

III Sunday in Lent
Luth Church of the Master
3-21-76

"THE DECLARATION OF DEPENDENCE"

Text: Exodus 20:1-8 (1st three Commandments)

Today's textual focus gives us one of the best known yet most misunderstood and misapplied documents of the Judaeo-Christian heritage. The Ten Commandments.

I think I can safely speculate that anyone over 25 here probably had to memorize these commandments. Such is the case for catechism classes at the Master yet today.

But I would also speculate that most of us over 25, including myself, received a poor explanation and application of these during catechism. Many of us simply memorized Luther's application - and that was that! As if Luther had the last word on the Commandments.

Unfortunately, Luther can probably be blamed for much of the bad understanding of the Commandments. Being the product of a monastic education, there can be little doubt that God was viewed as an angry, vindictive and punitive task-master. So it is that the Commandments get off on a slanted course.

But There is ~~only one~~^a way that the Commandments can be accurately read -- within the context in which they were given. And that context was one of deliverance - God had brought the Israelites out of Egypt, the land of bondage. Through the fact, God proved himself a loving Lord -- seeking to establish a covenant relationship based upon a chosen and loved people.

Contrary to what many of us were taught or led to believe, the commandments were not orders sent down from on high by a harsh ruler. They were not based upon a relationship founded on force, but on one built firmly on love.

The tablets with the Commandments were not slapped into Moses' hand by a beady-eyed God, holding a big fist over his head, and snarling, "Do this or else!"

It was in love that God gave to humanity these undying principles of peace and harmony. The commandments were a covenant - an agreement in which two parties agree to deal with each other in a specific way. God promised to watch over his people, supply their needs, and show continual concern for the direction of their lives. His partners, in turn, were to respond to him in a way befitting their love for God.

As one of my OT profs. always stated - the commandments are really a positive roadmap for our life with God -- He always impressed upon us that a better expression than "thou shalt" in the Hebrew is to supply a clause before each commandment. So they read: "Because I, your God, love you, YOU WOULD NOT HAVE ANY OTHER GODS."

And so we see - the relationship between God and his people is like the relationship of husband and wife. When two persons come together to pledge themselves to each other, the bond they are forming is being fashioned out of love, not out of fear. Their promise is -- I will keep myself only for you so long as we both shall live.

They promise to "hang in there" regardless of sickness, financial ruin or any other adversity. No amount of force can make those promises hold. Love is the only glue that can cement them so that the relationship will last.

Within that love-pact, both partners have responsibilities if the marriage is going to work. Each of them has commandments to fulfill, NOT OUT OF FORCE, but out OF LOVE.

Such is the covenant between God and his people. Each of the partners, God and man, is to be loving and loyal toward the other. The Commandments simply point out what that love-pact looks like as it is lived out.

It is this understanding of the Commandments that TOO FEW of us were given in our formative years. Too many of us have suffered from an angry & punitive image of God -- a Father who angrily was keeping his kids in line WITH THE COMMANDMENTS.

How much more life giving these commandments are when seen as our Declaration of Dependence UPON GOD'S LOVE. The commandments are the Christian's declared agreement of how he will love God and his fellow beings.

Hopefully - this aids in clarifying our understanding in general -- but what about their application? If time permitted, it would be instructive to deal with all of them. But since the last seven ARE NOT UNIQUE TO ONLY Jews and Christians, we'll presently assume that they are best applied.

But what of the first three. You shall have no other gods - you shall not make graven images of me. Which of us possibly worship other gods, images that we have fashioned? Seems like these are almost irrelevant to our age?

Yet, Paul Tillich enables us to see how applicable this combined 1st Commandment really can be. He states: faith is ultimate concern. So - whatever is our ultimate concern is our faith, or god. If saving money is our ultimate concern, then that's our graven image.

The second commandment states that those who love God will not take his name in vain, which means that they will not take his name lightly. Too often this commandment gets simple application as a prohibition against cursing and swearing.

There is little doubt that such swearing is often taking God's name lightly. But much more serious today is the tendency for believers to use God's name to bless their many personal causes and concerns. The truly blasphemous taking of God's name in Vain is that which uses God to justify racial discrimination, or aggres-

sive wars, or claims that this or that are the result of God's will. How often we have heard people attribute natural or accidental tragedies TO BEING GOD'S WILL. Such blasphemy surely is the most offensive use of God's name in vain.

Finally - the application of remembering the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Because God entered into a covenant of love with his people it is important that his people set aside a time and place where that relationship CAN BE remembered and renewed.

So we see - this commandment was not given in order to make WORSHIP an obligation -- it was given out of love. We worship in order to REMEMBER God's love for us, and to RENEW our love for him and each other.

And so we have a proper understanding and application of the commandments. But what was true of Israel is also true of Michiganders and all God's people -- we have failed to keep our side of the agreement.

For either we as God's people DISOBEY our side of the agreement -- or we use our OBEDIENCE to exalt ourselves rather than glorifying our partner, God. Or as Luther once infered, either we're disobedient rebels, or pompous asses.

And so, without dissolving this love-pact, God offers us Jesus the Christ. We are still to live our side of the agreement. It is still the declaration of dependence between us.

And yet - we know, just ^{as we do in} ~~the~~ our marriage vows, we ~~will~~ fall short of our covenant with God. But that will not be our doom - for if we confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, we will be saved -- FOR GOD DOES NOT RENIG ON HIS SIDE OF THE AGREEMENT.

