

October 3

Tradition says the Greek lawgiver Solon instituted reforms in Athens but then left for ten years so that the citizens would learn to live under the rule of law. It's a wise person who's mindful of coming generations.

When John Marshall died in 1835, President Andrew Jackson praised the Chief Justice's service to posterity: "In the revolutionary struggles for our National independence, and particularly in the subsequent discussions which established the forms and settled the practice of our system of Government, the opinions of John Marshall ...gave him a rank amongst the greatest men of his age" (in John Marshall by Jean Edward Smith, p. 524).

Today the seventeenth Chief Justice of the United States presides over his first session of the Supreme Court. John Roberts Jr. expressed the desire to "pass on to my children's generation a charter of self-government as strong and vibrant" as that he had received.

We don't know if Chief Justice Roberts' wish is also his religious prayer, but let it be our prayer for his service. Lord, "May Your deeds be shown to Your servants, Your splendor to their children. May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us – yes, establish the work of our hands" (Psalm 90:16-17)

October 4

In 1884 Calais , France commissioned Auguste Rodin to sculpt the "Burghers of Calais" to commemorate six prominent citizens who had saved that city by offering their lives to the conquering British in 1346-1347. For the town council honor meant placing the sculpted group on a high pedestal but Rodin had a different view. He wanted the "Burghers" at ground level so viewers would be drawn into what's real, into the anguish and fear he sculpted on the heroes' faces. Rodin's wishes eventually prevailed. Today you can look straight at the "Burghers of Calais" in the Hirschhorn Sculpture Garden on the National Mall in Washington D.C.

Coming down from our own "pedestals," repentance, is an important part of Rosh Hashanah. Jews believe God is judging our deeds of the past year and deciding our fate for the coming year, and so they repent on Rosh Hashanah in the hope of divine mercy.

Coming down from a "pedestal" is what Jesus did. One reason Judaism rejected Jesus was His suffering. What kind of divine savior gets crucified? Christians counter that Christ left the highest pedestal of all, the glorious realms of heaven, and came down to our level that He might raise us to God. Can we appreciate that if we insist on our own precarious pedestals?

October 5

I've routinely assumed that unwelcome experiences like hurricanes and other personal tragedies push people away from God. I've met people for whom that's true. Recently,

however, two different, unrelated speakers have presented a second possible outcome: the injustices of life actually bring us closer to God.

For Muslims today is the first day of Ramadan, the month they believe Muhammad received his revelation from Allah. Islam and Christianity divide on the basic conception of God. “The Koran does not refer to Allah in...personal terms. Where John 3:16 speaks of God as being one who ‘so loved the world...that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life,’ the Koran alludes to Allah as being capricious at times. Some Christian apologists have noted that Allah appears to be dispassionate and arbitrary and even one who misleads for the sake of populating hell.” (Dictionary of Cults, Sects, Religions and the Occult, George Mather and Larry Nichols, p. 143)

Once again the point of division is the cross of Jesus Christ. Christianity sees Christ as the face of God to us, the Suffering Servant through whom God takes a personal interest in your life and sufferings. “Whoever comes to Me I will never drive away” (John 6:37). Christianity or Islam: Which system of belief draws you closer to God?

October 6

Hey, it tasted strange but not strange enough to stop eating. Last Saturday morning after an hour of strenuous walking, I came home and decided to cancel out the exercise by eating eggs. Understand, Diane is out of the house. So where’s the olive oil for the bottom of the frying pan? Seeing a fancy bottle on the counter, I thought that must be it. Funny, it doesn’t say olive oil on the bottle. Whatever, I poured some into the pan and it soon was smoking and smelling strange, but hey, I’m hungry. I fried three eggs, sat down to eat them, and, as I said, it tasted funny but I’m a man and I’m hungry.

Home comes Diane. “What is this stuff?” I asked. “That’s dish soap,” she said. “Why?” I told her. “You ate it?” “Well, not all of it. The dog finished it up.”

