

SELECTED  
SERMONS



**by Jerold L. Irvin**

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## PREFACE

These several sermons were randomly selected from approximately 2300 messages I delivered during the 40 plus years I preached. Most of the sermon manuscripts from the 1950's, the 1960's, and the 1970's were destroyed in about 1980. From about 1980 until I retired in 1991, about half the sermons I used were from hand-written outlines. I haven't sought to put them in manuscript form. In addition to these sermons, there are around a hundred manuscripts in my files. Those all are unedited and uncorrected. There are around a hundred pastoral prayer manuscripts in those files, also. They are from my earlier years in the ministry. In later years, I normally used extemporaneous prayers. Those manuscripts are also unedited.

These sermons were, of course, spoken and the manuscripts were written with oral delivery in mind. In addition, while not reflected in the written text, I frequently added a limited amount of extemporaneous material which seemed appropriate to the time and setting.

One of the purposes of preaching is to communicate the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ. Another purpose is to apply Biblical teachings and resources to life. Still another purpose is to teach. And a fourth purpose is to seek decisions from the hearers. I believe these sermons seek to fulfill one or more of those purposes.

At any rate, it may be that these messages reveal more about me than the book of remembrances which I have compiled.

They surely reveal something of my basic commitments and my outlook on life. Hopefully, they reflect something of my faith and my convictions about the truth of the Christian Gospel.

I make no claim that I fulfilled in my life the call to Christ-likeness to which these sermons may point. That is the reason that emphasis on God's grace frequently appears in these messages. The Gospel simply says that God has done in Christ what we cannot do for ourselves...make ourselves acceptable to him. In Christ, God accepts us as we are. We respond to God's love shown in Christ...his life, his teachings, his death, and his resurrection. We do not earn God's love nor do we merit it. We seek to obey God because he loves us; we do not obey God to get him to love us.

I don't mean for this to be a sermon, but those ideas are basic to my preaching. They are reflected, in one way or another, in all my messages.

Another aspect of preaching has to do with the eternal relevance of the Gospel. Assuming this copy of sermons survive, say for a hundred years, it would be interesting to see if the basic message is still valid then. Contemporary references and examples would have to be altered or left out, of course.

I never claimed to be a dynamic preacher. What I did try to do was two-fold: To be simple and clear; and to have something important to say to at least one of my hearers.

So I hope whoever is bold enough to read these sermons will enjoy them; and I dare to hope that the reader will be touched by the spirit and grace of God.

June, 1993





THE GOSPEL IN MINIATURE  
John 3:16

I heard recently about a man who went to the hospital to have a bunion removed. He ended up with a broken leg, a heart attack, and a ruptured stomach. The newspaper carried the story about a man in Buenos Aires who feared the pain that might result from the bunion treatment, so he requested a general anesthetic. Sadly, that led to the heart attack. The doctors opened his chest and massaged the heart and revived him. Later, though, he suffered a stomach contraction which resulted in a rupture. While being carried on a gurney he rolled off and broke his leg. And he still had the bunion.

Sometimes it seems that our lives are like that, doesn't it? Maybe our luck is not that extreme, but Murphy's law says that anything that can go wrong, will. That is why the gospel comes as such good news. That is why it is refreshing to pause for a few minutes at the end of a hectic week to worship and give thanks to God for his presence in our lives. Particularly, it is a time of refreshment when we can think about this verse that Martin Luther called the Gospel in Miniature....John 3:16.

"God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life". That about says it all, really. God so loved the world. You and I are loved; we matter. Our lives have value.

A little boy one time was supposed to bring his birth certificate to school for the school records, but he lost it along the

way. He went to his teacher and sobbed: "I lost my excuse for being born". This verse tells that we don't have to have an excuse for being born. We are loved, we are prized, not because of any special virtue on our part, but because God so loves his world. There are lot of people in the world who need to know about that love.

A frequent topic of conversation today is the rising rate of violent crime. It shocks us to read that in a recent year, 18,000 persons were murdered. It might shock us more to realize that during that same year 25,000 persons committed suicide. It may be that, without minimizing the problem of violent crime, a greater problem for our society might be loneliness, depression, and emptiness. People need to know that they are loved.

How desperately the world needs to know that it is loved. How powerful that love can be in people's lives. Art Buchwald, a humorous newspaper writer, once wrote about a man who single-handedly tried to save New York City. Buchwald was in a cab with this man. When they got out of the cab, he paid the driver and said, "Thanks for the ride, you did a superb job of driving". The driver looked at him suspiciously and said, "What are you? Some kind of wise guy?" Buchwald asked his friend why he did that, and the reply was, "I'm trying to bring love back to New York City. Suppose that cabby has 20 fares today. That means, that because I was nice to him, he may be nice to 20 people. And those people, in turn, are going to be nice to clerks and waiters and employees and maybe even to their own families." Buchwald said he was skeptical and asked, "Does it work?" And

the man replied, "Nothing is lost if it doesn't". They continued down the street, the man being kind to people as they walked along. Finally, Buchwald said, "You just winked at that very plain looking woman". "I know", he said, "And if she is a school teacher, her class will be in for a fantastic day".

Well, that is a whimsical approach to a very serious matter. The world needs to know that it is loved. What greater good news could there be than that "God so loved the world"? How much? "that he gave his only begotten Son". That's what God did.

John Bergland tells about a young father who stood at the bedside of his ten year old son. A doctor had just removed a malignant tumor from the boy's brain. Through his tears the father said, "I wish it could be me". The Biblical image of God is just that, a father weeping over the sinfulness of mankind. But God doesn't just say, "I wish it could be me". In the person of Jesus Christ, he took to himself the estrangement of us all...the horrible malignancy of our sin, our pride, our greed. I don't understand exactly how that works. No one does. But we ought to know by now that any salvation that comes to us is a gift. It is not something we attain ourselves. There is too much emphasis by we moderns that somehow we have the ability to save ourselves.

A little boy said to his father: "Dad, do you know that the biggest room in the world is?". And the father said, "No". And the little boy said, "The room for self-improvement". And that is true. A lot of books have been written on how to improve ourselves. And it is important that we seek to discipline, to refine, and to channel the energies, the imaginations, and the ideas that God has

given us.

But we need more. One time a manager of a 10 story office building was informed that a man was trapped in the elevator between the 3rd and 4th floors. He rushed to the grill work around the car and shouted, "Keep cool, sir, we'll have you out soon. I've phoned for the elevator mechanic". There was a brief pause and a tense voice replied, "I am the elevator mechanic".

There are some situations from which we cannot deliver ourselves. If a large ocean liner becomes disabled in the middle of the ocean, the passengers can't get out and push.

Any salvation is not from within, it is from above. That is why the scripture says, "God so loved the world that he gave his Son". It isn't simply a matter of deciding to be better people. We become better people when the reality of what God did for us, the cross, becomes the center of our lives...when we know God's great love for us, when we understand God's willingness to become involved in his world, involved in our lives. That is when the room for improvement begins to be renovated.

Yes, "God so loved the world that we gave his only Son that whosoever believes in him...". Concentrate on the verbs..love, gave, believe. Belief is more than subscribing to a particular creed or doctrine.

Some years ago a well meaning mission board sent a plow to Africa, It failed, however, to send any support people. The plow went to a primitive tribe in entral Africa. The people had never seen such a thing. They didn't know what to do with it. So they sat it up in the middle of one of their fields and worshipped it. Each day, they would interrupt their work several

times to pray to their new God. The plow, of course, was intended for the cultivation of the soil. It was supposed to make life easier for the people. Instead of using it as a means of deliverance, it became an added burden to their lives. If we misunderstand what it is to believe, our faith can become an added burden to our lives, and not a deliverance.

Belief is not assent to a doctrine, though doctrine is important. When we say we believe in Jesus Christ, it means that we enter into a trusting relationship to him, with him. That is, we not only believe in who he is, we also believe if we live the way he calls us to live our lives will be blessed. It is one thing to say we believe in the builder of a bridge. It is another thing to drive across the bridge.

A famous acrobat was crossing Niagara Falls on a wire. He was to push a wheelbarrow. He asked the crowd, "Do you believe I can do it"? They all shouted "Yes". "Then who'll get in the wheelbarrow?" Christ does not call us to make a dangerous and pointless journey over a roaring waterfall. But he does ask us to trust him in our daily lives. Not only to believe in him as an historic person, or as an abstract idea...but to believe in his power working through us in our lives.

God so loved the world..you are loved, I am loved. That he gave his Son. The cross of Christ is our hope and our salvation. The answer does not lie within us, but within him. That whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting live. Not just in heaven way out there somewhere. Heaven begins the moment we give ourselves to him and walk with him in a trusting relationship of love.

THOUGHTS ON DEATH...AND LIFE

Romans 8:14-18, 28, 31, 35, 37-39

(Used May 28, 1978 at Clarinda)

Memorial Sunday presents itself as a time to remember the past and contemplate the future. It offers opportunity to reflect on friends and loved ones who have died. The day, as you know, came from the desire to remember and honor our military sons and daughters whose lives were taken in the wars which have ravaged us as a people. And surely we want to pay the tribute which they deserve in sharing in the preservation of the heritage of our nation and our land.

This morning, though, I would like to be a little more personal than that and share with you some faith concerning death and concerning life. Obviously, my sharing is colored by the difficult pain which has been ours the past few weeks. And I guess what I am saying is that this is a personal testimony coming from my experience and my convictions.

First, death, particularly the death of one who dies before all his years have been lived out, is not the will of God. We do not accept the pagan fatalism so prevalent in our society. It manifests itself in such statements as "his time was up", "it was his time to go", and "it's God's will, we just have to accept it". We find little, if any, consolation in that. Indeed, it cannot be that a God who loves can be so capricious. We rather affirm that it is God's will for each person to live out his 3 score and 10 years in a life of fulfillment and service. The scripture says, "It is not God's will that any should perish".

True, God's intentional will for a person's life is often frustrated..thwarted so badly that a 19 year old young man could be killed, or that 6 month old infants should die. Oh, I am not prepared to offer explanations, for, as Paul says, "Now we see through a dark glass dimly". However, we affirm God's continuing love, and his continuing presence and power to be with us and to assist us in molding a future of quality and significance and fulfillment.

Second, we affirm that life is of one piece, it is whole. That is to say, we believe that death is an experience in the wholeness of life...a life not ended by death. Just as birth, just as selecting a vocation, just as choosing a life mate are among life's experiences so is death, though death is much more mysterious.

Third, how then do we explain death, whether it be the death of our son and brother, or of someone we have never seen? Well, that is the point, we do not seek to explain it...we accept it as a part of the risk of living, we accept it as part of the oneness and wholeness which God gives to life. We do not live by the questions which we have but by the certainties of what we do know and understand. As difficult as it is, we are content to know that sometimes we have to trust in the wisdom of an all-wise God. In other words, we do not live by our fears and doubts, but we live by our faith...however fragile that might be at times.

