

February 2008

February 1

Do you expect glory without a struggle?

This is the great high festival of the Super Bowl, but it wasn't always such a glorious thing. John Bacon writes, "contrary to popular belief, the Super Bowl wasn't intended to showcase the sport's top teams-or to create an unofficial national holiday...It began as a way to stop the mutually destructive bidding wars between the NFL and the upstart American Football League for star players" (World Traveler," January 2004; p. 18).

Shift to spirituality: The Bible shows Jesus' unswerving commitment to struggle with a special set of problems, the things that thwart God's goodness dominating our lives, sin, death, and the devil. Jesus fought them all the way to the cross; He didn't flee from them. Peter was repulsed by the idea that Jesus should suffer, but Jesus said, "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Matthew 16:23). Peter came around. Jesus' resurrection victory did that.

There would be no Super Bowl if the two leagues hadn't faced their problems. There'll be no crown of glory if we don't face the fight against sin and Satan.

February 4

Congratulations to the New York Giants! Super Bowl glory didn't just fall into their laps; they worked toward it.

Did Isaac Newton discover gravity out of the clear blue when an apple fell on his head? Scott Berkun, author of "The Myths of Innovation" would say "No." "The most useful way to think of epiphany is as an occasional bonus of working on tough problems. To focus on the magic moments is to miss the point. The goal isn't the magic moment; it's the end result of a useful innovation." (Janet Rae-Dupree in the New York Times, February 3; Business 4).

Yesterday many churches observed Transfiguration, a transition from Epiphany to Lent. The strange story is told in Matthew 17. Jesus displayed His heavenly glory; so Peter naturally wanted to settle in forever with that magical moment but no. Jesus led Peter down from the glory and to the work of suffering that led to His crucifixion and to their persecution because they followed Him.

Newton and the apple tree is a myth and heavenly glory won't drop into our laps without our work. That's the work of repentance, of sorrow over sin and dependence upon God for His love and forgiveness. That justice of God toward us is what you and I take to others in the inglorious tasks of today's work.

February 5

Jeremiah 29:11 has become popular in recent years. "I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and

a future.” I don’t remember hearing that in my early years but people have glommed onto it. “Isn’t that great, God wants to prosper me, to give me hope and a future!”

Minor point, actually a major point: The passage is not directed to individuals but it’s to God’s people as a whole. And it wasn’t for believers in comfy, inherited surroundings. It was directed to people exiled to a hostile environment, to a society that didn’t share their faith values. “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city into which I have carried you into exile.” (v. 7)

Tonight we’ll watch Super Tuesday returns on TV. It’ll be a nice spectator sport, and I’ll be on the couch watching with you. Jeremiah 29 really asks: Are you all involved in your community? Rotary, Lions, American Legion, Meals-on-Wheels, city government, political campaigns, are YOU involved? Are you contributing beyond whatever you do in your church?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “Jesus cares for those who suffer for a just cause even if it is not exactly for the confession of His name.” (“Ethics,” 346-347)

February 6

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 on the bus from hell.

“You were sent there because you were 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 cruel 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 7

A prayer I heard in church prompted me to check out passages about "weakness" in the Bible. "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41). "God has chosen the weak things of the world" (1 Corinthians 1:27). "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). "We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). "If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness" (2 Corinthians 11:30).

There's nothing unusual when you and I don't feel up to some task, especially holy living. This is what being a "sinner" is all about. Instead of denying our weakness admit it to Him and others and seek help from God and others.

This was the prayer that set me searching: "Almighty God, because You know that we are set among so many and great dangers that by reason of the weakness of our fallen nature we cannot always stand upright, grant us Your strength and protection to support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen".

"Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble" (Hebrews 12:12).

February 8

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 it 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 dialog.

February 11

Is it a crime to covet something your neighbor has? It's no crime but it is a sin. Again, if you hate someone but don't act on it, it's a sin but not a crime. Sincere followers of Jesus confess our sins and try to control our sinful impulses so we don't harm others, but if someone commits a crime against you, is that your sin?

The St. Louis area is in deep grief because a gunman stormed into the Kirkwood City Hall and killed six people. The next night hundreds of people gathered for a vigil of prayer and Bible reading led by Kirkwood clergy. Some clergy read passages and spoke about our need to repent. That made me angry. What they said was true but it's not the question. I know I have a sinful heart that constantly needs to repent. What does the word of God say when someone else's sin leads to terrible crimes that destroy lives?

