

April 2008

### April 1

In 1564 King Charles IX of France introduced a new calendar. Up until then, the New Year had been celebrated 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 several 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 2

"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee." (Isaiah 26:3)

Yesterday I attended a meeting, at which one of the speakers was Dr. Dennis Golden. Dr. Golden is in his fourteenth year as president of Fontbonne University in St. Louis. He said something that I took to heart and I hope you find this short saying helpful as well. President Golden recalled that some years ago he was talking to a friend who also was a college president. She gave this short description of the job of a college president.

"Absorb chaos. Give back calm. Provide hope."

Who can begin to know what's going on in your life? Only you...and God. Without confidence that Christ has been raised from the dead... Without the prayer that today's afflictions are momentary (2 Corinthians 4:17)... Without the hope that "Eye has not seen nor ear heard, neither has entered into the mind of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him" (1 Corinthians 2:9)... Without such faith, how can you and I cope today, and not only cope but be blessings to others?

"Absorb chaos. Give back calm. Provide hope."

### April 3

Financial problems in our country let some people rationalize cutting back on their church offerings.

A church in wheat-growing country was having such great financial problems that the church's financial secretary resigned. Church members approached the owner of the huge grain elevator and asked him to take over the financial secretary's duties. "Yes," he finally

said, "but with two conditions. No treasurer's report will be given during the first year and no questions asked about the finances during the year."

The members were surprised but agreed because they trusted this owner of the elevator.

After a year passed, he gave his report. The \$200,000 debt had been paid. The paid workers received a much-needed raise. No outstanding bills. A cash balance of \$30,000.

The church members were shocked. "How'd you do it?" His answer was simple. "Most of you trade with me, so when you brought your grain I withheld 10% on your behalf and turned it over to the church in your name. You didn't even miss it!"

There's so much good our churches can do in this troubled society. Is there really a lack of money or a lack of will power?

### April 4

I'm sure you've had this experience. After a big rain, you walk down the sidewalk and come to a place where the rain has formed a little lake. Not a puddle you can jump over but a little lake, and you think about how you'll get to the other side. You have to cross over.

Much daily news is like that. Genocide in Sudan, astronauts in space, a fiercely contested Democratic race... That's there but I'm on this side. Do I need to connect that news to my life? For example: Yesterday NATO voted unanimously to endorse the United States' missile defense shield. That's big, big news. So what? That news is on the other side of the pond but you're on this side, going about today's tasks. Is the news over there relevant to your life here? Try this: Governments "do not bear the sword in vain" (Romans 13:4). Over there the missile shield is intended to protect innocent citizens. Here? Local police, fire, paramedics...all intended to protect you. Basic biblical truths integrate world news and your life: In the missile shield example, God has provided government to protect us.

What in the Bible connects big news and your little life? Keep asking, "What does this mean?" and you'll make that jump, you'll get to the other side.

### April 7

Sandra Aldrich writes in "Will I Ever Be Whole Again?" about her children's first experience with a visitation at the funeral home. Young Jay and Holly's grandma had died.

"Is she breathing?" Holly whispered.

"Well, Holly..." I stalled, searching for something both simple and theologically sound.

"Jay then turned from his study of the casket handles to face his little sister. 'No, Holly, she's not breathing. Remember? The breathin' part's in heaven!'"

Your soul, your "breathin' part," isn't in heaven yet. It's here and now, Monday, facing the push of a new workweek. So take time to breathe in the continuing fresh air of Easter. Do a daily devotion. Keep hope and resurrection in mind as you work. Because the tomb is still empty, the Spirit of life can inspire you with the faith, hope and love that are available in Jesus Christ. We all need that for all the days ahead!

Jesus, keep inspiring my "breathin' part" with the fresh air of Easter morning. Amen.

## **April 8**

200 years ago...April, 1808...A man named Benjamin Henry Latrobe was having a bad month.

An architect of the United States Capitol, Latrobe became a lightning rod for controversy.

On April 8<sup>th</sup> he had to explain cost overruns. On April 13<sup>th</sup> he said artists were good managers of money but – if it can go wrong it will – Latrobe himself was caught making accounting mistakes. A House committee decided April 21<sup>st</sup> that he could keep his job, but that wasn't the end of his long month. On the 26<sup>th</sup> he was blasted by William Thornton in a letter published in a D.C. newspaper. They scheduled a duel but Latrobe seems to have backed out.