Obviously this was HER fault. “Why didn’t you put the olive oil out where I could see it?” First she offered a lame excuse. Then she said our son-in-law on his last visit here thought the soap would look better in this bottle. Good! Now I can blame Diane and Darren.

Which brings me to the point: Don’t we often try to blame someone else for our own stupidity?

October 7

The news broke Wednesday night that the FBI is investigating Leandro Aragoncillo. He allegedly spied for Filipino rebels while working for vice presidents Gore and Cheney. Nothing new. In the Bible Moses sent spies into the Promised Land (Numbers 13) and Joshua sent spies into Jericho before attacking (Joshua 2). In our own time we know that James Bond had non-fictional Cold War counterparts. So what?

Spies deal in deceit and we're tempted all the time to be deceitful in the way we use words. A spy? No, not you, but are you ever slippery with your words? Ever present yourself in a way that's not the true you?

Dr. Glenn Nielsen preached an excellent sermon Wednesday in the chapel of Concordia Seminary. He told how children had been asked to talk about good words. One girl said, "Our words are to be little silver boxes with bows on them." An apt picture. The words we speak to others should be our gifts to them, "little silver boxes with bows on them."

Jesus said, "Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Matthew 5:37).

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive!" (Sir Walter Scott)

October 10

"You fool! You'll fall off the end of the earth!" Surely someone said that to Christopher Columbus, whose adventure we celebrate today. Columbus thought he knew where he was going, a new route to India, but he didn't have a clue.

What does the future hold for you? You know very well your clues about the future may not prove true. No wise person is cocksure about the future, and that leaves room for fear and worry. The dependable things and people of the past will be taken from you. Could Columbus fall off the earth? Have you ever had a nightmare that you were falling? What's to become of me?

Venturing into an unknown future is a recurrent theme throughout the Bible. It is God's way with us. "Follow Me," Jesus says. He's already in that future. As we grope in the dark, we pray ourselves into our future, "Do not forsake me, O God my Savior" (Psalm 27:9).

"Lord God, You have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go but only that Your hand is leading us and Your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen." (Lutheran Worship, collect 176)

October 11

The death toll approaches 20,000. People buried by landslides, by collapsing buildings, children included. At least ten schools turned into ruins, turned into tomb. "Many villages have been wiped out in the earthquake-hit areas," said one witness.

This Wednesday evening begins Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Central to the day is the forgiveness of sins, which Christians believe is accomplished in Jesus Christ. That forgiveness, the Bible teaches, is the heart of our relationship with God. In Him "we

have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13 -14). Forgiveness makes “atonement,” “at-one-ment” with God.

When students in our seminary preach sermons, they zero in on the forgiveness of sins. To that I say, “Fine. I believe that, but how does that relate to Saturday’s earthquake in Pakistan ?” What I say to them and am saying now is that I find it increasingly hard to connect the dots between forgiveness and the crisis du jour.

A man with a sick child begged Jesus, “take pity on us and help us.” Jesus answered, “Everything is possible for him who believes.” To that the father said, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”(Mark 9:24). I think he was saying, “Lord, help me connect the dots.” Connecting the dots in grade school took our time and effort and the Teacher’s help. It still does.

October 12

Years ago I was teaching religion class to the 8th graders at our parochial school. One day I had enough of their picking on each other, their cliquishness, their hurtful behavior. So I unloaded the standard grown-up lecture they’d probably heard many times. “Pastor, you’ve got it wrong,” interrupted a courageous girl. “How’s that?” I asked. “The reason we act that way is we’re afraid that we’re not going to fit in.”

Why does that office worker hoard information that would help the rest of you do your job? Why does the up-and-coming professional hide the fact he’s drowning in debt? Why does the fearful woman present herself as having it all together? Does some of your behavior grow out of a fear that you’re not going to fit it in some way or other that’s important to you?

Because we compartmentalize our hectic lives, security in one area of life does not always carry over to other areas. What we need is a security that embraces every aspect of daily living, a security that radiates out from a confident heart. Who fully has that, a centered sense of well-being? Only one person I know, one whose Spirit is working to fit us into His heart, the One who says “Come unto Me” (Matthew 11:28).