James Catford, President of the British and Foreign Bible Society, described an earlier time in his life. "It wasn't that I didn't believe the Bible but it was describing a life I wasn't experiencing." If clergy don't tend the hurts and sorrows that repentant sinners experience, is it any wonder people are walking away from churches?

February 12

Last night the Westminster Kennel Club opened its 132nd annual dog show. I felt compelled to watch. You see, my dad grew up on the farm and had his fill of animals, so we couldn't have any pet bigger than a goldfish or turtle. But I fell in love with a dog lover and it's always been three of us, Dale, Diane and a dog.

She's out of town right now; so I have doggy duty. "Be sure to give Speaker a walk at 7:00 am. Be sure to feed him at 2:30, feeding him his special diet for his sensitive tummy. When he's done, be sure to hustle him outside to do his business. In the evening try to wake him up and get him out one last time. And Dale," she says, "Don't forget! I'll keep calling you every few hours to make sure the dog is being taken care of." She will. I know from experience.

Metropolitan Terasios of the Greek Orthodox diocese of Buenos Aires says, "I've always wanted to take the young children to the zoo." It's his way to show children the wonderful creations of God. That's the right perspective for my week of doggy duty. Speaker is a sermon to me from the Creator. "The righteous care for the needs of their animals." (Proverbs 12:10)

February 13

Ash Wednesday...one week ago today. Our grandson, 22-month-old Christian, was taken forward to have ashes put on his forehead, but the boy wasn't having any of it. What should have been ashes in the shape of a cross ended up as a smudge.

Something deep within religious people struggles against repentance. After all, we do the church thing many Sundays, if not every Sunday. We do live upright and moral lives. We take God seriously. But, God "saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of His own purpose and grace" (2 Timothy 1:9).

Ash Wednesday, one week ago, I sat in St. Thomas church on 5th Avenue in New York. When ashes were offered, a young woman in the pew ahead of me went forward. She

returned to the pew, took out her compact and looked at the ashes on her forehead. Was she checking her Ash Wednesday style?

Presenting a proper religious face to the world can be as sinful as not wanting to repent. "Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven." (Matthew 6:1)

A week later...Are you still repenting without any external sign?

February 14

The "Letter of Aristeas," perhaps from the first or second century before Christ, says, "All activity takes place by means of the hands." Two thousand years later that's still largely true, though voice activated commands are now becoming common. On this Valentine's Day, think of the activities that love shows by means of the hands.

A doctor places a new born baby into the hands of mother and father. The hands of the parents will be in almost constant motion for years to come, from changing diapers to writing checks.

The child grows, and if so blessed, stands before the altar to exchange marriage vows. Hands are joined and they are pronounced husband and wife.

Hands do work around the house. They run the vacuum, they clean out the gutters, they warm up the car in the cold, they fix the closet door, they build a shelf... because love is about doing for others.

Hands care for an older person. They open doors, they run errands, they deliver meals on wheels... because our understanding of love gets deeper as we live through more and more Valentine Days.

And when bury our sobbing face in our hands because we have lost a loved one, we know how blessed we are to have been given God's gift of love.

February 15

One of the greatest horrors of World War II was the bombing of Dresden on February 13-14, 1945 . The devastating attack did not take down Dresden 's magnificent Frauenkirche, the Church of Our Lady , not immediately.

That church began as a small chapel around the year 1000. From 1726 to 1743 a new building was erected for the congregation, which had become Lutheran in 1539. That was a tall building, able to seat 3000 on the main floor and in several balconies. It was built of sandstone, which is able to withstand temperatures of 600 degrees Celsius but temperatures from the firebombing reach 1700 degrees. The weakened sandstone collapsed on this date, February 15, 19 45 .

"The devil led Jesus to Jerusalem and had Him stand on the highest point of the temple" (Luke 4:9). There Jesus was tempted. Magnificent places of worship can be places of

temptation, and we succumb whenever our affection is more on the dear building than Christ, who is to be the foundation of every church.

Built on the Rock, the Church shall stand Even when steeples are falling.

Crumbled have spires in every land Bells still are chiming and calling,

Calling the young and old to rest, But above all the souls distressed,

Longing for rest everlasting. (Nikolai Grundtvig, 18th century)

The Frauenkirche has been rebuilt.

February 18

Saturday, February 16th, was an anniversary I assume no one in the world celebrated.