Fourth, we make several affirmations about life as we experience it in this "thin veil of tears".

1. Amid the great certainties of life there are some uncertainties. We don't know what each day will bring forth. We, in faith, know that the sun will come up tomorrow, that the seasons will come and go, that the laws governing the universe are de-



pendable. But uncertainties mar our experiences.

Sometimes we approach the tomorrows with anticipation, sometimes with apprehension. For such is the nature of existence... amidst an amazing predictability there is an equally amazing unpredictability. God says to us, "Wise is he who so orders his life and structures his priorities that he will be ready for the uncertainties of life".

2. Partly because of the uncertainties of life, it is never too early to appreciate the valuable. Not only is that true of appreciation, it is also true of commitment and action. Tomorrow may be too late to appreciate, to commit, to act.

One of the great prayers of the church has these lines in it: "Since we do not know what a day may bring forth, but only that the hour of serving thee is always present; may we wake to the instant claims of your holy will, not waiting for tomorrow but yielding today".

Let us appreciate the valuable while we can. Let us commit ourselves while there is still time, and let us act out our commitment while the Lord yet gives us life.

3. Human life is an inexplicable mixture of good and evil. It is a mixture of joy and pain, of happiness and sorrow, of fulfillment and frustration. We live in a world where the innocent suffer, where the good bear pain and sorrow, and where, often as not, evil prospers. It is a world where the rain falls on the just and the unjust, where the sun shines on the good and the evil. But we affirm that it is a world which God controls, one in which he acts. We affirm that, though human love and hopes are sometimes crushed, this is still God's world. How blessed is the person who so believes and whose life is framed by such a faith.



4. The significance of life is determined more by its quality than by its quantity. Length of years do not mean completeness in life. We do place a good deal of importance on the length of life...and that, indeed, is a worthy goal. But we affirm that God's great concern is that a life be one of quality and joy. God is more concerned about life's deepness than about its durability.

You will note, for example, that some of the finest things in life do not last very long.

Beauty is often fleeting. The inspiration and the moving power of a wondrous sunset are gone in just a few minutes. The most beautiful flowers endure only for a season.

So it is with life. Its significance, its beauty, its meaning, all are determined by its depth and its quality rather than its quantity. It is a sad truism that so many people live out their life without really living...painfully struggling to get through each day. They offer themselves to no great cause, they dream no great dreams, they hope not great hope. The fact that someone lives to be 100 is no assurance that he has lived.

5. We further affirm that sorrow and grief, pain and hurt, are not faced alone. It is true that suffering is very personal, and must be dealt with personally.

But people care and they express that care in a myriad of ways. There is something about the power of shared hurt. It does seem that someone who sincerely cares takes to himself some of the pain of another who is hurting. No, never all of it... maybe not even a small portion of it...but some of it.

But more important is the fact that God himself knows all about pain and suffering and loss. After all, he lost a son, and

has for ages had his heart wrenched by wayward people. So God, because he loves, is able to share one's hurt. He does it knowing what it is all about because he himself has and is suffering.

The scriptures are replete with the evidence that God suffers with us. Such wonderful promises are everywhere in his Word: "I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you", "Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid", "My peace I give to you". "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? .....nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord".

Our pain and hurt will abide throughout our lives. But we trust in a God who loves us and who shares our sorrow. We thank God for Phillip and for his life. And we know that his memory will bless us in the days ahead.

## WINDMILLS OF THE SPIRIT

John 3:5-12

One of the symbols of our past is the windmill, and there is some anticipation that it may be an energy savior of the future. I guess I have some fascination with windmills, for as I drive through the countryside I think not one of them misses my eye.

In seeking insights into understanding the Spirit of God, consider that Jesus asked Nicodemus: "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" Let me share my windmill image, an earthly image, but it helps me understand myself, the people around me, and in some ways how the Spirit moves among us. Maybe it will help you too,

In the New Testament scriptures, the Greek word for wind and spirit is the same. I have wondered how to express the sense of the Spirit in the language of the wind. Note four things about windmills.

1. They are solidly constructed. Most of them are made of angle irons anchored in firm foundations of concrete. They are set in a particular place. They are built so that when the wind blows they will not tip over.

2. Secondly, even though the windmill cannot go any place, it has the ability to turn its top all the way around. It can't change its location, but it can change its orientation, and it can catch wind from all directions.

3. Third, windmills have great fans and fins that are strong and reach into the wind. And on most windmills there is a braking device that overcomes the power of the wind so that it will no

longer run.

4. Fourth, windmills are made for specific purposes. In our area that purpose was to pump water. In other lands, windmills grind grain and are used for other purposes as well.

These four things set me to thinking about how it is that we, who are rooted in the earth with some real limits on our abilities to move, to change, and to grow, can attune our lives to catch the winds of the Spirit as it blows. Think with me now about these four things and how they relate to your life and mine.

1. First about being well built and set in one place. Praise God if you are firmly anchored where God wants you to be. Not everyone is where God wants him to be. There are some here this morning who are not where they ought to be. They need to make some radical choices, and become anchored where the wind of the Spirit can more easily blow upon them.

Once we find the place where God's will intends for us to be, we can then learn to wait patiently for whatever winds of the Spirit may come. God's Spirit will come to you whether you are where you ought to be or not, how much more, though, when you are firmly rooted where you should be. God's Spirit comes to you where you are to empower you here and now for what you are to do and what you are to be.

2. Now once we are set down in a particular place - whether it be permanent, or a temporary one in your pilgrimage to where you belong, we can turn ourselves in all directions to catch the Spirit from whatever direction it blows.

We can learn, that once we put our roots down where we really belong, that we are open to a lot of new things. For instance, we can learn a lot from people we never took seriously before. We can

learn a lot from children, from women, from the third world. We can even learn from those who disagree with us. We can let others cease to be "them" and become "us".

We might not see ourselves as being stiff and prejudiced, but we do have areas of stiff-necks and blinders, and there are directions in which we never look. But we are freed to turn in all directions, to taste the fresh breeze of many ideas and doctrines - and sense the Spirit of God in them.

These two parts of the windmill go together. When we are rooted and grounded where God wants us to be, then we have the basis from which to appreciate a wide variety of perspectives. Then when we look around us and try to see what God seems to be doing among us in different ways, we can take seriously who we are, what we are, where we are. But we also try to look and listen, to be open to influences that once seemed alien and strange. Curiously enough, we can become more open and less defensive. And I take that to be a gift of the Spirit.

Yet, there is more of the Spirit blowing in our lives that we are aware of.

However, we in the church have a real tendency to put the brakes on, and hang on. We ought to discover that with our dedication and commitment we ought to take on as much as we can handle and a little bit more. We need to strain and stretch a little. Instead of tightening the brake of personal windmill of faith, we need to release it and let the Spirit flow in new and creative ways. But that will mean the willingness to risk and the willingness to engage in spiritual discipline.

Sometimes there will be more than we can handle. We can put the brakes on but the Spirit will still blow. But on most days the wind does not gust, not is it calm...it just blows, God's

Spirit moves. God's presence and power come in ways which we have experienced and ways in which we expect...and in unexpected ways, too. I guess it is important for us to know we can make adjustments in our lives in relation to the Spirit, just as a windmill can adjust to the wind. We can learn how to adjust the brakes, how to reach for more wind, how to catch some we didn't feel before. And, as a result, we can feel new strengths emerging from within.

4. Fourth, each windmill is set in a particular place to perform a particular function. Now, once we find our place, as I noted earlier, not everyone has even if he is 30, or 50, or 70, let alone 16 or 20, we still grow in grace and in our understanding of the Christian life. We learn to be more aware of the Spirit in our lives. We will find specific confirmation of God's will for our lives that matches our gifts and graces. When we arrive at where God wants us to be and seek to do what he wants us to do, then we receive the power to do it. And the life which Jesus called the abundant life is ours.

Now, there will be times when we want to be another windmill in another place. I look around, though, and see other windmills pumping water in their places, or charging electricity in theirs, or grinding grain in theirs. I look and the other windmills are turning...and the Spirit is moving in us all. Someday, maybe we'll know what wind is blowing. It is as mysterious now as when Jesus said to Nicodemus: "The wind blows where it will, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with the Spirit". (John 3:8)

Consider the windmill. Without wind it is a lifeless thing, a useless machine, sitting idly in a field. It has potential but

no power. The wind comes and brings power. It does not change the nature of the windmill. It brings power so that the windmill becomes useful and valuable.

And so consider yourself. Without the Spirit you are all potential and no power. You wait for the Spirit. The Spirit moves. It does not change your nature. It affirms you as you are, and empowers you for the work of the Kingdom.

We don't know whence it comes or where it goes, but we can be certain that as we wait for the Spirit as a windmill waits for the wind, as we make ourselves servants of the Spirit, we shall be empowered to do what God has for us to do with our lives...and that is enough for now.

TELL ME ABOUT THE CROSS

Galatians 6:14

Here's how a little girl described the place where she went to church: "I go to that building there, the one with the plus sign on top". She was referring to the cross. The cross is indeed the plus which Christianity brings to the world. No other religion offers that plus.

The cross has been a stumbling block and a puzzle to many. It was in Thomas Carlyle's early life. He was standing before a crucifix when he shook his head and said, "Poor fellow, you've had your day".

Those who crucified Jesus: felt the same way. They said, "He saved others, but he cannot save himself".

Paul found the cross a stumbling block before he was converted on the Damascus road. To him, the whole Christian movement, particularly the cross, was offensive. How could anyone believe that the crucified Jesus was the Savior? If he had been God's anointed surely he would not have died such a cruel death. But after the Damascus road, Paul engaged in an inner struggle about the cross. And this is how it came out: "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ". The cross became the central theme in Paul's preaching.

Parenthetically, let me note that Carlyle became convinced too. In his later years he no longer said, "Poor fellow, you have had you day" but he said, "His day is just beginning".

The cross has been a puzzle to Christians in all generations. At least 3 interpretations of the cross with variations have



been given and accepted by Christians as they have wrestled with the meaning of the cross.

1. There was the belief for centuries that the cross was God's way of paying a ransom to the devil for the release of God's children. You can see why that view has been discarded because it suggests a divine weakness. It indicates that God was in the hands of the devil, and that the devil was the more powerful of the two. It says that God could not secure the release of his children unless he bargained with the devil and paid a ransom. The ransom was Jesus. If God let Jesus go to the cross that would satisfy the devil and God's children would be released from their bondage. Sensible Christians no longer can accept such a view.

2. A second idea may be called the substitutionary theory. Anselm developed this theory in the 11th century.

It means that Jesus became a substitute for man's sin. God was displeased with man because of his sin. Jesus came along and said, "I will give my life as a substitute so man will not have to die because of his sin".