AMEN

TEXT III
Luth Church of the Master, Troy
March 13, 1977

"IT'S NOW ... OR MAYBE NEVER"

"And the vinedresser answered him, 'Let it alone sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'
Luke 13:9

How many times have you heard someone say, after experiencing a disaster, "What have I done to deserve this?" Maybe after a serious car accident or serious illness or natural disaster, you've even said yourself: "Why do I deserve this?"

There's no doubt about the fact that some suffering results from human sin. Drunk drivers often kill and injure themselves and others -- and that's sin. Heavy smokers are almost pleading for lung cancer. Criminals and killers deserve social incarceration and retribution. No doubt that suffering is often the result of these sins and many others.

But not every calamity results from sin, and Jesus was addressing that issue in today's gospel text. Some righteous Galileans had been murdered while offering sacrifices (we'd say they had been killed while worshipping or at church). So the people with Jesus asked: "How could God allow this to happen?"

As the text shows - Jesus refused to be trapped by this question into an argument over the origin of evil. He simply pointed out another calamity in which 18 innocent people had been killed. So it is that in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says: (God) makes the sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust."

What Jesus is saying is that in many calamities and disasters, there simply is no causal connection between the suffering and the person's religious life. He simply says, The believer ~~must~~ accept the fact that tragedy and suffering are a part of life for everyone on God's earth.

But then Jesus goes on. In essence he's saying, "Now that being the case, how do you stand with your nurturing Father?" Or stated differently, since calamity can strike anyone at any moment, are you alive now to God?

And then Jesus proceeds with the fig tree parable to illustrate man's response to these realities of life. Obviously, the tree represents you and me; the vinedresser is God. And Jesus is saying: "Look at the unproductive, uncaring tree. It could be hacked down at any moment -- and it just doesn't seem to care. But the vinedresser (God) says: "No, don't cut it down at this very moment. I'll be patient a bit longer. I'll prune and fertilize it -- and wait just a bit longer for a fruitful response."

But God's waiting doesn't last forever, For next year, or maybe next month, or maybe tomorrow MIGHT BE THE MOMENT OF DISASTER. And with that storm of life, the tree may be cut down for good. So the message of the parable is -- Respond to God's love now ... or maybe never.

That's kind of a heavy. The message is very pointed -- but also enveloped within the patient love of God. And yet how often man puts off his life with God. "Let it wait til tomorrow" says the man who's too busy - who's got other things to do - who thinks he's got eternity to be fruitful to his Father.

Again this past week that mentality was illustrated. Often I am called to officiate for funeral of "unchurched" people. And I usually respond affirmatively if time permits -- because it's an opportunity to proclaim the gospel to the living.

Yet how often these funerals are more agonizing for me and the survivors. Because the one thing we all want to have security about at death is: HOW DO I STAND WITH GOD? Even among agnostics and atheists, I've seen great anxiety over this issue: How does he or she stand with God?

And I'm not talking about how virtuous was that

persons life. I'm not talking about adding up all the credits and good deeds. You see, even pagans do many good deeds.

But a fruitful life is not determined by our moral perfection and good deeds. God knows that every one of his children WILL FAIL to get a perfect score on his morality final. Not one of us will come close to a perfect score. But the fruitful life is the one which has remained in an active relationship to him.

Just like a faithful parent to a child. Our acceptance of our children is not based on their moral perfection. It's based upon their relationship to us -- as long as they remain communicative, open, receptive, in dialog and in relationship. This is the basis of our love and acceptance.

But how sad when a child turns his back on his parents - and then tragedy strikes. And then there's no time for repentance -- no time for reconciliation -- that relationship has ended in brokenness, spiritual death.

And it's for that reason that Jesus keeps beckoning mankind to repent. For it's only out of love that he doesn't want our relationship to him to end in brokenness. He knows that tragedy could strike us any moment -- that's what omniscience is all about. And he doesn't want us struck down without a living relationship to our Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Our presence here would seem to indicate that we have responded to the vinedresser. Thanks be to God - for we have taken the opportunity to return. But he doesn't leave us ~~here~~ here to feel pompous or self-righteous. A tree that produces fruit, share the nutrition of that fruit with others.

We are called to be his witnesses -- there are many opportunities for fertilization these weeks. And there are literally thousands of trees in this community NOT BEARING FRUIT. We have the choice to help God tend the vineyard -- or to

reject that responsibility.

Many times we choose to reject it. We put everything else before God; we put high priority on telling our stories and doing our things rather than telling his story and sharing his thing.

And so we see how easy it is to fall back into sin; to take his nurturing care for granted. But thank God for his patience. And yet, we don't have forever. It is either NOW ... or maybe never.

AMEN

LENT III
Luth Church of the Master, Troy
Feb. 26, 1978

"THAT THE BLIND MAY SEE..."

Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind."

John9:39

A famous English physician, Sir James Wylie, was noted for studying the effects of light as a healing agent for patients in the hospital of St. Petersburg. His research led to a dramatic conclusion: he discovered that the number of patients who were healed in rooms properly lighted was four times greater than those patients confined to dark rooms.

I've not researched this area myself -- but from a pastoral perspective I strongly agree with his conclusions. I can remember as a young boy visiting the hospital in my home town and feeling very depressed -- because it was poorly lighted. Likewise, when I visit patients these days -- almost without exception -- when they are put in a dark room or a large room without windows -- their progress is stifled. Even cardiac care units today are being designed so that patients will be near windows.

Seeing light is a much greater need than most of us can even imagine. And that's what Jesus' ministry was all about -- enabling people to see. NOT ONLY TO SEE PHYSICALLY, but to see the power of light that is expressed in his way of loving and helping other people.

The text from John's gospel today seeks to illustrate this LIGHT-GIVING dimension of Christ's ministry by showing that the Christian mission is always at war with the forces of darkness -- both the natural and circumstantial clouds of darkness.

