

September 1, 2005

Looking forward to the Labor Day weekend? Before it begins, take a moment to add some spiritual significance to this secular holiday.

The first pages of the Bible say that God created the world in six days. “By the seventh day God had finished the work He had been doing; so on the seventh day He rested from all His work” (Genesis 2:2).

Why did God rest? God doesn't get tired (Isaiah 40:28). I think it was Rabbi Abraham Heschel who pointed out that God rested to show His presence with us in our human patterns of work and rest. God worked and rested, setting the pattern for our work and rest. He's with us in our routines. He's Immanuel, God with us.

As you begin what I hope will be a long and relaxing weekend, let God be with you. Delight in His creation, not only in the wondrous nature He created but delight also in your dearest fellow creatures, family and friends. And as you relax, remember that you're fulfilling the pattern set for you by your Creator, work and rest. Let Him be with you, your Immanuel, the One who says, “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

September 2

Put out your flag this weekend...rest and relax...honor the blessings of labor in this free country...and remember Cooch's Bridge. In a thick forest Cooch's Bridge, a stone bridge, spans a tributary of the Brandywine, Christiana Creek. It's a perfect place for an ambush. When General George Washington heard about advancing British infantry under Lord Cornwallis, he ordered General William Maxwell of New Jersey to set the ambush at Cooch's Bridge. Washington's order was received this date, September 2, in 1777, and the next morning fierce fighting began. The Americans lost 40 of their 600 soldiers. British losses were even greater.

“With respect to its effect on the war, the battle at Cooch's Bridge was insignificant. It was, however, the first battle ever fought under the American flag. Congress had recently passed the Flag Resolution, and...historians of the revolution consider the battle at Cooch's Bridge the first conducted with the new colors.” (Jean Edward Smith, John Marshall, p. 57)

So as you relax this weekend, maybe much of the time on your couch, remember Cooch's Bridge. The labors that have so blessed us in this country were made more possible because of men and women fighting for us under the Stars and Stripes.

I'll be back Tuesday. Have a safe holiday!

September 7

Today Major League Baseball observes "Roberto Clemente Day." Born in Puerto Rico in 1934, Roberto Clemente had excelled in track and field but chose a career in baseball. What a success! His first year in the majors was 1955 with the Pittsburgh Pirates, the team he stayed with his entire career. With a .317 batting average over 18 years and 3000 hits, Roberto Clemente was one of the best to ever play baseball but it wasn't only baseball skill that earned him today's recognition.

Nicaragua had been devastated by an earthquake. Because he had heard that some relief supplies were not getting to the victims, he was determined to fly there himself and make sure the help was delivered. Weather conditions were not good that day, December 31, 1972. The plane went down off the coast of Puerto Rico and his body was never found.

"Love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 12:10). Love? Ultimately that's God who loves us in Christ (1 John 4:8-10). So who's really touching the victims when you offer help? God is. Roberto Clemente did that; now we do it with Katrina. More than altruism, this can be the Spirit of God and Christ working through you!

September 8

Was it Anna in "The King and I" who sang, "Whenever I feel afraid, I hold my head up high and whistle a happy tune so no one will suspect I'm afraid?"

Honestly now, what are you afraid of?

Afraid for the safety of someone in your family? Isaac was afraid when his wife's safety seemed threatened (Genesis 26:7). Afraid about a meeting that's coming up? Jacob had cheated his brother Esau out of the birthright, so he was quite afraid when it came time for a face to face meeting (Genesis 32:8, 12). Afraid for your life, scared of death? David was afraid when Saul wanted to kill him (1 Samuel 21:13). If the great heroes of the Bible were afraid, it's OK to admit that we're afraid too.

Why did Jesus so often say, "Fear not?" He said it because He knows that we, just like those biblical heroes, are often afraid. And he added a reason why we don't have to continue in our fears. "Fear not," He said, "It is I" (Matthew 14:27). He's with you, He really is. When you remember that, you can whistle a happy tune.

September 9

We thought it must be an accident, a plane off course, but then came the news: A second plane, a second tower. What happened was more than could be understood that day, that year, even four years later.

Back then we had let ourselves believe that people are basically good. The buildings hit. People jump to their deaths. People like us fleeing for their lives. There is evil, and evil lives in people. Are more and more of us forgetting that painfully learned lesson?

"God, where are You?" we asked and we still wonder.

He was there. "God sits high but looks low." He looks down in the rubble, down with the sobbing souls. The Most High who came down to the cross is with the victims of every tragedy, with the crushed whatever the cause, with you, with me.

It is time again this weekend to be quiet, to remember that there are two sides, good and evil, and to be determined for which side you will work. "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do? The Lord tests the righteous, but His soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence. The Lord is righteous; He loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold His face" (Psalm 11:3,5,8).