There is truth in the doctrine. Certainly, an innocent man may suffer because of another's sin. But the doctrine raises a difficult question: Can an innocent person be justly punished for another's sin?

3. Consider a third view. We might refer to it as the moral theory of the cross.

It begins with a picture of God as seen in Jesus Christ. There we have a perfect picture of God...a picture which he climaxed by hanging on a cross. So what does the cross tell us?

1. The cross first tells us of God's faith in man. You have heard it many times "Have faith in God". Sunday school teachers tell us that, preachers tell us that, parents sometimes do. And

the advice ought not go unheeded.

The cross however presents another picture - a picture of God's faith in man. Think of it--God knowing all about mankind; knowing every evil thought and deed; and knowing the depths to which mankind can fall; seeing all of that, God continues to have faith in his children. The cross says emphatically and magnificently "God has faith in you". That is what the man shouts from the cross on Golgotha, "God has faith in you".

2. Then, secondly, the cross tells us of God's suffering. Does God suffer? We might answer that by merely asking, "Do parents ever suffer?". This is very important in any consideration about the character of God..a suffering father.

Did the prodigal's father suffer when his son went into the far country? God is our father. No matter how unworthy we are, God's help is always available - if only we would reach out for it.

How can every command of God be broken without God suffering? How can he avoid suffering when we betray him, and when we recklessly go our own way?

One of the most powerful pictures of God's suffering appears in GREEN PASTURES. The play pictures an uneducated minister's interpretation of the creation and other Bible stories.

There is a scene where Gabriel says: "You look pensive, Lord. You been settin' here lookin' this way an awful long time. Is it somethin' serious, Lord?".

The Lord says, "Very serious, Gabriel".

"Lord, is the time come for me to blow?".

"Not yet, Gabriel. I'm just thinkin'".

"What about Lord?".

"About somethin' that boy told me. Somethin' about Hosea and himself. How they found somethin'".

"What, Lord?".

"Mercy...through suffering".

"Yes, Lord".

Then the Lord says, "I'm tryin' to find it too. It's awful important. It's awful important to all my people on earth". Did that mean that even God must suffer?

Suddenly, in the distance, a cry is heard. The voice says, "Oh, look at him. Oh look. They are goin' to make him carry it up that high hill. They're goin' to nail him to it. Oh, that's a terrible burden for one man to bear".

How can we continue to slap God in the face with our sin and disobedience when we see such suffering. It should bring us to our knees crying, "My Lord and my God".

3. The cross tells us of God's love There is no clearer and greater revelation of God's love than the cross. When we see such love demonstrated how can anyone remain hard and unrepentant? The cross tells us how far divine love will go.

The enemies of Christ were wrong when they shouted: "if he is the Christ let him come down from the cross". Love does not come down from the cross and destroy its enemies. Love tries to win over the enemies, it tries to make them friends.

With that picture of God's love painted on the cross, you cannot imagine God sending lightning and flames to destroy the wicked. God is love. Rather you can imagine the darkness falling upon the earth to remind people of the darkness of their sinful lives. Such love brings man to his knees in repentance.

Someone told the story about a girl who married a weak and worthless man. He rarely done a manly thing in his life. Why a woman falls in love with such a man, no one can comprehend. It happens, of course.

She loved him and would do anything for him. She gladly worked for him, she made the living. She paid his fines when he got in trouble with the law. She made excuses for him.

One day he robbed a store. Someone recognized him and reported him to the police. He knew it and rushed home, fell into a chair and told his wife.

Then he said, "Mary, I am now a thief. I am weak and unfit to be your husband. I have never done anything noble in my life, but I shall now. The police will be here in a few minutes. I don't want you mixed up in this. I want you to leave. Leave right now, and don't ever see me again".

What do you think Mary did? Did she leave? No, because that is not the way love acts. Instead, she sat down on the floor in front of him. She humbled herself and she said, "Now that you and I are in this together, what will we do about it?".

Unbelievably, he looked at her and said, "Mary, you have nothing to do with this. I'm the guilty one...just me. I'm guilty and I will take my punishment".

She put her hand into his and said, "John, have I been married to you all this time and you do not see that we are one? My love cannot let you go now just because you are guilty of a crime".

He broke down and cried like a baby. But it was the birth of a man.

When Abraham Lincoln was assassinated his body was carried back to Springfield for burial. The train carrying the body of that immortal president stopped in every town and village along the way. Thousands of people gathered to pay their respects to the man who had given his life in service of his nation.

In Albany, New York, the casket was taken from the train and

carried through the streets. People by the thousands crowded close to see the body of the fallen president. A black woman, standing far back in the crowd, even on her tiptoes, was unable to see. Her little son was holding her hand. When she couldn't see she suddenly took the little boy and lifted him as high as she could and said: "Take a good look, Honey. He died for you".

I wish it were possible just now to lift you to Calvary with its 3 crosses and ask you to focus your eyes on the man on the center cross. I would say to you: "Take a good look, my friend, take a good look. He died for you".

Let us, in turn, live for him.

LIFE BEGINS AT EASTER  
Matthew 28:1-10 or Luke 24:1-12

For too many people life does not seem worth living. The late comedian Joe E. Brown once said, "I enjoy life so much that I wish everyone to feel as I do about it".

A minister friend reports that he and his lay delegate were on the way to annual conference. She was middle-aged, a mother 3 times, a college graduate. She had been in the church since childhood.

As they traveled, at first the talk was trivial, then it took on deeper tones. All the sudden this Christian woman said, "I am going to confess something to you which may surprise you. Life has brought me no joy, it really has been meaningless. I don't think it is worth living".

Several years ago the play DEATH OF A SALESMAN was popular. It is the story of a rather shallow man, Willie Loman. At the end of the play his two sons stand at his grave, and one of them says, "He never knew who he was".

That, of course, is one of the great tragedies of life - not knowing who you are, not knowing what life is for.

Life is not worth living...that and similar attitudes are all too much with us. The cares of yesterday, added to those anticipated tomorrow, cause many people to conclude that life is a drag, something to be borne for a season, but without a good deal of worth.

Take old Methuselah. Did he know who he was, was his life worth while? He lived to be 969 years old, and, then we read,

"And he died". Imagine him going down to coffee shop on his 969th birthday and saying, "Boys, I have lived 969 years". And someone may ask, "Why?". Yes, Methuselah...why? What did you do with those years. You did not write a book, you did not paint a picture...all you did was live for 969 years and then you died. Why?

Life has no meaning, how often. In various ways, do we hear that...from the young and from the not so young.

But there is Easter.

Individual Christians, and the Christian community, have for a long time found something in Easter that gives them a new lease on life. Easter gives meaning to life. Easter says that life is important. Indeed, Life Begins At Easter.

1. Note that life began for the disciples at Easter.

Observe what happened to them when Jesus was crucified. They were scared, like frightened children. They were afraid for their lives. And they didn't know which way to turn. So they ran and hid.

But it was a different story after Easter. They were transformed into men of great courage. They believed their leader was alive and that he would be with them always "even unto the end of time".

You see, the disciples made an important decision. They had to decide who they were. Were they cowards? Would they spend the rest of their lives running from life? Would they go on being afraid? Would they be cowards or men? They finally decided that they were men of Christ...God's men who were to bring a new age into being.

Are you acquainted with a story called THE BEAR WHO WASN'T? It appears to be a silly story but it can teach us an important

lesson

The story tells of a bear who went to sleep for the winter. While he sleeps a factory is built over his cave. When he wakes up the factory is operating full steam. The foreman sees the bear and thinks he's a loafing worker, wearing a fur coat. He tells the bear to get to work. But when the bear claims that he is a bear, and not a man, no one believes him. He is sent to the manager, then to the vice-president, then to the president of the company. The officials think he is just a silly old man wearing a fur coat and in need of a shave. But the president thinks the matter ought to be looked into. So he consults the bears at the zoo. They tell him that he can't be a bear because bears are caged and he is not. Finally the bear becomes convinced that he is not a bear. He is just a silly old man in a fur coat who needs a shave.

Later the factory closes. The men are paid off and so is the bear. Winter comes and he is freezing. He knows what bears do in the winter but not what people do. Finally, he decides that he was right in the first place...that he really is a bear and not a man. So he goes to his cave and goes to sleep.

There are people like that bear...they can't make up their minds who they are, they let other people tell them who they are. I know a man who is 5'2", who thinks he's a bear...at least he is always growling and living a miserable life and causing those around him a good deal of discomfort. On the other hand, there was John Wesley, only 5' tall, who decided that he was a child of God and ought to act like one. And what a man he became.

It is important that you decide who you are.

Easter gave new meaning to life for the disciples. They started believing in God again. They discovered that God was



alive. They became men of strength, of confidence of faith. They started believing in themselves again, and in others, too. That is what Easter did for them. Life began for them.

2. Life can begin for you, too.

Life can begin for you today. Christ come to make your life good - here and now.

Do you think life has handed you a bad time? Jesus spoke of how good life can be: "I am come that they might have life and have it more abundantly". That means the good, full, meaningful life here and now.

Why are you complaining...because of handicaps, real or imagined..illness..short on funds..lack of education? Do not deny your failings and handicaps, everyone has them. But everyone has assets and strengths as well.

Most of us are handicapped in some way or another. But life does not stop because of that. Robert Louis Stevenson was sick from childhood and had to write with a pencil strapped to his hand. Yet, he brought pleasure to millions of readers. James Thurber, who made countless people laugh, was nearly blind for a long time. But he entitled his autobiography "Long Time No See".

This Easter can show you that you have an important life to live, here and now. Life can begin for you this Easter.

3. Then Easter has something else to say about life. It says that life can be so meaningful that it will last forever.

There is an old saying that two things are certain; death and taxes. No one questions the fact of taxes..this being a few days before April 15.

Yet, many people refuse to face up to the fact of death. Everyone shall die, so why do we so strongly refuse to face up to that reality?

We Christians, of all people should face that fact. Easter helps us to take a sensible view of death, or so it seems to me. Easter says that when a man dies, he will live again. I don't ask you to believe that...I do. And that is the witness of the New Testament: "I am the resurrection and life...because I live you shall live", Jesus said.

Don't ask me to prove that. No, the Christian does not try to prove it. It is a matter of experience and faith; it is a matter of one's convictions about God, and his creation. In many ways, this life is an introduction to the history of man, a prelude to a larger existence with God.

We are living an unfinished story.

The late Ashley Chappell was one of America's great story tellers. He was a clergyman, but was in great demand to speak before groups all over the nation. One time he was to speak at the state convention of the Alabama Lions' Clubs.

