

March 2009

March 2

"Lord God," begins a helpful prayer, "You have called Your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending."

Yesterday many Christians heard how Abraham responded to God's command to sacrifice his only son Isaac. "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering." An awful and captivating story, Abraham sets out on a venture to which he could foresee no good ending. When Isaac innocently asked, "My father, where's the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." God did provide. Abraham's arm raised to sacrifice his son, God intervened and provided a ram to take the place of Isaac. (Genesis 22:2, 8)

Lent reminds us God poured out "the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:19). "He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32). If God sacrificed His own Son for our sake, we can trust that He will guide us in "ventures of which we cannot see the ending."

What's the uncertain path before you? "God will provide."

March 3

Take a walk in my town and you'll see cracks in buildings, cracks that have been patched but are still plain to see. Most of Collinsville sits above abandoned coal mines. I once saw a modern ranch home that had sunk overnight about six feet. On this date in 1947 a coal mine disaster in Centralia, Illinois took 111 lives. No matter how our fortunes may be sinking, we still have God's gift of life, difficult as it is.

Many people have been deceived by a wishy-washy, pamper me sort of religion that leaves us unprepared to cope with the harsh realities of life, physical and spiritual. Jesus didn't teach us to pray, "Spare us from evil" but when we're in it we pray, "Deliver us from evil." When you get a sinking feeling, don't be surprised, like a child discovering adult realities. Tend to the cracks with prayer and Bible reading...and don't go far into any day without remembering, as one hymn begins, "I walk in danger all the way." And remember...

"I walk with Jesus all the way; His guidance never fails me;

Within His wounds I find a stay when Satan's power assails me;

And by His footsteps led, my path I safely tread.

No evil leads my soul astray; I walk with Jesus all the way."

March 4

Before the twentieth amendment to the Constitution, the new president was inaugurated in March, not January. On this date, March 4, 1864 Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated.

Some people get all excited when the current president reflects his Christian faith. Listen to this from Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address:

"The Almighty has His own purposes. If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but...He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue...so still it must be said, 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'"

True, the White House is not a pulpit for preaching a religious faith but it's also true that traditional faith has long been part of the public discourse in the United States .

Give us, O God, leaders who are mindful of theological truths as they impartially serve all the people of our country.

March 5

Most of us have been on the receiving end of an official home visitation, like a visit from an adoption official. That's the kind of visit we had from Bob.

The appointment was set for Thursday, January 28 at 1:30. Bob was right on time. We opened the door and Bob marched right past us and into the living room. Looking out the window toward the back yard he said gruffly, "Where's the fenced-in play area?" Gruff, but we learned that Bob's got a huge heart and was taking this seriously. While we were stammering about no fenced-in play area, Bob walked through the rest of the house. Diane and I said, "We haven't had a home visit like this since our kids were in grade school." At that, Bob turned on us. "What were you doing wrong that caused the school to make a home visit?" "Nothing," we said. "Our kids went to a Lutheran school and the teachers always made home visits." "I've never heard of such a thing." "Well, they did. Every year. Standard operating procedure."

Many schools, parochial and public, put care into action. This is national Lutheran Schools Week and God bless them for caring about their children and their homes.

The adoption went through. We now have an 83 pound Golden Retriever named "[Ferdie](#)."

March 6

God has put you in His world to serve Him. Are you grabbing onto that task with both hands?

Dred Scott was born a slave in Virginia sometime around 1800. He eventually came into the possession of an army doctor who lived in the slave state of Missouri. When the army reassigned Dr. John Emerson to the free state of Illinois and then to the free territory of Wisconsin, Dred Scott went with. Dr. Emerson died and Dred and his wife Harriet passed

into the possession of Emerson's widow. They moved back to Missouri where Dred Scott sued for his freedom, appealing to a Missouri law that said, "Once free, forever free." Years of litigation followed until the Supreme Court announced its decision on this date in 1857. Chief Justice Roger Taney wrote, "The negro has no rights which the white man is bound to respect."