St. Paul minimized his own bad times by maximizing God's help and eternal goodness. "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me.... But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory for ever and ever." (2 Timothy 4:16-18)

Do you minimize your tough times by maximizing your trust in God's help and eternal goodness?

## **April 9**

No minute

## **April 10**

Tuesday President Bush awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously to Petty Officer 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Michael Monsoor.

President Bush said, "On Saint Michael's Day -- September 29, 2006 -- Michael Monsoor would make the ultimate sacrifice. Mike and two teammates had taken position on the outcropping of a rooftop when an insurgent grenade bounced off Mike's chest and landed on the roof. Mike had a clear chance to escape, but he realized that the other two SEALs did not. In that terrible moment, he had two options -- to save himself, or to save his friends. For Mike, this was no choice at all. He threw himself onto the grenade, and absorbed the blast with his body. One of the survivors puts it this way: "Mikey looked death in the face that day and said, 'You cannot take my brothers. I will go in their stead.'"

Shame on so many of us for our stingy service to others. What Petty Officer Monsoor did inspires awe, even from the writers of Scripture: "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die." (Romans 5:7) The Savior Himself commended such sacrifice of love. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13)

## **April 11**

"April showers bring May flowers." I better get to work on the ark. The old rain gauge is overflowing. But first, I wonder what the Bible says about all this rain.

Matthew 5:45 tells us that God's generosity is not confined to church-goers. "He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous."

But He does want His generosity to be returned with devotion. Deuteronomy 11:17 says that if His people don't follow Him, "He will shut the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce." Jeremiah complains "They do not say to themselves, 'Let us fear the Lord our God, who gives autumn and spring rains.'" ( 5:24 )

Get it right through His word. "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth...so is My word that goes out from My mouth: It will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:10-11)

My curiosity about rain in the Bible is satisfied. Now I need to get on with it and build an ark. An ark will certainly get me to my weekend preaching destination much faster than American Airlines MD-80s!

## April 14

The "Newseum" opened to the public Friday in Washington D.C. Dedicated to journalism, an introductory film tells visitors to the Newseum that, as Edward Rothstein wrote, "War is news, peace is news; love is news, hate is news; life is news, death is news. Nothing is not news, and its chroniclers take on heroic status here." (New York Times, April 11; B36)

On Pennsylvania Avenue , close to the Capitol, its outside wall quotes the First Amendment in big, bold letters. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

Here's something most journalists refuse to mention as news. When the First Amendment begins, "Congress shall make no law" the founders said we citizens are ruled by two sovereigns. One is the government; the other is God. Our duty and conscience cannot be claimed completely by the government.

People sometimes say that there are two subjects to avoid in polite conversation, religion and politics. Nice to know that the document that has made our government work so well for so long was amended to acknowledge the claim of God on America's citizens.

## April 15

In wealthy nations people spend 10 to 15% of their disposable income for food. Compare that to "Raju," head of a family of six in New Delhi , India . Correspondent Laurie Goering reports Raju makes \$77 a month and spends 70% of it to buy rice, lentils and wheat. Vegetables on the table are becoming rare. Forget about meat and milk.

Because of weather, increased biofuel production, increased demand in developing nations, and corruption, worldwide food prices have gone up 45% this last year. Robert Zoellick,

president of the World Bank, says that 33 nations are at risk for social upheaval because of food shortages. Rioting is already occurring in some nations, like Haiti . And some of us are only thinking about the cost of gas?

An AP photograph by Emilio Morenatti shows a crowded food market in Pakistan , really crowded, people pressing against each other. Big neighbor India , second leading exporter of rice, has stopped most rice exports. Think about possible scenarios. Both nations have nuclear weapons. Food fight. ( Chicago Tribune, April 13; 1, 21)

"Our Father who art in heaven," we pray, sometimes thinking of others and not just our own needs. Next time you pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," remember the world.

## April 16

The theme of Pope Benedict's visit is "Christ our Hope." Our hope for what? My friend is having serious surgery today. There will be prayers but the immediate focus is on the doctors. How about hope for the homeless and starving? Again prayers but the immediate focus is on fulfilling our duty to help. How about hope for troubled marriages and families? "What a friend we have in Jesus" but the need for counseling and disciplined selflessness are immediate. And so it goes. Christ is one of many objects of hope.