The 4th century church historian Eusebius tells about a Christian teacher named Pamphilus who was on trial before the Roman governor of Palestine, a pagan named Firmilianus. It was February 16, 310 and Christianity was illegal. That didn't stop Pamphilus from talking about his faith. According to Eusebius, Pamphilus told the governor, "Jerusalem was his fatherland, meaning, indeed that Jerusalem of which it was said by Paul: 'But the Jerusalem that is above is free, which is our mother,' and 'You have come to Mount Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.'" (Galatians 4:26; Hebrews 12:22)

At this time the city named "Jerusalem" was not generally known. Jerusalem had been destroyed in 70 A.D. and was replaced with a little, no-account town the Romans called "Aelia." Hearing about this "Jerusalem," Eusebius wrote, "The judge was puzzled and shook with impatience, thinking that the Christians had certainly established a city somewhere at enmity and hostile to the Romans; and he was much occupied in discovering it, and enquiring into the said country in the East." (Martin Goodman, "Rome and Jerusalem," p. 534)

Pamphilus witnessed with words that didn't communicate. Do we church people do the same?

February 19

Hi, Christian here! Sunday my Daddy took me to a big building. It was sooo big! We walked down long halls. We saw many rooms. Every room had beds. We went into one room and I saw my Mommy! Happy me! Whatever this big building was, it was good for Mommy. She was slim again.

Mommy and Daddy introduced me to something called "Connor." Connor is a mini-me. 7 pounds, 11 ounces, whatever pounds and ounces are. 20 inches long, whatever that means. I held Connor. That was nice. When Daddy and I left this big building, Mommy came with us...and so did this Connor! You mean we're taking that home with us? Mommy and Daddy said, "Baby brother, Christian."

I'd like to talk to Opa about this. He probably has Bible passages.

"God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply'" (Genesis 1:28). "Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from Him" (Psalm 127:3). "May Your deeds be shown to Your servants, Your splendor to their children" (Psalm 90:16). "May the Lord bless you from Zion all the days of your life...and may you live to see your children's children" (Psalm 128:6).

Welcome, Connor!

February 20

People debate about the virtues of spontaneous prayers versus written, formal prayers. Each kind has its place; the more revealing question is, how intense are you whenever you pray?

Shootings, most recently at Northern Illinois University . A New York therapist butchered. Drag-racing deaths in Maryland . Suicide bombers. An Ohio police officer kills his pregnant girlfriend. 143 million pounds of beef recalled. Closer to home, some personal problem probably weighing you down. God, why do these things keep happening?

His answers are clear. "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you" (Psalm 50:15). "I am with you," (Matthew 28:20) and so on. Our intense question is, You're saying this but I'm not seeing it.

Shortly after the Berlin Wall opened, I was in East Germany with the Director of the German Lutheran Hour. I was dumbfounded by the depressing society I was seeing for the first time. When I asked why the people stuck with such a depressing system, Dr. Neumann answered, "Blind faith." Those poor people's faith was misplaced, wrong. Are we different?

I believe so, but part of prayer is quoting God's promises to Him. Not defiantly but humbly, not waffling but trusting, always wanting to see more clearly. Intense, both formally and spontaneously.

February 21

It's common in art history, people gathered around the cross. Often the people gazing on the sufferings of Jesus are those we would expect to see. So the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. John were painted by Lucas Cranach the Elder in his 1503 "Crucifixion." Sometimes artists departed from a strict representation of the biblical account and included their own contemporaries before the cross. An example is "Adoration of the Trinity" by Albrecht Durer in 1511.

Our imagination paints pictures. Does your imagination place you at the cross? "Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree? Oh... Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble. Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

In "The Small Crucifixion" Mathias Gruenewald painted Mary and John standing at the cross but he painted Mary Magdalene kneeling before her Savior. "In three days time she will again kneel at his feet, but then it will be in a garden outside his tomb, and she will be radiant with joy." (Richard Abrams, "An Illustrated Life of Jesus," p. 118) Our Lenten devotions before the suffering Savior become most meaningful when we remember that His Easter victory over sin and death is going to be celebrated...and we'll be there!

February 22

We're getting clobbered with a dandy ice storm. Hopes of Spring dashed again. 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 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." (Washington Post, February 7; B3) Don't you southerners envy us up north?

