

## February 2009

### February 2

Last Thursday my seminary class read 1 Peter 4:3-4. "You have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do – living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living."

I suggested we turn one of our dormitories into a casino and brothel. "We don't do things like that," they said. "That's not becoming our faith in the Savior."

Next I asked them to page back to 1 Peter 2:1. "Rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind." Why do you think Peter put that list early in his letter and left the sordid stuff, the sins they had given up, until later?

After a few attempts, the professor gave the answer. Yes, God forgives us for Christ's sake but sin still looks for ways to show itself in our lives. Since we are, or should be done with sordid sins, a very available and respectable place for sin is on our lips. "Deceit, hypocrisy, envy, slander." The problem in Christian communities isn't bawdy houses but poisonous tongues.

"Upon your lips, then, lay your hands and trust His guiding love;

Then like a rock your peace shall stand here and in heaven above."

### February 3

Long ago, 1776 in Germany to be exact, a hymn was written that the 19<sup>th</sup> century poet Catharine Winkworth translated into English.

"All depends on our possessing God's abundant grace and blessing, though all earthly wealth depart." Those are ageless words speaking to our recessionary age. "All depends on our possessing God's abundant grace and blessing, though all earthly wealth depart. They who trust with faith unshaken by their God are not forsaken and will keep a dauntless heart.

"He who to this day has fed me and to many joys has led me is and ever shall be mine. He who ever gently schools me, He who daily guides and rules me will remain my help divine."  
From two centuries ago, we're told, Put it in perspective. God has taken care of you throughout your lives.

The old hymn continues: "Many spend their lives in fretting over trifles and in getting things that have no solid ground. I shall strive to win a treasure that will bring me lasting pleasure and that now is seldom found." Voices from the past ask, What are you worrying about? Why are you thinking that God will abandon you now? Take the problems that come your way. Just remember, "All depends on our possessing God's abundant grace and blessing though all earthly wealth depart."

### February 4

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 5<sup>th</sup> in 1934 and legendary Babe Ruth was born the 6<sup>th</sup> in 1895. Also on February 6<sup>th</sup>: Ronald Reagan (1911) and on the the 7<sup>th</sup>, 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 who 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 5

What do you do when your emotions have been brought low, when you're not happy, not whole, and you feel scattered in your own debris field? A natural desire is to ask God to reconstitute your life, to put what has been shattered together in a new and better way. "All things work together for good" we intone. But whose good do we instinctively seek? Isn't it usually our own?

"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise." (Psalm 51:17)

A vital, breathing relationship with God cannot be focused on self. Jesus didn't say, "I'll follow you," but rather "Follow Me." He didn't teach us to pray for our will to be done but rather that His Father's will be done. "Seek the Lord while He may be found." (Isaiah 55:6)

Our national recession mirrors what we all go through when we lose something important. Offer the pieces to God, unconditionally, for Him to create you anew after His own heart. Get your will out of the way.

## February 6

A prayer in church last Sunday prompted me to check out "weakness" passages 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, depend on God's help, not our own weak capabilities.

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 9

Hypocrisy on Wall Street and in Washington? Anyone active in a church should read "UnChristian" by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons (Baker, 2007). "UnChristian" is based upon research of 19 to 29 year olds by The Barna Group. "Young outsiders have lost much of their respect for the Christian faith." (p. 24).

Why? For one reason, they see us as hypocrites. "They are skeptical of our morally superior attitudes. They say Christians pretend to be something unreal, conveying a polished attitude that is not accurate" (p. 29). Our hypocrisies are wide-ranging. 30-year-old Erin was abused by her husband, "even though he taught Bible studies about how husbands should love their wives." Jake, 32, said, "My former pastor used to teach baptism by immersion, then he got a better job with the Presbyterians and now teaches baptism can be done by sprinkling. What you believe depends on where the paycheck is coming from, I guess." (p. 42)

"UnChurched" quotes Philip Yancey: "Having spent time around 'sinners' and also around purported saints, I have a hunch why Jesus spent so much time with the former group: I think he preferred their company. The sinners were honest about themselves and had no pretense.... In contrast, the saints put on airs." (p. 60) Something for us religious people to think about.

