

April 1, 2005

In 1564 King Charles IX of France introduced a new calendar. Up until then, the New Year had been celebrated from March 21st until April 1st but Charles' new calendar dictated that January 1st would become New Year's Day. Since there's "nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9), some people didn't adjust to the change and kept on celebrating April 1st. They came to be known as April Fools. Pranks soon became part of the day.

Hindsight is 20/20. If someone fools you today, you won't realize it until after the fact. That, I think, is a little ray of insight on spiritual reality. In His parable about the 5 wise and the 5 foolish virgins, Jesus makes clear that it's at the end, the end of your life, Judgment Day, that your spiritual wisdom or folly will be revealed (Matthew 25:1-13).

Although a Gallup poll two years ago showed 2/3rds of American adults believe in hell, the poll also revealed that only 1% think they'll go there. If you're in the 99% that doesn't expect hell, make sure your reasons are right. "The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing" (1 Corinthians 1:18).

April 4

Monday morning is tough enough... without a time change!

According to Michael Downing in his new book, "Spring Forward: The Annual Madness of Daylight Saving Time," it was an Englishman, William Willett, who first promoted this change in 1907 so people could exercise more in the evening. In 1966 Congress encouraged Daylight Saving Time for all the United States. Today only Hawaii, Arizona and most of Indiana don't change their clocks.

We've "lost" an hour. We talk about time as a commodity, a thing. "I'm running short on time." "Can you spare me a minute?" Time as a thing.

The Bible talks more about time as a place. The first commandment tells us to have no false god in our heart. The second or third commandment, depending on how you number them, says to revere God with our lips. Heart...lips...what's next? "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." That is, after heart and lips, worship God in time. Time is not so much a thing; it's a place... of worship.

We all have the same amount of time each day. On Monday or any day, try looking at time as a place, your cathedral of thanks and service to God. That might just ease the madness of squeezing more and more into less and less time.

Spring forward... to deeper spirituality!

April 5

Rev. Richard Eyer is a pro-life medical ethicist. Years ago in a conversation he told me something to this effect: it finally doesn't matter to us if our culture goes pro-life or not. Either way, our job is to keep on promoting life.

I'm thinking about Terri Schiavo, who was forced to die. I'm thinking about Pope John Paul II, who hung tenaciously to life and work until the very end.

Whether the culture of death or the culture of life wins out in the short-term, it doesn't change what I do, what you do. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). That's not about being valiant in cancer or what have you. It's about slogging it out for the Lord of life, whether you're winning or losing.

Martin Luther; "He who is not 'crucianus,' if I may coin a word, is not 'Christianus.' In other words, he who does not bear his cross is no Christian, for he is not like his Master, Jesus Christ." ("For All the Saints," III, p 1011). Jesus suffered and died...He lost the short-term battle...for the cause of life. In the long-term life will win out. His resurrection is leading our way!

April 6

"Our daughter shared a conversation she overheard at home," writes 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 as 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).

April 7

A Roman Catholic friend is puzzled because the Protestant sources she reads have been generally quiet about the pope’s death. Let me suggest a partial explanation.

The papacy – note my shift: not talking now about Pope John Paul II but about the institution known as the papacy – the papacy has not been a unifying presence in the history of western Christianity. It claims a pre-eminence that troubles many. Its material riches seem out of sync with Christ’s spirit of humble service. Its claim to be able to issue doctrine that the faithful must believe greatly troubles those who believe teaching should come from the Bible and not from the church. There are other issues; let those suffice to make the point that not all Christians revere the papacy.

I’m not arguing the pros and cons of these points and I’m not implying they are inconsequential. They are highly important and many Protestant churches have discussed these differences with the Roman church. The mainline media, of course, wouldn’t cover such discussions of truth. They do polls.

While the papacy plays a secular role (John Paul II did that with communism), people of faith give primacy to spiritual matters. Because many Protestants give primacy to the Bible, they’ve been more restrained these days. That’s at least part of the answer.

April 8

I’m using this “Minute” to send greetings to my mother, whose birthday is tomorrow. Truth is, it’s too late to get a card to her through the mail!

