

## September 1

"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!

## September 2

Will the President get a bounce in the polls from his convention speech?

When a public speaker named Gorgias arrived in Athens in 427 B.C., he attracted great crowds, got a "bounce." Philosophers, like Plato, objected that the orators were self-serving, shaping truths or half-truths to achieve their own ends. It's a real tension, speeches, true or half-true, that aim for a bounce versus uninspiring presentations of the truth. Listen to the punditry this political season and you'll hear the same subsurface tension between objective presentation and calculated persuasion, between truth and spin.

American religion is much the same. People today go to church looking for a "bounce" in their spiritual life but did the orator, the preacher, give you a "bounce" based upon a presentation of the truth? That's eternally important since each of us is responsible for what we believe. The most discerning ancients appreciated an inspiring speech that gave bounce but didn't trust it until they had checked out the truth. "They received the message with great eagerness and examined the scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11).

2500 years ago the orators, not the philosophers, carried the day. That's human nature, still today. The one that gets the biggest bounce wins. But is it true?

## September 3

"Leopold Zunz...has shown that almost the whole of Israel's inner history since the close of Bible times can be traced in following the development of...Sabbath discourses on the Torah. Sabbath worship is still the chief bond which unites Jews into a religious brotherhood" ("The Torah: A Modern Commentary," p. 546)

Apply that to this welcome and relaxing weekend. If Jews grew closer by using their weekly day of rest to talk about biblical topics, can't we grow closer by reading and talking in relaxed ways about important things? When spiritual people do that kind of talking, the important things will be talked about also in reference to God. Such talk, faithful to what God has revealed in Scripture, will bring blessings because God's word "does not return void" (Isaiah 55:11).

Christians see the fulfillment of the Sabbath in Jesus. "Come unto Me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). He welcomes us to a long weekend, not a legalistic tent revival but a weekend willingly spent with family and friends in talk, relaxed talk about trivial things and talk about the "one thing needful." "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love; the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above."

## September 7

On 80 secluded acres in metropolitan St. Louis, we faculty and students of Concordia Seminary today begin the 166<sup>th</sup> year of training pastors for The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod.

"Secluded" can present a problem. In 1884 Woodrow Wilson, then 28 years old, wrote to his future wife, Ellen Axson. "I am afraid of being a mere student. I want to be part of the nature around me, not an outside observer of it.... You'll never find in a cloister a fulcrum for any lever which can budge the world" (James Chace, "1912," p. 45)

Wilson wasn't opposed to academia. He was president of Princeton University from 1902 to 1910. Wilson feared isolation from the pressing issues of the day. Academic seclusion easily becomes seduction into self rather than service. When that happens, no fulcrum will be found to budge the world.

But seek seclusion in order to engage societal issues wisely and you'll find fulcrums. One stands out in world history. "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). What came from that seclusion with the Wisdom of God and engagement with society? They "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6).

## September 8

"The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deuteronomy 33:27).

The Bible has many passages like that, "refuge" passages, and we quickly focus on the safety promised. But wait! What's the context? Aren't "refuge" passages prompted by a whole lot of real life trouble? "Many are the afflictions of the

righteous" (Psalm 34:19). Really, who needs refuge except someone having big time troubles? Charley, Frances, and next comes Ivan. There are reasons why people seek shelter. So when the Bible presents God as a refuge and his "arms" supporting you, it's against the background that you've got troubles and your strength, your resources aren't enough.

Do you pay insurance premiums to guarantee you'll have no problems? No. Realistically you know problems come and insurance helps you deal with them. "He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). Faith in God and trust in Jesus don't exempt us from the hurricanes of life. What pious habits do is implant in us the directions to divine shelter when the storms come. "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all."

Our thoughts, prayers, and help go out to the people driven to refuge by the hurricanes.

## September 9

This past Tuesday one local paper buried this story amidst short notices: "University student jumps to her death." That little notice identified Joann Mitchell Levy, a 23-year-old graduate student, as the fifth student at New York University who apparently committed suicide this year.

