

February 1

Welcome to February! Until 450 B.C. February was the last month of the year. The name comes from Latin, Februa, the Roman feast of purification. Romans used February to clean up their accounts with the gods, a kind of year end spiritual 1040. That they were concerned about atoning for wrongs even though a thousand miles from the Hebrew prophets' scathing calls to repentance... That they had a repentant urge long before hellfire and damnation Christian preachers suggests there is something instinctive in us humans about straightening out our accounts with the gods...or the god.

Many people ignore that urge, which makes sense to me...if the gods...or the god...are vengeful. Why punish yourself now with repentance if the gods...or the god...will punish you eternally for your sins? "Eat, drink and be merry; Mardi Gras while you can!"

But if the gods...or the god...intend repentance as a kind invitation to reconciliation, to forgiveness and life, then February with Ash Wednesday and 27 other days can be a welcome time. "Do you show contempt for the riches of His kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?" (Romans 2:4)

"God, be merciful to me a sinner," prayed one man to the God (Luke 18:13). "Whoever comes to Me I will never drive away," is the answer of God's Son. That's the welcome of February.

February 2

A treasured little card I have, 2 ½ inches by 5 ½ inches says: "United States House of Representatives. Admit Bearer to the visitor's gallery. Address to the Congress. President George W. Bush. February 27, 2001 ." I was there and it was an awesome experience, not just for a Midwestern boy but for the political workers with whom I socialized after the speech. With all its ritual, tonight's State of the Union address shows democracy at work.

From Monday's Washington Post: "Yesterday...Americans finally got a good look at who they are fighting for: millions of average people who have suffered for years under dictatorship and who now desperately want to live in a free and peaceful country. Their votes were an act of courage and faith -- and an answer to the question of whether the mission in Iraq remains a just cause." Although not yet democracy in full bloom as we'll see it tonight, the bud is there and we pray and work for its unfolding.

The Christmas hymn says, "He rules the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove the glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love...." Most of the time we simply trust that's true, even when evidence is lacking. These days we are privileged to thank God for glimpses of its truth.

February 3

No one lives any more in Snag, in the Yukon Territory near the Alaskan border. Not many people ever did, Snag being, as people say, a God-forsaken place. Snag existed for others. Since travel in the Yukon is often by plane, Snag's few people and airstrip were a rare place where planes in trouble could land. That was often the difference between life and death. On this date, February 3 in 1947, the coldest temperature ever recorded in North America was recorded in Snag, 81 degrees below zero. Today Snag is deserted; its inhabitants who are still alive live somewhere else, someplace warmer.

Robert Service wrote "The Law of the Yukon :"

"This is the Law of the Yukon , that only the Strong shall thrive;

That surely the Weak shall perish, and only the Fit survive.

Dissolute, damned and despairful, crippled and palsied and slain,

This is the Will of the Yukon , -- Lo, how she makes it plain!"

In ways literal but more often figurative, we all experience the cold realities of life, times we feel God forsaken. We are not, the Bible says. The Spirit in fact is very present, trying to kindle in us a greater desire to expect something better, to detach our heart from our problems, to leave our "Snags" behind, "longing for a better country – a heavenly one" (Hebrews 11:16).

February 4

Going to church...boring! Super Bowl party...exciting! Perhaps, but which benefits you more?

"Every day brings to the Christian many hours in which he will be alone in an unchristian environment. These are the times of testing. This is the test of true meditation and true Christian community. Has the fellowship...transported him for a moment into a spiritual ecstasy that vanishes when everyday life returns, or has it lodged the Word of God so securely and deeply in his heart that it holds and fortifies him...." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer in For All the Saints, I, 286)

I know no one whose life has changed because of a Super Bowl party but I know many people whose lives are better because of the habit (yes, habit) of going to church. Here I don't mean mindless sitting in a pew but engagement. What's God saying to me? Bonhoeffer advocates engagement with God's Word in a way that will sustain you in the rough and tumble of the week. Sunday afternoon's party simply can't do that.

An old pastor told about the swimming hole on his family's farm. Some summer days the water on top was agitated but when he dove down to the bottom all was peaceful. Enjoy the Super Bowl but deep down have a heart held and fortified by God.

February 7

This evening at 8:00 the American Kantorei under the direction of Robert Bergt will present Beethoven's "Mass in C." The concert will be in The Chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus on the campus of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis . An offering will be received, all of which will go to tsunami relief.