Mom, you sure did a lot for me, like the time my arm got caught in the ringer washing machine. Thanks for pulling it out! Is that why I have the biceps of Tweety Bird?

I don't remember, but you say toddler Dale threw a beer bottle out the window. Honestly, what kind of home life did we have?

Remember the times I said some bad words and you washed my mouth out with soap? Ivory Soap: It floats!

You had three ways of telling us to obey. First way: "You kids are driving me batty." That always confused me. Earl Battey was a catcher for the White Sox and I couldn't figure out why you thought of him when we misbehaved. Second way: "I'm going to send you to the Glenwood School for Boys." Would she really do that? Third way, the best: "Remember the Fourth Commandment." Faith!

Now decades later, older women sometimes compliment my sermon at the church door. "Thanks," I say. "I'll tell my mother. She still worries about me." They smile at that because they understand. A mother's love never stops.

Happy Birthday, Mom!

April 11

Rabbi Muser had a problem. Every Thursday for 12 years he's inspected an "eruv" in St. Louis, making sure it was intact. Last week for the first time it was not.

I didn't know what an eruv is either. An eruv is a boundary that marks off an area within which observant Jews can push or carry some things on Sabbath. For example, you can't carry keys on the Sabbath unless you're within the eruv. The eruv is made up of fences, telephone and power lines, rope, and whatever else connects so that there is a continuous boundary; in St. Louis it's 15 miles long. (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, April 8, A1; George Robinson, "Essential Judaism," p. 226)

Christians believe the rest of the Jewish Sabbath is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. "Come unto Me and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). If a Christian is serious about that, there will be boundaries of time and space. You will set boundaries in time when you will not work but pray and meditate. You will set boundaries in space, having places where you go, leaving work behind and putting God in mind. Without these boundaries, eruvs of sort, you get frazzled, worn and spiritually off focus.

Rabbi Muser's eruv was fixed. Do the fences that protect your spiritual life need some mending?

April 12

Do you ever get frustrated by casual conversations at the water cooler? I don't mean frustrated by what's being said, idle chatter, office gossip and the like, but irritated that people who have work to do aren't doing it?

Today the Senate holds a confirmation hearing for John Negroponte, nominated by President Bush to be the first director of national intelligence. This new position is extremely important because of intelligence failures in the war on terror.

One theme to be sounded is urgency. “Negroponte doesn’t have much time,” said Richard Kerr, a former deputy director of central intelligence. “If we don’t move fast, we will lose the ability to assess enormous threats correctly.... But we’re also going to lose many good people,” said Representative Jane Harmon. (New York Times, April 11; A11)

A similar sense of urgency seems lacking in water cooler Christians. A spoof on “Onward Christian Soldiers” says, “Like a mighty turtle moves the church of God . Brothers, we are treading where we’ve always trod.” But Jesus said, “We must do the works of him who sent Me while it is day. The night is coming when no one can work” (John 9:4).

Is your church the kind that only needs a water cooler to fill out its talk about mission? Or is your church urgently on mission for Jesus?

Are you?

April 13

I skim. One by one, I skim through the stack of reports and letters on my desk. It’s efficient – don’t get hung up by minutiae – but it borders on carelessness. “Did you really read that?” asks my assistant Michelle. “No, I skimmed it.” “Well, you better read it,” she warns.

So we skimmers skimmed through yesterday’s newspapers and caught a title like this: “Gay clergy might be accepted by Lutherans.” That headline was in the Belleville News-Democrat. The Associated Press copy reports the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America may allow gays and lesbians in committed relationships to serve as pastors of their congregations.

Being Lutheran, I read the whole story. Way, way down at the bottom was this: “The nation’s other major Lutheran body, the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, is staunchly conservative on gay issues and other matters.” That’s where I belong. We believe the Bible is clear about homosexuality.

But how many skimmers get to the bottom paragraph? How many assume that all Roman Catholics, all Baptists, and so on uniformly believe the same thing? They don’t, any more than Lutherans agree about Bible truths.

The stack on my desk includes documents requiring my signature. There are stick ‘ems for skimmers: “Sign here.” For news and religious news, maybe they’ll produce a skimmer stick ‘em: “Read here!”

April 14

“One reason I am attracted to Scripture....”