The same day another local paper ran this headline on page one: "Group wants to prevent more suicides." This is Suicide Prevention Week. According to [www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org) there were 83 suicides a day in 2001, one every 17 minutes. For each death by suicide, it's estimated there are 25 attempts.

I couldn't begin to describe the devastation that suicide brings, not only to the person like Joann but the lasting damage to family and friends. Sadly, some of you know it. Doyle Wilson, a crisis-line supervisor, says, "Suicide is one of those things everybody knows about...but nobody wants to talk about it. It's one of those touchy subjects that people are afraid to get into, but knowing about suicide, and knowing the warning signs, can save someone's life" (Belleville News-Democrat, September 7).

Isaiah 28:15 deplores a "covenant with death." Did one paper bury the story because it conflicts with assisted suicide propaganda? Better that we bury the "covenant of death" with a pervasive and helping reverence for life. Check out the website.

## September 10

Carlyle Marney observed that "much of one's solitude is caught in a crowd." May I suggest that you seek that solitude this weekend, wherever you happen to be?

First, the third anniversary of 9/11 calls for quiet reflection. When communism was collapsing, I told my daughters to take in all the news they could. They did, but not with the intensity I did. After all, the threat of nuclear war hadn't defined their young lives in the same way it loomed over mine. 9/11 defined, as they say, "the

new normal" for all of us. Now terrorism haunts us all, and that's an evil unlike other important campaign issues.

That leads to the second topic for your weekend solitude, the election. Voting will begin Monday in Pennsylvania. By the end of September voting will have begun in 17 states and by October 18 there will only be 6 states in which voting is not underway. Bernadette Budde of the Business Industry Political Action Committee says, "November 2 is the LAST day to vote." (David Broder, Omaha World Herald, August 23).

People do what they want to do and so the ignorant around us won't turn to thought this weekend. You, I trust, will catch some solitude in whatever crowd you're in.

### **September 13**

Two blocks west or five blocks south. When I grew up, both sets of grandparents were close to home and we visited them all the time. I don't remember when it happened, but sometime this little kid figured out that Grandpa and Grandma actually were the parents of my parents. Those authority figures who kept telling me how to live my life? They were kids too. They reprimand me? Hey, they were reprimanded by their parents. "Don't slam the door when you go out!" I bet they got yelled at for that too. Wow, was that great when it dawned on me that my parents were just grown up kids.

Yesterday was "Grandparents' Day." In earlier eras we didn't need an artificial day. We were at Grandma's and Grandpa's all the time and we truly did show them the greatest of respect. After all, they deserved it. They had to raise our parents! Moral of the story: Young moms and dads, with all your parenting books and parenting tapes, don't be obsessive about perfect parenting. If they haven't already, your kids will soon figure out that you were a kid too. When they do, when they bring up your foibles, as you probably did to your parents, an admitting smile will strengthen family love....from generation to generation.

### **September 14**

The Anheuser-Busch commercials "Real Men of Genius" poke fun at people with odd jobs, like "Mr. Clip-on-Tie Inventor." Isn't that playing to human nature, making ourselves feel better by putting others down?

Another ad mocks "Mr. Really Really Really Bad Dancer." Now the brew boys are getting personal! In high school and college I either stood awkwardly off to the side or was a self-conscious klutz on the floor. I am "Mr. Really Really Really Bad Dancer!"

Sunday many churches heard Luke 14. Jesus, attending a banquet given by a prominent religious leader, advised his host he'd do better to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind than the socially conscious "respectable" religious people who had come to be seen. By that is Jesus commanding us to have a heart for those who are not as well off as we are?

Do you belong to Sam's Club or Costco? Another AB commercial pokes fun at "Mr. Warehouse Shopping Club Member." Truth be told, we "respectable" religious people are the real men and women of questionable genius. We're among the poor, the crippled, the lame and blind of Bible times. That, I think, is more what Jesus means than the respectable religious puffery, "There but for the grace of God go I."