February 25

We don't like being identified by numbers. "Take a number" is necessary but we much prefer being known and called by name. Yesterday many liturgical churches observed "The Third Sunday in Lent" but it used to be known commonly as Oculi. That's the Latin word for "eyes" and it's taken from the Latin translation of Psalm 25:15, "My eyes are ever on the Lord." Archaic, "Oculi" is, but unlike "The Third Sunday in Lent," it drives home a point better than the bland number.

Mimi Swartz wrote in yesterday's "New York Times Magazine" about Christian comedienne Anita Renfroe. She's popular, in large part because she's honest. "Some of us are not trying to play it like we've got it all together and have risen above the fray. The celebration factor comes in when it dawns on you that you don't have to lug guilt and shame around your whole life" (p. 35a). Author Swartz contrasts that attitude with testimonials from other women, testimonials about how wonderful God had made their lives, more me-centered than, as Ms. Renfroe, God-centered.

"My eyes are ever on the Lord." How God-centered will I be today? You? Or, you can skim over the me-challenging spiritual stuff by saying, "Yeah, I did the Third Sunday in Lent."

February 26

Some conservatives don't trust John McCain. Interesting political intrigue, but what about you and trust?

"Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us," (Romans 15:4). So let's take King David as an example. David was a trusting youth when he fought Goliath. David trusted King Saul's son Jonathon and vice versa but Saul didn't return their trust and even tried to kill David. Years later as the powerful king, David abused the trust of Bathsheba's husband Uriah and contrived his murder. Because of that abuse of trust, the rest of David's

reign was troubled. His parental trust in his son Absalom was betrayed to the point of civil war and great personal grief. Many more stories from David's life show that trust can be used and abused in many ways.

A repentant person isn't confident of always being trustworthy. "You can trust me" has to be proven over and over again. Your stewardship of trust is judged daily by others and most decisively by God. Repentance has two parts, and since the first part is to know we haven't always been trustworthy, the second is to know that our Judge is also our Savior. "Whom can I trust?" At the end of the day, it's less yourself and more David's descendant, Jesus.

February 27

The "Pew Forum on Religion and the Public Life" was in the news yesterday. Their new survey shows that 44% of Americans have changed their religious affiliations. The losers are the Roman Catholic Church and mainline Protestant groups. While a big gainer is non-denominational churches, up 3%, the biggest increase is people who are not affiliated with any church, up 9%. Most of them are not going atheist; they're just not going to church. Stephen Prothero commented on the data: "The trend is towards more personal religion, and evangelicals offer that. Those losing out are offering impersonal religion." (New York Times, February 26; A12)

For over 35 years I've stood in some pulpit most Sunday mornings looking out at church-goers. Here's what especially caught my attention: "Nearly one in five men (20%) say they have no formal religious affiliation, compared with roughly 13% of women." Hmmm... come to think of it, I have looked out at many women coming to church without their husbands.

1 Peter 3:1-2 says those wives shouldn't preach at their husbands but win them by exemplary Christian conduct. But what are we churches doing to encourage those wives in their lonely attendance at church? Maybe sensitivity about wives worshipping without their husbands is a good place to start. That would make our religious offerings more personal.

February 28

The verse jumped out at me. "There is a future for the peaceable" (Psalm 35:39). What a promise, peace is coming! Interpersonal problems, inner turmoil about health and money, aggravations at work... Yes, give me peace.

Not so fast! Peace will come, the translation says, to the "peaceable." "Blessed are the peacemakers," Jesus says (Matthew 5:9). Peace passages are directives as much as promises. "Seek peace and pursue it," (Psalm 34:14). By the way, these aren't peace slogans for anti-war protesters. These passages are personal, laying on you and me the kind of lives we should be living right now. "God has called us to live in peace" (1 Corinthians 7:15).

Say "peace" and we might think of some earthly carefree living. No, this peace comes from above. Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives" (John 14:27). Christ's peace is the calm you have because you know God has saved you eternally. "Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness" (James 3:18).

So keep that salvation in mind as you slog through whatever this day brings. "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus," (Philippians 4:7).

February 29

This day is special, not just this day but every day. The news media will explain to us the scientific reasons why we've got this leap day, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah. The ultimate reason we've got this extra day is the same reason we have any days. The Creator has given each day to you and me. Leap day...every day.

"Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'" (James 4:13-15)

In historic baptismal services, the minister makes the sign of the cross over the head and heart of the baptized and says, "Receive the sign of the holy cross upon your forehead and upon your heart to mark you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified." How good to awake and know that the new day is a gift that will focus on us God's goodness for our eternal good. "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24).