

March 2006

March 1

An older woman went to the funeral director. "I'd like to prearrange my funeral," she said. "We can do that," the director answered. "I'd like to be cremated," she said. "No problem," was the reply. "I'd like my ashes spread around the entrance of Wal-Mart." "OK," said the surprised funeral director. "But may I ask why?" "That way I know that my children will finally come to visit me."

Ash Wednesday begins Lent, the time we hear God plead with us to come to Him. We're easily deceived into thinking we really aren't all that bad. Oswald Chambers expresses the deception well: "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." (My Utmost for His Highest, November 28) It was for your sins that Jesus died.

So while you still have time in life, Lent is for you to return again to God. He'll welcome you and say, "I have made you, you are My servant; O Israel, I will not forget you. I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to Me, for I have redeemed you" (Isaiah 44:21-22).

March 2

Yesterday morning Diane and I got into a conversation after we saw a news report about Anna Nicole Smith. Ms. Smith, you may know, is the widow of J. Howard Marshall II, a Texas oilman whom she married when he was 89 and she was 26. Now she wants part of his \$1.6 billion estate.

"You may know," I said, because our conversation followed gender lines. Diane said she thought Anna Nicole Smith was some kind of singer. "No," I said, because we guys know the truth. "She was a Playmate of the Year and then became a stripper. She was "working" when she met the old guy. She's a gold digger."

If men think alike, women stand up for women. "What did he think about himself?" Diane asked. "Come on, he was 89 and thought he was attractive to a 26 year old? You never know what you're dealing with with men, especially rich ones."

I can't stand when she does that, when she shoots down my opinions. Yesterday being Ash Wednesday, it made me wonder how many other attitudes I have, how many attitudes you express, that won't bear up under scrutiny? "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). Lenten repentance sometimes starts by losing a conversation with your spouse!

March 3

"God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform." William Cowper's famous line isn't always the case. As Dr. Paul Irwin, president of the American Bible Society, recently remarked, "not all God's ways are mysterious."

The South Dakota legislature last week voted to ban all abortions, except when abortion is the only way to save the life of the mother. Governor Mike Rounds is expected to sign the bill. Down in Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour said that he would probably sign a similar bill now in the Mississippi House. In Missouri a bill has been introduced to make abortion a felony with a sentence of 5 to 15 years, except to prevent the death of the mother. And a proposed amendment to the Missouri constitution reads, "No person shall knowingly use or employ any instrument or procedure upon a pregnant woman with the specific intent of causing or abetting the termination of the life of an unborn child." (Associated Press, Belleville News-Democrat, March 2, S1) Since God's "Thou shalt not kill" provides for the safety of the pre-born, developments in these and other state houses are very encouraging.

Uncounted hours by pro-life volunteers, more and more people sensitized to the brutality of abortion... Nothing mysterious about it, but we do pray that God will continue to perform His wonders for life.

March 6

Yesterday was the 60th anniversary of one of the most significant speeches of the twentieth century. On March 5, 1946 Winston Churchill gave his famous "Iron Curtain" speech. "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia; all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject...to a very high and in some cases increasing measure of control from Moscow."

Churchill gave the speech at little Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. Today's students don't seem overly impressed. Said student Chris Campbell, "We've been doing this for 60 years and it's time to give it up." Administrator Pat Kirby "acknowledged that Churchill's connection may be more alluring to international students for whom the Cold War holds more meaning" than for American students (Kavita Kumar, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, March 3; A5).

Churchill said that day, "Our difficulties and dangers will not be removed by closing our eyes to them. They will not be removed by mere waiting to see what happens; nor will they be removed by a policy of appeasement." Are we teaching our children and grandchildren the relevancy of the past for the longed-for peace of the future?