## February 10

John Beecher recalls the Great Depression. "They were living...in stinking quarters and barracks, sometimes 13 people in a room. Every morning before dawn, they climbed onto trucks, bound for the bean fields. It would be dark night again when they got back to quarters. And all night long the gyp joints stayed open, where whiskey, dice and women ate up the earnings of the day. Instead of a church or a school, the grower would build a gyp joint at the center of his quarters. To get back at night what he paid out in the day." (Studs Terkel, "Hard Times," p. 280)

Leroy Barber works with kids in the city. "The drug kingpin knows their name, and the pastor does not. The teachers at school don't think they can learn, but they conquer the 'street classes' just fine. The street culture always pursues and welcomes them, but the doors of the church are open only on Sunday. The church wants them neat and clean, but the streets take them as they are." ("Unchristian," p. 63-64)

"The people began to mutter, 'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.'" (Luke 19:7) Why would anyone bother with a church if it doesn't show its neighborhood the searching love of Christ? Talk about a gyp joint!

## February 11

"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. (Sat on Wall Street that is.) "Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the King's horses and all the political men, couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again."

Do you feel like old Humpty? Many are wobbling because of finances. Some people feel like Humpty on getting a serious medical diagnosis. Personal relationships can put people on the edge, ready to shatter into a million pieces. In one way or another we're all Humpty Dumpties and it's a long wall. Look to the left or look to the right and there are a lot of other people teetering with us. Every once in a while someone falls off, and sometimes it happens to the sincerest of Christian people.

"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1). Have you already fallen? Despite all the broken pieces, trust the promise: "In all things God works for the good of those who love Him. Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:28,39). One thing we Humpties need to do. Meditate upon God's promises. "When I said, 'My foot is slipping,' Your unfailing love, Lord, supported me. When anxiety was great with me, your consolation brought me joy" (Psalm 94:18-19).

## February 12

Abraham Lincoln was born in Harding County, Kentucky, 200 years ago today. I'm no Lincoln scholar but best I can tell he was a "still waters run deep" person. And deep down in his still waters ran the Bible.

James Humes passes along this story. "At a White House reception where the guests were ushered past the President and not allowed to come too close, an old man, disappointed at not having shaken hands with the President, waved his hat and called out, 'Mr. President, I'm from up in New York State where we believe that God Almighty and Abraham Lincoln are going to save our country.'" Hearing that remark, Lincoln smiled and nodded. 'My friend,' he said, 'you're half right.'" (p. 130)

Here's a second story from Humes' book, "The Wit and Wisdom of Abraham Lincoln." "During the Civil War, a delegation of Methodist clergymen called on the White House. The spokesman of the group intoned, 'Mr. President, our cause will prevail, because the Lord is on our side.' 'Gentlemen, the question we should always ask ourselves is: 'Are we on His side?'" (p. 155)

In our day we go to the Christian book store and pick up sound-byte books to get us through life. Lincoln would probably offer a wry smile. How deep do your waters run?

## February 13

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. For 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 16

Hi! My name is Connor. I am Christian's brother. I had a birthday party Saturday. I am one-year-old. It was quite a year. I got born. I met my family. I crawled. Now I walk and run. You big people say it was quite a year for you too. What's an election and what's a president? What's a war? Is it like when I smack my brother? You big people talk about a 'recession.' I hope you understand it because I have no idea what a 'recession' is. I watch and I listen.

I hear you big people whisper about us babies and toddlers. You say, "Oh, such a hard world you are born into." Huh? Think it through, big people. That's what you see from your old, tired perspective. It's all new to me and my toddler friends. We're new faces to face new problems. Please, big people, don't discourage us!

I still don't know how Opa and Oma fit into the picture. Opa quotes the Bible. "People are like the new grass of the morning: In the morning it springs up new but by evening it is dry and withered." (Psalm 90:5-6) We toddlers are new and eager to grow. What about you?

## February 17

One way I clear my head of the pressures of campus life is by taking walks and one favorite route is through the campus of Washington University. I always pick up their student newspaper but last Friday could hardly find a copy. Here's why. "Tomorrow is Valentine's Day," page one said, "and you know what that means." I was sorry to find out. It means, the paper said, "the sex issue." Sure enough, a whole section was devoted to "student love." Not talking Platonic here. Let me just say if your son or daughter reports spending a lot of time in the library it might not be for reading.

The book "UnChristian" reports a deeper and more widespread disrespect for the church than in previous generations. Here's another shocker. Of church goers ages 23 to 41, almost 60% say cohabitation is OK, 57% say sexual fantasies about someone are morally acceptable, and sex outside of marriage is not immoral to 44%. Practicing Christians over age 42 disapprove those conducts in large numbers. "UnChristian" author David Kinnaman

wrote, "young people in our churches are showing major cracks in their moral perspectives." (p. 52-53)

And I walked back to the Seminary campus wondering if we're really preparing our future pastors for the churches they will serve.