At the convention the district governor was pressed for time. The agenda for the convention was running well behind the schedule. So in introducing Chappell, he pointed out that fact. He said, "Dr. Chappell, we are short of time. But, you know, of course, that you are supposed to speak 30 minutes..not 31, not 33..not 35 minutes, but 30 minutes". Chappell agreed. When he started speaking he said he would speak exactly 30 minutes, even if he had to cut off in the middle of a sentence.

When he had spoken 28 minutes, he looked at his watch and said, "I have spoken 28 minutes..I have one more story to tell.

When I was a pastor in Texas, I was asked to perform the wedding of a rich rancher's daughter. The wedding was outdoors in a garden. And I stood before the bride and groom and started

the ceremony. In those days the minister asked the question "If any man can show just cause why these two may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak or forever hold his peace'. I had just asked that question, and two men got up - one on my left, the other on my right. The one on the left drew his six-shooter and said, 'I have a reason, Reverend'. And the cowboy on my right drew his gun out and said, 'I have a reason, Reverend'".

Then Chappell looked at his watch and said, "Gentlemen of the Lions' Clubs, I have spoken my 30 minutes as requested". And he sat down.

Everywhere in the auditorium, men jumped up and shouted "Finish the story, finish the story". One man got up and said, "I move we pay him another \$500.00 to finish the story". But they never heard the end of the story.

Life is an unfinished story. And our souls cry out, "Finish the story, finish the story".

Easter tells us that the story will be finished. Life is not an unfinished story, there will be another installment.

THE WAITING FATHER

Luke 15:1-3, 11-31

A teenager came to his pastor for advice: "I did something", he said, "that will make my dad furious with me when he finds out. What shall I do?" The minister thought for a moment and replied, "Go home and confess to your father, and he'll probably forgive you and treat you like the prodigal son".

Sometime later the boy reported to the minister, "Well, I told Dad what I did". "And did he kill the fatted calf for you?" asked the pastor. "No", said the boy, "but he nearly killed the prodigal son".

There are few stories in all the world's literature that are as well known as the parable of the Prodigal Son. And rightly so. There is no portrait of God in any of the world's literature more winning than this one.

Helmut Theileke said that we should call this parable the parable of the Waiting Father. And he was right. This great parable is the third of 3 parables in the 15th chapter of Luke. One is about a lost sheep, one is about a lost coin, and this one is about a lost boy. It is important for us to see that in this parable Jesus was not interested in teaching us something about shepherding or keeping our money, or even about being good parents. What he was trying to do was to answer the age old question, "What is God like?"

In the first place, Jesus shows us a father who loves enough to let go. This is remarkable if you think about it. An impudent boy comes to his father and says to him, in essence, "Look old

man, I'm tired of staying on the farm. I want to see the city. I don't want to wait until you die to enjoy life. Give me my share of the inheritance now". Needless to say, good Jewish boys do not talk to their fathers like that. Surely his punishment would be swift. Surprise! The father ponders the young man's request for a time and then says, "All right. If that is what you want, that is what you will get".

Remember now that Jesus is seeking to say something to us about God. And this is it: God loves us enough to let go. God did not create us to be robots. He created us in his own image. Whatever else that might mean, one thing is certain. We are free to choose our own destiny. We are free moral agents.

He has given us our inheritance. That inheritance takes many forms. We have amazing minds. We can use them or waste them. We have remarkable bodies. We can keep them healthy or abuse them. We have the gift of life, of time, of precious relationships. All are at our disposal. We are free.

Have you ever considered the fact that over most of the world God has placed a go sign, a yes sign? We are free - free to love, free to enjoy, free to dream, and free to decide. The Father loves us enough to let go.

Of course there are a few "no trespassing" signs along the way. "Thou shalt not kill", thou shalt not steal", "thou shalt not commit adultery", etc. Every game has its rules. So does the game of life. There are only rules that make sense, though. Some things in life are destructive.

But we are free to make those choices...even bad choices if we desire. The Father loves us enough to let us go. That is the first thing about God that Jesus shows us.

Jesus shows us a second thing...he shows us a Father who patiently waits for us to decide. There is a difference between lost sheep and lost coins and a lost boy. Lost sheep or lost coins are not responsible for making decisions. The shepherd goes out to find the lost sheep; the woman sweeps the house to recover the lost coin. But the Father waits on the lost boy to make his own decision. That is the ultimate consequence of our freedom. God will not force himself on us. He will not make us behave. He will not interfere. We are free to choose life or death, love or indifference, heaven or hell. We need to know, however, that we must live with the consequences.

And there are consequences in life.

Jesus showed us a God who is like a loving Father. But Jesus did not rescind the law of consequences. As one cynic put it, "Some of us want to sow our wild oats and then pray for a crop failure".

The prodigal son abused his freedom. He squandered his wealth and was reduced to feeding pigs. For Jews, pigs are unclean. A young Jewish boy could not fall much lower than feeding swine. The Bible says that the boy would have gladly eaten the pods which he fed to the hogs.

But one day he came to himself. What a great statement! He came to himself. He wasn't a pig. He was a boy. He wasn't a swine. He was a son. Even the servants in his father's house had enough to eat and a warm place to sleep. What was he doing in a pigpen? He would go back to his father and say. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son....."

He was taking responsibility for his own situation, and that

is always the first step in salvation. I hope if you ever end up in one of life's pigpens because of bad choices - whether it be enslavery to drugs or alcohol, or watching your family break up because of your own lack of moral discipline, or whatever pigpen you may be in - I hope that you won't blame it on your parents, or your friends, or your spouse, or your God. I hope that you will be man or woman enough to say, "I brought this on myself".

The young man came to himself and started home.

The father welcomed him back unconditionally. "Seeing him from afar, the father had compassion on him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him". The boy started his rehearsed litany of confession, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you: I am no longer worthy to be called your son". But the father did not even give him the opportunity to finish. He said to his servants, "Bring the best robe and put it on him..." The robe was a symbol of honor. "Put a ring on his hand..." The ring was a symbol of authority. "Put shoes on his feet..." Slaves went barefoot; sons wore shoes. "Kill the fatted calf..." They were going to celebrate.

The boy didn't deserve that kind of reception, did he? Many who heard Jesus tell this story were surely offended that a boy who had treated his father so would get off scot-free. Their discomfort is reflected in the envy of the older brother. He had stayed home all these years and the father had never killed the fatted calf for him. It wasn't fair.

Paul Tournier, the great Swiss psychiatrist and theologian, suggests that Christianity is the only religion in the world which says that God loves the unrighteous as much as the right-

eous. How unfair can God be?

But listen. There is a reason. If you or I stay home in the Father's house and keep all the rules and obey all the laws, we might have the idea that we somehow deserved the Father's favor. Even worse, like the Pharisee, we might get the idea that somehow we are morally and spiritually superior to the rest of God's children. We would not hear the gospel...that we are all sinners saved by grace. Our virtue would be in vain...for we would trust to our own will-power rather than the mercy of God. There is one thing that God rejoices in more than virtue and goodness. It is faith.

Why? because faith produces virtue and goodness...not vice versa. Let me use an example.

A young man loved playing golf. He used to spend hours in the back yard practicing his golf swing. He wasn't allowed to use real golf balls because of the danger to the nearby houses. So he used practice balls. He couldn't hit it very far and it would do no damage.

One day he thought both of his parents were out and the house empty, and he longed for the feel of a real golf ball on the head of the club. Just once wouldn't matter.

He teed up the ball and swung. You guessed it, he sliced the stroke and the ball headed for his parents' bedroom window. He heard the glass shatter, and then he heard his mother scream. He ran into the house and up the stairs to her bedroom. She was standing in front of the broken window, and she was bleeding. When he saw his mother standing there bleeding the young man started to cry and couldn't stop. All he could say was, "Mom, what have I done, I could have killed you". His mother hugged him, though, and



said through her own tears, "It's all right, I'm all right, everything's going to be all right". His mother knew that punishment was not what he needed at that point. He needed to know that everything was all right. Need I add that this young man never took a real golf ball into the back yard again?

That is what grace is all about. It is about love that is more interested in redemption than judgement. Most of the problems in this world are caused by people who do not really know that they are loved and accepted.

How about you? Is there a need in your life to come home? But I'm not good enough, some would say. That is the whole point. None of us are, no matter how faithfully we have stayed in the Father's house. Thank God, we do not have to be "good enough".

The Father loves us enough to let us go. We are free..free to choose our own paths. The Father patiently waits for us to decide. He will not force his way into our lives. But there is unconditional love, unconditional acceptance awaiting our decision. Earthly fathers may be tempted to kill the prodigal son; but God the Father kills the fatted calf.

## THE SECOND COMING

### II Peter 3:1-10

Who of us has not been confronted with someone's strange and different attitudes about what is in the Bible? Perhaps their ideas caused a little apprehension, or maybe a feeling of "Gosh, I wish I knew the Bible better". Or maybe we dismissed that someone with a "Well, he is a religious fanatic".

People say things like this to me: "Say, Reverend, did you know that spaceship visits are recorded in the Bible?", or "Reverend, why don't you preach more about how international events are predicted in the Bible? All that Middle East stuff and crisis are right there, plain as day". Parenthetically, these are the same people who tell me that religion and politics are not to be mixed. Or people say to me, "You know, preacher, anyone who hasn't received the baptism of the Holy Spirit just can't imagine how wonderful it is to have that happen to them. Do you know what I'm talking about? The Bible says.....". And they say, "We just have to put up with all the evil and suffering in the world. The Bible says that that must be before the Lord comes again to defeat the Devil".

I have come to believe that dealing with this kind of Bible usage ought to be more of a priority with me. I used to take the attitude that such people could remain convinced of their own superior understanding of the Bible even though I knew them to quite ignorant of the wholeness of the Biblical message. But I have decided that I will take a more aggressive stance. After all, and I say this with no sense of boasting, how many in this community were trained for 7 years in the Bible, and how many have spent

an additional 20 years living with the best and the worst of the Bible commentators, interpreters, and scholars?

Most people I know are abysmally ignorant of the wholeness of the Bible, of its history, and the extensive background information which is so essential to good Bible interpretations.

For example, to interpret the Bible adequately a person needs to be aware of the individual personalities of the Bible writers and characters. God chose certain individuals through whom to reveal himself, but he did not blot out the personality of his chosen agent. This lack of understanding on the part of many is symbolized by the common practice of saying, "The Bible says...." instead of "Amos says..." or "Paul says..." There is a difference, for example, in saying "Paul says 'it is a shameful thing for a woman to speak in church'" and saying "The Bible says 'it is a shameful thing for a woman to speak in church'". (I Corinthians 14:35)

With this saying of Paul, we come face to face with some crucial considerations for understanding the Bible message. And we can use that passage for purposes of illustration.