The standard religious sales pitch from a preacher, right?

“One reason I am attracted to Scripture,” the minister continued, “is because it fits life so well. It doesn’t try to gloss over grief as if it were not real and say, ‘Smile; be happy.’”

You saying the Bible is real, kind of like a novel?

“It tells us that much of what happens in this world is not what God desires. That the kind of thing that happened to Peter and to the other constables last Thursday....”

The words were spoken by Rev. Ralph Mayan at the funeral of Peter Schiemann, a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Peter and three others were murdered by James Roszko on March 3 near Mayerthorpe, Alberta.

What happened, he continues, “is but a horrible reminder of just what this world is like as it lives in rebellion against its Creator and His will for life; Jesus saw it, He experienced it and we are told, He grieved too. He wept bitterly..... but horror and evil, sin and death did not win the day – Jesus Christ already has and now Peter has – with Jesus Christ awaiting that great day of resurrection.” (The Canadian Lutheran, Easter, 2005; p. 9)

The Bible: No novel; it’s real. What are you waiting for?

April 15

Today I feel ownership in America. That aircraft carrier... I own part of it. That flight of the space shuttle in June... I’m paying for some of it. That famous bolt or toilet seat that costs \$500 because of lousy Pentagon accounting... Yeah, I’m paying for that too. It’s tax day and I hate it!

Here’s an odd thing. The Bible talks about taxes: “Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes.” Then, in almost the same breath, it says, “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law” (Romans 13:6, 8).

Love and taxes? Yes, because real love means doing good to others even when it doesn’t suit you. The model for this is God who sees our lives spiraling downhill, as in toward the grave, and responds by giving us help and hope in His Son Jesus. That’s a simple but fundamental truth that helps interpret today’s duty to pay taxes. It’s a love-hate thing. While taxes are an unpleasant burden, remember today that you’re doing good for others just as you have received good in the selfless Christ.

And a necessary prayer: God, guide the spending of our taxes wisely for the common good. Amen.

April 18

Grandpa Meyer, a retired farmer and faithful churchgoer, used to complain about “politicking” in the church. The harsh sound, politicking, grated on my ears and stuck in my mind. It means “engaging in often partisan political discussion or activity” (Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary).

Today 115 cardinals meet to select the next pope. Will there be voting blocs? That would be very human. Will there be king-makers, pope makers? That too would be very human. Is that politicking...or might it be politics, the very necessary human work of discussing and persuading and voting to guide an institution?

Have you thought about the implication of this: God has chosen to keep His being hidden from us and instead works among us through means, working through words He has revealed and working through people who serve (as opposed to not serving) His revealed purposes? That leads to the conclusion that politics, good politics, in government and in church is one of God’s ways of looking after our temporal and spiritual good.

What bugged Grandpa was the appearance of church people promoting their personal partisan agendas as if they weren’t accountable to God. Politicking or politics: It’ll end up like the Wizard of Oz: When God pulls back the curtain, will we be seen pulling the levers for our own purposes or for God’s?

April 19

“Once upon a time I went to daycare. At 9:01 a.m. I played with my friend. Chase played with me too. At 9:02 a.m. Boom. My friend died. At 9:03 nothing but dust in the air and a building that collapsed.”

Today is the tenth anniversary of the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City . 168 people were killed, including 19 children. Six children survived, including Brandon Denny, who wrote those opening words. Because of the bombing, Brandon had four major brain surgeries. Today he is subject to seizures and wears an ankle brace. He is in continual need of physical and speech therapy. Brandon ’s sister Rebecca was also hurt in the bombing. The bombing left Rebecca looking “like a raw piece of meat,” said her mother Claudia. Their father Jim quit his job to help take care of the children. Expenses forced the parents to sell their home in 2002.

Thank you to Arnold Hamilton of “The Dallas Morning News” for that information and for stories of the other children who survived the blast. (Sunday, April 17; 1, 30, 31A)

What comment can I make? “Once upon a time,” Brandon’s beginning, is the way fairy tales begin. How sad this is not. Mr. Hamilton has reminded of the continuing effects of evil in our lives.

