

December 2008

December 1

Yesterday in church I saw several friends who lost family members this year. How hard these weeks are for people grieving the death of a loved one. Grief is always hard but the very first Thanksgiving and Christmas have to be the hardest of all. Death left a hole in the grief-stricken life and the empty place at the table or around the Christmas tree makes the heart's hurt painfully fresh. "Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more," says Jeremiah 31:15. That says it well.

So Advent needs to be appreciated in all its depth. There's plenty of shallowness these days. Shopping, cards, parties, and wondering if "Black Friday" was black enough to lift retailers out of the red are not to be despised but who cares when a loved one is gone? For church kids Advent means getting ready to celebrate Jesus' birth...along with the presents...but Advent offers adults a deeper spiritual experience because it also focuses on Jesus' coming now in the Word and Sacraments and His return on Judgment Day. Both speak to those grieving with faith. There will be a joyous heavenly reunion and until then the Spirit of God gives strength and hope.

A thought and prayer for you who are going through tough times.

December 2

Thank goodness! Someone official has come out and said what we've suspected. Yesterday the National Bureau of Economic Research officially announced that we went into recession in December, 2007.

We appreciate high-standing people who say what the rest of us are feeling. Just like saying we're in recession, some of us want to hear some sanity about getting up at 4 or 5 last Friday morning to act like stupid fish in a feeding frenzy. "I would rather spend some quality time with my dentist than stand in the dark chill waiting for a store to open." Thanks, David Carr, for that, and for pointing out that Black Friday was not a major shopping day ten years ago...until retailers and the media decided they could benefit by hyping it as a major day. Says Kalle Lasn of Ad Busters, "This is a tired American ritual that has had its day." (New York Times, December 1; B2)

Thank goodness, there's a silver lining. Media induced spending doesn't define who we really are. Quite the opposite, my spending may show I don't know who I really am. Thank goodness is a polite way of saying, "Thank God!" Let's out and out say it, Thank You, God, for a recession that makes us rethink who we really are.

December 3

Sometimes nothing need be said because nothing adequate can be said.

This is one of those times. As you may know, Diane and I have two grandsons Christian and Connor. Sometimes Christian and Connor "write" the Minute, but you know what's really going on with that. Anyway, 10-month old Connor is crawling and shows signs of being a track speedster. The other day he crawled over to his mom's nightstand, pulled himself up but then fell down. When he fell he cracked his head on the nightstand, cracked his head bad, scary bad.

Dad Darren took Connor to the ER while Mom Liz stayed home with Christian, who is 2 years and 8 months old. Liz was in the kitchen, crying, because she was worried about Connor. Christian toddled up to her, looked up and said, "Mommy, you sad?" "No Christian, I'm worried about Connor." "Mommy, you no worry. I make you happy; I sing you songs." Liz asked Christian what he was going to sing, and he thought for a second. "Twinkle, Twinkle." "Twinkle, twinkle little star how I wonder" he sang. Mom's crying face turned to a big grin. Christian said, "Mommy, you no worry anymore. Me make you happy!"

It's a true story. Nothing more need be said. The ER said Connor was OK.

December 4

Above the old easy chair in my bedroom is a copy of a painting by John Constable, a famous 19th century British artist known for painting landscapes. Constable was fascinated by the sky. He said the sky is the "principal instrument for expressing sentiment." (Great Museums of the World: National Gallery, Washington, p. 149)

The prophet Isaiah used the sky to express his deep religious sentiment. "Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down!" (Isaiah 64:1) Aren't there days when you wish God would come down in a very visible way, come down and once and for all eliminate evil? Be careful what you wish for! You know some shameful things about yourself, sinful things. "How then can we be saved?" Isaiah's answer is to plead to our heavenly Father for mercy. "Do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are all Your people" (64:9)

Children imagine animals in the clouds. Adults, sometimes world-weary, see more. Advent, these weeks before Christmas, is time to see God's coming from heaven, coming in the past as the babe of Bethlehem, coming now with a good word of forgiveness and hope, and coming in the future on Judgment Day in a way all will see. What will you see now when you look to the sky? Dr. Timothy Saleska observes that people are more afraid of global warming than Jesus.

December 5

"'Tis the season to be jolly" so let's have some fun with the nonsense du jour, the effort to turn Christmas into a totally secular holiday.

Tomorrow, December 6th, is St. Nicholas Day. Nicholas lived in the fourth century and, according to tradition, was imprisoned by the emperor Diocletian, a fierce persecutor of Christians. Nicholas was released, served as the bishop of Myra, and, tradition also says, was a great confessor of Jesus Christ.

The story goes that Nicholas heard of an extremely poor family in his town, so poor that the family's only hope for survival would be to sell their three daughters, a prospect they hated. To save the girls from such a life, Nicholas went secretly to that home in the middle of the night and left a bag of gold coins. Hence the remembrance of this confessor of Christ, Santa Claus, has come to include the giving of gifts.

The First Amendment promises freedom of speech and free exercise of religion to people of all faiths. There are some wanna be Diocletians among us, people who would eliminate the sounding of any Christian themes in public, but they're doomed to frustration and failure. Ho, ho, ho! See Santa, give gifts and you're in the spirit of that confessor of Jesus Christ, Saint Nicholas!

December 8

no minute

December 9

no minute

December 10

Diane and I are proud of our home state, the great state of Illinois! It's getting publicity but not from the state tourism department. Yesterday Governor Rod Blagojevich was arrested for allegedly shaking down money for political favors.

Back in the Roman Empire, provinces were run by governors appointed by the Emperor or by the Senate. They often used their appointments to line their pockets to pay off political debts and to enrich their personal lives. It was common practice and only occasionally prosecuted.