It's not just tsunami victims who need relief. At different times and in various ways we all do. Troubled relationships, career difficulties, health or financial problems... If you are a spiritual person, you struggle with your problems in a religious idiom: How does a just God do such things? Why me? The questions Job asked.

Relief awaits when you go into a cathedral setting, are still, and hear the music of the church, not the latest Christian pop from Nashville but the music of the church that has lived through the ages. Most Meyer Minute readers aren't near St. Louis , aren't near The Chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus. Our newest subscriber is in Serbia ! Literally in a church or by closing your eyes and imagining the sacred setting, sacred space with sacred music offers this relief: "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). Sacred space and sacred music, and when the concert is over, "It is well with my soul."

February 8

Fat. You know, pinch your tummy to see if you've got an inch or two of spare tire. Fat. We've all got it, more or less. I do; most of us do.

Fat isn't all bad. It provides energy. Fat under our skin serves as insulation. (What's your R factor?) Fat around our organs serves as protection against injury. OK, all well and good, but as every American who's worth his salt and French fries knows by lying on the couch and watching TV, too much fat – not good. Fat increases cholesterol, contributes to coronary heart disease and on and on, or should I say wider and wider?

Today is called "Fat Tuesday." Tomorrow will be Ash Wednesday, the day when Christians begin their Lenten commemoration of Jesus' suffering and death, a commemoration that traditionally began with fasting. Fasting, not feasting. So the day before the fast became known as "Fat Tuesday."

There's another name for today, "Shrove Tuesday." The word "shrove" comes from "shrive," to obtain absolution for sins by confessing and doing penance.

This "Minute" is not about losing weight, a very, very hard thing to do. This "Minute" is about attitudes. Which name best describes your approach to this day? The name that highlights bodily over indulgence...or the name that focuses on your inmost being and your most important relationship, your sin and your Savior?

February 9

In his 1946 book, The Great Divorce, C.S. Lewis describes a varied collection of people who push and shove to get on a bus out of hell. When the bus makes a stop on its journey, some residents of heaven come and meet the people leaving hell. One person from heaven recognizes a person from the bus from hell.

“You were sent there because you are an apostate.”

“Are you serious?”

“Perfectly.”

“Do you really think people are penalized for their honest opinions?”

“Friend, let us be frank. Our opinions were not honestly come by. We simply found ourselves in contact with a certain current of ideas and plunged into it because it seemed modern and successful. When, in our whole lives, did we honestly face, in solitude, the one question on which all turned: whether after all the Supernatural might not in fact occur? When did we put up one moment’s real resistance to the loss of our faith? We were afraid of crude Salvationism, afraid of a breach with the spirit of the age, afraid of ridicule, afraid (above all) of real spiritual fears and hopes.” (p. 35ff.)

How many Ash Wednesdays have you lived through? How much of your simple, pure childhood faith have you lost? It’s Lent. Worship to reclaim it.

February 10

A good writer gets your attention early on. William F. Buckley did that: “At church on Sunday the congregation was asked to pray for the recovery of the pope. I have abstained. I hope he will not recover.”

Whoa! So I read on, which is what a good writer gets you to do. Buckley has nothing personal against the pope; he’s just putting confession into practice. Life moves on, we all know, and Christians follow Jesus Christ, moving toward heaven. So there come times to let go, of our own personal attachments and of people we love.

“The length of our days is 70 years – or 80, if we have the strength... Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:10, 12).

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

Buckley’s not advocating euthanasia, causing a person to die who could still live. Though he doesn’t say it in so many words, the unstated undercurrent is that death has been defeated by the resurrection of Christ. “So, what is wrong with praying for his death?” He quotes Muriel Spark: “When a noble life has prepared old age, it is not decline that it reveals, but the first days of immortality.” Buckley’s a good writer. Does he have you thinking? (in Belleville News-Democrat, February 9; A4)

February 11

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 14

The setting is the couch in the Meyer's family room. It's a cozy, comfy room, television noise in the background, no one paying attention. Diane has been reading, nibbling on a snack, totally absorbed in what she's doing. But he has something less intellectual on his mind, a prospect that has popped into his little mind, a consuming hope that makes his old eyes twinkle. Of course, he won't realize his passionate desire by just sitting there. He's got to make a move. Inching closer and closer, he touches her, his touch signals his intent.

“Not yet!” Diane says.

No matter, my desire is not put off! It's stronger than ever.