October 13

Guilt is persistent, keeps coming at you. Even in the middle of the night, guilt can wake you and get you tossing and turning, useless, fretful tossing and turning.

Forgiveness is more flighty. It comes and goes, often going as soon as it has come. You hear words of forgiveness, maybe from a friend, maybe in church on Sunday, and feel better but before those words have settled in your heart they’re evicted by that squatter guilt.

Leviticus 16 spells out the ancient ceremony of Yom Kippur, the High Priest offering sacrifices for his personal sins and for the sins of the people. This had to be done every

year; one year's sacrifice was not good for the next, guilt keeps on coming. In contrast, the New Testament presents the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins as a once and for all time offering, no need to repeat it.

You can and should make amends every year, every day with people you've sinned against but those deeds are done and atonement with God is still a problem. Hence, guilt keeps coming. The art of Christian spiritual living is to keep invoking that once-for-all forgiveness from God through Christ until guilt, that squatter, leaves. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1)

October 14

Tomorrow is the long-awaited, much discussed, much heralded, much scoffed, much argued about, much whatever constitutional election in Iraq . It's instructive to read what Alexander Hamilton wrote when the Constitution of the United States was much discussed, much argued about, much whatever.

"After an unequivocal experience of the inefficacy of the existing federal government, you are called upon to deliberate on a new Constitution. The important question (is) whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitution on accident and force. Among the most formidable of the obstacles (is) the obvious interest of a certain class of men in every State to resist all changes which may hazard a diminution of the power...they hold; and the perverted ambition of another class of men, who will either hope to aggrandize themselves by the confusions of their country..." (The Federalist Papers, Number 1)

If a political way of doing business can be achieved in Iraq , as it was here so long ago, the peace and justice God intends for the Iraqis can be better realized. For that, say a prayer. Hamilton : "In politics, as in religion, it is equally absurd to aim at making proselytes by fire and sword."

October 17

The incarnation, that our unseen God not only appeared to humans long ago but actually became fully human in His Son, is mind-boggling (see 1 Timothy 3:16). More and more I find myself fixated on it.

A memorial service was held yesterday for Diane's father, James Ermler. Devoted to his family... A Marine veteran of World War II in the Pacific... A hospital volunteer for 17 years after retiring... A youth leader, Bible class teacher, usher, and most memorably, a greeter. By all accounts, many people joined St. Paul 's Lutheran Church in Villa Park "because of that man who greeted us and remembered our name the next week when we came back." Pastor Steve Swanson preached a wonderfully apt sermon on the gift of hospitality. "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2; Genesis 18).

Theorizing about God can be a nice way to while away the hours, but for me often fails to connect the unseen God to the world I inhabit. More and more I see that there is a link, the incarnation, God become one of us. Jim Ermler impressed that upon us, without words by a lifetime of service. “Whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).

October 18

We don't think twice about it but back in 1918 sneezing caused more than a polite “God bless you” or, as I was taught, “Gesundheit.” Posters outside theatres said, “Influenza...is prevalent at this time throughout America . This theatre is co-operating with the Department of Health. You must do the same if you have a cold and are coughing and sneezing. Go home and go to bed until you are well. Do not enter this theatre. Coughing, sneezing or spitting will not be permitted in the theatre.”

In 1918 the Spanish Influenza killed 675,000 Americans and perhaps 50 million worldwide. Although it started with birds, it quickly passed among humans. So for 18 cents you could buy a “Flu Mask,” which an ad said, “Should be worn as protection against influenza, coughs and colds. (Scott Fornek, Chicago Sun-Times, October 16; 12A). So far, the current bird flu passes only from birds to humans...so far.

Praying the Lord's Prayer is more meaningful when you have something specific in mind. As children afraid of illness, we go to “Our Father,” knowing He's “in heaven,” strong and able to help. “Deliver us from evil” not only asks the Father to keep us safe from the devil, but also, as Martin Luther says, “rescue us from every evil of body and soul.”

“Gesundheit,” God, our Father, bless you!