## September 15

"Why?"

"Because I say so. That's why!"

When you pull that one out, it's a sure sign you're losing!

A blogger, who calls himself "Buckhead," says he was sitting in his pajamas late one night when he posted his belief that documents about the President's National Guard service were fake. It spread like wildfire and now the documents are generally regarded as phony. Media elites, who had promoted the documents as true, looked down their noses. [Jonathon Klein said](#) dismissively, "[Bloggers](#) have no checks and balances...(it's) a guy sitting in his living room in his pajamas."

"Because I say so. That's why!"

The presidential election between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson in 1800 was one of the most contentious in American history. Jefferson "proposed to channel the energy of the common man into an anti-elite assault on the Federalists. They were aided in this endeavor by Federalist hubris and by the rapid growth of an independent and increasingly gregarious press" (Jane Dailey, Chicago Tribune, September 12, 14, 3).

The current forgeries broke God's commandments against stealing and bearing false witness against another, not to mention human laws. Aren't we blessed by God to live in a country where the elites "Because I said so" can be challenged? By the way, Jefferson and the non-elites won.

## September 16

"Come, my children, and I will teach you the fear of the Lord" (Psalm 34:11)

The Bible talks about fear in several ways. One way is the feeling that you and I have when something bigger than we can handle comes right at us, something like 9/11 or a terrible medical diagnosis. But the Bible also talks about the feelings we have when something overwhelming comes at us but comes to help us. God for us, not against us (Romans 8:31). That feeling is what the Bible calls the "fear of God." Rosh Hashanah began last evening. Rosh Hashanah begins ten days called the "Days of Repentance" or "Days of Awe." God is overwhelming for us.

Christians focus this fear of God, this awe in Jesus Christ. "Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory" (2 Timothy 3:16).

A woman who got one of the Pontiacs Oprah gave away said, "It's so awesome." While I certainly wouldn't have minded being in that audience last Monday, those Pontiacs will depreciate. The mystery, the awe of God for us, not against us, appreciates every day in a believer's heart.

## September 17

According to the Baltimore Sun, "An important question is whether a sense of fairness is something people pick up in school, home or church, or whether it's a concept that has been hard-wired into the human brain through the eons." Sarah Brosnan and Frans de Waal of Emory University have been experimenting with monkeys to discover what gives humans a sense of fairness. They've "found compelling evidence of an evolutionary origin. The monkeys...know a raw deal when they see one."

The Bible spares us this monkey business. God planted His ways, including fairness, into Adam and Eve's hearts. Unfortunately sin has blurred this innate knowledge of God, which brings us to monkey story number two.

Hindus consider monkeys sacred. In the town north of New Delhi, some monkeys are a nuisance, even attacking children. So officials gather up the worst of the monkeys and put them in jail. Yes, in Patiala, India there is a jail for monkeys. Apparently not all monkey business is fair and honest.

In humans the Bible calls this lack of justice sin. For our sin, God sent a Savior, in whom forgiveness overcomes the unfairness of life and moves us to act justly (Micah 6:8). That's a cause of hope...unless we're nothing more than descendants of monkeys. (Chicago Tribune, September 12; A1; 13, 8)

## September 20

When I was in grade school, we had a series of workbooks called "Think and Do." I don't remember what the workbooks were about but the title stuck with me. Think and do is a good reminder as you plunge into the new work week. Before you plunge into your workday doings, think: God is real and can't renege on His promises to you.

Jesus once told a rich young man to sell all that he had and follow Him (Luke 18:22). About that Oswald Chambers wrote, "Jesus did not go after him, He let him go. Our Lord knows perfectly that when once His word is heard, it will bear fruit sooner or later." Think, remembering God's word will bear fruit in your life.