September 12

Last Thursday Rev. Oswald Hoffmann died. Dr. Hoffmann was one of America's best known and loved clergymen. For 33 years he was the Speaker of The Lutheran Hour radio program, the world's oldest syndicated weekly religious program. He had a unique voice, I've never heard anything like it, and it conveyed a down-to-earth humanity that he mixed naturally with heavenly optimism centered in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dr. Hoffmann once told me about a preaching tour in Viet Nam during the war. One day he was struggling over a message he was to deliver to the troops, not knowing how best to express that good word from God that the troops needed to hear. He found the way. One of the soldiers told him in conversation that he couldn't wait to get out of Nam and get back to the real world. That was it, Dr. Hoffmann told me, that was his message. Soldier, this is the real world. Fightings and fears and death, this is the real sinful world and it was for this that Jesus Christ came, Christ "who has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10). Resurrection was the part of the message he never forgot. Let's not forget in our versions of the real world!

September 13

I'm reminiscing about the late Dr. Oswald Hoffmann, Speaker of the internationally known radio program The Lutheran Hour. Dr. Hoffmann died last week. I had the singular privilege of succeeding Dr. Hoffmann as the Speaker of the Lutheran Hour, a position I held from late 1988 until 2001. I'd often stop by his office and seek out his advice. He was dependably kind and encouraging.

One day I asked him what audience he pictured in his mind when he was behind the microphone in the studio, no one else in the room. He told me that he pictured himself in a car talking to his fellow passengers. Not preaching to crowds of thousands, which he often did. Not hammering away a message of doom and gloom as some preachers delight in doing. Not pontificating about his way being the right way. No, just talking to fellow travelers in a car.

Someone once observed that we never meet “humanity,” but we do meet individual people with their individual names and their individual stories. Isn’t that the way God comes dearest to us, with kindly words that give us hope in Christ Jesus? It’s like traveling with people in a car. That’s a good way to picture the Good News of Jesus, “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20).

September 14

If a husband has any brains, he learns more and more as the years pass to treasure the blessing God has given him in his wife. These days I’m sharing some personal stories about Dr. Oswald Hoffmann, who passed away last week. I’m sharing the stories with the hope that they’ll illuminate real life truths for you just as they have for me.

Back in 1992 Dr. Hoffmann and I both spoke in Cleveland for the 50th anniversary convention of the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League. 7000 people attended that convention. Our wives accompanied us, Mrs. Marcia Hoffmann and Diane. It happened one day that both the Hoffmann’s and the Meyer’s entered the crowded foyer of the convention hall at the same time and at the same door. Instinctively Dr. Hoffmann and I plunged into the crowd, greeting people and being greeted, totally forgetting our wives. Marcia Hoffmann looked at Diane and said, “He does this all the time.” Diane understood completely. Dr. Hoffmann understood the sacrifices his beloved wife, now sainted Marcia, made for his Gospel work. She knew that greeting the people to whom he brought the Good News of Jesus was something he did all the time.

“He who finds a good wife finds what is good and receives favor from the Lord” (Proverbs 18:22).

September 15

Back in science class, did you ever hand in an experiment and attribute the results to God? Of course not. A scientific understanding of the world depends upon natural cause and effect, things which we can discover and quantify. So when the media reports on hurricanes like Katrina or Ophelia, we hear about the natural phenomena of the storm, not about God.

Read the Bible, however, and you find yourself in a different worldview. “The Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and...a violent storm arose” (Jonah 1:4). The Lord’s “way is in the whirlwind and the storm” (Nahum 1:3).

Two different worldviews...do they leave you spiritually schizophrenic? Is God involved or not? If God is to be relevant to your life in our scientific age, there must be some places where He steps into the closed world of scientific cause and effect and makes a difference. The Bible suggests several breakthrough places: The coming of His Son into flesh, sacraments like Baptism and Holy Communion, and the biblical revelation itself. And sometimes, if He so chooses, He can reach down and deflect a hurricane. If

He does not, as with Katrina, we are humbled and remember that God is God, supreme over all creation.

September 16

The “Godless Constitution” it was called. 218 years ago tomorrow the Constitution of the United States was signed in the Pennsylvania State House, known to us as Independence Hall. The only hint of religion in the Constitution, excluding the later First Amendment, is Article VI: “No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States .”

Is it really a Godless document? The Preamble has many words with religious overtones. “We the People of the United States , in order to form a more perfect Union , establish Justice...” The Founders understood justice as a religious obligation. In the Declaration they appealed “to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions.”

The Preamble continues, to “insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare...” That is very much in line with what the Bible teaches in Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Timothy 2:1-2.

“...and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity...” Said John Adams, “Let it be known that...liberties are not the grants of princes and parliaments.” Said Thomas Jefferson, “The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time.”

