

## February 2004

### February 2

"It's hard to have patience with people who say 'There is no death,' or 'Death doesn't matter,'" wrote C. S. Lewis. "Cancer, and cancer, and cancer. My mother, my father, my wife. I wonder who is next in the queue?" ([A Grief Observed](#))

A friend of mine stands in that queue. Thankfully, her prognosis is good.

"How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?" complained the prophet Habakkuk about the collapse of justice in society. God's answer fits all the problems we face: "The righteous will live by faith" (2:4). That is, hang onto God's promises. He's given His word and sooner or later He'll keep His good promises. Hanging onto God's promises, sometimes against the evidence, produces hope, not just hope that cancer will be cured and one day eliminated, but hope confident in resurrection. "The last enemy to be destroyed is death" ( 1 Corinthians 15:26). "Hope does not disappoint, because God has poured His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit" (Romans 5:5).

Are you or a friend standing in that queue? God stands in line with you. "Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God" (Psalm 43:5).

### February 3

Let me say a word of thanks to the mainstream media. Thank you to the major TV networks. Your coverage of politics and today's primaries is so extensive that you have many of us feeling like our lives are being swallowed up by a political quicksand over which we have no control.

Thank you to the newspapers and news magazines. Your pundits who write about politics and show up on the talk shows have convinced many of us that your prognostications are about as dependable as the weather forecast.

Henrietta Leonhardt. I used to visit this gentle woman who was over 100 when she died. She often recited to me a German poem learned in her youth. "O lieber Heiland hol' mich heim!" "Dear Savior, take me home." "My old heart," went part of the poem, "longs for its rest, so worn and weary, far from this world's grip, so anxious and dreary."

Yes, like you, I am interested in the things of this world, today's primaries included. Still, the coverage reminds me there's nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9-10). So thank you media, for unwittingly driving us to something eternal. Ultimately "our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20).

### February 4

It wasn't just the so-called "wardrobe malfunction." It was the choreography and the lyrics as well.

"They were not at all ashamed, they did not know how to blush." So said Jeremiah about his society, not just the headline grabbers. Then he added, "They shall be overthrown, says the Lord." (Jeremiah 6:15). The whole society was, 586 B.C.

Years later, given another chance, Ezra said, "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to You, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens" (Ezra 9:6).

We blush when the capillaries in our face expand, and my encyclopedia tells me that can happen when we're anxious. The basic meaning of anxious is to be apprehensive, "I've got a bad feeling about this." Anyone blushing because sexual shamelessness is rousing the anger of God (Romans 1: 26)? We miss the offence if we talk only about what the children might see. What are adults seeing? So much depicts people as objects for selfish use. So much today strips away the mystery of sexuality from our adult lives. And each outrage calls for another to exceed it. "They did not know how to blush."

## **February 5**

Today is the National Prayer Breakfast. People praise prayer, and rightly so, but it seems to me that before we begin to pray we should contemplate what we're about to do. That's why I like the practice I've seen especially in black preachers...significant silence before they say the first words of the prayer.

Prayer proceeds on the assumption that your words will be heard by the mysterious Almighty. That's a breathtaking assumption. The content of our prayers is even more amazing because most of our requests to the Eternal are small in the cosmic scheme of things. That's fine; His eye is on the sparrow.

But doesn't it follow that God can respond to us with His specifics? If we speak words to Him, can't He speak words to us? We don't communicate to God with visions and emotions but words. Isn't it the obligation of prayer that we get into biblical words, "the word of God" as it's called...and is?

Read the Hebrew prophets and you often come across their complaint that ancient Israel prayed the right words but their heart wasn't receptive to God's words and ways. So let the pray-er beware. When you bow your head and fold your hands, you're taking on a dialogue.

## **February 6**

Years ago I was sitting on the couch, I still remember it so clearly, and I was caught up in my habitual mix of fretting and praying. It's like spaghetti, "What am I going to do?" and "God, please help" all mixed up in one bowl, worries and hopes all jumbled in one prayer time.

Then came one of those "Dale, the problem is you" moments. "Ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" (James 1:6-8).

My spaghetti mix of fretting and wishy-washy praying was all wrong. Not only counterproductive, you won't get your wimpy wish, but it's an out-and-out offense to God. "God, I don't have enough confidence in You to stop my worrying."

If we leave our prayer times a spaghetti of worries and petitions, the meal will prove unsatisfying. Every prayer time needs to come to this surrender: Our petitions to God are based on confidence that in Christ He is our loving and involved Father.

Can you relate to my experience?

## **February 9**

"All creatures that have breath and motion," wrote the poet John Mentzer. Our dog "Speaker" has breath but not a whole lot of motion. When Speaker does move it's either to lie in front of the vent to get hot air in winter or cold air in summer.