March 7

March 8

March 9

Why it comes, I have no idea. I don't subscribe but Rolling Stone comes to my seminary office. In the March 9th issue, Janet Reitman writes about the Church of Scientology. "In June of last year, I set out to discover Scientology.... A closed faith that has often been hostile to journalistic inquiry, the church initially offered no help on this story; most of my research was done without its assistance.... Ultimately, however, the church decided to cooperate and gave me unprecedented access to its officials, social programs and key religious headquarters." (March 9, 2006; p. 56)

Such secrecy is the opposite of the Christian church. When Jesus was arrested, He pointed out that His teaching was public. "Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts" (Mark 14:49). Paul promoted faith in Christ in public, as in Athens where he preached in the marketplace (Acts 17:17). Today books like The DaVinci Code claim the early church was secretive but that's fiction. A few hundred yards from my office is the Concordia Seminary library with over 245,000 volumes, public writings about Christian theology and the church.

Which would you expect from a God who wants all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4), a secretive cult or a church, faults and all, open to the public?

March 10

How tight do you draw the circle?

The church fires in Alabama last month were set by three students. Two are students at Birmingham Southern College, a school of 1,500 students affiliated with the United Methodist Church. It wasn't terrorists or radical secularists who torched the church but people associated with Christianity. "This was a bit of a kick in the gut," said Keith Thompson, a college vice president. "Something like this is so contrary to what Birmingham Southern is all about" (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, March 10; A2). It is another demonstration of what Karl Barth wrote about the church long ago. "Here is an ancient and venerable institution...often and severely attacked from outside and still more often and more severely compromised from within." (Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* in "For All the Saints," ALPB IV, 423f.)

It's the kind of news that delights critics of the church but they're not drawing the circle tight enough. Can they present God perfect integrity? "How can a mortal be righteous before God? Though one wished to dispute with Him, he could not answer Him one time out of a thousand. His wisdom is profound, His power is vast. Who has resisted Him and come out unscathed? (Job 9:3-4)

How tight do you draw the circle? "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13).

And a P.S.: If you'd be interested in information about a tour to Germany July 29-August 12, please reply to this Minute. With us will be Dr. Uwe Siemon-Netto, a career journalist who has covered historic events in Germany the last 50 years. We'll also be visiting the newly rebuilt Frauenkirche in Dresden. This will not be a run-of-the-mill tour!

March 13

Students of Bracketology, now is the time! With 65 teams picked and slotted for the NCAA tournament, it's time to make your predictions about the future. Which teams will make the Final Four? The national champion? Bracketology has sports students peering into the future.

Earlier this year I hear someone introduced as a "futurist." His lecture filled the billing nicely, talking about the massive changes coming upon our technological and cultural lives. Asked what we should do for the future, he was honest and said he didn't know. Partly true: "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)

Students of theology, now is the time! Time to make one confident assertion about the future. "Lord, take my hand and lead me upon life's way; direct, protect, and feed me from day to day. Without Your grace and favor I go astray; so take my hand, O Savior, and lead the way." (Julie von Hausmann)

March 14

"What's in it for me?" is the guiding principle of the "Me generation." Think about it; that's a prescription for societal disintegration. Is it already happening?

Enter Esther. A beautiful Jewish woman, Esther was in the harem of the King of Persia. When a government official named Haman crafted a clever plot to exterminate the Jews in Persia, Esther could have played the "Me generation," trying to save her own skin. No. She presented herself uninvited before the King, something forbidden by Persian custom and punishable by death. Go in she does and Esther saved her people. Haman, who had plotted the genocide, was revealed and executed.

Today our Jewish friends celebrate Purim, remembering the courage of Esther and giving gifts to family, friends and to the poor. Says Rev. Kevin Parviz, pastor of a Jewish Christian congregation, "A joke is going around our Jewish congregation that says that many of the Jewish festivals could be summed up in three sentences: 'They tried to kill us. We won. Let's eat!' That is so true. We are persecuted, but Jesus is our Deliverer. This is cause for celebration."

What if God hadn't sent His truth into the world? What if Jesus hadn't lived by His words, "greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends?" (John 15:13)

March 15

Jesus said, "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15). Thank you, Lord, for that reminder, especially apt after last weekend. Somehow I suspect I wasn't the only one who spent last weekend working on income taxes. For me the task was worse because I had fallen behind, way, way behind, keeping up with my financial records. Over the last months piles proliferated around my desk at home. The Quakers sing, "'Tis a gift to be simple" and I believe it, but the weekend showed how poor my performance has been.