April 20

It was a Sunday afternoon, quite a few years ago. I was worn out from the morning preaching and boarded a flight home, window seat near the back of the plane. Now come two women, thirtyish, assigned the two seats next to me. The moment they saw my clerical collar they started in. “Oh, good, a priest. Now we know we’ll be safe.”

Clerical garb produces different reactions. In Boston I’m sure to get a sincere, “Hello, Father” from someone. Other times people see it and try to goad me, maybe a few cuss words. I think these two women, however, weren’t putting me on. They were superstitious and thought that I was their good luck safety charm. Imagine that, reduced to a rabbit’s foot!

I wasn’t in the mood. “Jesus,” I said, “loves me and is going to take me to heaven. He might use this flight to do it.”

That shut ‘em up. “We’re sitting next to a nutcake.”

At the end of the flight I got nice, which I should have been at the start. Turned out they were backup singers for Engleburt Humperdink.

I think of that because of all the cardinals and now a new pope in all their clerical garb. What do we clergy think when we put on our special garb? And what do you think when you see it?

April 21

I’m glad the newspaper included a map. Not knowing precisely where Angola is, it gave me a fix on the problem. The problem, reported by The New York Times press service, is “the world’s worst outbreak of one of the world’s most frightening viruses, known as Marburg.” (in The Dallas Morning News, April 17; 25A).

My problem is not only getting a fix on the geography but also on the theology. When you get a report like this, when you think about so many wrongs in our world, where do you locate the problem theologically? In the Bible there are so many good things promised to us by God. In the world there is so much trouble. It doesn’t connect...

Unless you look to Jesus Christ. The unseen realm whence come all the good promises of the Bible... He’s there as eternal Son of God. The world of trouble... He’s here as God who became man and was executed in yet another example of injustice. But by the resurrection the suffering One is declared Lord of all things in heaven and on earth (see Colossians 1:15 -23). The only way I’ve found to fit it together is in Him.

So when you're struggling with the disconnect between religious faith and your experiences in life, get a fix on the situation. Locate your thoughts on the God-man, in whom all the promises of God are "Yeah and Amen" (2 Corinthians 1:20).

April 22

"The sword bereaves," wrote Jeremiah after war destroyed Jerusalem (Lamentations 1:20).

Today is an anniversary of the grief war brings. You probably remember the name Pat Tillman. A star football player in college and an NFL starter for the Arizona Cardinals, Tillman gave it up to serve his country in Afghanistan. Told he could leave the military because NFL clubs were interested in him, Tillman declined. A year ago today, April 22, Pat Tillman was killed by friendly fire.

"Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

A prayer for those who serve: "Almighty God, we commend to Your gracious care and keeping all the men and women of our armed forces at home and abroad. Defend them day by day with Your heavenly grace; strengthen them in their trials and temptations; give them courage to face the perils which beset them; and grant them a sense of your abiding presence wherever they may be; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (The Book of Common Prayer, p. 823)

May the day come when we can again say, "Come and see the works of the Lord.... He makes wars to cease to the ends of the earth; He breaks the bow, and shatters the spear" (Psalm 46:8-9).

April 25

Sometimes I miss my normal Saturday phone call with my mother. So the next time we talk, she leads off, "I haven't heard from you for soooo long." Guilt trip.

Sitting in my favorite chair, I'll say to Diane, "Why don't you sit down and rest?" "There's too much work to do," she says. Guilt trip.

Our Jewish friends are celebrating Passover. Jeff Libman pictures this conversation: "Ida, your matzo ball soup is to die for!"

"What? It wasn't good last time?" Guilt trip. (Chicago Tribune, April 22)

Passover remembers the miraculous deliverance of the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt. Guilt is a kind of slavery. We feel guilty about things more serious than, say, a missed phone call. Where do your heavy duty guilt trips take you?

Ignore your guilt and it'll fester within you to no good result. But let your guilt trip take you to forgiveness, and you'll have a healthy freedom. Exodus tells us that an angel of death passed over every home in Egypt that had the blood of a lamb on their door, Passover. Christians believe the blood of Jesus Christ covers over all our sins. That's a Passover from the slavery of guilt to the freedom of forgiveness.

Where are your guilt trips taking you these days?