Is Paul's word here literally the Word of God? If so, few churches have kept it. Or would it be more to the point, and more faithful to God's word, if we were to consider the social context and background of the time and endeavor to understand why Paul would make such a statement. Perhaps it would be more faithful to the Bible and God's word if we looked into Paul's personality. and see his culturally conditioned bias toward women.

Well the point is this: God did not blot out Paul's culturally conditioned personality and viewpoints. God did use Paul as a marvelous agent of his word and way, even with all of Paul's

hangups. I believe that the same principles used in this illustration ought to be applied to the whole of the Bible and its parts and its personalities as we try to discern what God's word is as it comes to us through the Bible.

Now, I don't want to engage in "proof texting" to confront the "proof text" users. In the following example I merely want to show that it is necessary to appeal to the wider witness of the scripture to get the Biblical point of view. Many people are unwilling to do that.

Many of you have read or heard about a book called THE LATE GREAT PLANET EARTH by Hal Lindsey. In this book, Lindsey claims to demonstrate how prophecy has been and is being fulfilled in our time. He even sets a date for the world's end in 1992. (This sermon is being copied in 1993) Perhaps you have been thrilled by the book, I have been unimpressed, mostly because I am able to see that larger picture. Let me show you part of that larger picture.

To do so let us use one central idea which is in Lindsey's book - an idea current among many today - the second coming of Christ. Now I invite you to take a Biblical journey and probe that gets beyond the books of Daniel and Revelation, so heavily relied upon by the advocates of the physical second coming.

If you have a Bible with you, turn to Mark 9:1 "And he said to them 'truly I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Kingdom of God come with power'". Now try Mark 13:30: "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place".

Jesus' word here is very clear: In his own generation the Kingdom of God would come into being. I do not question the word

of Jesus...but Jesus did say that the Kingdom of God was expected soon, in his own generation. Did it come in his generation? Since it did not, how are we to look at his words here? I raise the question here...I do not have the time to answer it here.

Now turn to I Corinthians 7:25-31. Here Paul reflects on the same expectation of the return of Christ. He says, "The appointed time has grown very short...for the form of this world is passing away".

Both Jesus and Paul are quite plain: They expected the Kingdom of God to come in their generation, not a 1000 years later, not 100 years later, not even 50, but very soon. But it did not. I believe that presents us with a rather complex problem of Biblical interpretation - particularly when we compare this expectation with the imagery in such books as Daniel and Revelation.

Still later in the New Testament after Paul's time of writing we find the author of II Peter writing in II Peter 3:1-4. Here the author tries to explain why the prediction of Jesus is not coming to pass.

"...you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets ...and the commandment of the Lord...scoffers will come in the last days...saying 'where is the promise of his coming...all things have continued as they were'".

Then in verses 8 and 9 the writer tries to explain why the prediction of Jesus and Paul isn't happening: "...with the Lord one day is a 1000 years, and a 1000 years is a day".

But how does that reconcile with what Jesus said. He didn't say anything about a 1000 years being a day or anything like that. He said it would happen in his generation...and Paul said it would happen very soon.

Perhaps we have the author of II Peter trying to explain

something he had misunderstood.

Now this is not an easy dilemma...Jesus saying that the Kingdom was coming in his generation, and Paul saying it would come in his, and the author of II Peter trying to explain how his and others' expectation had been thwarted.

But there is a possible answer to this dilemma, and it is found in the Gospel of John.

In John, Jesus spiritualizes the special promises and the end of the age. He understands them as spiritual experiences with each believer. For example, the second coming is spiritualized in John 14:15-17: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments, and I will pray the Father and he will give you another counselor, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive...but you know him, for he dwells with you and shall be in you".

Likewise, Jesus spiritualizes the resurrection. In John 11:25-26: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die".

And Jesus spiritualizes the last judgement in John 16... that is, Jesus understands the second coming, the resurrection, and the judgement as religious and spiritual experiences of each believer.

This has gotten to be longer than I intended. But let me quickly add a concluding thought.

I believe the burden of scripture indicates that the second coming doctrine or idea, is properly interpreted as that time when the spirit of God becomes a part of a person's experience. And this

hasty journey, which I have attempted to take with you through the scriptures, is not to be seen as an effort to prove anyone wrong. It is only to suggest that an adequate and faithful understanding of the Biblical message demands a larger view than most are willing to take...perhaps larger than most can take with their own unaided efforts. The best corrective to faulty Biblical interpretation is not debate...it is more Bible.

THE TIE THAT BLINDS  
2 Corinthians 4:3-6

This is Valentine's Day, 1988. It reminds me that romantic love is one of the most beautiful gifts God has given us.

In a PEANUTS cartoon a while back Charlie Brown was sitting alone talking to himself. There was a new girl in his class whom he was dying to meet. He said to himself that he was going right up to her and introduce himself to her. Then he would invite her to eat lunch with him. Then he would tell her how much he liked her. "Then..." said Charlie Brown wistfully, "Then, I'll flap my wings and fly to the moon". Everyone who has been in love knows the feeling.

Our world would be much sadder without romantic love. Still, one of the truisms about love is that it is blind. There is something about that ecstatic feeling that affects the way we view things. There is a statement in the Talmud that goes like this: "Every goose is a swan in the eyes of a lover". In other words, there is something about "being in love" that has a tendency to affect our judgement.

Romantic love can be a blinding experience. Not always, of course. But sometimes our judgement is affected.

This truth is important to us this morning because of something that Paul wrote. It is found in the Epistle lesson. He writes, "...the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ...".

Here is the central message for the morning: There are some things in this world that can blind people to the truth of Christ.



There are certain affections that can mar our vision of God. There are impediments that distract our attention from those things that are of eternal significance. What are some of these "ties that blind"? What are some of these misguided affections that keep us from seeing the glory of Christ?

The first is the myth of self-sufficiency. Many modern people no longer feel the need of God.

An obvious observation about modern people is that they no longer feel that day to day dependence upon God that our ancestors who lived off the land felt. Someone put it this way: "Grandfather owned a farm, Father owned a garden, Son owns a can opener".

Or as a Girl Scout leader advised her Brownies: "Remember, girls, if you are lost in the woods at night, get your bearings from the sky. A glow will indicate the nearest shopping center".

That is the kind of society we live in. The Old Testament writer talked of people who sat in darkness who had seen a great light. One has to wander far afield today to find a place that is truly dark. If the Old Testament writer were alive today, he might write of a people blinded by artificial neon lighting.

I understand that at the famous Forest Lawn Cemetery one hears birds singing brightly at any hour of the day. But only during the day. They are turned off at night. Literally. For what you hear are recorded bird sounds coming from speakers cleverly hidden in bushes and trees. We live in a world in which the cleverness of man has supplanted a consciousness of our connection with God.

We can become slaves to our technology. Even more importantly, we can make our technology a God substitute. Technology offers us everything, some say. Why do we need God? The myth of self-sufficiency.

The second "tie that blinds" is the pull of sensual pleasure. The satisfaction of our own sensual needs can blind us to God. In the late 1950's there was a very popular book entitled THE UGLY AMERICAN. In that book one of the central figures, Tom Knox, was enraged by the policies he saw our government pursuing in Cambodia where he was assigned. In righteous indignation he resigned to come back to the states to tell his story.

But the State Department, understanding these things, sent him home by a leisurely, pleasurable route. He was taken by way of Switzerland, France, and England. The best hotels, the finest meals, lots of rest, a few stage plays in London, swimming pools, etc. By the time he arrived in Washington, it was hard for him to remember what it was that he was so angry about. His indignation had been dulled by sensual pleasure.

That can happen to us. Who would deny that there is something quite seductive about the affluent society? We have it made. Every pleasure is at our finger tips. Only a spoilsport would question whether we are in danger of gaining the world and losing our souls. But the question has to be asked. For you see, it is easy to condemn the hardened sinner and ignore our susceptibility to the tempter.

You have heard it said, "Oh, everything I love is either immoral, illegal, or fattening". We smile.

Yet there is sense in which that little joke is really no joke at all. Something has happened to us. The sins of the flesh are very real. They may not send us to hell, but they do have a dulling effect on our sense of discipleship. Many of us will confess that we are not as committed to God as we once were. It shows in our giving to the church. There are necessities that used to be luxur-

ies that now claim a greater portion of our income. We are resentful when asked to take on responsibilities that might keep us from watching our favorite TV program. We want to make sure that the morning service ends on time. Heaven forbid that we should have to wait a long time in a restaurant line. The pull of sensual pleasure is very real and can blind us to the call of God.

And then we are blinded by the tyranny of our self-centeredness. We want to be our own God. We want to determine our own destiny. We want to make our own rules.

Do you remember Oscar Wilde's THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY? Dorian Gray was a vain, corrupt man who acted without restraint of conscience. His greatest wish was that he would stay forever young. His wish came true. He remained the same forever. No sign of age could be seen in his face. No grey hair was found in his hair. However, a portrait of himself hanging in his drawing room began to change. It reflected the real toll that Dorian Gray's lifestyle was taking on his soul and body. It made Gray uncomfortable to see the painting of himself aging while he stayed young. So he hid the painting in the attic and continued to live his hedonistic life.

Several years later, while looking for some lost article in the attic, he accidentally knocked the cover from his portrait. He stood face to face with himself as he really was. He saw etched into his appearance all of the evil, all the resentment, all the degeneracy. He had only been deceiving himself all those years by looking into mirrors that showed him as he wished to be.

There are many people who do not want to really confront the possibility of a God because if such a being does exist, that has some hard implications about the way they are living their lives.

Then they would be forced to look at themselves as they really are. They really do not want to think about deeper matters, because if they were forced to think about such things they might have to assume responsibilities that now they can happily ignore. "The god of this world has blinded the eyes of unbelievers", says Paul, "to keep them from seeing the light of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God".

The sad thing is that when you are blind, you miss seeing the glory. We have mentioned the transformation of Dorian Gray. But Mark tells us of an almost opposite picture. The setting is the Mount of Transfiguration. Mark tells us that Jesus took Peter, James and John and led them up the mountain. There he was transfigured before them. They saw him as he really was. His garments became glistening white. With him they beheld Moses and Elijah. They beheld on that mountain "the light of the glory of Christ", who, as Paul put it, "is the likeness of God". See Mark 9:2-8

Can you imagine the impact that this event had on their lives? Can you imagine the joy, the assurance, the devotion they felt? Wouldn't you like to have the same kind of experience? You can. The scriptures promise, "If with all your heart you truly seek me, you shall surely find me". Each of us can behold Christ's glory ...if the god of this world is not blinding our eyes with the myth of self-sufficiency, the pull of sensual pleasure, or the tyranny of self-centeredness.

Love is blind. But the most unfortunate blindness of all is to be blinded to the glory of Christ.