## February 18

"Your heavenly Father knows what you need." (Matthew 6:32)

What do you need today? Something better at work? Something better in a relationship? Something better in your finances? It's not really a thing, something outside yourself, you need. You are the object of need. You need someone to know you for who you are, the good and the bad, and someone who will still say I'm with you unconditionally. Externals are a distraction.

"Your heavenly Father knows what you need."

I had a stress test yesterday. Got on the tread mill and all that. Haven't heard the official report but it seems to have gone OK. I saw the images of my heart. There it was, doing its God given thing, beating. Those heart images were a new look for me but something God has seen for all my years...and for all your years. "O Lord, You have examined me, and you know me. You are all around me – in front of me and in back of me. You alone created my inner being. You knitted me together inside my mother." (from Psalm 139)

"Why spend the day in blank despair, In restless thought the night? On your Creator cast your care; He makes your burdens light." (Paul Gerhardt)

"Your heavenly Father knows what you need."

## February 19

no minute

## February 20

No minute

## February 23

Circumstances change and sometimes force unwelcome change upon us. One of the great transition stories in the Bible is the "Transfiguration" and it was the focus for many Christian churches yesterday. Jesus took Peter, James and John up to a mountain and "was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white.... And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus."

That was better than an easy chair before a big screen TV, surrounded by loving family, enjoying health and money in the bank. Better because that was heavenly viewing, surround sound included. God spoke from a cloud, "This is My Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!" No wonder "Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here.'" But transitions

come and often God causes them. "Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus." (Mark 9:2-9) Moses and Elijah disappeared, Jesus went back to normal and said, my words, "Boys, we're going to the cross. That's why I came. It must be. Good bye, great room! No cross, no glory."

Only God sees the end of our transitions, but see them He does. What we should see is only Jesus. "Change and decay in all around I see. O Thou, who changest not, abide with me!"

## February 24

Traditionally today is the last fling before Lent. Many religious will join the parties tonight but tomorrow they'll give up something for Lent, something important.

"If I give up clams, which I hate, I'm not really doing anything," says Kevin Shine, a 39-year-old electrical contractor from Philadelphia. But abstain from posting 'status updates' on his every move? 'That's a worthy struggle,' he explains, noting that he logs on as much as 20 times a day. 'That's pathological.'" Whitley Leiss did a Facebook Fast last year. "When Lent ended, she logged on to find dozens of messages waiting and strangely little desire to answer them. 'I saw all that I had missed and I realized I hadn't missed anything.'" Lisandrea Wentland hopes "putting her renunciation of Facebook in the spiritual context of Lent will help. She plans to use some of the time she would have spent online in prayerful reflection." Thanks to Stephanie Simon for those quotations in Friday's Wall Street Journal (February 20; A13).

Lenten fasting recalls Jesus' 40 days of fasting in the desert, tempted by the devil and communing with His Father. Jesus must have been in a Wi-Fi hot zone, right? "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it." (Isaiah 30:15)

## 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?

Several years ago, 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

What do you do when you have had your heart set on something...and you don't get it?  
How do you react when you've worked hard and long for something...and you don't get it?

"Hope deferred makes the heart sick." (Proverbs 13:12)

Here on the campus of Concordia Seminary we have millions of dollars of deferred maintenance. That doesn't bode well for the future of an institution and hop too long deferred is dangerous to your physical and emotional well-being and to your relationships.

When you're not abiding in hope, you're in a perilous place. The broken heart can do many things in those times. It may cry, argue with itself, perhaps live in denial, perhaps enjoy the plunge into despair. In the Bible the opposite of hope is despair. When your earthly hope is deferred too long or denied, you are forced to reorder how you understand your life.

The psalmist knew hope deferred. He struggled to work out of his pity party by reordering his thoughts toward God. "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God." (Psalm 42:11)

"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5)

## February 27

Need encouragement? Jay Sramek was sitting in church, listening to the choir. "I heard her voice, and I felt like it was God talking to me. Right then I said, I'm going to make this happen." Sramek, track coach at Royal High School in Simi Valley, California, let Alyssa Rossi join the team. Alyssa is blind.

Thanks to Bill Plaschke of The Los Angeles Times for this story. Alyssa Rossi runs 800 and 1,600 meters. She wears a belt that is attached by a cord to a second belt worn by a teammate. The tugs and pulls that Alyssa feels on her belt along with verbal directions from her running mate enable Alyssa to make her way around the track. "It's really an awesome thing," Alyssa says about her teammates, "because it must be really hard for them. In fact, I bet it's just as hard for them as it is for me. I've always been blind, but I know they've never had to do something like this." (February 22; D1, 11)

It's a story that lends itself to spiritual application. "May our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who loved us and by His grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word." (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17)