

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 they were a thousand miles away from the Hebrew prophets' scathing calls to repentance, 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 if the gods...or the God...is vengeful. Why punish yourself now with repentance if the gods...or the God...will punish you anyway for your sins? Eat, drink and be merry, Mardi Gras while you can!

But if the gods...or the true God...intends 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 true God (Luke 18:13). "Whoever comes to me I will never drive away," is the answer of God's Son (John 6:37). That's the welcome of February.

February 2

Let me suggest that you "close-caption" the Super Bowl commercials. Those commercials are well worth all the waiting for Sunday to come. They get you laughing, make you admire the creative wit that produced them, and subtly begin to seduce you. "I'd like to have that product. I really want that product!" So the "closed-captioning" I'm suggesting is this: "Thou shalt not covet" (Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21).

We materially blessed Americans could learn a lot from reading the book of Deuteronomy. The people of Israel were slaves in Egypt, enduring terribly hard work and meager material possessions. When they were delivered, God promised them that abundance was coming. "For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land... a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing" (Deuteronomy 8:6, 8). Their temptation would be to revert to slavery, not slavery to the Egyptians but to the desire to have ever more material things. So God finished the Ten Commandments with "Thou shalt not covet." Don't let desire for anything enslave you!

"Amidst our plenty something still...to me, to thee, to him is wanting! That cruel something unpossessed corrodes and leavens all the rest" (Charles Wesley). So watch the game and the commercials with this "closed-caption" on your spiritual screen, "Thou shalt not covet."

February 5

Sean Stevens is 28 and Peter Berdovsky is 27. These two are the... now what word should I use? These are the two whatevers who carried out the advertising stunt in Boston for Turner Broadcasting and the Cartoon Network, the stunt that made people think their city was under terrorist attack, the stunt that cost the city almost a million dollars, the stunt they laughed about when they were arraigned for disorderly conduct. What word should we use to describe them?

28 and 27 years old. Here on the campus of Concordia Seminary our first year class averages 27.1 years old. I do know many words to describe these young men. "Dedicated" comes immediately to mind. Walk around Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. and you see thousands of people of that age who work in government. The words "public servants" comes to mind. Think of the tens of thousands of young men and women serving and dying in Iraq and Afghanistan. Oh, there are words for Sean Stevens and Peter Berdovsky. Let's hope some words penetrate their hearts and turn them into contributing members of society.

These comparisons remind us that by and large our young people are great. They are gifts of God whom we should encourage in all that is good and right. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

February 6

Hi, Christian here. I feel bad. I hurt. Mommy and Daddy are tired out because I'm crying all the time. I keep them awake at night. They talk about me. Mommy says I have a fever. They talk about getting a tooth. What's a tooth? I don't know what's happening to me. All I know is I hurt.

Do you big people ever hurt? Do you ever cry because it hurts so bad? Do you wonder, why do I hurt so much? Nobody explains it. What's happening to me?

Opa and Oma are at my house. The old people came to visit. Opa said, "Christian, don't try to figure it out." Opa thinks some people try to find God in every little event of life. Opa says don't. God is always with us but Opa says we can't explain God's every way. Opa says, "Trust God and don't try to explain it."

I wonder. If God did tell me why I hurt, would it make a difference? Maybe some day I will know why I hurt now. Now I don't know why. It hurts. I know Daddy and Mommy love me. That helps. "I am Jesus' little lamb. Loves me every day the same."

February 7

I was struck by the famous people who were born these days. Aviator Charles Lindbergh was born February 4, 1902. On February 5, 1900 Adlai Stevenson was born. Baseball star Hank Aaron was born on the 5th in 1934 and legendary Babe Ruth was born the 6th in 1895. Also on February 6th: Ronald Reagan (1911) and on this date, the 7th, in 1812 author Charles Dickens.

What would it be like to start out in life with a fully developed and functioning mind? Take my little buddy Christian, for example. What if he knew at the start of his life

all that his parents or grandparents know? It might be scary, to start out in life and think about all that might lie ahead.

"The torment of their own beginnings," wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer. "Blessed are those whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord" (Psalm 119:1). So Bonhoeffer described those who see themselves in the line of God's age-old dealings with people and His desire for our good. "Happy are they, for they have been freed from the torment of their own beginnings." ("On Psalm 119; p. 109) Starting out in life or starting out on today's work: Don't let what is ahead torment you. The God of the ages is already in your future for good.

February 8

You're an intelligent person. You read; you follow the news; you think about things. So what do you make of the bizarre story of Lisa Nowak, the astronaut who drove 900 miles to kill another astronaut she considered a love rival? What do you learn from this weird story that can help you avoid doing something stupid?