Unlike other hopes, hope in Christ is based on His resurrection from the dead. It is "from the resurrection of Christ that a new and purifying wind can blow through our present world. Here is the answer to 'Give me a place to stand and I will move the earth.' If a few people really believed that and acted on it in their daily lives, a great deal would be changed. To live in the light of the resurrection – that is what Easter means." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Letters and Papers from Prison," 132-133)

Some objects of hope will disappoint us and certainly all earthly objects of hope will pass. Christ's resurrection promises to take us to the other side of failed hopes. Is it the place you take your stand?

## April 17

Hi, Christian here! Mommy and Daddy ask, "Christian, what do you see with?" I point to my eyes. Mommy and Daddy ask, "Christian, what do you hear with?" I point to my ears. Mommy and Daddy ask, "Christian, what do you talk with?" I toddle over and pick up the cell phone. Opa will tell you this is true. Why do Mommy and Daddy chuckle when I pick up the cell phone? I learn it from them. I learn it from big people. We children learn what we live.

Opa says, "Christian, you are at a precious time. You are learning habits by watching big people. You also will learn to think twice about what people do. You should learn to examine habits." Opa says that being a Christian means thinking about the things we do and don't usually think about.

Psalm 139:23-24: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

Is it hard for big people to change their natural habits? Do you try? Is it, like Opa says, part of repentance?

## April 18

No minute

## April 21

The following prayer is worth more than a minute of your time. I'm told it goes back to Sir Francis Drake and was adapted by Dr. Harry Krieger.

"Disturb us, O Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves; when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little; when we have arrived in safety because we sailed too close to the shore. Disturb us, O Lord, when with the abundance of things we possess we have lost our thirst for the water of life; when having fallen in love with time we have ceased to dream of eternity; and in our efforts to build the new earth, have allowed our vision of the new heaven to grow dim. Stir us, O Lord, to dare more boldly, to venture on wider seas, where storms shall show Thy mastery, where losing sight of land we shall find the stars. In the name of Him who pushed back the horizons of our hopes and invited the brave to follow Him. Amen."

Doesn't that fit the tough realities of Monday morning? In ways we cannot know, God is behind today's disturbances to make us people of more faith in His Son. "O ye of little faith." (Matthew 14:31)

## April 22

God said to Abraham, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you." Abraham didn't say, "Let me check it out and I'll get back to you." The Bible simply says, "So Abram went" (Genesis 12:1, 4).

Today is "Call Day" at Concordia Seminary. Well over 100 men will be told where God through the Church is sending them to serve as pastors. They will line up in chapel, step forward one by one, and hear where in the country or in the world they are being sent as they receive their first "calls" into pastoral ministry. Some have an inkling where they might be sent, those headed for team ministries, but no one knows for sure and most have no clue. It is a very real demonstration of putting oneself into the service of God, faith being put into action.

Jesus says to you and me, "Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me will save it" (Luke 9:23 -27). You may not be called to move to an unknown land, but is your faith ready to venture into service today for Him?

## April 23

When you think about God, or when you talk about God, or when you talk to God in prayer, what word do you use to name Him? Is it the word "God" that you use, nothing wrong with that, or do you have other words to name Him?

Call God "Eternal" and you remind yourself of our mortality but His never-ending life. Call God "Almighty" and you remind yourself that He can do all things, that He can bring worlds

into being and help you in your need. Call God "Judge" and you remind yourself that you must give account, but call God "gracious" and you remind yourself that He does not deal with us according to our sins. Call Him "Father" and you've got the dearest picture of all.

And Jesus? Jesus is His name and means "Savior." Call Him "Savior" and remind yourself that you need deliverance from sin and so many other evils in this world. Christ is His title. Call Him "Christ" and you are reminded that this man from Nazareth is God's anointed one. Call Him "Lord" and acknowledge your submission to Him.

Some talk at length about God and some pray long prayers to God. You can make it shorter but sweeter by using other words that describe so, so much.

## April 24

"You have one new voice mail."

So I punch "P" to play the new voice mail.

"Hi, Dale, this is Fred or Sally or whoever. Sorry I didn't catch you. What I'm calling about is such and such." And Fred or Sally or whoever goes on and on, telling you about such and such. Then more often than not, it ends this way: "You can reach me at 618-555-7145 or my cell phone, 314-555-2076 ." Huh? You said it so quickly that I only got a couple numbers.