April 26

Does God bring bad things into our lives?

Some Bible passages say, “Yes.” “When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?” (Amos 3:6)

Two years ago I was invited to preach for the 50th anniversary of The Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Greenville, South Carolina. Just before that anniversary, the church burned down. They still celebrated their anniversary. “Keep on keepin’ on.”

Last Sunday I was back in Greenville, this time to preach for the dedication of their brand new church building. In all the happy words of the weekend, several people said, “God burned our church down.”

Maybe so. God certainly didn’t reach for the cosmic fire extinguisher. Years after Joseph had been sold into slavery by his brothers, he said, “You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to...save many people alive” (Genesis 50:20).

“Keep on keepin’ on” isn’t easy, but somewhere along the way you want to experience a shift. To “this is bad” you add, “This is also for good.” Yogi Berra said, “When you come to a fork in the road take it.” It’s not either/or. God’s mercy enables you to take both attitudes: This is bad and (“and,” not “but”) God is blessing us through it.

Says the poet, his name unknown to me: “But we know, as children should, that the cross is for our good.”

April 27

First Lady Laura Bush appeared on the “Tonight” show last night.

The widow of Alexander Hamilton, Eliza, said this about the first First Lady, Martha Washington: “Mrs. Washington who, like myself, had a passionate love of home and domestic life, often complained of the ‘waste of time’ she was compelled to endure. ‘They call me the first lady in the land and I think I must be extremely happy,’ she would say almost bitterly at times and add, ‘They might more properly call me the chief state prisoner.’” (in Ron Chernow, Alexander Hamilton, p. 335)

In the early nineties that great preacher, Dr. Oswald Hoffmann, and I were scheduled to speak to a convention in Cleveland. It happened one day that Dr. and Mrs. Hoffmann and Diane and I arrived together at the convention hall. Dr. Hoffmann and I instinctively plunged into the crowd, abandoning our wives without a thought. Marcia Hoffmann turned to Diane and said, “He does this all the time.” Are pastors’ wives “chief church prisoners?”

Husbands tend to get more public attention than their wives. I haven't found a magic key to free a wife from feeling like a prisoner but I do think this is a big help: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25).

April 28

I work at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis . Last evening 107 of our students were assigned to serve as pastors in their first congregations. It's one thing to study for the ministry; it's something else, even scary, to get plopped in a place and told, "Now do it."

Some words from the first president of Concordia Seminary, Dr. C.F.W. Walther. Date: 1885. "When a place has been assigned to a...candidate of theology where he is to discharge the office of a minister, that place ought to be to him the dearest, most beautiful and most precious spot on earth. He should be unwilling to exchange it for a kingdom. Whether it is in a metropolis or in a small town, on a bleak prairie or in a clearing in the forest, in a flourishing settlement or in a desert, to him it should be a miniature paradise. Do not the blessed angels descend from heaven with great joy whenever the Father in heaven sends them to minister to those are to be heirs of salvation? Why, then, should we poor sinners be unwilling to hurry after them with great joy to any place where we can lead others, our fellow-sinners, to salvation?" (Law and Gospel, p. 207-208).

Please, say a prayer for our young pastors!

April 29

"The big e-word," Lisa Volland calls it.

The Kansas State Board of Education will soon review what's taught in schools. Conservatives, who want to teach biblical creation or intelligent design, have a majority on that board. To teach or not to teach evolution, that's the question. Says high school teacher Volland, "I don't think you can talk about living organisms without talking about evolution." "The big e-word." (AP in St. Louis Post-Dispatch, April 27; A8)

Lee Strobel was an atheist who was trained to be an investigative journalist. In his new book, The Case for a Creator, he shares his investigations about "the big e-word" and about conservative belief in a Creator.

Evolution teaches that you're a chance of nature. But Strobel, after extensive reading and interviews with scientists, writes this: "New findings are suggesting that we are special. More and more scientists are studying the mind-boggling convergence of scores of extraordinary 'coincidences' that make intelligent life possible on Earth and concluding that this can't possibly be an accident." (p. 155).

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, "Earth is crammed with heaven and only he sees who takes off his shoes." Be skeptical. Take off your e-shoes. You're on the Creator's holy ground!