Crafted with a belief in God, thank God for the blessings we have received from the Constitution!

September 19

“If I had time in a bottle.” Jim Croce sang that, reflecting the way we talk about time, time as a thing, something we need more of. “I don’t have enough time!” While he’s known for “You Don’t Mess with Jim,” “Bad, Bad Leroy Brown,” and “I’ve Got a Name,” Croce’s hit “If I Had Time in a Bottle” is most poignant. Jim Croce died in a plane crash outside Natchitoches , Louisiana , on this date in 1973. He was only 30 years old. “There never seems to be enough time to do the things you want to do once you find them.” True, so don’t think about the length of your life but about the service you offer God and others today.

“Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12). Another song about time is relevant, not just because of a death at age 30 but because that dead man conquered death. “Crown Him the Lord of years, the potentate of time, Creator of the rolling spheres, ineffably sublime. All hail, Redeemer, hail! For Thou hast died for me; Thy praise and glory shall not fail throughout eternity.” You can’t store time in a bottle but you use today to lay up eternal treasures. “My times are in Your hands” (Psalm 31:15).

September 20

The Pledge of Allegiance is back in the news. Should school children be compelled to say “under God?”

It’s a democracy so you can express your opinion...and run the risk of exposing your ignorance. Wrote one blogger: “Under God should be removed from the Pledge of Allegiance. Immigrants, newly naturalized, are required to say ‘under God’ whether they are Christian or not.” Whoa! “Under God” doesn’t suggest Christianity. Except for atheists and perhaps agnostics, “under God” fits most people’s beliefs.

He continues: “We are forcing them to acknowledge ‘our God’ whether they are Muslim, Buddhist, Taoist, Shinto!” (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, September 18; B1). “Our God?” He’s assuming, wrongly, that Christianity is the religion of the West, especially of America . You need only turn one page in Philip Jenkin’s book to get the truth: “Many of us share the stereotype of Christianity as the religion of the ‘West’.... Already today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in Africa and Latin America .” (The Next Christendom, p. 2).

Think what you will about the pledge, just don’t confine the faith of Christ to the west and America . Jesus said, “This gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14). Won’t those who relativize Christianity be surprised!

September 21

Pastor William Engfehr volunteered his time in the devastated Gulf Coast area. He tells about driving through a subdivision, or trying to drive, to find the home of a certain minister. House numbers were of little help because the houses in that subdivision had been moved around by the storm surge. When he saw a man standing in his driveway, Pastor Engfehr approached and said he was looking for pastor so-and-so. “You found him,” the man said. Picture that. A man standing before his ruined home, standing there and thinking, thinking only his thoughts and maybe thinking about God, maybe.

People alone with their thoughts, weighed down by the unfairness of so much in life. Sometimes you alone wrestling with the unfair way God seems to treat you. “Sweet hour of prayer” goes the Gospel song but sometimes the hour of prayer is bitter and needs a sweetener. Take enough time alone with God and He’ll add the sweetener. Maybe it’ll come in reading your Bible or devotional book. Maybe it’ll come as you recall a hymn or Bible passage you memorized long ago. The sweetener is the Spirit of Jesus, who suffered unjustly but gives hope by His resurrection. “I am with you” (Matthew 28:20). Your thoughts sweeten. God says, “Friend, I am not being unfair to you.” (Matthew 20:13).

September 22

Did you catch the real life drama last night on TV? A Jet Blue flight took off from California and immediately had landing gear problems, the front wheels turned sideways and wouldn't retract. To burn fuel for a lighter emergency landing, the plane circled Los Angeles International Airport for three hours. When the crew finally landed the plane skillfully and safely, you can imagine the thankfulness. Said Christine Lund, "We all cheered. I was bawling. I cried so much." (AP)

Ten lepers met Jesus, Luke 17 tells us. "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" He did...in an interesting way. Rather than just zap them healthy, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." The lepers went, and found themselves healed in the going. Offering their diseased self to God by going to His intermediary, there was healing from Jesus. How many lepers did a U-turn to thank the One who had healed them? Only one. (Luke 17:12-19)

Whom do you thank when you are healed or saved from a terrible accident? Calling Jesus the "Savior" is using a word that doesn't communicate to everyone. Call Jesus "deliverer" or "rescuer?" He often helps us through intermediaries, through skillful pilots or showing yourself to the priests, through doctors and counselors and other professions. Do you return to thank Him?

September 23

A prayer for deliverance from Hurricane Rita:

O God, You are not seen by us but we see the power of Your creation and are afraid. We hear the roar of the winds, the reports of the news, and the echoes of Hurricane Katrina in our minds. We shudder at the impending destruction of another hurricane.

We pray you to soften the impact of this storm.