So - when our text tells us that Jesus said "he came for the purpose of judgment" -- this means that Jesus came TO INSPIRE US to choose his power of light OVER the many forms of darkness all around us.

And this same text basically names TWO CONDITIONS OF DARKNESS challenging Christ and his mission. The first one is natural blindness, represented by the blind man. The second one is spiritual blindness (or self-righteousness), represented by the Pharisees.

And as the text so clearly points out -- Jesus Christ has no trouble overcoming the darkness caused by natural blindness. People who have not had the benefit of Christ's powers and then finally receive them -- they always choose Jesus Christ.

Let me be more specific. Often in Christian circles you hear people ask, "Well, pastor, what about those pagans in the hinterlands of Africa? or what about a person who is severely retarded and cannot know Jesus Christ the way and I do? What chance do these people have??"

Jesus' answer is crystal clear! "I came into the world so that those who do not see may see." Jesus has promised that he will take care of his blind children - whether that's now or when he returns again in his glory. Many times he even uses the medical profession to accomplish this miracle RIGHT NOW; and it's obvious that he uses missionaries in other places.

But even if these miracle workers don't succeed, Jesus tells us not to worry ABOUT HIS CHILDREN who have been severely blinded by natural, physical, or geographical limitations. HE WILL GIVE THESE children a miracle cure in his own time.

It is the second form of blindness which is so much more severe. It is this form that presents a real challenge to Jesus and his disciples -- because here there is no guarantee of a 100% cure rate. This form of blindness is like that of the Pharisees.

They could see very well -- moreover, they could read and they even had the advantage of observing Christ's power of healing and love. BUT THEY WERE STILL BLIND -- as the text says, those who see MAY BECOME BLIND.

This is the difficult blindness to cure -- sometimes it's even incurable -- because it's caused by self-righteousness -- by laziness -- by guilt -- by greed -- by apathy and a host of other forces of darkness. These are the powers which compete with Christ and his light, because these are the powers which are determined to DENY and CRUCIFY Jesus Christ and everything he stands for.

At the retreat on Friday night the counselors were talking and one fitting example of this power of the dark was shared by a counselor. He was saying that recently a management decision had been made in his company in the sales division to get rid of all sales personnel WHO WERE OVER 55.

The reason for this was that top management wanted a young, aggressive image in its sales division. And the exact word from the top was "get rid of them, and make sure that you cover your tracks so that their won't by any law suits."

Friends in Christ - that's the power of this world -- a power which is totally blind of compassion and respect for people who have dedicated their lives to a corporation. That kind of calculated, ruthless power brings only darkness into lives at a very vulnerable age.

Under those circumstances - Jesus Christ is the loser. His power of love and mercy is made pretty dim under those circumstances.

And that's why our mission as a local congregation and a whole church is so important -- because we must be standing by to bring Christ's light to one another when we have been dashed to the ground by the devastating powers of other people -- whether those people are friends, family, bosses, or institutions.

Because as much as Christ's light is constantly threatened by the extinguishing powers of darkness in the world -- his torch of mercy and forgiving is also blazing brightly in each one of us -- if we will but share that light.

I don't know how your week has gone -- but I do know what Christ's light has done for mine. This week presented me with some rather darkening circumstances in the lives of other people. And it just so happens that this last week was ONE week that several people let me share Christ's light for a little while with them.

And I don't mean to imply that this meant I was preaching -- it simply meant that I was bringing the torch of healing and forgiving love into several lives. And what a thrill that is. To see the power of Christ's love reuniting families. To see the power of Christ's truth giving a person the courage to tell a partner what's really going on. To see Christ's torch of concern really bringing new hope to 26 young kids at Echo Grove.

Yes - an exhausting week - full of tears and pain and frustration and fear -- but above it and through it was the guiding light of Jesus Christ. A light that even caused several people to give up a Saturday to brighten up this house of worship -- with a color called LAMPLIGHT.

All these things may sound like sentimentality from a rather tired pastor. But you ask the people who have had the power of Christ's light touch their lives -- you ask them if it was just sentimental goop -- or if it was the power of forgiving and confronting love known thru Jesus Christ.

Yes - we can be able to see and still become blind; but that doesn't have to be our decision. We can always decide for the light of Christ -- which renews and brightens life -- which empowers us with the courage to be honest even when its costly - BECAUSE WE WILL NOT SETTLE FOR A HALF-HEARTED RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD OR ANYONE ELSE WHILE WE CAN YET SEE AND BREATHE.

AMEN.



CELEBRATE

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

February 26, 1978

THE DAY

The recurring theme in all three lessons today is the change from blindness to sight, from darkness to light. The Second Lesson sums it up: "Once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light."

THE CONFESSION OF SINS [The Act of Reconciliation]

Minister: Let us confess our sins before God and in the presence of one another.

A brief silence for individual prayer.

Assistant: Blessed Jesus, Light of the world, we confess that we sometimes avoid you because we are afraid of exposure.

All: **Teach us that your light brings healing and joy.**

Assistant: We conceal some of our inmost thoughts and desires because we are ashamed of them.

All: **Teach us to realize that to you all hearts are open, all desires are known, and from you no secrets are hid.**

Assistant: We are more afraid of human judgments than of your condemnation.

All: **Teach us to fear your wrath against our sin.**

Assistant: We often prefer our own lusts to your purity.

All: **Teach us to have a proper sense of values.**

Assistant: We fail to appreciate the warmth and splendor of your light.

All: **Teach us to rejoice in it and give thanks for it.**

Here may be offered other petitions.