Whoops! I made a mistake there. I shouldn't have said “My desire is not put off.” This scene is about our dog Speaker begging Diane for part of her snack. I was sitting in my easy chair, watching the animal make his move. To see what I am referring to click here: [respublica](#)

Animal instincts obsessively seek satisfaction but the better humans restrain desires, train desires, and at our best convert our desires into service to others. “Love is not self-seeking” (1 Corinthians 13:5). Jesus Christ is all about a passion not for self but for others. “Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

February 15

She wasn't allowed to speak at a temperance rally in 1852 simply because she was a woman. That experience pushed her to work for equal rights and women's suffrage. Still, it wasn't until 1920 that the 19th amendment gave women the vote. Her name was Susan B. Anthony and she was born on this date in 1820.

Women have made great progress, but look at magazine stands, channel surf, or see what young women think they have to wear – or not wear – to be accepted and you conclude our culture still looks at women in degrading ways.

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7:12)

Some ancient books pretended to be biblical but were rejected for the Bible. One passage in “the Gospel of Thomas” makes us glad the early church rejected it. “Simon Peter said to them, ‘Let Mary go away from us, for women are not worthy of life.’ Jesus said, ‘Lo, I shall lead her, so that I may make her a male, that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself a male will enter the kingdom of heaven’” (114).

Scholarship has shown that Jesus treated women far better than His first century contemporaries...and far better than many do in our day.

February 16

I composed this “Minute” while sitting in a meeting. Most of you know how to pull this off, how to be in a meeting but have your mind on other things. You get yourself a seat in the back, get your papers out and get to your work, but every now and then do something to give the impression you're engaged in the meeting. Most of us are experienced at multi-tasking. We've all done the religious version during boring Sunday sermons, looking engaged but planning out the week, paying the bills, and the like.

Just a second...

OK, I'm back. The speaker was looking right at me and I had to look back, had to look like I'm really into it.

Multi-tasking is a way to get a lot of work done but it's addictive and not always good. I find that it makes it hard to keep my mind focused during prayer. Prayer is like a meeting. “Our Father who art in heaven,” you say and the meeting is opened, you and your God, but the prayer goes on and your mind inevitably goes off to other things. When the meeting adjourns, “Amen,” you haven't accomplished the purpose of that meeting, an intimate, renewing time with your Father and your Savior. Whose loss?

He's looking your way!

February 17

The newspapers we read had it buried toward the back. The morning news show we watch only scrolled the story at the bottom of the screen.

Ex-priest Paul Shanley was sentenced to 12 to 15 years for child rape. Shanley, who is 74 years old, will be eligible for parole in 8 years, if he's not murdered. Another convicted pedophile priest, John Geoghan, was murdered in prison in 2003.

The terrible sexual abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church is no longer front page news, but that doesn't mean the wounds are gone, the hurts healed. I have interviewed abuse victims and read their autobiographies and, not having had that experience myself, I found the depth of their hurt incomprehensible.

Said one of Shanley's victims, I want him to die in prison, whether it's of natural causes or otherwise. "However he dies, I hope it's slow and painful." (AP, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, February 16; A6) I'm not endorsing that, just underscoring how deep the hurt is.

Who will you deal with today who carries that hurt, carries it silently and you don't know?

"Be kind and compassionate to one another" (Ephesians 4:32)

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."

The longer we live, the more we see our stature decline. The world that revolved around us in our heady days, keeps on going, going past us, leaving us to realize that we're simply one more person in the masses. As we decline, God's stature rises, or it should. "Thy will, not mine" Jesus said in Gethsemane . Even your good aspirations, your praise-worthy deeds, the things you've set your heart on... The good gifts of God are enemies of godliness if we misuse them to deny our status as beggars. "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 21

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 catalogues 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 suggest 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... Contentment with godliness just doesn’t seem to fit the spirit of modern America . Happy Presidents’ Day!

February 22

This is just too good! Sharing birthdays today are Senator Bill Frist, Republican majority leader, and Senator Edward Kennedy, the outspoken liberal Democrat. “ Providence ” is a name sometimes used for God, a name reminding us that God looks ahead, farther ahead than we can. Did God play a practical joke by causing these political opponents to share the same birthday?

Do we learn from the coincidences of life? Turn on TV and see former presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton urging Americans to get together behind tsunami relief efforts. “The odd couple,” Bush said, old political enemies now working together in the life and death cause of tsunami relief.

No, I don’t think these are practical jokes from God but moments of insight, if only we’ll pass the message to our brains. “All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall...but the word of our God stands forever” (Isaiah 40:6, 8).

Belated birthday greetings to Representatives John Shimkus, John Lewis, Charles Boustany, and to Senator Olympia Snowe who celebrated their birthdays yesterday. Both sides of the aisle!