God rules the world through the Gospel message proclaimed by the Church but God also rules through the laws and power of government. The government has been called the "kingdom of the left hand" and the church "the kingdom of the right." Have you limited your understanding of God's rule only to the Church? Do you see yourself as God's person for good in both kingdoms? Are you active with both hands?

March 9

Concordia Seminary is on the quarter system, and today happens to be the first day of classes for the spring quarter. So today at 10:30 I'll meet my new class of students who will take their second required course in preaching. One of the rules I always lay down for my students on the first day goes like this: If you talk about or even hint about mission or evangelism in any sermon in this class, you will get an F for that sermon. You might imagine the reaction I always get. Stunned faces. After all, they know that the Bible says, "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creation" (Mark 16:15). If someone asks for an explanation, I say, "Not now; later."

As we progress through the ten weeks of the quarter, I explain my rule to them. It's not that I'm against mission or evangelism; quite the contrary, I have a heart for it. I want you future pastors to make Jesus look so good that your hearers will say, I need Him in my life and I know someone who needs Him.

Unemployment at 8%. A shooting in a church not far from our home. People don't need evangelism guilt trips laid on them. They need Jesus.

March 10

It's popping up in the news and in conversation, in tough times people turn to religion. Jesus said that some people are "like seed sown among thorns, (who) hear the word, but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful." (Mark 4:18-19). People turning to religion and those of us practicing religion for many years are being tested to see how deeply rooted our trust in God really is.

"Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me." (Psalm 51:15) We gush about God when we get a quick answer but in this deepening and lengthening recession new and old religious people have doubts. "Has His unfailing love vanished forever? Has His promise failed for all time?" (Psalm 77:8) Are our understandable doubts challenging God...or us? "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)

"Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior" (Habakkuk 3:17-18)

March 11

Many pagan religions understand time to be cyclical, an ever recurring series of events. So these religions and their deities are intimately tied to the seasons, the birth of spring and the dying of fall and winter. The Bible reflects the cyclical nature of time. Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die," but Ecclesiastes teaches the vanity of confining your outlook to the here-and-now. Biblical Christianity is oriented toward the future, toward God's final judgment and the hope of heaven. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:1-4).

It's curious how we Americans are being led to think in terms of political cycles and economic cycles. It's worrisome that in pursuit of here-and-now healing, some sincere Christians argue for embryonic stem cell research without considering the possibility of future shame when they come before God. "God will bring into judgment both the righteous and the wicked" (Ecclesiastes 3:17).

March 12

Maybe it's because we had to memorize them in parochial grade school, but I appreciate old, classic hymns. They often express what I've been feeling but haven't quite known how to put into words. Filled with biblical allusions, the old classic hymns teach us how to think theologically, how to put various truths together in a unified spiritual outlook. And when the melody sticks in your head, those divine truths go down to your heart. Consider, for example, these verses by Paul Gerhard.

Why should cross and trial grieve me? Christ is near with His cheer. Never will He leave me. Who can rob me of the heaven that God's Son for me won when His life was given?

When life's troubles rise to meet me, though their weight may be great, they will not defeat me. God, my loving Savior, sends them; He who knows all my woes, knows how best to end them.

God gives me my days of gladness, and I will trust Him still when He sends me sadness. God is good; His love attends me day by day, come what may, guides me and defends me.

Paul Gerhard was born on this date, March 12, in 1607. His words reach through the centuries to help me, and I hope they help you today.

March 13

The stock market has had a good week, the indices going up about 10%. Are "happy days...here again?" Well, no. "There is nothing new here, every serious bear market has rallies like this," said James Melcher, president of Balestra Capital. But this week did give some hope. Ryan Larsen, an equity trader, said, "Whether this is the bottom or not, nobody's going to know for months to come. At least for the short term, we're seeing some very positive signs." (New York Times; March 13, A19)

In the comedy "Talledega Nights," Ricky Bobby says a table prayer...and it's pure satire on the American commercialization of faith: *Dear Lord baby Jesus... We thank you so much for this bountiful harvest, Domino's and KFC and the always delicious Taco Bell. We just thank you for all the races I've won, and the \$21.2 million...Whew! Loved that money that I have accrued over this past season also due to abiding endorsement contract that stipulates that I mention "PowerAid" at each grace. Thank you for all your power and your grace, dear baby God. Amen.*

Is our obsession with getting stuff over...or are we just waiting for the days to come back when we can feed our consumer addiction? A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.