Minister: Our merciful God gives us pardon and peace, and opens our eyes to the true light, Christ our Savior. We give thanks for his forgiveness and grace.

All: **Amen.**

Or the minister may conclude:

We are forgiven and reconciled to God through Christ our Lord. Therefore, let us be reconciled with one another and share the peace of the Lord.

THE PRAYER OF THE DAY

Eternal Father, your kingdom has broken into our troubled world through the life, death, and resurrection of your Son. Help us to hear your Word and obey it, so that we become instruments of your redeeming rule in the world; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

THE PSALMODY

Psalm 142; Refrain, verse 3

For singing: *The refrain (R)* is introduced by choir or cantor. The congregation repeats the refrain. Choir or cantor sings psalm verses; congregation sings refrain as indicated. For reading: *Boldface lines are the responses. The refrain is read by the leader alone at the beginning and by all at the end.*



R. When my spir-it faints with-in me, you know my path.
With a loud voice I cry out to the Lord; with a loud voice I beseech
the Lord.
My complaint I pour out before him; before him I lay bare
my distress. **R**.
When my spirit is faint within me, you know my path.
In the way along which I walk they have hid a trap for me. **R**.
I look to the right to see, but there is no one who pays me heed.
I have lost all means of escape, there is no one who cares for
my life. **R**.
I cry out to you, O Lord; I say, "You are my refuge, my portion in
the land of the living."
Attend to my cry, for I am brought low indeed. **R**.
Rescue me from my persecutors, for they are too strong for me.
Lead me forth from prison, that I may give thanks to your
name. **R**.
The just shall gather around me when you have been good to me.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:
As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen. **R**.

CELEBRATE, January-February 1978 issue. February 26, 1978; Volume IX, No. 15.

CELEBRATE is prepared by the Division for Parish Services of the Lutheran Church in America. It is published bimonthly in weekly parts by the Board of Publication of the Lutheran Church in America, 2900 Queen Lane, Philadelphia, Pa. 19129. Second class postage paid at Philadelphia, Pa., and at additional mailing offices. Copyright © 1978 by Fortress Press. Price per weekly part, \$1.74 per 100 copies postpaid; minimum order, 50 copies of each issue. Printed in U.S.A. Unauthorized reproduction of copyrighted material is unlawful.

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THE LECTIONARY

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 42:14-21

GOD SAYS,

"For a long time I kept silent;
I did not answer my people.
But now the time to act has come;
I cry out like a woman in labor.
I will destroy the hills and mountains
and dry up the grass and trees.
I will turn the river valleys into deserts
and dry up the pools of water.
"I will lead my blind people
by roads they have never traveled.
I will turn their darkness into light
and make rough country smooth before them.
These are my promises,
and I will keep them without fail.
All who trust in idols,
who call images their gods,
will be humiliated and disgraced."

The Lord says,

"Listen, you deaf people!
Look closely, you that are blind!
Is anyone more blind than my servant,
more deaf than the messenger I send?
Israel, you have seen so much,
but what has it meant to you?
You have ears to hear with,
but what have you really heard?"

The Lord is a God who is eager to save,
so he exalted his laws and teachings,
and he wanted his people to honor them.

(TEV)

SECOND LESSON: Ephesians 5:8-14

FOR ONCE you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is a shame even to speak of the things that they do in secret; but when anything is exposed by the light it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it is said,

"Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead,
and Christ shall give you light."

(CB)

GOSPEL: John 9:13-17, 34-39

THEY BROUGHT to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. The Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And

he said to them, "He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" There was a division among them. So they again said to the blind man, "What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet." . . .

They answered him, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out.

Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, "Do you believe in the Son of man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and it is he who speaks to you." He said, "Lord, I believe"; and he worshiped him. Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind."

(CB)

Or John 9:1-41

THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

Minister: Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus and for all persons according to their needs.

Assistant: O God, enlighten your Church, that it may clearly perceive the truth you have revealed in your Son Jesus Christ and that it may see the way it should follow, without stumbling or straying.

All: **O Lord, hear our prayer.**

Assistant: We pray for those who walk in darkness and in the shadow of death. Open their eyes to your beauty and your love. Cheer all sufferers with your light and fill them with peace and thanksgiving.

All: **O Lord, hear our prayer.**

Assistant: We pray for all rulers and leaders, that they may not be blinded by ambition and lust for power, but may be guided by your will.

All: **O Lord, hear our prayer.**

Assistant: Guide and enlighten our congregation. Increase our understanding and enlarge our vision, that from us and through us the light of the gospel may spread into our community.

All: **O Lord, hear our prayer.**

Assistant: Lead us constantly, O God, so that in company with all your saints, we may come at the last to the uncreated light of glory.

All: **O Lord, hear our prayer.**

Here may be offered other intercessions and thanksgivings.

Minister: Into your hands, Father, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy, through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**

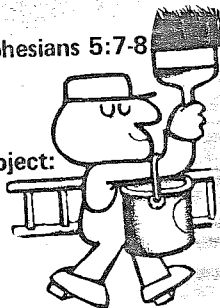
CHILDREN OF THE LIGHT

March

Ephesians 5:7-8

"Therefore do not associate with them, for once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light."

Object:



Piece of wood, paint brush, some oil or water base paint, some dirt or wood shavings.

Good morning, children of the light!!!! That's a new one, isn't it? Has anyone ever called you a child of light before? You know that not everyone is a child of light, don't you? You know why? Because the light isn't yours, it belongs to someone else. Do you know where the light comes from that I see in you? (See if you can't get one to say God or Jesus). Right, from God. St. Paul says that children of light should be very pleased to know that God wants to shine through them and they must or should want to live the way God wants them to live. God says that we should love everyone and be kind to all but we should choose our friends carefully.