Visiting a church last month in Torgau, Germany, I was taken by a Latin inscription near the pulpit. No worshipper can see this inscription; only the preacher sees it, and that only when he leaves the pulpit. "In silence and hope will be your strength" (Isaiah 30:15). That is to say, Preacher, think about it. If you've properly spoken the promises of God, be still now and let God work on the people through His promises.

God is real. Think about that, and then go about your daily doings.

## September 21

When I walked into the house the other day, the first thing I did was go through the day's mail. An envelope from church said, "For Hurricane Relief." I didn't open it, just left it in the stack.

Sometimes you'll hear Christians go on about spiritual warfare. Paul says, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). Well, yes, but how is little me or little you going to fight cosmic forces of evil? Sounds like Don Quixote tilting at windmills.

A hurricane is a force of chaos, nature's rebellion against the Creator who tamed chaos. When Jesus told his parable about burying or not burying our talents, He was really talking about faith active in love (Matthew 25:14-30; Galatians 5:6). There are people, I'm one, who like to think about the cosmic things of theology. Doing so, we can also bury our talents that were intended by God to be His service through us to others. The best thing about a donation to hurricane relief is that it joins us in a hands-on-way in the battle against things that just ought not be. I'm sending in a donation.

## September 22

The rabbit died.

No, my wife isn't pregnant! Our pet rabbit died. When Katie's boyfriend gave her a bunny 5 years ago, she said, "I can't have him at college." So Diane, who has a big, big heart for God's creatures, took in the little white bunny.

We invested him with human qualities. His name was Amos, although he didn't know that. He lived in his apartment with maid service, although you'd call it a big cage in the family room that Diane took care of. When he was loose in the house, he'd sometimes nibble on a newspaper or on some book left on the floor. "Amos is reading," we said.

He had "personality." He loved his afternoon carrot. When he was excited about going outside or getting his "seed balls," he'd stand up in eager expectation. When something upset him, he thumped. Amos liked to sit quietly by Diane and me and be petted.

This little guy brought love to our home. If you think my sentiment is overdone, recall those articles you've seen in magazines and newspapers that praise the positive effects pets have on people. "God is love" (1 John 4:8) in so many, many ways. Thank you, Amos, for leading us on your bunny trail to that love. May all God's creatures do the same for you.

## September 23

Happy birthday, Caesar Augustus!

Who? The first century B.C. saw civil war throughout the Mediterranean world. Caesar Augustus established himself as emperor and ruled from 27 B.C. until his death in 14 A.D. The historian Tacitus wrote, "When the world was wearied by civil strife, (he) subjected it to empire under the title "Prince" (Annales I.1). His birthday, September 23<sup>rd</sup>, was celebrated throughout the Mediterranean world with parades, sacrifices for his welfare, dramas, and a general carnival atmosphere. (Calvin Roetzel, "The World that Shaped the New Testament," p. 74)

Augustus, of course, was no Christian, dying when Jesus was just a teen-ager. He was kind toward the Jews throughout his empire, part of his policy of kindness toward all subjugated peoples. Because he put in place the "Pax Romana," the Roman peace, a sect of the Jews, the "Christians," was able to practice their beliefs and grow rapidly in numbers.

God works that way, using world leaders who do not acknowledge Him to serve the people who do. Hence Paul wrote, "I urge...that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Timothy 2:1-3). So, happy birthday, Augustus, wherever you are, and we are reminded to pray for our leaders.

## September 24

Our Jewish friends begin their celebration of Yom Kippur this evening. Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement, the day when sacrifices were made for the forgiveness of Israel. Christians believe this practice foreshadowed the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for our sins.

Again, it begins this evening. The Genesis account of the creation of the world says that "the evening and the morning were the first day." That's typical Hebraic thought, the day began at sundown, not sun up.

There's something very rich in this. We're conditioned to think the day begins with work and ends with rest. The Hebrew view is totally opposite. The day begins with the rest and sleep of the evening...understand God's grace...and then waking and work follow as our response to the graces received. It's radically different and I've found from experience, also spiritually enriching.