March 16

Last Friday on MSNBC Peggy Noonan recalled the daily news cycle in the Reagan White House. First they had to respond to the "Today Show," then deal with newspaper and magazine reporters, and finally prepare the spin for the evening news. But now? It's a 24/7 blogosphere world that finds the White House in continual response mode. Ms. Noonan's asked, When can White House people work, when can they meet to discuss and ponder policy without the constant prying of the media? Walk away from "inquiring minds want to know" and you'll be accused of dastardly plotting.

G. K. Chesterton wrote in his classic book "Orthodoxy" about "a cynical man of the world, a skeptic, a diplomatist, a great practical politician." Here I would add today's media paparazzi. "Their incessant calculation of their own brains and other people's brains is a dangerous trade. A flippant person has asked why we say, 'As mad as a hatter.' A more flippant person might answer that a hatter is mad because he has to measure the human head." (p. 13)

So much that is broadcast to us is mad, insane. Are you a "Mad Hatter" seeking answers to everything? Or might you live more calmly with this greater truth: God is, and finally our questions must give way to trust in God?

March 17

The Wall Street Journal reported that J.P. Morgan Chase renovated its dining rooms last summer and named each room after a company it has absorbed. So on the 49th floor of the Park Avenue headquarters you can find the Chase Manhattan dining room, the Hanover Manufacturers room, the First Chicago room, but reporters Robin Sidel and Kate Kelly noticed there is no Bear Stearns room yet. There could be. A year ago today Bear Stearns was gobbled up by J.P. Morgan Chase. (March 14-15; B1)

I'm thinking about the life of institutions. I've often hear active Christians say it really doesn't make any difference if someone joins a church, just that they know Jesus. Today is St. Patrick's Day. According to tradition, Patrick baptized 120,000 and established 300 churches, aka institutions, institutions that became physical places for people of God's good in this world. On this anniversary of the collapse of Bear Stearns, I wonder if we Americans are so into disembodied spirituality that we don't care if our religious institutions live or die.

Imagine the corporate tour guide of the future. "And this dining room is named after churches of Jesus Christ. Sad," the tour guide says, "they had so much to offer but the people didn't give themselves to keeping the institutional church alive and vibrant."

March 18

I came across a Minute I wrote five years ago. "The other night I had trouble sleeping. That's happening with some regularity now...." Ha! Good thing I didn't know how regular it would become. Five years ago I diagnosed the problem. I said, "I get up and try to figure out why I can't sleep. Sometimes it's because of what I ate and drank. Sometimes it's for lack of exercise. Sometimes I've got things on my mind. Sometimes? Often. When I toss and turn at night, can't sleep, it's because my subconscious mind is tossing and turning."

Some of that is still true but here's something that has changed over five years. Back then I used those sleepless hours to wrestle with my thoughts. "I've got loose ends in my life," I wrote, "regrets, disappointments." While I still look at the ceiling and ponder problems, I find myself looking beyond to God and repeating to myself Bible promises He has made.

While I'd rather sleep the whole night through, I'm less bothered about being awake because I know it's a time to apply faith to my life.

"The Lord hears when I call to Him. Tremble and do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent. Offer the sacrifices of righteousness and trust in the Lord." (Psalm 4:3-5)

March 19

You've never been there, but that's no matter. Yesterday I had breakfast at Rosie's Café in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. While you haven't been to Rosie's, it's the kind of place you know. Formica tables, chrome chairs, and behind the counter and stools a display case with the day's slices of pie. It was my first time but the two Dons and Tom had been there before. If we didn't know what the truth was, we decided it. Bonuses to AIG big shots, a local man who lost millions but still is rich, good and bad politicians, and subsoilers. "Is that South Dakotan for chisel plows?" I asked. "Yup."

One Don told about the morning when someone was served a coffee cup with lipstick on it.