The pounding of our coasts has humbled us. We do not approach You with any claim of our own worthiness but totally dependent upon Your mercy. Let our humility be born of a sense of our sinfulness and that we have merited Your temporal and eternal displeasure. Yet for the sake of Your Son, the Suffering Servant, Jesus Christ, we ask Your mercy upon us here, upon the Gulf Coast region, and upon our nation. O eternal God, remember that we are mortal. O omnipotent God, remember that we are weak. O Father of mercies and God of all comfort, for the sake of our Savior, extend your mercies to those already suffering and to those whose test is coming.

Whenever You shall bid the storms to cease, send Your Holy Spirit to our thoughts and devotion that we will give You our thankfulness and commit ourselves to lives of service.

Amen.

September 26

“Well begun is half done,” they say... but it’s still only half done and the second half is often the hardest. Do they call it “compassion fatigue,” that weariness that comes when you’ve been giving of yourself, giving, giving, giving and the demand on you doesn’t let up? There was the tsunami and we responded, then Katrina, now Rita. Sometime down the road the news will carry someone in the Gulf Coast region complaining, “Everyone has forgotten us.”

“Let us not become weary in doing good,” Paul wrote to the Galatians. He said the same to the Thessalonians: “never tire of doing what is right” (Galatians 6:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:13). Obviously he understood compassion fatigue.

The help comes when you realize that you can’t give and give and give. We’re mortals with limitations. That’s why God had His Old Testament people keep the Sabbath, give of themselves for six days and rest on the seventh and let God’s goodness restore you. That’s why Jesus said to His weary disciples, “Come with Me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest” (Mark 6:31). It’s finishing the tasks of compassion that drives us to seek God’s help. The first flush of helping others is easy. When that’s gone, the discipline of regular devotion is required.

September 27

The other day I attended a church meeting that began, understandably, with a devotion. The devotion was printed out and included singing this hymn: “Cast care aside; lean on your Guide; His boundless mercy will provide. Trust and enduring faith shall prove Christ is your life and Christ your love.”

Good enough. Then we sang the next stanza, which had a typo in it. “Faint not nor fear, His arms are near; He changes not who holds your dear.” That was the typo. It should have read, “who holds you dear.” Instead, it said that “who holds your dear.”

That got me thinking. We have our “dears,” those people we love. Your wife, your husband, your mom and dad, your son or daughter, and you can add to that list. Sometimes we worry about our dear, sometimes even beside ourselves with fear for their well-being.

And do you fret because one of your dears doesn’t know the Lord? Peter says, “they may be won over without words...when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. (1 Peter 3:1-2) So for all your dears, pray, live a joyfully reverent life and remember the truth is not a typo: “He changes not who holds your dear.”

September 28

Cindy Sheehan, the mother who lost her son in Iraq , is using her grief to fuel her anti-war protests. Pamela Hallal lost her son Deryk in battle in the Al Anbar Province.

“Why hadn’t God answered our prayers?” Pamela complained. “What purpose could this possibly fulfill?”

Going through Deryk’s personal effects, she found comfort and purpose for her grief. “Deryk had been invited to give his testimony to our youth group upon returning home after his seven-month deployment. He never had the opportunity to do that – at least not in person. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I read (what he had prepared). I had been confident our son was with the Lord. At that moment, I became more assured than ever.” The final point Deryk’s made: “Of everything I learned in boot camp, this is the best thing: Praise God All the Time, not just when you are in trouble! God will be there and has a plan for you no matter what you think.”

Deryk’s parents have used their energies to share his witness with thousands of people.

Pamela Hallal’s story is in a great new volume, “God Answers Prayers, Military Edition,” edited by Allison Bottke. Subtitle: “True stories from people who serve and those who love them.” How are you using the energies of your grief?

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 29th, 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

When I was about to leave my first congregation to take another position, a church official came out to ask church members what they wanted in their new pastor. He asked if there were any minorities in the congregation. “Yes,” a woman replied. “We have a few families who aren’t German.”

It's easy to make generalizations about people, about us and them, but it's just not the way it is. The Summer Institute of Linguistics regularly publishes a massive book called the "Ethnologue." The most recent edition documents 6,912 languages in the world. Papua New Guinea is the most linguistically diverse country with 820 languages. Mexico has 297. In the United States 311 languages are spoken. Many of our assumptions about ethnic groups are wrong. (New York Times, July 19, 2005 ; F3)

A fellow pastor once corrected me when I referred to the "mission field." "Mission fields," plural, he told me. Right. Remember, 6,912 languages spoken in the world. In Genesis chapter 11 the Bible tells that God didn't like excessive human pride and so He caused people to speak different languages so that they could not understand one another. Every four years a new "Ethnologue" comes out, always listing more languages. Is God still trying to humble us, making us realize many of our assumptions about other people are wrong?