The governor's arrest reminds us we are blessed with our judicial system. Unlike citizens in Roman provinces, we Americans live under the rule of law which strives to protect us from criminal harm. And, non-religious as it is, our system reflects God's good will for all people, Christian and non-Christian alike. The government "is God's servant to you for good" (Romans 13:3, 4). "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake...to governors, as to those who are sent by (God) for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good" (1 Peter 2:13-14). So as the Blagojevich story unfolds, remember God's goodness to us through government is happening.

What a great state, Illinois! We have a picture of Diane with former governor George Ryan. He's now in prison.

December 11

Where's the Golden Mean between these two cases? First, the despicable Blagojevich revelations. An example of the governor's greed from a November 7th wiretap: "I want to make money." (USA Today, December 10; 2A) Second, consider what Father Richard Benson of the order of St. Vincent DePaul and Dean of St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, California, tells future priests. He says he hopes that sometime in their careers they will ask their bishop, "Give me the poorest parish in this archdiocese."

On the one hand, you're not going to be as crass as Blagojevich. On the other hand, as admirable as Benson's advice is, you're probably not in a position to up and move into a poor neighborhood and serve the poor. Where's the in-between? A nun who runs a major health care system says, "No margin; no mission." She means that it often does take some dollars to serve others in the name of Christ in this world. Is your stewardship balanced between the two, between gathering and giving? The Roman poet Horace wrote about the Golden Mean, "aurea mediocritas" in Latin, which sounds like "Golden Mediocrity." The greedy think gathering so we can give to others is Golden Mediocrity. Though the world mocks it, Jesus likes it. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Romans 7:12).

December 12

Call me "Dinosaurus Dale." Dinosaurus Dale is a social creature. He walks upright on two legs, has a brain a bit bigger than a pea, and functions pretty well in a stable environment. The problem is that Dinosaurus Dale and those like him are living in a world of global changes and many don't realize they're nearing extinction.

Ryan Bolger is editor of "The Local Church in Mission." He's an expert who can talk at length about how the Internet has changed our culture. Here's one example: People like Dinosaurus Dale, people who want the church to grow, imagine they can devise the right kind of worship service and people will come. That's so prehistoric! Today individuals can get spirituality that suits them on the web or they can gather in cyberspace groups and create their own worship culture. Worship from here; sermon from there. Why go to church to get someone else's idea of worship culture?

Dinosaurus Dale is scared when he sees other dinosaurs unaware of what's happening. The only thing that Dinosaurus Dale knows to do is bow his little head and ask for wisdom from the God of the ages. So when you go to church Sunday, don't go for the culture. Huddle with the other dinosaurs to seek the wisdom of the Gospel.

December 15

My name is Connor. Big brother Christian calls me "Tonnor" but it's Connor. I am proud of myself. I can walk! Last Friday at day care I got up off my hands and knees and walked! When Mommy picked me up, my teacher Carmen said, "Connor walked all by himself!" Mommy asked Christian and he said, "Yeah, all by himself."

Mommy says there's been an "uptick" in my confidence. What does that mean? All I know is I can walk. I can go anyplace I want. Here comes me! Opa says there is a Latin word "conor." It means, "I attempt." That's me. I can now attempt anything. I can walk. No limits to what I will attempt!"

Hmmm.... Big people, are there limits? Are limits why you big people build fences? Are limits why you big people have laws? If there are limits, why can't you just go over the limits with a credit card?

Old Opa says there are limits. We are creatures, Opa says, and not the Creator. Opa, I will walk wherever I want! I will be like big people. I will test the limits. Then we'll see what happens.

December 16

I was people watching at San Francisco International Airport when Hall of Fame baseball player Joe Morgan sat down. Everyone watched him out of the corner of their eyes, everyone except one. As we all eavesdropped on his cell phone conversation, people whispered, "Yes, that's him."

William Carl, president of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, gave a devotion about being a "somebody." "Isn't that somebody famous?" we sometimes wonder. Dr. Carl pointed us to St. Paul who could have claimed to be a somebody. "Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am more." Instead of resting on his laurels, Paul said, "I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." (11:22-23; 12:9)

Dr. Carl said a woman complimented Adlai Stevenson on a speech. "It was superfluous!" she gushed. "I expect that it will be published posthumously," Stevenson replied. She said, "It can't come soon enough!"

A young man was sitting right across from Joe Morgan. The young man had a Cincinnati Reds baseball cap on but apparently had no clue about the famous somebody across from him. Nothing wrong with being a somebody, but finally it's all superfluous. Finally there's only our weakness and God's grace in Jesus.

December 17

This is for the women trying to get everything done for Christmas. Many years ago I asked Diane if I could help her. "If you have to ask, you don't care," she said. In the most recent installment of trying to help unasked, I went Christmas shopping with her last Sunday.

When she suggested we might go to the mall, I said, "No, all the benches are already filled with old men."

When she was looking at a possible gift, I said, "Don't we have one of those at home we're not using?" She didn't like my money-saving idea.

When we got separated in one store, a clerk asked, "Sir, can I help you?" "Yes, find my wife and get me out of here."

When a new checkout line opened in our last store, I started to believe again in God. When we got home, I turned on football and settled into my easy chair. As I fell asleep (that's what Sunday football games are for), I had a big smile on my face. Without asking, I had helped her out! I dozed off quite pleased with myself. Diane probably looked at me

napping and thought, "He doesn't have a clue." But you're wrong, Diane. I do have a clue. That you've put up with me for over 30 years proves that there is a God, a very good God.

December 18

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 19

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."

Diane and I are going to slip into quiet Christmas time. We'll be back January 5th. We wish you and yours a Blessed Christmas and Happy New Year!