The customer complained. "What's the problem?" the waitress shot back. "It wouldn't bother you at night." The other Don told about a teacher who asked a class of little children to draw a picture of God. One little boy was deep in thought but drawing nothing on his paper. "What does God look like?" asked the teacher. The boy answered, "You are about to find out."

Churches have their place but you see a fuller picture of God at a place like Rosie's. I hope you have both places in your life.

March 20

"Isn't this Joseph's son?" people asked about Jesus (Luke 4:22) and the Bible answers, "No, Jesus was miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit." If your mind balks at that possibility, ask if your God is bound by the laws of nature. So, no, Joseph wasn't the physical father but the "Guardian" of God's Son.

Joseph modeled what fatherhood should be all about. First, he knew Jesus wasn't his child, and today we fathers need to remember that the children we beget are really God's children, entrusted to us to be raised in the ways of their true Father. Second, Joseph sacrificed for Mary and Jesus, taking them to Egypt to avoid murderous King Herod and

then to Galilee to avoid murderous Archelaus. How much time do modern fathers set aside to be with wife and children, quantity time, not just quality time? Third and most important, Joseph was a pious man whose greatest devotion was not to family but to God. Out of that devotion to God came exemplary fatherhood.

Yesterday was the day of "St. Joseph, Guardian of Jesus" in the calendar of the church. Fathers, let's not be a day late in our parenting. We fathers have an abundance of good works awaiting them!

March 23

How is it where you live? At home in southern Illinois I'm now waking up to hear the birds singing. I no longer have to bundle up to go out and get the newspapers. Forsythias and daffodils are in full bloom with the lilacs and tulips promising to open. Bare branches of trees are taking on a green hue, showing hints of what's to come. Lawnmowers are being readied. People are working in their yards. Exercise amateurs have come out of winter hibernation and are trying to walk off, joy off, or bicycle off the pounds of winter. Good luck!

Genesis chapter one tells how God created this wondrous world of nature that now is springing into bloom. Then Genesis 2:2 says, "On the seventh day God rested from all His work." What did God do on that day of rest? He enjoyed His creation. It was very good.

I hope you can take some time these days to enjoy His handiwork. If we did, we should!

All creatures that have breath and motion,
That throng the earth, the sea, and sky,
Now join me in my heart's devotion,
Help me to raise God's praises high.
My utmost powers can ne'er aright

Declare the wonders of His might!

March 24

This recession is not without some benefits, and one positive for me is that I'm praying much more for other people. "Intercessory prayer" they call it and it's urged on us by the Bible. "Pray for each other" (James 5:16). "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (Psalm 122:6). Jesus says, "Pray for those who mistreat you" (Luke 6:28). The prophet Samuel said, "Far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you" (1 Samuel 12:23).

In praying for others, you can learn much about your own relationship with God. When you are having a disagreement with someone, do you pray that they will come around to your way of thinking? When you pray for someone out of work and soon out of money, do you pray merely for a job and money? Are you praying according to your will or God's? Are

your intercessions bounded by your limited knowledge...or do you place the person into the unlimited care of God who can do "immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine"?

(Ephesians 3:20)

Oswald Chambers wrote, "Preaching the Gospel has a snare; intercessory prayer has none." (March 30) Done properly, intercession is the work of a heart tired of itself and aligned with God. No self-serving in it, only submission.

March 25

"Getting to know you, getting to know all about you" goes the old Broadway song. Diane and I are getting to know all about our new dog Ferdie, and he's getting to know us. Ferdie doesn't respond to reason but does respond to rewards and threats. He'll obey if he knows there's a dog yummy in it for him and when I raise my preacher's voice, he stops in his tracks.

In this morning's New York Times Hugo Dixon and Edward Haas write that many AIG executives have given back their huge bonuses because of public outrage and a 90% tax voted by the House. "You can't legislate morality, but moral behavior can sometimes ward off terrible legislation. The threat of punitive legislation...has surely affected their thinking."

(B2)

Threats to keep us on the straight and narrow are what theologians call the "Law." "The Lord commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the Lord our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive" (Deuteronomy 6:24). The opposite is Gospel, what God does to rescue us from our transgressions. Even a dog reacts to the workings of the Law. Are we getting to know God better by taking to heart His commands and consequences, even as we take comfort from His forgiveness?