GOOD THINGS THAT GOD WOULD GIVE US

Luke 11:1-13

There is a story about a young man from a good home who rebelled against the values and ideals his parents had tried to instill in him. He ran with the wrong crowd, he got into scrapes with the law, and he seemed to delight in trampling on the feelings of those who loved him most.

One evening his father came home late from a business meeting and walked into the boy's room. There his son was stretched out on the bed fast asleep. Seated on the bed next to him was the boy's mother. He watched quietly as she gently stroked his hair and softly kissed her son. With tears in her eyes, she turned to her husband and whispered, "You know, he won't let me love him when he is awake".

The sad loneliness of the mother must be something like the loneliness of God. He wants to love each of us, but we resist him. He wants to bless our lives, but we are reluctant to receive those blessings. How frustrating it must be for any parent who has so much that he or she wants to give to a child who will not receive it.

Jesus speaks of our Father's desire to give good gifts to his children. "Which of you would give your son a serpent, when he asks for a fish? If you, who are evil, know how to give good things to your children, how much more, then, will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him"?

You see, many people stay away from Christ because they have the idea that he will detract from their lives. Just the opposite

is true, of course. Christ adds to our lives. There are some good things he wants to give us. All we have do is ask...and be willing to receive.

What are some of the good things God wants to give us? What are some of the blessings he wants to pour out upon us?

The first would be A HEART FILLED WITH JOY. That is God's will for you. To put it simply, God wants you to be full of joy, to be happy. But, be careful, happiness is not something found outside yourself. Happiness comes from within.

Clement Stone tells about an old Hindu legend stating that when the gods were making the world, they said, "Where can we hide the most valuable treasures so that they will not be lost? How can we hide them so that the lust and greed of men will not steal or destroy them? What can we do to be assured that these riches will be carried from on generation to another for the benefit of all mankind?".

So in their wisdom they selected a hiding place so obvious that it wouldn't be seen. There they placed the true riches of life, endowed with the magic power of perpetual self-replenishment.

Where did the gods hide the secret of happiness and fulfillment? They hid them within the heart of man. A new house, a new car, a new boat will not make you happy, for happiness comes from within.

It comes from an awareness that we are God's children. It comes from having his spirit within us. That is the only source of joy and happiness. Some have described the mood of persons today as being one of outer optimism and inner despair. That is pretty much true. Despite the glib confidence we show to the world,

many of us have a feeling that we've missed something. We are not sure what it is, but there is a void in our lives. Augustine described it as a "God-shaped void"... "Our hearts are restless 'til they find their rest in thee". That is the first good thing that God wants to give to us... a heart filled with joy.

The second good thing God wants to give to us is A SOUL FREE FROM THE BURDEN OF SIN. Wrong doing robs us of happiness. No one is happier than the person with a clear conscience.

Alan Walker tells about Brendan Behan, the Irish playwright. Behan virtually drank himself to death. Only after his death did his biographer reveal the strange compulsion which drove him constantly to alcohol.

Behan lived with a deep and unrelenting sense of guilt. In 1942 he went to England as a member of the Irish Republican Army with sabotage as his purpose.

One day, he dropped a bomb into a London mail collection box. It exploded just as young lady with a baby in her arms walked by and both were killed. Behan was overwhelmed with grief and guilt about being the cause of needless suffering to helpless, innocent people. Increasingly he tried to drown his remorse in excessive drinking.

Unresolved guilt takes a higher toll on us than we realize. There are many who feel that God's laws can be broken without experiencing the effects of guilt. It is only being found out that frightens many people. "As long as no one knows, what harm is done", we ask. Yet, somehow, we are not able to forget. The wrong lingers on and clings to our being like a stain on a beautiful white carpet. And there is only one power that can remove that stain. And that is forgiveness of God experienced through the spirit.

Years ago, King Charles V was loaned large sums of money by a merchant in Antwerp. The note came due, but the King was bankrupt and was not able to pay. Then the merchant gave a great banquet for the king. When all the guests were seated and before the food was brought in, the merchant had a large platter placed on the table and a fire lighted on it. Then he took the note out of his pocket, held it in the flames and burned it. The king threw his arms around his benefactor and wept.

There are some here who would go off silently and weep tears of remorse and relief if that stain could be removed from our souls. And it can be. God is willing, he is able.

A heart filled with joy, a soul freed from the burden of sin...A MIND RELEASED FROM THE BONDAGE OF WORRY AND ANXIOUSNESS. That is the third good thing God wants to give us. "Why are you anxious?", Jesus asked, "Consider the lilies of the field...the birds of the air...". As the popular and trite phrase goes, "let go and let God".

Now, of course, there are those who are cynical about such promises.

Leslie Weatherhead once used a limerick to illustrate the cynicism with which some regard God's providence:

There was a young lady from Ryde  
Who was carried away by the tide  
A man eating shark  
Was heard to remark  
"I knew the Lord would provide".

Oscar Wilde had fun with the Christian idea of the infinite goodness of God. He wrote: "Don't you realize that missionaries are divinely provided food for cannibals? When ever they are on



the brink of destruction, heaven, in its infinite mercy, sends them a nice plump missionary".

We know that we live in world that is sometimes cruel. We know that there is much to fear. Yet, there is One far greater in his love for us than the sum total of all the things we dread. If we could only relax and release to his care our worries, our anxieties, and our fears, his spirit would bear witness with our spirit, as Paul put it. We would know the One whom we believe. We would know the quiet peace and strength he seeks to give to those who are troubled and afraid. I heard of a Sunday School teacher who asked her class of small girls if they would quote the 23rd Psalm. One girl who timidly raised her hand said she could. She stood up in front of the class and said, "The Lord is my shepherd. That's all I need".

That little girl was speaking for many of us, wasn't she?

An anonymous poet writes:

Said the robin to the sparrow,

"I should like to know,

Why these human being

Rush about and worry so".

Said the sparrow to the robin,

"Friend, I think it must be,

That they have no heavenly Father

Such as cares for you and me:.

Consider the lilies of the field...consider the birds of the air. Trust God to give you the good things he wants you to have...

A heart filled with joy...

a soul freed from the burden of sin...

a mind released from worry and anxiety.

In Marc Connelly's GREEN PASTURES when "de Lawd" prepares to leave heaven and come down to earth to see how his children are doing, he gives Gabriel some final instructions: "Gabriel, don't forget about that star that hasn't been working right". Gabriel agrees to take care of it. "And, Gabiel, remember that little sparrow with the broken wing? Take care of that, too, won't you?" God is portrayed as being equally interested in the cosmos and sparrows.

For some, such child-like faith seems too good to be true. But it is. God is like a mother kissing the forehead of a boy who won't accept her love when he is awake. God is like a father who is willing to give good gifts to his children if they will only accept them.

Perhaps it is time for some of us to ask God. Maybe it is time that you opened your life to receive the good gifts he has for you. Let God give you the good things he wants you to have, today.

IT DOES MATTER WHAT YOU BELIEVE

Acts 4:8-12

Every warrior I ever heard about was convinced that God was on his side. Abraham Lincoln was one of the few leaders who ever was wise enough to see that the question is not, "Is God on our side?" but that the proper question is, "Are we on God's side?"

I pose that question because of today's text. Speaking of the name of Jesus Christ, Peter declares, "Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved".

Peter doesn't leave much room for equivocation. "There is none other name..." Not Mohammed, nor Moses, nor Buddha, nor Darwin, nor Marx... There is no other name by which persons can be saved than the name of Jesus.

That is a strong statement. That is the kind of dogmatic declaration that crusades are made of. You have read about the Crusades, have you not? Christians taking up the sword in the name of Jesus - what blasphemy! - in order to convert Jews, and Moslems, and others to Christianity. When we are tempted to point a finger at the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland or the Moslems, Christians and Jews in Lebanon, or the dreadful white supremacist government in South Africa, we must remind ourselves of the tragic intolerance and hatred in our own history.

I make this point as we deal with this text because human existence has been rife with religious as well as racial hatred.

The Epistle of John tells us that the very nature of God is love. How can we possibly justify persecution or violence in the name of Jesus?

If there ever was a time when the religious people of the world need to sit down together, eat together, and get to know each other, it is now.

Did you know that in certain languages the word "enemy" is the same word used for "stranger"? Jesus was adamant in such teachings as the parable of the Good Samaritan that his followers were to love the stranger. And in the Sermon on the Mount, he commanded us to love our enemy. That we could ever commit a violent act against another human being in the name of Jesus is as far removed from the Gospel as anything could possibly be. That we could ever discriminate against another person is a blot on everything the cross of Christ stands for. Too much harm has been done in the past, and is still being done yet today, by mis-guided Christian militancy. Persecution of non-Christians is absolutely unjustified and, as I have already noted, it amounts to blasphemy.

Having said that, however, in order to be faithful to the Scriptures I must declare with Peter that there is no other name by which men may be saved than the name of Jesus. It really does matter that we let the world know that Jesus saves.

Now I realize such a statement is contrary to the spirit of our times. "It doesn't really matter what you believe, just so you are sincere". Have you heard that before? What nonsense! Of course it makes a difference what you believe. Did it matter to Jim Jones' followers, to David Koresh's followers? Did it matter

what Adolph Hitler believed? The whole future is determined by what people believe. Our best hope is that people will believe in Jesus Christ.

Of course, there have been other great teachers, and I would not minimize their contributions. Still there are some things Jesus stood for, things often distorted and even discarded by his own followers, that make all the difference in the world. What are some of these teachings that cause Jesus to stand unique among the holy men of the world?

The first was HIS REVELATION OF GOD. The kind of God you believe in will determine the kind of man or woman you become. Jesus said, "When ye have seen me, ye have seen the Father". The lives we live are reflections of the gods we worship. Some of us worship money. We might as well admit it. Some of us worship physical beauty. Others worship the esteem of our fellow man. The gods we worship will be reflected in the life we lead.

There is a startling illustration of this in Michener's book THE SOURCE. The story centers, around 2200 B.C., a hulk of a man named Urbaal - a farmer, and a devotee of the local religion which worshipped two gods, a god of death and a god of fertility. One day the temple priests tell Urbaal to bring his young son to the temple for sacrifice - if he wants good crops. Urbaal obeys, and on the appointed day drags his wife and boy to the scene for the boy's "religious execution" by fire to the god of death. After the sacrifice of Urbaal's boy and several others, the priests announce that one of the fathers will spend the next week in the temple, with a new temple prostitute. Urbaal's wife is stunned as she notices a desire written more intensely across his face than she had ever seen before, and she is stunned to see

him eagerly lunge forward when his name is called. The ceremony over, she walks out of the temple with her head swimming, concluding that "if he had different gods, he would have been a different man".

That is true of all of us. It is also true of the world. How can we expect sacrificial love of those who have no god? They worship only themselves so their natural philosophy is one of self-indulgence.