Has your mother ever told you to pick your friends carefully because you will be what your friends are? Let me show you. How many of you like to paint? I do too, because paint always makes everything look bright and clean. Let me show you. (Take a board and paint it a bright red or blue). That's pretty, isn't it? It makes the old board look brand new and clean. Now watch what happens when we are not careful where we put the board. (Lay it in a pan of dirt or dust sufficient to pick up and mess up the paint job). Oh, that's too bad. It looks awful, doesn't it? and what are we going to do? You see, that's what happens when we aren't careful with our lives and play with people who like to get everybody into trouble.

Do you think you know what Paul means now? It's a good thing to remember what he said. We should try to help all people know about God, but we should be very careful who we choose for our best friends.

JOINED BY JESUS

March

Hebrews 9:15

"Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant."

Object:

Two pieces of clothesline rope about 10" long and knots that have been tied and the ends cut off so that only the knots remain. There should be enough knots for all the children.

Good morning, boys and girls. Do you know what Sunday this is? It's Passion Sunday and to you it means that we are drawing closer and closer to what day? (Let them answer Easter). That's right, but before we come to Easter we must first learn about some other days like Good Friday. Do you know what happened on Good Friday? (Wait for 'Jesus died for us.')

I want to see if I can show you what's so important about Jesus' dying for us. Do you see these two pieces of rope? (Hold up both pieces). A couple of days ago this rope was all one piece until it was cut in half and now each piece is only half as long as the one piece was. One of these ropes I am now going to call God and the other rope man or maybe we will call it children. Now God wanted the children to be all one with him and the children wanted to be one with God but there was no way to get together.

But wait - there was a way. God had a plan. He went to the children and took them and joined them to himself and he formed a knot. (Tie knot). He called the knot Jesus. Now, because of Jesus, God and man were back together again. Now we can see God through Jesus and God can show us how to live through Jesus.

LENT III
Luth Church of the Master, Troy
3-18-79

"CROSS - EYED"

"For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength." I Cor. 1:25

This morning I'd like you to play a game that you and I have played many times before. I'd like you TO PLAY GOD. That's right - for the next several minutes - imagine yourselves as God.

Now that you've got yourselves into God's shoes (of course don't take that literally, cause I don't even know if God wears shoes) - please imagine yourself to be looking over your creation (and don't ask me where you're looking from). Now - what do you see going on between all those darling creatures that you created called human beings???

Well - I'm sure some of them are doing some constructive things -- in fact on a Sunday morning like this, some of them may even be soaking up sunshine on a golf course... violating the 3rd Commandment. But probably you see worse things than playing hooky from Sunday worship. I would venture to bet that you see very disappointing things -- like malice, and jealousy, misunderstanding and immorality, hatred and greed, and of course, all kinds of idolatry far worse than a golden calf.

Now- here's your goal as God -- the objective is to win the whole world back into a relationship of allegiance to you -- to create a harmonious relationship with all those people -- esp. the ones who have tuned you OUT!

How would you do it?? Let me suggest a couple

of ways that have had the greatest popularity for people playing God over the centuries.

The first is to develop an intricate system of intellectual philosophy that would persuade everyone else that you have the PERFECT KNOWLEDGE OF GOD. This is exactly what the Greeks were seeking to do in Jesus' day. To believe was to have a perfect system of knowledge. The only way to God was through an eloquent system of rational thought. God came into a harmonious relationship with man through lofty rhetoric.

But as the saying goes - that gets to be some pretty heavy stuff. It's too esoteric for many! So maybe as God you'd rather solve the whole dilemma according to another world-wide famous scheme -- this one promoted by the early Jews. In this system you, as God, become a mighty, warrior-type force -- and you would put all evil governments in their place, esp. those rotten Romans. This kind of system sees God pouncing around on all the evil principalities and powers of this world.

Well - throughout history - these are the ways that man would have God come to them.

But not quite so far God himself -- he chose to bring humanity into harmony with himself in quite another way - in quite an UNEXPECTED WAY. He chose to use a cross. He chose to allow his divine, yet human, son to bleed and suffer--hoping that through this act, humanity would recognize the depth of God's love.

But we all know how the Greeks and Jews responded to God's way of solving this dilemma. The Greeks called it foolishness! The Jews scoufed it off as weakness! And up to this moment there are still many Gentiles and Jews who are continuing to reject God's way of reconciliation. I'm certain you even have friends who view Jesus Christ and the cross as a foolish and weak act of God.

Needless to say - that only confirms the fact that mankind enjoys playing God... humanity wants to write the terms of redemption -- man wants his own agenda to be the source of salvation, whether its his latest computer program or the hydrogen bomb.

The whole story of God's solution in Jesus Christ has often seemed like foolishness and weakness to mankind. God enters his earthly inhabitat through an unmarried, peasant girl. Surely this is not the way of wisdom and strength according to man's standards.

And then God even goes so low as to identify himself with sinful man in baptism. But instead of choosing the wisdom and strength of a great high priest, God walks out into the wilderness... into the desert to be baptizd by a man most people considered to be a wierdo.

Then as an adult - Jesus goes into the temple and finds the good religious people doing their normal business. And instead of leaving them alone, he gets angry and throws them out of the temple. This was hardly the way to show wisdom and strength among these so-called religious people.

In fact, his whole ministry could hardly be characterized as the road to wisdom and strength in the world! Instead of ministering in a beautiful temple - a multi-million dollar religious place, Jesus went into the streets. Instead of coffee-clutching in presdigious places, Jesus went into the homes of outcasts. By those who were the religiously elite of the day - Jesus was called a crazy man -- one possessed by the devil. THERE CAN BE LITTLE DOUBT -- he had hardly won himself a position of wisdom and strength through his ministry.