Next time you're going to skewer someone, a politician, a boss, your enemy, remember Providence looks ahead and may well cast you and your mortal enemy together!

February 23

"I think it's stupid," I said to the stranger with me in the elevator. He agreed. The door had just closed, two others having exited. They'd been praising "The Gates," the latest controversial project of Christo. His gates hung with orange saffron stretch for 23 miles through Central Park. These days beauty seems to be only in the eye of the beholder.

If you want, you can also see "The Gates" from the top of the Metropolitan Museum of Art on 5th Avenue at 82nd Street ... or you can go into the museum and see the largest collection of art in the Western Hemisphere, real time-tested art, beauty to behold.

The Bible praises the gates of Solomon's temple as a way of praising God and His worship (Psalm 24; 118). Those gates preview the gates of heaven: "I saw the Holy City ... It had a great high wall with twelve gates... On no day will its gates ever be shut" (Revelation 21:2, 12, 25).

On Broadway at 61st, a new museum opens this May. "The Museum of Biblical Art represents a new model in American museology, one that emphasizes the original functions and meanings of objects growing out of the Christian and Jewish traditions."

By then Christo's gates will be long gone. Won't your entrance into the heavenly gates depend more upon Whom you behold than your Rorschach imagination?

P.S. For some interesting takes on "The Gates," go to [Respublica](#). For more on the Museum of Biblical Art, go to [the American Bible Society's biblical arts page](#).

February 24

Are you having financial problems?

John Marshall, a young lawyer destined to become chief justice of the Supreme Court, handled the finances of his friend James Monroe. Monroe would become the fifth president of the United States. All that, however, was in the unknown future when Marshall wrote to Monroe on February 24, 1784. "The exertions of the Treasurer and your other friends here have been ineffectual. There is not one shilling in the Treasury and the keeper of it could not borrow one on the faith of the government. The extreme inclemency of the season has rendered it impossible for the Sheriffs to make (tax) collections and I have my fears that you will not receive (your pay) till some time in April."

From shortage of money Marshall turns to the heart...

“This cold weather has operated like magic on our youth. They feel the necessity of artificial heat, and quite wearied with lying alone, are all treading the broad road to Matrimony.” (In Jean Edward Smith, John Marshall, p. 99)

Financial or other problems, why not turn to your heavenly Father’s love and the love of friends and family to warm your heart? “Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked.... The Lord upholds the righteous” (Psalm 37:16).

February 25

Did you bring your body with you today? Strange question, I know. Obviously you’ve got your head on. Did you bring your body with?

Rev. Mark Spitz passed away this week. I was privileged to work with Mark at Lutheran Hour Ministries. Mark was an expert on language, specifically the language we Christians use that doesn’t make sense to people who are outside the church. In our meetings Mark continually pushed us to communicate clearly to people who don’t know church jargon.

Mark loved motorcycles. When Lou Gehrig’s disease struck him, he had to park his bike and use a wheelchair. He didn’t sell his bike. He kept it as a symbol of hope, hope that ALS will be defeated.

The Bible talks about Jesus and believers in different ways, vine and branches, sheep and shepherd, and...back now to my opening line...as a body. Christ is the head and we are the members of His body. When you wake up in the morning, your head directs your body to follow its lead. Since Christ our head has risen from death, it won’t be long before He directs each of us His members to get up with Him, to awake to life in heaven. That’s why Mark kept his bike, a symbol of resurrection hope. Are you following your Head?

February 28

For the 25 years Diane and I have been living in Collinsville , we’ve been going to Kruta’s Bakery. Many years ago I asked the woman behind the counter for a couple bismarcks . She looked at me and asked, “You’re from Chicago , aren’t you?”

“How can you tell that?” I said.

She replied, “That’s what they call them in Chicago .”

“Well, what do you call them?” I asked, my view of the universe challenged.

“Jelly-filled donuts,” she answered.

“That’s not right,” I shot back. “A donut has a hole that you can put your finger through. This doesn’t. It’s a bismarck .”

She asked me a question and the result was that I learned something. Have you noticed that people ask, “How are you doing?” as they speed past you? If they really cared, they’d ask...and get into a conversation.

“What are you talking about?” Jesus asked the Emmaus disciples (Luke 24:17). They talked honestly with Him. The upshot was their spiritual growth. “The Lord is risen!” Who knows what you might learn if you slow down for conversation? Talk...talk over coffee...and a bismarck !