The day of rest commanded to Old Testament people says, "Six days you shall labor and do all your work" (Exodus 20:9). But what if all your work isn't done? No matter was the Old Testament judgment. Stop work anyway. It's a great paradox but true: Stop some work and put devotion and prayer into your daily life and you'll accomplish more. About those who put God first in their schedules: "The righteous will flourish" (Psalm 92:12). "You are worried and upset about many things," Jesus says, "but only one thing is needed" (Luke 10:41).

He also says, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth" (Matthew 6:19). After working on the taxes, I don't think I'll be guilty of that!

March 16

Francis Rossow is one of Concordia Seminary's memorable preachers. Years ago he talked about a coffee mug someone had given him. This was printed on the mug, "Expect a miracle." "You have to wonder," he mused, "about what's in that coffee."

Same way with ads for churches. "Church of miracles" is how one local church promotes itself. "Come in so we can pray for your miracle" promises another. "Celebratory music." "Transforming societies." You have to wonder about truth in advertising.

In The Divine Conspiracy (Harper San Francisco), Dallas Willard shows how instantaneous religious experiences have replaced the slow process of spiritual growth on the American scene. The slow process of spiritual growth has "been replaced by either some ritual at a point in time—baptism, confirmation—or a type of decision like Billy Graham's meetings." Patrick Kampert comments, "One of the problems with current contemporary Christianity is that every Sunday, churches are offering 'life-transforming experiences.'"

When the Bible teaches "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12), it's not denying instantaneous experiences. They happen. "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:9). The question is: Are you overlooking the miracle that has already come into your life? Are you savoring "the old, old story of Jesus and His love?" Are you finding that "good to the last drop?" (Quotations from the Chicago Tribune, January 29; Sec. 13)

March 17

That's not unlike Joseph in the Old Testament. He, too, was sold into slavery in a foreign land and he, too, did good to his brothers who had wronged him. "It was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you" (Genesis 45:5).

That's not unlike Jesus who came from His eternal home to our different place. "Being in very nature God, (He) made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.... Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8).

Enjoy the day, but remember that God's goodness is especially present in our toils and sufferings, not our parties, through serving and not being served, through the cross and not the glory. "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me and for the Gospel will save it" (Mark 9:34 -35).

St. Patrick's Day, party time! Here's the real story. Born in England in the 4th century, young Patrick was kidnapped by pirates and sold into slavery in Ireland. He escaped, studied theology, and returned to Ireland as a missionary. Tradition says Patrick established 300 churches and baptized 120,000.

Following Jesus, that's what St. Patrick did. Are you into the true spirit of the day?

March 20

Some quotations brought from different places to this space...

From AP writer Matt Crenson about physicists' latest findings on the origin of the universe: "In that trillionth of a second after the big bang, the universe expanded from the size of a marble to a volume larger than all of observable space... At the same time, the seeds were planted for the formation of stars, galaxies, planets and every other object in the universe." (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, March 17, 2006 ; A1)

From Psalm 33:6, "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of His mouth."

From Hebrews 11:3, "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible."

A small notice in today's St. Louis Post-Dispatch: "A public forum on intelligent design will be held from 7 to 9 p.m. April 6 at Clayton High School 's auditorium... Speakers will address why intelligent design should not be taught in public schools." (B5)

And finally this from the poet George Herbert, "A peasant may believe as much as a great clerk, and reach the highest stature. Thou dost make proud knowledge bend and crouch while grace fills up uneven nature." ("The Temple ," p. 45)

March 21

How do you listen to music?

Today is J.S. Bach's birthday. Born March 21, 1685, Bach was more than a musical genius; he was a layman who knew theology. The rare book room at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis has Bach's personal Bible, three volumes that contain both the text of the Bible and also commentary by a theologian named Abraham Calov. At 1 Chronicles 28:21 Bach highlighted these words by Calov: "In matters of religion we should not plan and do anything without His revealed Word. Use this as a warning against human deception, self-chosen worship, and man-made rules" (J.S. Bach and Scripture: Glosses from the Calov Bible Commentary, p. 95).