A psychiatry professor, Nick Kanas, said about astronauts, "These people are extremely well-suited, by personality and training, to deal with the stresses of being in space. But that doesn't mean that they're not vulnerable to emotional problems, or problems in their relationships" (New York Times, February 7; A15). Like I said, you're intelligent but so is Ms. Nowak. When was the last time you took stock of your emotional vulnerabilities?

Historic Christianity has always encouraged set times to use your intelligence to guide your heart. Times of private meditation and Bible reading, hearing sermons that penetrate with some insight from the Bible, times of confession and absolution, times to talk openly with trusted fellow-Christians... these are God's gifts to call you back when you start down some stupid road.

A "Far Side" cartoon showed two animals talking. One had a bull's-eye on its chest. "Bummer of a birthmark," said the other. That's you; that's me, vulnerable because of our sin.

February 9

I'm sick and tired of cold weather and snow. There was a time when Diane and I fantasized about retiring up in Michigan, sitting in a toasty little house, looking out at glistening snow, reading our books with no pressure to get anything done. Sometime these last years we pitched that fantasy. We're tired of putting on layers of clothes, tired of slipping and sliding on sidewalks and streets, tired of being chilled to the bone, tired, tired, tired.

Some of my faculty colleagues were talking the other day about how we've become insulated from the world of nature. We have so many things to shield us from the realities of nature that we don't regularly ponder our creaturely status in the great creation of God. Heating and air-conditioning instead of nature's cold or heat, cars and trucks instead of being exposed in horse and wagon, instant communication instead of walking to talk to someone... On and on goes the list. It's quite easy to

miss the realities of nature, the reminders of the real world God made, not man made.

So thank God for the nuisance of cold and snow. Sinclair Lewis said, "Winter is not a season; it's an occupation" (in Washington Post, February 7; B3). Don't you southerners envy us up north?

February 12

Today is the birth date of Abraham Lincoln, born in 1809. On the 11th of February in 1861, the day before his 52nd birthday, president-elect Lincoln left his hometown of Springfield, Illinois, to travel by train to Washington to assume his new duties. After speaking of his "oppressive sadness" at parting, Lincoln spoke words that remain true today for us and for our nation.

"Today I leave you; I go to assume a task more difficult than that which devolved upon General Washington. Unless the great God who assisted him, shall be with me and aid me, I must fail. But if the same omniscient mind, and Almighty arm that directed and protected him, shall guide and support me, I shall not fail, I shall succeed. Let us all pray that the God of our fathers may not forsake us now. To him I commend you all – permit me to ask that with equal security and faith, you all will invoke His wisdom and guidance for me. With these few words I must leave you – for how long I know not. Friends, one and all, I must now bid you an affectionate farewell."

Our leaders today stand on the shoulders of giants, but they will fail and we will fall with them unless we pray for support from the Everlasting Arms.

February 13

Uncertainty: Whether at work, at home, in the hospital waiting room, or in any place your mind can fret, uncertainty is unwelcome. Whatever the specifics, uncertainty brings predictable dangers. Uncertainty can breed fear because we don't know all that's going on. Uncertainty can breed anger, which can lead to bitterness, a poison hard to remove. Uncertainty can lead us to break the commandment that says, "Thou shalt not bear false witness," because we're tempted to put the worst construction on what others do, instead of giving them the benefit of the doubt. Uncertainty is not only very unwelcome, it's potentially dangerous to life together.

External circumstances can't always be controlled but your response to external circumstances can be. In fact, when all is said and done, each of us is responsible for how we respond to things around us. The psalms are filled with stories of godly people caught in uncertainty who provide us with positive examples for our times of uncertainty. "Take it to the Lord in prayer." A friend told me that God answers prayer with only two possible answers: "Yes, I'll give you what you're praying for," or "I'll give you something you'll see in time is even better." "Why are you cast down, O my soul? Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him!" (Psalm 42:11)

February 14

About the conduct of children, my father-in-law used to say, "They don't learn it from strangers." This Valentine's Day the question is, "From whom do children and adults learn about love?"

Many are learning from the likes of Anna Nicole Smith and all the adulterous men who claim to be father of her baby. The fact that the big media lust after viewers has them giving excessive coverage to the story, which translates into viewers learning about "love" from tabloid like press. Not to speak ill of the dead, hers was a sorry life. Where'd she learn it?