October 19

Saddam Hussein goes on trial today. In 1982 Saddam retaliated against an assassination attempt by killing 150 people in Dujail, north of Baghdad . Little will happen now. Saddam's lawyer is asking for and likely to get a three-month adjournment.

Justice comes slowly, sometimes so slowly that we hurried people think there is no justice. God's justice too can seem so slow that we get angry at Him or dismiss Him as an irrelevant concept. Why doesn't God act decisively?

Romans 1:18: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” Did you catch the present tense, “The wrath of God is being revealed?” That chapter goes on to say that God shows his wrath by letting people do whatever they want to do. That leads either to our own hurt and destruction or to our repentance and life. The second, repentance and life, is what God wants. God “wants all people to be saved and come to a

knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). God’s justice is higher, more noble than ours. “Your justice like mountains high soaring above,” wrote W. Chalmers Smith.

There is no adjournment in God’s courtroom. Friedrich von Logau: “Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small.”

October 20

Holy jolt of java! Yesterday Cathy Lynn Grossman reported in USA Today that Starbucks will be “putting a God-filled quote from Rev. Rick Warren, author of the mega-selling The Purpose Driven Life on its cups.” (D8) It’s not that Starbucks has gotten religion, just that they’re adding Warren’s spiritual quotation to other quotations they are already printing on their cups.

So how do you like your coffee? Down in Waco, Texas, one quotation on some Starbucks cups urged gays to come out. That didn’t go very well with Baylor University, a Baptist bastion, and the university pressured to get those cups pulled. So is that how we deal with opinions we don’t like, throw out the distasteful view and crumble the cup?

Openness can burn you too. American culture is religiously eclectic. Pick and choose the spiritual brew you like, maybe a little Christianity, Hinduism, materialism, stir it all up and sip the concoction down into your soul. When we’re told there is no absolute truth, a Bible passage or two has no special impact.

Tastes just right! There must be a way to disagree with someone’s views without quashing their speech but also not going to the other extreme of believing every piece of religious drivel either. The Bible calls it “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15).

October 21

And now comes Wilma.

How much can people take? The Bible promises God “will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear” (1 Corinthians 10:13). You have to wonder, though, as we get to the end of the hurricane alphabet. Coach Lou Holtz once said that the light at the end of the tunnel is an oncoming train. That’s being beaten into us but the Bible says, “The Lord disciplines everyone He loves” (Hebrews 12:6). To that we cry, “God, I can’t take much more of this love!”

My colleague at Concordia Seminary, Dr. Norman Nagel, once spoke in our chapel about the authority of God. Sometimes Jesus asserted God’s authority through confrontation, at other times by refusing to answer questions. In whatever unexpected way God chooses to act, Dr. Nagel made this his chief point: What God does dish out is faith.

That’s His answer to the triple-whammy, to Katrina, to Rita and now to Wilma, to your feeling beaten down and no longer able to go on because of whatever storm is in your

life. Faith is hanging on to the good promises of God. It's what Habakkuk was told to do when things went from bad to worse (Habakkuk 1-2). God dishes out faith. That's His way to bring you through every trial.

October 24

I'm facing a problem and wonder if perhaps you've also noticed it.

A memory makes my problem clearer. When my mom's uncle retired after 42 years as pastor of one church, the church put on a retirement meal. I can't remember if it was a potluck or catered, definitely nothing extravagant. Uncle Henry, Rev. Henry Meyer, identified with a prayer of Jacob. "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness You have shown Your servant" (Genesis 32:10).

Public educators tell me students these days act entitled and, here's my immediate problem, our staff tells me seminary students do as well. That doesn't bode well for their future service to the church. Uncle Henry must be spinning in his grave.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "He who would learn to serve must first learn to think little of himself.... To forego self-conceit means in all soberness and without mincing the matter to consider oneself the greatest of sinners." Hmm... entitlement isn't just my professional problem but it's also my personal problem. I'm not so bad; I'm entitled to some things. "If my sinfulness appears to me to be in any way smaller or less detestable in comparison with the sins of others, I am still not recognizing my sinfulness at all" (Life Together, 94, 96). Do you have the problem I have?