Things have changed since Bach's time when music was heard by people together, often in churches. Today it's every man, woman and child for himself! Put that piece in your ear and you can listen to what you want, when you want, and ignore real people all around you. In your own little unchallenged world, you easily become deaf to community...and more and more deaf to sounds around you. "A new survey found that high school students experience more symptoms of hearing loss than adults. Experts attribute this to the popularity of portable devices such as the iPod." (Chicago Tribune, March 15; 1, 13). "Can you hear me now?"

March 22

John Kelly of "The Washington Post" tells this story: Anne Nardick of Annapolis, Maryland, took her 7-year-old son Joey and his 9-year-old friend Devin to Washington D.C. to see the St. Patrick's Day parade. After the parade, Anne led the boys to the subway station to take the train back home. When their train arrived at the crowded L'Enfant Plaza, Anne guided the two little boys through the open doors but those doors shut before Anne herself could board. Horrified as the train started off with her boys, Anne screamed, "Stop the train!" Police came and began to help. So did a couple on the train who saw what was happening and looked after the boys. When Anne and the police arrived at the next station, Federal Center, there was a happy reunion. (March 16, 2006 ; B3)

Jesus told stories, many about something precious being lost. He told about a man who searched for his lost sheep, about a woman who searched for her lost coin, and about a lost son reunited with his father. Those parables point to one great truth: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 15:1-31; 19:10).

Parents panic for their children. Did God put that in us to give us a glimpse of how much He cares for us?

March 23

Rosa Parks was arrested over 50 years ago for refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a white man. Some want to pardon her in order to remove any suggestion she had done wrong. Mary Smith Ware, who was similarly arrested and fined, says, "I should be pardoned because I feel I didn't have to get up and give my seat to anyone." Others say giving a pardon is inappropriate because nothing wrong was done. Montgomery Mayor Bobby Bright said, "I feel horribly inadequate to pardon someone who did nothing wrong. We (the mayor is referring to whites; he's white) should be asking them to pardon us for the way we treated her and others in that period." (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, March 21; A4)

Such discussions are more likely to arise when a society does not have a clearly articulated and agreed upon sense of what is right and what is wrong. I can't recall a time when the Hebrew prophets urged a new social program to fight inequality but they repeatedly spoke against the sins of those in power. There's only one pardon that Rosa Parks needed, the one we all need, from God. That pardon is for our sins, racism included; it's not for our failure to come up with the right social program.

March 24

Kathleen Parker, a journalist for the Chicago Tribune, recently wrote about a piece of news that came and went, just as so many things that should command more attention come into and out of our too busy minds. Gay activists in Massachusetts challenged the practice of Catholic Charities of Boston to place adoptive children only in heterosexual homes. As a result, Ms. Parker writes that Catholic Charities, "which for more than 100 years has placed 80 percent of the state's most challenging children—those who are mentally and physically handicapped—has decided to cease its adoption operations." Says one Catholic, "Frankly...this is fundamentally about controlling the church."

Cases about freedom of religion have gone to court for a long time with varying judgments given. In current public talk about church and state, there's an amazing thing seldom said. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof" says the First Amendment. That's a significant acknowledgment by our founders. The Constitution says there is an authority other than government, the divine. By passing the First Amendment, "we the people" have commanded government to respect our conscientious exercise of faith. When truths like that from our Constitution leave our minds, the divine authority is sure to lose out to the human.

March 27

We're getting into that spring time of year when many churches hold confirmation services. At confirmation young people publicly reaffirm the vows made when they were baptized as infants. Picture a confirmation service. Here you have a child, 13, 14 years old, making declarations about how things are in the universe. There is a God, the teen asserts, a God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. There is a deep corruption in our world but there's help and hope from this God who loves His children. Mind-boggling! Mysteries the adult world has pondered for thousands of years and come to no conclusion are confidently explained by a young teen.

Yesterday I went back to the church where I was raised, St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Chicago Heights, Illinois. I preached twice and led Bible class. My grade school classmate Cindy said, "Do you know that we were confirmed 45 years ago today?" I hadn't thought about it, but sure enough, to the day, to the exact hour, I was preaching the same childlike faith we confessed at our confirmation 45 years earlier.

"I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" (Matthew 11:25). God bless all our confirmands, fresh and freckled or older and forgetful!