In the Old Testament Hannah waited long for a child, but then gave up young Samuel to the Lord's service. Ruth said, "Whither thou goest I will go," leaving her own people to take care of her mother-in-law. The selflessness of love is seen in the Holy Family in the New Testament. Joseph willingly endured criticism because he knew that the Virgin Mary was chaste. For her part, Mary told the angel, "Let it be according to your word" because she had learned humble devotion to God. "Love seeks not its own" (1 Corinthians 13:4). Such biblical stories teach us what real love is. Are we Christians doing our part so that our family and friends don't learn it from strangers?

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, February 15, in 1820.

Today women not only vote but hold many high offices. Harvard just selected a woman president, meaning half of Ivy League schools are headed by women. And to refer to her own infamous quip, Mrs. Clinton isn't baking cookies. Still, many commercials present women in overtly sexual ways and many men still treat them as chattel. Scholarship has shown that Jesus treated women far better than His first century contemporaries. Do we? "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is His instruction to us (Matthew 7:12). A symbol of our slowness toward gender equality in the public sphere (not talking here about the controversial issue of women's ordination) may well be the slow acceptance of the Susan B. Anthony and now the Sacagawea dollar coins.

Lord Jesus Christ, although You are God, You became a servant by living among us and raising us to an eternal salvation. Help us treat all people according to Your Golden Rule. Amen.

February 16

Marty Schottenheimer was fired the other day as coach of the San Diego Chargers. Now if you're not a football fan, keep reading. This isn't about football; it is about getting what you don't deserve.

Schottenheimer is one of the five most winning coaches in NFL history. He's won 200 games and lost 126. Twice in the last three seasons he led the San Diego into

the playoffs. No Super Bowl yet, but he's acknowledged as an excellent coach and last year's record proves it, 14-2. Still, he got fired.

Life isn't always fair. When the Creator made us, he put into our being some basic instincts. One is this: Do right and you should be rewarded, or at least not punished. Do wrong and you can expect trouble. But life doesn't always turn out that way, witness Coach Schottenheimer. "Not fair," we cry and it's not. If that were the whole story, life would be a chancy proposition.

But it's not so chancy because God carries us with grace at all times, especially when you're hurt because the fairness formula has broken down in your life. "My grace is sufficient for thee; My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). So go to God when you've been unfairly treated. Grace is His winning play for you!

February 19

Yesterday was the anniversary of Martin Luther's death, February 18, 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 among 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 20

Hi! Christian here. I am worried. I am worried about me and Opa. He used to tell me how people liked it when I wrote the Minutes. Margie goes to his church in Collinsville . Margie told him, "Dale, Christian is a better writer than you are." Char talks on radio in Ft. Wayne . Char wrote to Opa and said, "Enough of the old man. We want Christian!" I always thought Opa was proud of me but I wonder if he is jealous.

Opa and Oma came to visit me. Opa was happy when he saw my baby Bible. It is from the American Bible Society. Opa loves the American Bible Society but he asked, "How come they did not include the story of Absalom?" I don't understand. Who was Absalom? What did he do? Why does Opa think my Bible should have the story of Absalom?

Do big people get jealous of other big people? Do big people who believe in Jesus get jealous of other big people who believe in Jesus? Opa should not be jealous. I just want to help do the Lord's work. "Jesus loves me. This I know, for the Bible tells me so." I wonder if this verse is in Opa's Bible: "The greatest among you should be like the youngest" (Luke 22:26).

February 21

Dr. James Voelz reminds us that we should not forget what it is like not to know. Ponder that. We easily forget what it is like not to know.

Today is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, which will culminate in Holy Week, observing the passion, death, and resurrection of the Son of God.

Huh? There we go again, assuming everyone knows what we're talking about. We forget what it is like not to know and by such forgetting we easily scare people off from eternal truths.

Samuel Moor Shoemaker wrote, "I Stand by the Door." "The door is the most important door in the world," he wrote. "It is the door through which men walk when they find God." Then he contrasts those who go so deeply into theology and church life that they forget those who are outside the door, who don't truly know God. "I stand by the door. I admire the people who go way in. But I wish they would not forget how it was before they got in. Then they would be able to help the people who have not yet even found the door."

So if the imposition of ashes on this first day of Lent is your habit, don't forget what it's like for people to look at your forehead and not know.

February 22

Is America ready to elect a Mormon, Mitt Romney, president? The answer is obvious to anyone who has studied the evolution of church-state issues in America : Yes, Americans will elect anyone they think can do this public job.