...or Speaker moves to beg for food. The Bible doesn't speak very favorably about dogs, caricaturing them as wild, vicious scavengers. There is, however, one hint dog-lovers welcome. A woman said to Jesus, "the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" (Matthew 15:27). Perhaps some dogs were domesticated. At least for that woman the dog served as a reminder of the goodness of God for all people.

The Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show begins this evening and we'll be watching. Speaker will too, his ears perking up when he hears barking. We'll be reminded again what a marvelous creation this is.

"All creatures that have breath and motion, that throng the earth, the sea, the sky, now join me in my heart's devotion, help me to raise God's praises high. My utmost powers can ne'er aright declare the wonders of His might."

## **February 10**

I checked some newspapers yesterday.

The Chicago Tribune's music critic wrote that the "besieged music industry struggled to regain its dignity" at the Grammys. Regain its dignity?

USA Today gave three pages to the Grammys/Super Bowl story, including this quotation from performer Christina Aguilera: the Jackson controversy "needs to be put to bed." Why did she choose that metaphor?

Our local "Belleville News-Democrat" ran an AP story about the Grammys/Super Bowl controversy and carried this complaint from a reader: "I think a normal person would have been put in jail for indecent exposure."

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch printed parts of a letter complaining to the NFL. The letter is from Mr. James Kilts, the chairman of Gillette. Thank you, Mr. Kilts!

Justin Timberlake said, "I apologize if you guys are offended." "If?" Justin there are absolute standards for conduct that you and your peers consistently violate. We are offended and we are complaining. The FCC has received a record 200,000 complaints. The old record was 80,000. This story has "legs" as they say. This is an opportune moment to make a difference. I suggest you register your disgust with the powers that be.

## February 11

Today the House and Senate of Massachusetts are meeting to consider a state constitutional amendment to define marriage as between a man and a woman. While Bible passages don't dictate legislation, the attitudes and actions of true Christians, legislators included, are shaped by what the Bible teaches.

In an article in the "Concordia Commentary" on 1 Corinthians, Dr. Gregory Lockwood writes, "From beginning to end the Bible condemns the practice of homosexuality as an unnatural perversion." After a careful look at many passages, Lockwood admits, "All of this seems intolerably harsh to our modern culture." Nonetheless, we need "to take the divine Word at face value."

"Sensitive pastoral care will involve assuring the homosexual person 'that the pastor is speaking to him or her out of love and acceptance (but not approval), avoiding anything that smacks of pharisaic condemnations, keeping lines of communication open for Law/Gospel ministry, opening opportunities for confession and absolution, and above all, making sure 'that the proper understanding and reception of the *Gospel* is the key and goal.'" (pp.204, 208, 209)

In all the current discussion about gay marriage, a true Christian keeps the Bible in mind. What does it say about your faith if you don't?

## February 12

"Oh my God, get Martha on that phone!" That's allegedly what Peter Bacanovic said when he learned Samuel Waksal was selling his shares in ImClone.

Now let your imagination run free with that quotation. Imagine an important man (so he thinks) sitting at his important desk in some important office building. He learns that some power players are bailing out on their own stock, big news in this self-obsessed world, big news. So this important businessman does something quite common. He yells out the door of his important office to his dutiful secretary, who in this imaginative rendering happens to be God. "Oh my God, get Martha on that phone!" Dutiful God does what He's told, picks up the phone for His boss and calls the higher power, who of course, is Martha.

A fanciful play of my imagination, God the great secretary, the great enabler of important us in our important careers. Perhaps there's a truth in my fancy? How does God feel if He's not the One in the executive office of your life? And yes, I know that "Oh my God" is just a careless expression. Really now, how smart is it for us to call out carelessly to the CEO?

## February 13

Is all the Valentine's Day hype one of the cruelest things our culture does? Perhaps you've failed in love, separated or divorced. Perhaps you're alone with no prospects. Perhaps you've been widowed or lost a child. All the hype about Valentine's Day leaves you feeling standing on the cold, heartless outside. Inside are chocolates and roses and kisses and warm hearts, but outside it's cruel, and that's where many of us are.

"When Bob met Alicia, he...was so infatuated with her that he thought his life's journey for happiness was over. He was wrong. 'Alicia and I were very much in love,' Bob confirmed. 'Yet the more we talked, the more we realized that we were still missing something in our lives.'" They happened to hear a sermon that spoke straight to their hearts. It proved to be the beginning of their coming in, not simply coming into that church but coming into a warm, satisfying experience of love. (Thom S. Rainer, Surprising Insights, pp. 209-210)

If Valentine's hype has Cupid's arrow carving a painful, empty spot in your heart, here's a prayer that someone will care enough to send you the very best...and that you'll take to heart winsome words about God's warm love for you.