October 25

We're in one of the longer stretches of the year without a major holiday, Labor Day long gone, Thanksgiving still far off. This is a time of year when unremitting work wears us down.

Years ago my friend Bill shared an e-mail. A woman visited a silversmith who held a piece of silver in the fire, explaining that the silver had to be held in the very middle of the fire to burn away any impurities. The woman thought of Malachi 3:3: God "will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver."

She asked if the silversmith had to be there the whole time and he said, yes. He had to hold and keep his eye on the silver lest it be in the fire too long and be destroyed.

"How do you know when the silver is fully refined?" she asked. "Oh, that's easy," he answered, "when I see my image in it."

I hope you'll take that as an encouragement for rough days. "The Lord watches over you" (Psalm 121:5). And the refining of Christians will achieve its goal. "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians

1:6). When that “holiday” comes, you, refined, will see Him face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12). Don’t lose heart!

October 26

October 26, 1924 : 20,000 people came to see the cornerstone laid for the new Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, “While Francis Pieper, president of the Seminary, delivered an address in Latin, an airplane flew overhead. Pieper stopped speaking, so he and the audience could stare skyward and gaze at the spectacle. The irony of that moment, bathed in the language of antiquity and the buzz of modern technology....” (Proclaim His Salvation, p. 8)

Second story: An American soldier in Fallujah is watching real time images of an Iraqi village. A drone, an unmanned aircraft, is taking the pictures. The drone is being directed from Las Vegas , Nevada and its pictures are being studied in Tampa, Florida, in the Pentagon, and in the Gulf country of Qatar. “The different analysts around the world (are) conducting an online chat about how to interpret what (is) going on and what to do about it. Their conversation (is) scrolling down the right side of the screen.” (Thomas Friedman, The World Is Flat, p. 39)

From old biplanes to today’s drones and computer technology, we shut our mouths. What an exciting time in which we live! Lest you fear, it’ll be OK as long as we look up, way up to the One who oversees it all.

October 27

“The days of our years are three score years and ten...” (Psalm 90:10)

I’m not quite three score , 60 years, but it’s taken all my lifetime to see my Chicago White Sox win the World Series. Last night they did it. In the 1950’s I’d watch the Sox on WGN-TV, black and white TV. I can still see that one camera shot they used, from behind home plate, looking out toward the arches of old Comiskey Park . When Dad took Bruce and me to see our first game, I can see that too, like it was yesterday. Green grass. Color. “Field of Dreams.”

“ Three score years and ten, and if by reason of strength they be fourscore, yet is their strength labor and sorrow.” Fourscore? More than that, 88 years since our last world championship. When they lost to the recently relocated Dodgers in 1959, after a 40 year absence from World Series, cousin John predicted it would be another 40 years before the Sox returned to the series. Wrong. 46 years. “Labor and sorrow.”

This is the way some of us have defined the days of our lives, waiting for the Sox to make it. Thanks to dad for taking us to our first game. Green grass. Color. A kid’s glimpse of heaven. Deja vu, a momentary deliverance from “labor and sorrow.”

October 31

Recently in the mail... mail meaning ol' snail mail, my personal e-mail, or communications to the office, snail mail, e-mail and voice mail... Any wonder we're all tired out? Recently in the mail I've been asked: To accept or decline participation for the new year in the medical spending account; to accept or decline a social commitment for next week, to accept or decline speaking engagements, and to put my signature on some checks to pay bills... In fact, Jim just called to threaten me if I didn't put my name on a check to his company quickly. Jim and every Tom, Dick and Harry in the world is holding us accountable for something or other.

Isn't it interesting then... no, not interesting; better to say, nonsense... Isn't it nonsense to imagine God is not holding us accountable for what we believe and do? Today is Reformation Day, commemorating the brouhaha that started when Martin Luther challenged the teachings of the established church. Luther once wrote, "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord." "I believe." Luther knew he was accountable to God. Isn't it lapse of common sense to imagine you and I aren't accountable to God for what we believe about Jesus Christ?