So when you come home and relax this evening, every evening, remember you're entering the first part of your new day, the grace part. The greatest grace is to begin anew with a clean slate. Day of Atonement begins at sundown. You are forgiven!

Jesus, Savior, wash away

All that has been wrong today;

Help me every day to be

Good and gentle, more like Thee.

## September 27

What is it in marriage? "We" or "Me?"

Dr. Dale Lefever tells this story. A wife stopped at the grocery store on her way home from work. When she got home, she put the groceries on the counter and realized she had locked her keys in the car. Knowing how her husband would react, she decided not to call him. In due time he came home, found out about her keys, and exploded. "How could God make anyone so beautiful and so stupid at the same time?" he asked. After fuming a while, he started to walk away.

"Wait," she said. "I want to answer your question. God made me beautiful so you'd love me and God made me stupid so I'd love you."

Doing forgiveness is not easy. Think of all that Jesus went through for us. I hope this husband had enough sense to seek it... and it sounds like the wife had enough grace to give it.

"Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" (Colossians 3:12 -15)

We, not me.

## September 28

Charley...Frances...Ivan...Jeanne...all leaving destruction in their wake.

Somewhere the ancient poet Homer wrote, "Injustice, suave, erect, and unconfined; Sweeps the wide earth, and tramples o'er mankind; while prayers to heal her wrongs move slow behind." Too true. Rather than preventing these disasters, our prayers "move slow behind."

A story from Exodus sheds some light. Superhero Moses asks to see the God's glory. Although they're on good terms, God says, "no." He did grant Moses this: "I will cause all My goodness to pass in front of you.... I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.... But, He said, you cannot see My face, for no one may see Me and live" (Exodus 33:19-20). So God hid Moses in the cleft of a rock, shielded Moses while His glory passed by, but finally let Moses see His "backside," His goodness and mercy.

Mercy, mercies really, are the loving kindnesses God does for people and often through people. So the hurricanes sweep through, leaving destruction in their wake. It's just not right and our prayers move slow behind. But God goes ahead of it all and answers our slow moving prayers with all the loving kindnesses, the mercies, He shows to people through His people.

"I love the Lord, for He heard my voice; He heard my cry for mercy" (Psalm 116:1)

## September 29

No reason for you to know this as you plunge into your day of work, no reason to know this as you navigate dangerous traffic, no reason to know this as you walk in the crowds, not all kindly people, no reason to know...but in the calendar of the Christian church today, September 29<sup>th</sup>, is the day of "St. Michael and All Angels"

The archangel Michael shows up in the biblical books of Daniel ( 10:13 -21, 12:1), Jude (9), and in Revelation 12:7-9, "There was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down – that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him."

Michael is our protector. Indeed, that's the task God's given to all the good angels. "He will command His angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways" (Psalm 91:11).

Angels aren't objects of worship but servants of God. They get only one day of honor in the church calendar. Good thing God has them on duty more than one day a year for you and me. You're in good hands!

## September 30

Tonight is the first of the presidential debates. If the past is any indicator, some TV stations will interview groups of "undecideds," people who have been on Mars or Venus these last months and haven't studied the issues.

David Grimes of the "Sarasota Herald-Tribune" wrote about some schools in California , Nebraska , and Iowa . Students in these schools have been taught that there are 53 states, that there are four branches of government, and that the Senate in Washington D.C. is for Democrats while the House is for Republicans. Grimes reported that their civics lessons taught the United States flag "has not been updated to include the addition of Hawaii, Alaska and Puerto Rico to the 'original' 50 states." I'm not making this up! (in Omaha World-Herald, August 23). The schools have taken corrective measures, but still...

"I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth," says the Apostles' Creed. One of the things God has made is our mind. Martin Luther explained, "I believe that God has made me and all creatures, that He has given me my body and mind, eyes, ears and all my members, my reason and all my senses." My reason. For some fellow citizens in our participatory republic, reason is a new frontier. Let's hope they start exploring the issues ASAP!