And finally his most significant act -- handing on the cross. This was hardly a symbol of wisdom

and strength in the world of super-powers. But he did experience the wisdom and strength of the world while he hung there -- people mocked him, spat upon him, gambled over his clothing, and left him there to die.

That's the kind of wisdom and strength that often shines in this world ... a wisdom which says, "get the next guy before he gets you." A strength which often gloats over seeing someone else in the gutter. Yes - this is the kind of wisdom and strength that the Greeks and Jews were looking for in their God ... because they were looking for the wisdom and strength of man-made gods!

And let's face it -- these are the gods that really tempt you and me as well. Many of us are far more committed to the wisdom of the New York Stock Exchange than we are to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Many of us are far more inclined to define strength in terms of the greatest number of barrels rather than to use the greatest commandment. Let's face it -- too often wisdom and strength for us IS NOTHING MORE THAN THE GREATEST NET WORTH!

Into this sick society comes God hanging on a cross. Is it any wonder that Christ is a stumbling block in this society. Any wonder that he is foolishness to a lot of Gentiles around us. The cross simply does not live up to the world's expectations of wisdom and strength!!

Yet Paul says: "the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."

What Paul is saying here is that the theological wisdom of today will be totally inadequate tomorrow! We will never fully know God through our inadequate definitions of Him. What a farce to think that we can compress God into our limited impressions of him!!

Only as we see the cross can we see the limitless wisdom and power of God -- because the cross does not represent human wisdom nor military power! Rather, the cross reflects that power that cannot and has not been defeated-- the power of God's love.

In the cross we see a power that is battered, bruised, spat upon, rejected, humiliated, and crucified -- and yet it remains LOVE! The human heart cannot reject that kind of wisdom and power ... and the Centurion testifies to that truth. That power of ~~cross~~ is hardly foolishness or weakness -- it is God's timeless love seeking to bring his lost children home.

To be Christian is to be cross-eyed ... never looking away from the life on that cross. To look at the cross is to be reminded that none of our failures NEED EVER DEFEAT US!

We may fall short in our love lives ... we may misuse, even exploit, God's gifts and talents to us ... we may fail our children or our parents ... we may fall into pits of slander, deceit, and other acts of destruction... we may even momentarily worship graven images other than Almighty God. But as long as we ~~keep~~ our eyes on the cross of Christ, God receives us back into his power of forgiving love. There is no sin too great to be forgiven by the *Christ on the Cross.*

Truly the crucified Christ is the only lasting wisdom and strength to bring this world into harmony with her God.

AMEN

LENT III

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
March 9, 1980

"ONE LAST CHANCE"

"Therefore, let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall." I Cor. 10:12

"And the vinedresser answered: Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put manure on. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

Luke 13:9

A good beginning is important. Whether a new career, a new born baby, a new car, a new romance -- good beginnings are always important. But a fine start does not guarantee a good finish. There must be follow-through all along the way. It takes faithfulness, forbearance, and responsibility (or commitment) to make a good beginning into a good finish.

I am certain that the fig tree in today's had a good beginning. But what happened to it over those three years? Why didn't it bear fruit? Was it the environment? Was it the character of the tree itself? Had it been over-protected? Were the others trees selfishly sucking the nourishment of the ground all for themselves? The lesson doesn't tell us the reason for its unproductive quality.

But even in spite of its poor track record -- we do know that the vinedresser was going to give it ONE LAST CHANCE. He would not yet give up on that tree. He was going to do everything possible to insure its fruitfulness. And then the next year would tell the final story. After all his patient care -- would it finally show a response to his TLC?

The tree was quite literally being given a new beginning -- a fresh start. But that alone would not guarantee its finish. The tree would now have to follow-through. The tree would now have to show its gratitude.

St. Paul reflects this same theme in his letter to the Corinthians. The people of Israel began their journey out of bondage in a very dramatic way -- God had intervened -- he had fed them with his supernatural help. Now they would have to move from captivity to a unknown perils of a new freedom in a new land. God made sure that they were getting off to a good start.

But they faltered along the way. They became diverted by all the side shows of life. Some of them became idolaters. Others indulged in immorality of all kinds. They became a nation of wandering sheep -- lost in their direction for ultimate guidance. Not only their individual sin - but as a nation their rebellion and disobedience to a Godly relationship led to their poor ending. And so Paul warns the Corinthians: "Anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."

Similar messages need serious reiteration today. As Americans we have been graced with a good beginning -- esp. during the last quarter century. We've had a great beginning. We have truly been delivered from the bondage of poverty - of religious tyranny - of political facism. But we run the risk today of standing on the laurels of the past. Like the Israelites, many Americans today are wandering in a wilderness of idolatry and immorality -- and many of them don't even know it.

The family - a basic foundation given by God for human health and security - is being terrorized today by apathy. How long can the family tree stand under the stress of a near 50% divorce rate -- and 60% rate of divorce for second marriages? What chance are we giving 50% of the 13½ million babies born to mothers 18-24 who have no legitimate father? What is the reason that 2 million children suffer child abuse every year? Are these the conditions that cultivate fruitful trees in a society?

In 1978 - one billion dollars worth of school property was destroyed by students. 70,000 assaults were made on teachers; and 100 murders occurred in our prep schools. Suicide has become the second highest cause of death among our teens, and one out of nine high school students is hooked on pot daily. Schools have always been the very harvesting ground of our future leaders. What values are being implanted to lead to such violence in the very harvesting fields of our land??