March 28

It's partly cloudy here, an overcast that doesn't perk you up. We like to describe a good mood and a happy soul as the sun shining. Clouds, on the other hand, suggest a gloomy, overcast soul.

God came to the Israelites in a thick cloud at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19). Think about that. God appeared to His people where they were, at Mt. Sinai. He didn't show up someplace where they weren't, say Pike's Peak or Denali. That He came in a cloud shows His tenderness. Since no sinner can see God's glory and live, as God told Moses in Exodus 33:20, God veiled Himself in a cloud. He wanted to be close but didn't want to destroy the people He loved. The theme carries through the Bible. That's how God led Israel through the wilderness: "The cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels" (Exodus 40:37). Jesus' transfiguration, crucifixion and ascension are all attended by clouds or, let's say, the cloud of God. And Judgment Day? "Look, He is coming with the clouds" (Revelation 1:7).

So if your soul is overcast today, recall this Bible truth: It's on the cloudy days that God comes closest to the people He loves.

March 29

"Our daughter shared a conversation she overheard at home," wrote August Mennicke. "Our 3-year-old grandson was standing at the basement stairs, trying to muster enough courage to make the descent. Before taking the first step, he said, "Oh, Jesus, it's awful dark down there. You'd better hold my hand.'" ([Devotions for the Chronologically Gifted](#), p. 58)

19th century poet John Greenleaf Whittier also wrote about a 3-year-old... and about us adults.

"A tender child of summers three seeking her little bed at night, paused on the dark stair timidly. 'O Mother, take my hand,' said she, 'And then the dark will all be light.'

"We older children grope our way from dark behind to dark before; And only when our hands we lay, Dear Lord, in Thine, the night is day.

"Reach downward to the sunless days wherein our guides are blind was we, and faith is small, and hope delays; Take Thou the hands of prayer we raise, and let us feel the light of Thee."

"Commit Thy way unto the Lord" (Psalm 37:5)

March 30

Editors of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel hoped to grab readers' attention with this headline yesterday, "Americans don't like cheaters – on spouses or taxes." It got my attention. The article reported latest findings from the Pew Research Center on what Americans think about ten activities.

Is it morally wrong for married people to have an affair? 88% of the respondents answered yes. Is it morally wrong not to report all income on your taxes? 79% said it's wrong. 61% said it's immoral to drink alcohol excessively, 52% to have an abortion, 50% to smoke marijuana. Homosexual behavior is morally wrong said 50%, telling a lie to spare someone's feelings gets 43% disapproval and sex between unmarried adults is frowned on by 35%. 35% disapprove of gambling and 32% of overeating.

Comparing the Pew poll to the Ten Commandments is interesting (Exodus 20). The Pew poll is narrow, focusing only on issues in 4 of the Ten Commandments (5, 6, 7, 8). Pew doesn't ask about God but the Ten Commandments are all based on our 24/7 duty to God. Pew reports changeable opinion but the Ten Commandments are God's definitive "Thou shalt, Thou shalt not." The Journal Sentinel headline grabs attention but the actual list was back page 12A. Is God's list on the front page of your day? Can you recite the Ten Commandments?

March 31

The weekend, a time that inevitably makes us think about our satisfaction, or lack of satisfaction with our work.

A court in France ruled yesterday in favor of a new law that allows employers to fire a new employee within the first two years. That has further infuriated French youth who have been rioting in protest against the law. French commerce and transportation have been disrupted and the government could be toppled.

Those riots are rooted in the same thing that threatens our common life in America , the sense of entitlement. "You owe me," it begins. Then fill in the blank, whatever you imagine society owes you. "You owe me because" and fill in the blank about how you're being victimized. Totally opposed, the Christian faith teaches work as opportunity to serve others as an expression of our life in God. Our motivation is Jesus who gave Himself for us. When the disciples were arguing about who of them was the greatest, Jesus said, "you are not to be like that. I am among you as One who serves" (Luke 22:27).

Christians dominate American society. When we go to work Monday, we can make a difference by sincerely serving because of the One who serves us. And this weekend, we can see the alternative as we catch up on the news from France .