What Mormons believe should be of interest, not for an election but for anyone who takes the Bible seriously. Mormons do believe in Jesus Christ as Savior. What does that mean for them? "All men by the grace of God have the power to gain eternal life. This is called salvation by grace coupled with obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel.... Salvation in the kingdom of God is available because of the atoning blood of Christ. But it is received only on condition of faith, repentance, baptism, and enduring to the end by keeping the commandments of God" ("What Mormons Think of Jesus Christ" in Mather and Nichols, p. 195).

That doesn't fit very well with a bedrock Bible verse: "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

I've heard that Romney says he is not running to be "pastor-in-chief." If he were, his parishoners could use some clarification on what it really means to say Jesus is our Savior.

February 23

Britney, shaved head... Anna Nicole, circus... Obama-Clinton mudslinging...

Today something good comes to us in the media. The story of William Wilberforce's long campaign to end slavery in the British Empire opens today in theaters. William Wilberforce entered parliament in 1780 and seven years later he promoted the first anti-slavery bill. It was defeated but Wilberforce persisted...and persisted for a long time. It wasn't until March 25, 1807 that parliament passed a bill ending the slave trade. In 1833, one month after Wilberforce died, Britain set free all slaves in its Caribbean territories. Contrast those dates when Britain ended slavery peacefully, 1807 and 1833, with our later and bloody Civil War, 1861-1865. You wonder if the American political process could have avoided the bloodshed. Politics should have the highest of goals.

"Amazing Grace" is the title of this movie, taken from the familiar hymn written by John Newton. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." That was autobiographical; John Newton had been a slave trader who repented and encouraged Wilberforce through all the years of his persistent efforts.

Describing the film, Alan Riding wrote, "A 20-year-long battle begins, and only Wilberforce's Christian faith will keep him going" (New York Times; February 18; 18). That's a good moral. Imagine, something good from the media!

February 26

"I heard a story once of a husband and wife hopelessly lost in a cave," wrote Barbara Hurd in "The Yale Review." "After days had passed and they had given up hope of rescue, they began to confide in each other as they had never done. They revealed extramarital affairs, the disdain each felt for the other's naiveté.... On and on they went, unwrapping secrets, lifting layers off their life together.

"Of course, they were rescued. Hauled out of the labyrinth and returned to their kitchen, where they could no longer stand the sight of each other. Knowing more than they could bear, they divorced, went their separate ways."

Let Lent be your time in the cave with God. Tell Him all your secrets. When you come out, He won't divorce you. Nothing "will separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

Lord, bless my Lenten time with You. Amen.

February 27

"One and a half years later, hundreds of thousands of people are still facing a grim reality: New Orleans and the Gulf Coast are still in crisis," the Institute for Southern Studies reported yesterday. 110,000 families are either still living in temporary trailers or still receiving rental assistance from FEMA. One federally funded program administered by the state of Louisiana was intended to help people return and rebuild their homes. Although 107,000 people have applied, only 630 have received help. (From Cox News Service)

John Steinbeck wrote about the Joad's, one family among the hundreds of thousands of impoverished people who migrated to California in the dust bowl days of the 1930's. They too had hopes, and their hopes were too long delayed. "The hunger and fear bred anger. Then boys went out, not to beg, but to steal; and men went out weakly, to try to steal.... The women stood silently and watched." ("The Grapes of Wrath," Chapter 29)

Says the report, "Katrina may have fallen off the national radar, but the disaster never stopped." Steinbeck: "In the eyes of the people there is the failure; and in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage." (Chapter 25)

February 28

A scene in the movie "Talladega Nights" pokes fun at some popular American Christianity. NASCAR driver Ricky Bobby sits at the head of the dining room table in his huge new house and offers grace.

"Dear Lord baby Jesus.... We thank you so much for this bountiful harvest, Domino's and KFC and the always delicious Taco Bell. I just want to take time to say thank you for my family, my two beautiful, handsome striking sons, Walker and Texas Ranger, or TR as we call him, and my red-hot smoking wife, Carley.... Also want to thank you for my best friend and team-mate, Cal Naughton, Jr. who's got my back no matter what...."

Wife Carley interrupts to tell Rickey he should stop referring to baby Jesus because Jesus grew up. Everyone starts talking about what Jesus they most like to pray to. That's too much for Carley who says, "I want you to do this grace good so that God will let us win tomorrow."

Last Sunday many church-goers heard about Jesus' temptation by Satan (Luke 4:1-13). Jesus came to defeat the forces of evil but Satan tried to sidetrack Him. It was a deadly earnest mission Christ was on, about making us right with God, certainly not about enabling the American life-style. What Jesus do you pray to?