What are we cultivating as our standard of fruitfulness?? It would seem that the status quo has become the dissolution of relationships - the escalation of violence - and the tolerance of escapism as the signs of fruitfulness in our world.

The great beginning in America saw the plantation of such God-given seedlings as fidelity forbearance, and responsibility. But these are being dissolved in our American melting pot of values. The good beginning is fast becoming a bad ending. And St. Paul rightfully reminds such a society: "Anyone who thinks he stands on such values - take heed lest he fall."

Israel mistakenly thought that once she got across the Red Sea that she had it made. Quite to her surprise - she faced new and more subtle perils in her new land. Instead of cultivating responsibility to God and neighbor -- she allowed her new freedom to let everybody to their own thing.

Likewise - some Americans think that because we have survived a Civil War, and two World Wars, a financial crash and an energy crisis -- that now we've got it made. Obviously - these same people have seen the results of their more-more-more for me-me-me mentality in recent weeks. Individual greed has become a corporate obsession. With it has come faithlessness to God, family, and neighbor.

Yes - God graced America with a good beginning. He gave us a land flowing with milk and honey and taught us the meaning of fidelity, forbearance, and responsibility. But many Americans have not been cultivating those values -- they have just been consuming the natural goodness of the land, while yielding nothing but the temporary fruits of pleasure and wealth.

And then they wonder when the crises come -- whether natural or caused by sin -- why they feel they have been cut down!! It's so obvious that they have not been rooted to anything eternal. Their roots go no deeper than the things of this world.

But God is still the vinedresser - and he desires deeper roots for all his trees. And to that end he is still cultivating us.

This morning God (has) baptized Nicole Frances Cramer. He uses you and me to proclaim his mystery of a good beginning for Nicki. Through our words and actions - God is telling Nicole even before she can understand that he loves her and from this moment wants her to grow to bear his loving fruit forever.

But Nicole's good beginning must be cultivated for a lifetime by her parents, her sponsors, her family of faith, and by Nicole herself. Each of us is held responsible for the ongoing cultivation of God's spirit within us. In baptism - God gives us the great beginning. Then he calls upon each of us to follow-through so that our ending will be as our beginning -- fruitfully ripe in his love.

But Nicole is not alone in the cultivation of her baptism today. As God has given her a great beginning today -- he baptized this whole body of Christ with that same beginning some 50 years ago. And this body called Hope has been blessed with dedicated leaders and servants

over those years. Hope has had many disciples who have done more than talk about follow-thru--- they have lived the grace of God ... and done so sacrificially/

But some -- and sometimes too many -- of Hope's disciples have rested on the laurels of her good beginning. Far too many of her disciples have suffered from stunted growth -- they've taken more of God's nourishment, but their yield has remained static. Some of Hope's disciples have had to be cut down because of their fruitlessness: these have not remained faithful, for bearing, or responsible!

But God has not yet given up on any of his living trees -- whether seasoned veterans of 70 years, three years, or just nine weeks. He desires a fruitful relationship with all of us for a lifetime.

God is still trying to cultivate
He does not despair yet over those who have become or remained fruitless. But he does say: Take heed lest you fall away forever. Now is the time to repent from faithlessness, violence, and escapism.

God does not want to lose one tree from his vineyard. And so he gives us ONE LAST CHANCE... a new opportunity to show our faithfulness each and every day of life. Unlike the tree in the gospel - our season of fruitfulness is not a yearly cycle -- it is a daily one. Each day is a cycle of cultivation -- each day is ONE LAST CHANCE to show a fruitful relationship to God.

Today is God's good beginning for Nicole and each of us -- by our faithfulness, for bearing, and responsibility - God offers us an opportunity to bring this day to a fruitful ending. It may not be a perfect yield -- but if it yields a Godliness of repentance alone -- it will be the ending of a fruitful day.

AMEN

IV SUNDAY IN LENT
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
March 22, 1982

"YOU CAN DEPEND UPON IT!"

"For God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

John 3:17

"By his grace you are saved." Eph 2:5

Our whole reason for being here today - or any other day is summed up in six words: "By his grace you are saved!" Everything else we do here - our liturgizing, our praying, our learning, our giving of ourselves, our good deeds, our sacrifices -- ALL THESE THINGS AND WHATSOEVER ELSE WE DO is a response to the six words just spoken: "By his grace you are saved!"

Some people respond to these words by living almost in the image of God's grace; others don't respond to them at all! And the majority of us live a lifetime showing only a lukewarm recognition that we have been graced by God -- we have been rescued from the ultimate defeat and hopelessness of life.

By his grace you and I have been saved -- "saved," we have been made eternally acceptable and worthwhile in God's sight. There's only one place in the world where we can find that statement about our lives: through the Word of God, and him alone. Every other manual of life, every other religious book or guru, every other life management prospectus TELLS you and me that we can only be SAVED BY OURSELVES ... saved by our own sweat ... saved by our own good deeds. But in Holy Scripture we hear a different word: By his grace you are saved.

Karl Barth, the great 20th century German theologian, remembers someone telling him: "I don't have to go to church. I don't have to read the Bible. I already know what the church teaches and what the Bible says. It says: "Do what is right, and do unto others."

Karl Barth's response was: "If this is the message at stake in Christianity - then we are wasting our time in listening to it. If the Christian message is: Do unto others and do what is right, then neither prophets nor apostles, neither Bible, Jesus nor God are needed. For anybody can say that

message to himself. You don't need God to say: "Do onto others and do what is right." But you do need God to say: "By grace, by my forgiving love, you are saved."