Lyman Abbot once paraphrased the Lord's Prayer to reflect the philosophy of those without God. This is what he wrote:

"Our brethern who are on the earth, Hallowed be our name, our Kingdom come, Our will be done, for there is no heaven. We must get this day our daily bread; we neither forgive or are forgiven. We fear not temptation, for we deliver ourselves from evil. For ours is the kingdom and the power, for there is no glory and no forever".

Can you see the difference that such a philosophy would make? How about those for whom God is a war-like god of vengeance? Or those for whom god is a passive god, uncaring and unmovable?

The good news about the God that Jesus revealed to us is that God is a loving and purposeful God who is involved in his creation - who notices when the smallest sparrow falls from the sky, who cares about the least and the lowest. Saint and sinner, rich and poor, no one is outside his love. God's nature is love. Can you see what a difference that makes? If Mohammed taught that, fine. If Buddha taught that, fine. If that truth is found in the Old Testament, fine. But nobody taught love and lived love like Jesus of Nazareth. And the world needs to know about that love. It is the hope of the world...he is the hope of the world. The

world needs to know about Jesus because of his revelation of the nature of God.

But it is equally important what Jesus SHOWED US ABOUT MAN. It can be summed up in two words: "people matter".

After WORLD WAR I, the government had the bodies of four unknown soldiers brought to Washington. Then Sgt. Edward Younger arbitrarily selected one of the four to be buried where the tomb of the unknown soldier would be built. On the tomb are inscribed these words: "Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God".

Those last four words are crucial: "known but to God". People do matter. That is what Jesus' whole life was about. That is what the cross is about. He gave his life because people matter. You matter - I matter.

That ought to make us feel a little puffed up. It helps me feel about myself the way a young boy who delivered groceries part-time must have felt about himself. He went to the home of a new customer with an order. She asked his name. "Ronald Reagan", he said proudly. His customer replied, "Well, that's a pretty well-known name". Without a moment's hesitation he said, "It should be. I've been delivering groceries around here for four years".

We matter. But so do the children in Somalia, the people in former Yugoslavia, the people in Iraq, the residents of our slums, black teen-agers. People matter. If other religions teach the same truth, so much the better. But nobody taught it and lived it like Jesus.

Jesus taught us that God is love, he taught us that people matter, and HE GAVE US A COMMISSION THAT WE SHOULD BRING ALL PEOP

PLE INTO THE FAMILY OF GOD. That is what he meant when he said to make disciples of all men. He did not mean that we should put a sword to a person's throat and make him say "I believe in Jesus". Nor did he mean that the power of our government should be used to legislate laws that would make Jews, Moslems, atheists, Bubbhists, etc feel like second class citizens. What a perversion of the Gospel. No, our job is to tell the world that the God who created them is a God of love. It is to reach out in love to all persons of every religion, of every race, of every nation, because he has reached out in love to us.

There is no other name by which men can be saved. I believe that Jesus reveals the nature of God, the worth of man, and our mission to the world. That is why, without apology and without any ill-feeling towards any other person in this world, I can say I long for the day when every child in this world can grow up singing, "Jesus loves me this I know...".



A PENTECOSTAL CHURCH  
Acts 2:1-11

Today is Pentecost Sunday, the celebration of the birth of the Church.

In the days of the great California gold rush some prospectors discovered a very rich mine. "We've got it made", they said, "As long as we don't tell anyone else before we stake our claims". And they made a vow of secrecy.

But they had to go into town for provisions and tools. When they left the town, a lot of people followed them. Why? Because their "secret" was written all over their faces. It was impossible for them to hide what they had found.

And it was impossible for the disciples to mask their joy on the first Pentecost. They were so happy and so boisterous that some passersby accused them of being drunk. Imagine people driving by our church and seeing us so excited that they think we are drunk!

Many of us long to see the modern church infused with the same joy, the same love, the same energizing power that characterized the church on the day of Pentecost. That is only natural. But we should understand that the first Pentecost was a unique event in human history. The descent of the Holy Spirit on the church on that wonderful day was an act of God, not of man. It was not something conjured up by the disciples. Because it was an act of God, we need to see some important implications of what it meant and what it means.

First, PENTECOST SERVES TO REMIND US THAT THE CHURCH IS THE CREATION OF GOD. We are unlike any other institution. Beginning with Christ's selection of 12 disciples and continuing through his life, his crucifixion, his resurrection, and climaxing on the day of Pentecost, the church was born in the mind of God...long before anyone was ever baptized or the first Lord's Supper served.

Note the scene at the church's birth. The disciples were all gathered in one place as the risen Christ had asked them to do. He told them to wait for the empowerment of the Spirit. But this was no founding convention. No one turned to Peter and said, "Pete, call the meeting to order and let's get on with this business of starting this new organization called the church". Nothing like that happened. The scripture tells us simply that "suddenly a sound came from heaven like a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance". The church was born from above not from below.

That is encouraging news to me. Many churches and denominations seem to be losing ground and deteriorating. One major denomination in a recent year lost the equivalent of an 800 member church each day. That's scary and that is the reason it is good news to realize that the church is of God. Individual churches may lose their way. Denominations may fade into history. But the church of Jesus Christ cannot fail. Why? Because it is not a human invention but a divine intervention. If the church in our generation fails, God will raise up another and bolder one to take its place. The church is God's creation.

In the second place, PENTECOST REMINDS US THAT THE CHURCH EXISTS FOR ONE PRIMARY PURPOSE...TO COMMUNICATE TO THE WORLD THE LOVE OF GOD REVEALED IN JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD. Note the manifestation of the tongues. First we have "tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each of them". Then they began to "speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance". Now, this is not speaking in tongues in the same sense as many would have us believe today. There were no interpreters present. None was needed. Indeed, in spite of the fact that there were persons present from many nations, each of them heard the disciples in his own tongue.

What an amazing miracle of communication. How many times problems between people and groups have been aggravated by a breakdown in communication.

The primary purpose of the church is to communicate. We are God's Word in the world today. We are called to communicate the Good News of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ.

There is a story about an English gentleman named Alfie. Alfie could do nothing right. He bungled everything he ever touched. One day, in a moment of despair, he tried to take his own life. He failed that, too. While he was in hospital, a friend asked, "Alfie, why did you do it?" And Alfie responded, "Because there is no good news anywhere. Because, if there was, surely someone would have shared it with me".

Heaven help us. The world is filled with Alfies...just waiting for someone to bring good news into their lives. As members of the God creation, the church, we are those charged with that responsibility.

Now, we communicate this love in many ways.

Sports fans have noticed this big scripture signs on TV sportscasts...The Super Bowl, the World Series, etc. In bold letters we read JOHN 3:16, II COR 5:17, ROM 5:8, etc. They pop up on bed sheets hung from the upper decks, over golfers' heads as they putt, and in other places where the camera will catch them.

These signs are the work of a man named Rockin' Rollen Stewart, his wife Margaret, and a friend William King. They drive some 75,000 miles a year in an old Toyota van. They speak to any religious group that will have. They receive love offerings in order to buy tickets. Then they get in the right place for the cameras. Rockin' Rollen said, "We are evangelists who want to get everyone to read the BOOK, and we reach millions.

You see, Stewart knew a time when he was addicted to drugs. His life fell apart. One Sunday morning he was watching a church service on TV. "I immediately saw how I could take the Word of God to the world", he said, "I fell to my knees and allowed Jesus Christ to take control of my life". Since then, he has been spreading the gospel, free of commercial cost, through every TV camera he can find.

Rockin' Rollen's method of communicating the good news is not the same as yours or mine. While admiring his determination, perhaps we should ask "How am I spreading the Good News?"

The church is God's creation. Our purpose is to communicate the good news of God's love. THE ULTIMATE GOAL, HOWEVER, IS THE CREATION OF A NEW COMMUNITY. Note two things. First, as we have suggested, peoples from many different nations were present on the day of Pentecost and heard to good news in his own tongue. The gospel is not restricted to a particular nation or race or

class. The gospel cuts across every dividing line in society. And second, notice at the end of the second chapter of Acts the description of the early church following the Pentecost experience: "And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved". (Acts 2:44-47)

The Christian faith is a communal faith. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am also", Jesus said. The purpose of the Pentecost event was not simply the saving of individual souls, but the creation of new community. That community was and is the church. The strength of the church is love.

It is only right that we should pray that we might be a Pentecostal church, if we understand what that means. The church at Pentecost was a creation of God, not of man. The church at Pentecost was a church that communicated the Good News of Jesus Christ to all persons. The church at Pentecost was a community of faith, hope, and love.

I don't particularly want people driving by this morning to think we are drunk, but I would like for them to see the joy in our faces. I would like them to see how much we love one another. And I would like them to know that there is good news in the world...the good news of God's great gift of Jesus Christ.

AN INVITATION FROM THE KING  
Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20

You are invited to a party. Maybe a celebration would be a better description, or a homecoming. Do you enjoy being with your friends? Good, for everyone you have ever known is going to be there. Your mother, your dad, your grandmother...everyone whose life you admired and who was important to you.

I am aware that for some such statements smack too much of "pie-in-the-sky" sentimentality. So be it. There has to come a time when we decide whether the Good News of the Gospel is true, that "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life". If it is true, we ought to shout it from the roof-tops. If it is false, we ought to acknowledge that a fraud has been perpetuated and close up shop. It is absurd to settle for a blush and a vague reference to "the Christian hope". Now is Christ raised from the dead...the "first fruits of those who have fallen asleep". (1 Corinthians 15:20)

When this world and all that is in it ceases to be there will still be those who are more alive than ever before...alive and vibrant and happy because they are in the presence of One whose very nature is Love. There will be laughter and singing and fellowship and peace beyond human imagination, and you and I are invited. The entire Bible climaxes with our invitation. The last chapter of the last book...Revelation 22.

Three times the invitation is given. "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come'. And let him who hears say, 'Come'. And let him

who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price". (Rev. 22:17)

This is a royal invitation issued by the Creator Himself. The sovereign God of all the universe extends to you his personal invitation "to gather with the saints by the river that flows from the city of God".

Before you start making excuses why you cannot come to the royal celebration to which God has invited you, let me tell you exactly what the invitation means.

First of all, THIS IS A "COME AS YOU ARE" PARTY. You haven't anything to wear? Your hair is in curlers? Your shoes are worn? Your best suit is soiled? It doesn't matter. You'll be given a new, pure white outfit.

You're ashamed of your appearance? Your face bears the marks of your sins? Your shoulders are stooped from needless burdens you've carried? Your soul is clogged with bitterness and resentment? That's okay. He's even going to give you a beautiful new body.

But wait, there are some things you've done? Some secret sins? Some skeletons in the closet? It makes no difference. There won't be anybody there who deserves an invitation. You are invited to come just as you are. The King has left instructions at the gate that no one is to be turned away regardless of past deeds. Why? It has something to do with the King's nature...pure love, a love of which only a pale imitation exists in this world. It has to do with what the King has done on our behalf.