So you go back and listen to the same message again. "Hi, Dale..." and this time you get a few more numbers, but still not enough to return the phone call.

"Hi, Dale, this is Fred or Sally or whoever..." and now you're listening for the third time. It's like the movie "Ground Hog Day," same thing over and over and over again. Maddening!

Just because you've said it, doesn't mean I've understood it. Oral communication is more than just making your point. That works in print where a reader can pause but successful oral communication needs slowness and repetition. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matthew 7:12 ). That might help communication in many areas of your life, not just these confounded voice mails!

## April 25

Here's a scary quotation. "We deplore those who are led astray," said Russian Orthodox priest Aleksei Zorin, "those Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, evangelicals, Pentecostals and many others who cut Christ's robes like bandits, who are like the soldiers who crucified Christ, who ripped apart Christ's holy coat."

Yesterday's New York Times featured an article on religion in Russia . Russia has not returned to the oppressive atheism of Soviet days but government officials decidedly favor the Russian Orthodox Church. Baptist minister Vladimir Kotenyov said, "This is how they think: If you are a Russian person, it means that you have to be Russian Orthodox." If you're not Russian Orthodox, especially Protestant, you and your church are often viewed as a front for America .

Said Mikhail Odintsov, a senior aid in Russia 's Human Rights office, "In Russia there isn't any significant, influential political force, party or any form of organization that upholds and protects the principle of freedom of religion." (New York Times, April 24; A 1, 14)

Americans should be deeply thankful that our First Amendment guarantees free exercise of our chosen religion. At the same time, we should also ask ourselves a deep and revealing question: Do we distinguish our faith from our patriotism? God is certainly not an agent of Russia ...or America .

## **April 28**

The credit crisis. Homes being foreclosed. Fuel prices rising. Food costs rising. In some places food shortages. Layoffs. How bad is it?

Is it as bad as this? No rain for years. Famine. A widow is about to prepare a meal that she and her son will eat...and then they'll die. Let's tell young people about the Great Depression. So this widow...read about her in 1 Kings 17...this widow is about to make their final meal when the prophet Elijah tells her to bake some bread for him! No way, I've got to take care of myself! But Elijah gets her with a promise from the Lord. "The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord gives rain on the land." (1 Kings 17:14 ) The widow trusted God...and He kept His word. "The jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah" (v. 16)

I've been hearing church people talk about our economy, how times are tough for church finances, how people can't give to the Lord's work. What does Jesus say? "You cannot serve both God and money." (Matthew 6:24) The widow took God at His word. Why don't we?

## **April 29**

What's the purpose of the Bible? "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name." (John 21:30-31)

And the purpose of a minister? Timothy was told, "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." (2 Timothy 3:14-15)

Saying attacks on him have been attacks on the black church, suggesting the government used AIDS against blacks, identifying himself with the hatred of Louis Farrakhan... Rev. Jeremiah Wright is back in the news. Is he simply a modern day prophet? Take a random look at the writings of the Hebrew prophets. Apples and oranges. They chastised ancient Israel for leaving faith and life in God. Repentance before God was their focus.

Rev. Billy Graham showed us there is a way to fulfill a minister's biblical purpose in the public spotlight. The word "reverend" means someone who is to be respected. Some should be; others not.

## April 30

Diane had cleaned the house but now that's only a memory. The floor has things strewn here and there, including a toddler size Elmo. The coffee table has crayons on it, not in their box, of course. A baby swing is off in one corner. In another corner there's a drum Diane bought at an antique store. Until now it's been a nice, silent decoration. These days it's getting pounded by a young drummer. Daughter Elizabeth has brought two-year-old Christian and two-month old Connor to come visit Opa and Oma. Homeland Security has declared a high alert. My folks are here too, having their first meeting with their new great-grandchild. For their age they are active, but everything is relative. Right now they sit and watch the future. Diane is trying to keep up with everything and Dale, well, I'm in and out. Four generations.

Tomorrow is Ascension Day, a church festival that should get more attention than it does. "This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11) Life marches on. Don't let your faith muscles get stiff. Jesus not only died, he rose, ascended and is on the horizon. Older people watch the kids play. Ascension reminds us to look ahead.