March 26

"Thou shalt not steal," the commandment orders us (Exodus 20:15). Among other things, that means work earnestly for your employer and don't waste time...and your company's money.

If you accept that, think about your e-mail habits at work. Martin Westwell says, "I check my e-mail much less often." Mr. Westwell is certainly not one to live in the past. The 36-year-old is the deputy director of the Institute for the Future of the Mind, located at Oxford University, a think tank that has studied multitasking in younger and older people. You'd think that younger people would win hands-down at multitasking, but no. Says Mr. Westwell, "Older people think more slowly, but they have a faster fluid intelligence, so they are better able to block out interruptions and choose what to focus on" (New York Times, March 25; 25). So on the basis of those scientific studies, Mr. Westwell now spends less time answering e-mails.

If you're constantly checking your e-mails, taking most of them seriously, are you advancing the greater mission of your department and company...or are you majoring in minors? And if every thought that enters your mind gets e-mailed to your co-workers, are you distracting them from more important work? Recalling "Thou shalt not steal," are your e-mails an accessory to theft?

March 27

Years from now the people of Fargo, North Dakota, will not remember March of 2009 as the time of Lent. Our hearts go out to the people, not just in Fargo but in other flooded areas along the Red River and the Missouri. There's snow on the ground, the water is icy, and livelihoods are being lost. People will remember the flooding, not Lent.

Officials in Fargo decided to put up a second set of sandbag levees. If the first levees fail, it's hoped the second set will save the city, or most of the city. About a thousand homes sit between the two levees. One home owner complained, "What you're saying is that we're on the wrong side of the world." (New York Times; March 27; A14)

Do you ever feel that's where you are, stuck on "the wrong side of the world?" "Yes," we answer, although many of our poor-me moments are trivial compared to the people along the ravaging rivers. That's why we do keep Lent year after year. We watch Jesus, one of us, being destroyed by the brokenness and sin of this world. He put Himself dead in the middle of the wrong side of the world so that we might struggle on in the hope that comes from His Easter victory.

March 30

In the earlier years of our marriage, I was often working in the yard in the late afternoon when Diane would call out, "Time to eat." I heard her clearly but always kept working, planting a few more flowers, pulling a few more weeds, keep doing whatever. "I'll be there right away," meaning, "I'll come whenever it suits me."

Over the weekend I was thinking about Ephesians 4:1, "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." That's the calling to follow Christ. I've heard it said that the longest 18 inches in the world is the distance between the head and the heart. Our ears hear the call of Christ, our eyes see it when we read the Bible or devotional literature, and our brain gets it. Does it get down into our heart and life? Do the lessons of Sunday get carried into our lives this Monday?

Jesus says, "You did not choose Me but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit, fruit that will last" (John 15:16). We Christians are chosen, called, totally claimed by the Spirit of Christ to be united as His people in service to the workaday world. Diane calls; I now come immediately. Jesus calls and you? What do you do?

March 31

New York is the second largest Puerto Rican city in the world and the largest Jewish city. Chicago has more Polish residents than San Francisco has people. Los Angeles, wow! It has the largest Indonesian population outside of Indonesia, more Armenians, more Filipinos and more Japanese/Americans than any other cities in the world. And L.A. is the second largest Mexican city, Iranian city, Korean city, Guatemalan city and Salvadoran city in the world. Ethnicity makes up 78% of Los Angeles, 73% of New York and 61% of Chicago.

Thanks to Concordia Seminary's Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology for those facts. The question is, "so what?" If you went to church yesterday, did the faces in the crowd reflect the faces of America? When you read the Bible do you keep in mind that the epistles were all written to congregations of different and mixed cultures? Here's something else from our

EIIT: "On average, immigrants have not been invited into a Christians home during their first ten years in the U.S."

On this date in 1922 an architect named Charles Klauder was engaged to design a new campus for Concordia Seminary. Visit the campus or the web site and see the monumental Gothic buildings Klauder designed. I wonder if the people in our monumental Gothic churches are ready to welcome new people.