## February 16

Happy "Presidents' Day Sale."

Huh? You say this isn't "Presidents' Day Sale" but just "Presidents' Day?"

I think you're wrong. Look through today's newspaper. Presidents' Day Sale ads all over the place. Why did Washington and Lincoln endure all they did? Wasn't it so we can have our malls and catalogs and internet shopping? Isn't America about us buying stuff?

Some of you don't get it. Church people, for example. Congregations often struggle to make their budgets. So I suggested they sell naming rights to their churches. St. Matthew could become "AOL Church." Trinity church could become "Ford Motors Church" and so on. Companies would pay big bucks to have their logo on the front of the church and maybe even on the minister's robe. I think it's a great idea...

But they just stare at me in disbelief. They keep quoting some Bible passage: "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 6:6-8). I don't know...It just doesn't seem to fit the spirit of modern America. Happy Presidents' Day.

## February 17

Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion" is stirring up a storm about Jewish-Christian relations. I was shocked some years ago when I heard a minister say in a prayer that Jesus was killed by the Jews. His words weren't just ecumenically insensitive; they are untrue. Most early first-century Jews didn't know that Jesus of Nazareth even existed. When a few did call out to Pontius Pilate, "Let his blood be on us and our children," they were not expressing a decree from God (Matthew 27:25). Anti-Semitism existed before the first century because sin leads us to like our own kind of

people and hate others (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 5:43-44). Tragically, the followers of Jesus haven't always let His Spirit raise us above our sinful nature and so many Christians have engaged in various forms and degrees of anti-Semitism.

Who killed Jesus? Jesus wasn't killed by an ethnic group but by the religious leaders of His day. Their confidence in their religious life and their religious works led them to put to death the One who had exposed the hypocrisy of their own self-righteousness. Whatever the faith label, aren't all religious people subject to such self-righteousness? I am. Sinners are. It's that attitude, not ethnicity, which killed Jesus.

## **February 18**

Martin Luther died on this date in 1546. A piece of paper was found at his side on which he had written, "We are beggars, that is true." It wasn't a despairing confession, but a deep-cutting truth we all need in life.

"Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). That's so different than the love we show to one another, our impoverished love.

"Thy will, not mine" Jesus said in Gethsemane. Even your good aspirations, your praise-worthy deeds, the things you've set your heart on...Leave them outside when you go in thought and word to God. "Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before You" (Psalm 143:2).

"I will give myself in consecration, I will do anything, but do not humiliate me to the level of the most hell-deserving sinner and tell me that all I have to do is to accept the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ." (Oswald Chambers)

It may sound extreme, but being done with yourself is the only way that God can begin to fill you with all His goodness. "We are all beggars, that is true."

## **February 19**

Congratulations to John Daly for winning the Buick Invitational last Sunday. Life hasn't been easy for John Daly. He's struggled with alcohol addiction. He's on his fourth marriage, and his current wife has been indicted on drug and gambling charges. The easy moral of his story is, of course, hope, but that's more easily said than done. You have days when you wonder, "How can I keep going?"

A part of the answer is the Bible's encouragement to God-centered hope (1 Peter 1:21). For example, a Bible-believing golfer wouldn't set his deepest hope on winning a tournament but instead on God to do whatever our Father in heaven deems best. Apply that to your own situation. Hope in God; not in your earthly goals. God-centered hope will then produce ripples of smaller hopes that enliven your pursuit of whatever earthly goal lies before you.

There's a recurring line in the movie *Seabiscuit*: "You don't throw a whole life away because it's banged up a little bit." Congratulations to all of us who are persevering

in hope. "Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God" (Psalm 42:11).

## February 20

"Shibboleth" means a word or pronunciation that reveals your identity. When the Ephraimites approached guards serving the Israelite judge Jephthah, their pronunciation of the password "shibboleth" revealed them to be enemies (Judges 12:6).

"Your accent gives you away," said a servant girl when Peter denied he was with Jesus of Galilee (Matthew 26:73). Are the words of your daily conversations a shibboleth?

Sunday marks the birth of George Washington in 1732. In August of 1776 he made his displeasure known. "The general is sorry to be informed that the foolish and wicked practice of profane cursing and swearing, a vice heretofore little known in an American army, is growing into fashion. He hopes the officers will, by example as well as influence, endeavor to check it, and both they and the men will reflect that we can have little hope of the blessing of Heaven on our arms, if we insult it by our impiety and folly." ("Facts about the Presidents" in "The Arizona Republic," February 16, 2004; B8).

"With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. This should not be" (James 3:9).