Pure, unadulterated love. Love that surpasses your love for your child...no matter how long-suffering that love may be.

You are invited to a "Come as you are party". You really

don't believe that, do you? In fact, you would prefer that the King would add some conditions...especially for other people. Particularly those you don't approve of. But the invitation is to all and it says "Come as you are".

Here is the second bit of Good News. ADMISSION IS FREE. Do you mean I've been serving on all those church committees for nothing? Yes...if you thought that that would somehow earn God's favor. You mean all the hours and money I've given to charity aren't going to be taken into account? That's right...if you were hoping to add a star or two to your crown. Of course, the world would be a much more miserable place without your good works and your sharing. But I have to tell you that they will not help you gain entrance to the royal celebration. The admission price has already been paid. The King's Son paid it for you.

There is a story of 3 trees that grew side by side on a lovely hillside with a beautiful view. As they grew, they did what many young people do...they imagined what they would do when they grew up. One tree said to the other two, "What I want more than anything else in the world is to be important. I want people to acknowledge my importance and bow before me".

The second tree said, "What I want more than anything in the world is that wherever I go people will recognize me and will receive me gladly and will be glad that I have come".

The third tree said, "What I want more than anything is to help people be connected, to be in fellowship, to love one another.

The time came, after the trees matured, for them to be cut down and made useful. The first tree was selected by a master carpenter, and much to the disappointment of the tree, was made



into a shed and feed trough for animals. But the tree came to understand that God had other ideas because it was that shed that became a shelter for Mary and Joseph and the manger of the baby Jesus, and before which the wise and important knelt.

The second tree was selected by a mariner who transformed the wood into a sturdy boat. The second tree was also disappointed, it was not what it had wanted. But it was that boat that Jesus stepped into to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee and the bow of which became his pulpit, and the people were glad to see the boat.

The third tree was cut down by a Roman crew, who rough-hewed it, notched it, and used it for an execution cross. Again, it felt disappointment, and sadness that it was to be the instrument of death of Jesus. But after its use, it was placed across a stream, and people used it to cross over into the presence of God to worship and fellowship.

The old spiritual talks of crossing the river Jordan to get to the promised land. And the cross of Jesus Christ is that bridge. There is no other.

It is a come as you are party. Admission is free. Your saintliness won't get you in, your sin will not keep you out. But there is one thing more to be said, THE PARTY IS HERE AND NOW.

Eternal life means "no beginning and no ending". It is eternally present. You can experience heaven right now. It is not a physical place. Our telescopes, our space travel, will never discover it "out there". Heaven is a spiritual reality. Heaven is any place that God is. Because of our humanness, our finiteness, our sinfulness, we cannot experience it in this world in all its glory. Nevertheless we can still go ahead and step through its

gates. That is what faith in Jesus Christ does for us. We don't have to go to him. He comes to us and will dwell within us. The excitement of that kind of indwelling is a foretaste of that land where there is no night.

Benjamin Reaves tells about a little fellow whose mother died. His father was trying to Mom and Dad. The father scheduled a picnic for the two of them. The little fellow has never been on a picnic. He was excited, so excited that he would not sleep. So there was a patter of little feet down the hall to where his father was sleeping. He shook his father who would have responded gruffly except he saw the expression on his son's face.

"What's the matter, son?" asked his father. The little fellow said, "Oh Daddy, tomorrow's going to be great. I just can't sleep I'm so excited".

The father laughed and said, "Son, it won't be so wonderful if you don't get some sleep. Now go back and try to sleep".

A while later the ritual was repeated. The father was sleeping soundly when the boy woke him. "What do you want now", he asked.

"Daddy", said the boy, "I just want to thank you for tomorrow".

That's our prayer too, isn't it? "Father, I just want to thank you for tomorrow". And we live in the excitement of tomorrow today. That is how we are able to overcome our sins. That is what motivates us to do good works. We are experiencing heaven in our hearts right now. That is why we are invited to come as we are. That is why the admission is free. Once we have tasted, truly tasted, the living water Christ gives, we become a new creation here and now.

LOVE CAME DOWN AT CHRISTMAS

Isaiah 7:10-14

Matthew 1:18-23

When one little fellow was told about his new baby sister, he was not impressed. When he went to school the following day, his teacher remarked. "I hear you have a new member in your family". "Oh, yeah", he replied. "What's the matter?" his teacher asked, "Aren't you happy to have a new sister?" He said, "Yes I guess. But there were a lot of other things we needed more".

Someone has said that when God wants something done in the world he has a baby born. That was true in 1809 when Napoleon held sway with his tyranny in Europe. But in a log cabin in the Midwest a baby was born whom God used to free people. He was Abraham Lincoln. No one noted it at the time.

And that was true of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. The prophet had spoken of old. "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son. and his name shall be called "Emmanuel" (which means God is with us)." We have gathered today to acknowledge the fulfillment of that prophecy. The Messiah has been born to Mary and Joseph in the little town of Bethlehem.

It was in a stable that he was born. What a strange place for the nativity of the King of Kings. What plain and shabby surroundings for the birth of the Messiah.

I was reading a while back about a South Africa diamond miner who found one of the world's largest diamonds. It was the size of a small lemon. The miner needed to get the diamond safely to the company's office in London, so he sent it in a steel

box and hired four men to carry it. Even when it was in the ship's safe en route it was guarded day and night by at least two armed men. But when the package arrived at the company's London office and was carefully opened, it contained no diamond. Rather it contained a lump of coal. Three days later, the diamond arrived by ordinary parcel post in a plain wrapper. The owner had assumed correctly that people would not pay attention to an ordinary cardboard box.

Something like that took place that first Christmas. Who would think to look in a stable for the incarnate God? Only a few star-struck shepherds and some travel weary astrologers took note of what was happening in the tiny town of Bethlehem that night. Why should the world take note? As far as we know, no one else heard the angels, no one else saw the star. The rest of the world saw only a plain cardboard box. They could not know that that box contained the advent of divine love into this strife-torn world.

Joseph knew. An angel appeared to him in a dream: "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins".

Mary knew, too. In her amazement and adoration she sang, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the lowly estate of his handmaiden..." No wonder that Mary has captured the imagination of millions of the world's people. Mary knew that within the brown wrappings of the stable that the world would be forever changed. Rossetti put it most memorably, "Love came down at Christmas, Love so lovely, so

divine. Love came down at Christmas, Star and angel gave the sign".

That is the message of Christmas and that is the message of this morning. Love was born in the manger at Bethlehem. All kinds of love.

LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER, for one thing. It is a time when we try to say to our family and friends how much they mean to us. Hopefully, our love is not narrow and exclusive. We ought to be more mindful of the needs of others...not only at Christmas but at other times, as well.

A baby was left on the doorstep of a home in Georgetown, Penn. many years ago. A widow was head of the house, one with several children. But she took the baby and loved it as her own. In the evenings, she read great books to her children, and one of them, at least, developed a taste for literature. Today that baby abandoned on the doorstep is one of America's most prolific writers...James Michener.

We celebrate that kind of love today...love for one another...love for the less fortunate.

But we also celebrate another kind of love...OUR LOVE FOR THE CHRIST CHILD.

We see visual reminders, "Don't leave Christ out of Christmas". And we try to keep that from happening. He is the reason for the season.

Brennan manning tells a story recounted every Christmas in the forests of Provence in southern France. It is about four shepherds who come to Bethlehem to see the child. According to the story one of the shepherds brought eggs, another brought

bread and cheese, the third brought wine. And the fourth brought nothing at all. People called him L'Enchant. The first three shepherds chatted with Mary and Joseph, commenting on how well Mary looked, how cozy the stable was, what a beautiful star-lit night it was. They congratulated the proud parents, presented their gifts and assured them that if they needed anything more, they had only to ask. Finally some asked, "Where is L'Enchant?" They searched high and low, inside and out. Finally someone peeked through the blanket hung against the draft, into the creche. There, kneeling at the manger was L'Enchant...the Enchanted One. Through the entire night, he stayed in adoration, whispering, "Jesu, Jesu, Jesu...Jesus, Jesus, Jesus".

That is where you and I would be this morning, would we not? Kneeling before the crib whispering, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus". After all, what else can we offer him? He already reigns over all creation. What can we bring? Only our love and adoration. We do that gladly. We offer Christ our love.

But the most important thing in this world this Christmas is not our love for one another, nor even our love for Christ. The most important thing in this world is GOD'S LOVE FOR US as exemplified in the birth of his son.

In Edinburgh, Scotland, there is a place called the Museum of Childhood. It is filled with childhood treasures: teddy bears, puppets, rocking horses, model trains, books, games, doll houses and dolls...case after case after case of dolls. Baby dolls, porcelain dolls, costumed dolls, walking dolls, talking dolls, expensive dolls. The dolls of privileged children.

Off in one corner in another case, another doll sits alone.

It's an old raggedy doll, much the worse for wear. It even began its life raggedy.

That this doll was loved, there can be no doubt. For all its shabbiness...and it was shabby the day it was made...it had, and has, a value untold. A sign on it says: "Doll belonging to a London slum child, circa 1905". The doll is unnamed. The child is unnamed.

The doll's body is made of tattered brown socks, stuffed with rags. The arms are two sticks of wood, covered in wool. Its hair is another sock. It wears a plain gingham dress and a rough linen apron. For all its simplicity, it was made with painstaking effort. The head is a heel of man's shoe...a worn down battered heel with the nail heads visible around the edges. For a face the doll has small bits of paper pasted on. Paper eyes, paper nose, paper mouth. The mouth does not smile.

Some might call it ugly. But they would be wrong, absolutely wrong.

It is possible that some slum child made it for herself... perhaps it was a gift, created by a mother or father, who though poor in possessions were rich in love. All they could give was love beyond measure.

One does not need to have wealth to create something of value. One need only reach deep within...where "value" is defined. One need not have wealth to give a gift. One need only have the desire to give..to use whatever poor things are at hand and to make them the best gift possible.

In all the western world, there were no slums bleaker than those of London, circa 1905. But somewhere in those slums, a sad and sorry doll was born...a doll that could bring tears to your

eyes because it is so pitiful.

And because it is so very, very beautiful.

If you cannot appreciate the story of the raggedy doll, you cannot appreciate the story of Christmas. A diamond wrapped in a plain cardboard box...the Christ child. A pitiful doll loved into beauty...us. We are that doll. Look at us. Who are we that God should love us so? There is nothing to recommend us. Nothing but his love...love that came down at Christmas.

The world might cynically imagine that all it needs is another baby. But that is its greatest need. For that baby has brought love into the world. We celebrate that love at Christmas. Love for one another. Love for the Christ child. And, most of all, the Source of that love...God's love for us.