plows that clean highways and runways or people powered plows, aka the snow shovel. Like much of the country, we got dumped on yesterday, over 7 inches at our home in Collinsville . "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease" (Genesis 8:22). Snow: God's creation...but along comes the plow, altering nature...playing God?

"Playing God." You hear that about people altering nature. The Army Corps of Engineers, scientists altering genes, surgeons doing transplants... "playing God." Jesus did it too. The course of nature is that people get sick. "Jesus healed many who had various diseases" (Mark 1:34). Nature sends us storms. Jesus "rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was still" (Luke 8:24). Jesus wasn't "playing God." He is God. Contrary to God's plan, sin entered the world with the result that nature isn't dependably right. So Jesus altered nature for the good of God's people.

"Fill the earth and subdue it, God told us (Genesis 1:28). And so, yes, we do change the natural course of things...to bring more of the goodness that the Creator intended for all people. The things we think about when we're behind a snow plow!

December 18

"The darkness is passing and the true light is already shining." "Are you in light or darkness?" I asked my audience Sunday. "Light" some called out. I smirked at them. "Listen to the next verse," I said. "Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light" (1 John 2:8-10). Gotchya! I was preaching to prisoners in an Illinois correctional facility.

I transitioned to the Christmas story in Luke 2. "I bring you good news of great joy which will be to all people." I said I wasn't concerned about other people at the moment, only about the light of Christ coming into our hearts. About others, I ad libbed, "They'll get theirs in due time." I meant the Gospel but they instinctively thought about getting even. Another smirk...and we all chuckled, another truth moment. "Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in darkness."

Oswald Chambers: "The love of God at work in me makes me hate with the hatred of the Holy Ghost all that is not in keeping with God's holiness. To walk in the light means that everything that is of the darkness drives me closer into the center of the light" (December 26)

December 19

"The cashiers were slower than Christmas."

"Slower than Christmas?" I asked.

My son-in-law Darren explained. "Just an expression I picked up. Christmas comes so slow when you're a kid."

In these busy, busy, busy days, when time is flying, flying, flying, we adults forget how slow Christmas comes when you're a kid. Yet in our adult world, there is something we still yearn for that is oh, so slow in coming. Have you ever wished that everything would be laid bare, that people would stop justifying themselves, stop making excuses, even admit their wrongs? Have you ever wished that God would reveal Himself to us in a very visible way, a way that would make us say honestly yet comfortably, "Yes, I am Your creature. Have mercy on me!" The celebration of Christ's birth long ago rushes quickly at us but our yearning for His return at the end of time, for the revelation of perfection, drags on so, so slowly. The presents given these days will satisfy, being with family and friends will satisfy, the food and drink will satisfy...and then some! But I hope that you sense something still missing, something good still to come, but coming "slower than Christmas."

"When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory"
(Colossians 3:4)

December 20

In December 1914 British and German citizens sent Christmas packages to their troops fighting one another in the trenches of France. One German soldier wrote this poem and sent it to his hometown newspaper.

I wear love's gloves on my hands,

Love's leggings warm my thighs,

Love's tobacco fills love's pipe,

In the mornings I wash with love's soap.

For loving gifts, a thank-you letter:

Warm is love's cap against my skull;

I sigh to myself, "So much love – and no girl!"

(Stanley Weintraub, Silent Night, p. 11)

Christmas celebrates the Savior sent to bring us God's love. Our own well-motivated Christmas gifts can never replace personal demonstrations of love. So please remember...the widow, the widower... the single adult yearning for a life's mate...the person

at work surrounded by people but so lonely...and all military personnel in the "trenches" for us. Remember those for whom this time of year can be painful.

"Lord, lay some soul upon my heart and love that soul through me." Amen.

December 21

Like most kids, I wondered how Santa could get to all the homes in one night. I was especially puzzled how he could always come to our house during that Christmas Eve hour 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 Dad to come out and drive us to Christmas Eve church. After that service we hurried home and opened the presents that Santa brought while we were in church. But Christmas Eve, Dad was always, always late.

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

Christmas days are memory making days for you and your loved ones. Nurture 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.

Diane, who helps me so ably in putting out these Minutes, joins me in wishing you and your loved ones a blessed Christmas. From our home to yours, best wishes for a blessed celebration of the Savior's birth. I'll be back January 2nd.

December Minutes end