## February 23

Jesus made many promises, including this: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live..." (John 11: 25-26). But if Jesus ends up dead, He turns out to be just another religious huckster.

Sin is rebellion against God. Even the sins we judge petty are symptoms of our inborn rebellion. God, being God, can't long permit such challenges to His being. So the only escape from divine displeasure would be payment for sins, which was what Jesus set out to do (Mark 10:45).

If He succeeded, the stranglehold of death would start to loosen, since sin brought death into the world (Romans 5:12). That's why Easter is as essential to the Christian message as Christ's death (1 Corinthians 15:7). By the resurrection of Jesus God the Father shows that He's accepted His Son's sacrifice for our sins. "If there were no resurrection, we would have no consolation or hope, and everything else Christ did and suffered would be futile" (Martin Luther).

Read the four Gospels and you'll see that they are written toward passion and resurrection, not just passion. Keep that in mind as you watch Mel Gibson's movie.

## February 24

Years ago I used to visit a retired farmer, Mr. John Moellmann. He once told me a story about the depression. His hen hadn't laid any eggs, so he walked to the next farm and asked to borrow an egg, one egg. When Mr. Moellmann's hen did lay some eggs, he returned to his neighbor and paid his debt, one egg.

Today is Shrove Tuesday, the day before Lent begins, a day for the last fling, the final selfish indulgences before the penitential season of self-denial begins on Ash Wednesday. Hence the popular name for today is Fat Tuesday. Things have gotten very fat since the Depression, so fat that the idea of borrowing and repaying one egg is incomprehensible to most of us.

Medical experts say that many of us are obese, a condition that makes it harder for us to move around. I wonder, do we have it in us to move from our ever self-indulgent culture to the penitence and self-denial of Ash Wednesday? Wrote Rabbi Abraham Heschel: "As long as man sees religion as a source of satisfaction for his own needs, it is not God whom he serves but his own self" (*Between God and Man*, p. 182).

## February 25

Today is Ash Wednesday, for many Christians a day of ritual, of ashes, of the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The Hebrew Bible warns that ritual isn't enough to satisfy God. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise" (Psalm 51:11). So when you do the ritual thing today, how do you know you're pleasing God?

It was recently reported that two Afghan women removed and detonated almost 70 live cluster bombs that had fallen around their village. Having seen children killed and injured from playing with such bombs, they were determined to protect the rest of the village's children. (Belleville News-Democrat, February 22, 2004; A12) We might sit in our smugness and judge them foolish for taking such a risk, but whom have we ever helped when we sit in our smugness, including rote Ash Wednesday ritual?

"You may well have very pious thoughts, but this is no absolute criterion; you are still subject to error despite all your pious thoughts. But in the way in which you treat your neighbor you have very powerful evidence of the power of the Sacrament in your life." (Martin Luther, SL XI. 599.29)

## February 26

Today's media story: THE BALL

Last year, October 14th. Game 6 of the National League Championship Series. Winner goes to the World Series. The Cubs are ahead of the Florida Marlins, 3-0. Luis Castillo fouls Mark Prior's pitch down the left field line, Moises Alou is poised to catch it, but a fan reaches up and Alou can't make the out. The Cubs blow the lead, lose the game 8-3, and end up losing the series.

Tonight the ball will be destroyed. Grant DePorter bought the ball for \$113,824.16 so that he could destroy it and get it out of the Cubs psyche.

It's a great illustration of moving on. "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!" (Isaiah 43:19). Sure, we live with the consequences of our past, but past sins have been buried with Christ and every day offers hope for the future. "One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14).

The ball will be destroyed this evening at 7:31 at Harry Caray's in Chicago.

## **February 27**

Last night another debate of presidential hopefuls was held, this one in Los Angeles. Do you find so much current political talk transparently partisan, and oh so tedious?

If so, you'd enjoy reading a social critic from 2500 years ago. In his comedy, "Clouds" Aristophanes presents Strepsiades, a deadbeat who sends his son Pheidippides to Socrates and the sophists to learn clever arguments that will let dad evade his debts. But the spin backfires on old Strepsiades. The comedy ends with the son using his newly acquired sophistry to defend beating his father.

Jesus says, "Let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' 'no'; anything beyond that comes from the evil one" (Matthew 5:37). Paul warns against the argumentative words of conceited people (1Timothy 6:4). The commandment says, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against Thy neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). And no, this isn't just right-wing religion. Aristophanes' point was that society can't endure if we don't use speech and arguments on behalf of truth.

Aristophanes also said that the spinmeisters "believe in no god save only our trinity-chaos, clouds, tongue" and that they "campaign with whetted tongue." 21st century politics? "Nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9).