There is no guarantee of hope in the message "do onto others and do what is right." There is no relief for me in that message when I face a major crisis of life. Because that message is totally dependent upon you...and me. And I know there are many times that I have or will let you down. And there are similar times that you have or will let me down.

Yes - we dare never develop a theology or system of faith that is totally dependent upon the goodness or trustworthiness of humanity ... because such a system will never be 100% dependable. That has surely been illustrated by the classic letter sent by college daughter to parents:

"Dear mom and dad, I'm sorry it's been so long in writing again, but all my paper was destroyed the other night when the dormitory was burned down by demonstrators. I'm out of the hospital now, and the doctors say my full eyesight will return soon.

A wonderful black man, Bill, who rescued me from the fire has kindly offered to share his apartment with me until the dorm is re-opened. He comes from a fine inner-city family, so you won't be surprised that we are going to get married. And since you love little children, you will be so happy to learn that next month you will become proud grandparents.

Now, mom & dad, before reading further, disregard the first two paragraphs. These was no fire; I haven't been hospitalized; I don't have a boyfriend, and I'm not pregnant. However, I did get two D's on my grade report... and I wanted to be certain that you received this news in proper perspective.

Love, your daughter, Joy

The illustrative impact of this story makes the point well: We're never quite sure that we can depend upon the graceful love of others, even our parents. Joy did not know whether her parents would continue to accept her after the bad news of the grades. She feared rejection, because she knew she had failed ... she had not done right ... she had not lived up to her expectations or theirs.

We all live in that same arena with Joy. Whether its college, corporation, or church -- we often live in fear of someone or something because inside ourselves we know WE ARE NOT PERFECT. We all know that we have missed the mark -- we live as prisoners of our own flaws and the flaws of the world around us. And beyond that - we are often held captive by greed, we are caged by our own anxieties, and we are confused as to whom we can believe in.

No matter how long or how hard we work at it - we can never free ourselves from the imprisonment of imperfection. We cannot perfect our own lives ... or life around us strictly by our own efforts. In short, we are not in control of the destiny of life.

It's into that arena that the Word of God -- the ultimate word from on high -- is spoken: "By his grace you are saved." God's Word comes to free us from today's or yesterday's incompleteness ... from today's or yesterday's faults ... from today's or yesterday's guilts ... from today's or yesterday's crises. "By grace you are saved" means that we can look to the future with hope, because our destiny is not dependent upon our words, our deeds, our mistakes, or our tragedies. Our destiny is totally dependent upon God... upon his forgiving grace, his merciful kindness.

[That's the whole meaning of baptism. We baptize Christopher at the beginning of life so that he can be assured of God's love forever. Christopher's sins, as well as his greatest accomplishments will not alter God's love for him: God loves him now and forevermore. By his grace Christopher has been saved; God hopes that Christopher will reflect that grace in all his lifetime relationships.]

In baptism - God assures us of his grace -- assures us that we will always be acceptable in his sight so long as we don't reject him. We need not win God's favor - he gives it to us as a gift -- that's what grace means.

Possibly that's best illustrated by the case of a preacher once in a therapy group with me. By using preaching and group dynamics -- we learned how to share and take criticism from each other. Each person's preaching was video-taped; and then the group analyzed the person's preaching and personality with the presen present.

One of our colleagues continually boasted of his great ministry. Yet we were all suspect of this man. He appeared to be hiding behind many layers of frustration and anger. His life had been full of hostility and bitter disappointments. He had been granted a specialized degree after spending enormous sums of money only to discover that the school's rating was worthless. Likewise, other dreams had not materialized. And yet here was a man who had striven and worked hard to appear successful... his greatest desire had been to look good in the eyes of others.

It came time for this man to preach. He stood before us and shouted his message. In thunderous judgmental tones he let us know what the good Lord had to say to us. He swirled right and left ... waving his arms ferociously and shaking his fist with righteous anger. The sermon was a booming, blasting, emotional tirade.

And then it came time for class analysis of the video tape. And you guessed it - this great preacher didn't show up. A second time was arranged; and again he didn't show up.

It was obvious why he wasn't there. He knew deep down inside himself what all the shouting was about. It didn't have anything to do with the gospel of God's grace. It had to do with the mask that he was wearing to cover up all his hostility. He used his preaching and the gospel as an opportunity to unload his bitterness and disappointment. He was using God's Word to hide his own despair.

Finally - the TV technician arranged a private viewing for this man. He came and he watched and he wept -- he wept uncontrollably as he came out to be with the rest of the group. He wept ... and we let him continue to weep. He had to get rid of all the self-hatred that he had allowed to build up inside himself over all those years.

As he wept there with us -- he was finally letting God enter his life and forgive him. He was finally letting God free him from his past mistakes and unchain him from all his disappointments. For the first time in a long time - this man knew the meaning of BEING SAVED BY GRACE ... of being forgiven and healed from all of yesterday's hurts. For the first time in a long time - this man came to realize that his destiny was in God's hands ... and God could be depended upon to love him.

This man experienced a grace moment - a moment where he realized he was totally acceptable to God and others in spite of his life flaws and disappointments. By God's grace he was saved, not by his pretensions or pompous hostilities. The story of this man's life is not only his story; it's also Peter Martyn's story; and it's your story as well.

For many of us have too often spent our lives trying to justify ourselves -- trying to defend our greatness -- many times pretending to be so good and perfect. Likewise, many of us have lived in anger because of yesterday's disappointments and mistakes. And what have we proven by all of this self-righteousness??? Nothing at all!! Because all the self-righteousness in the world won't save us!!

There is only one whom we can really depend upon. For his forgiving love does not change with the shifting winds of time. And by his grace we are saved, for ~~he~~ sent his Son into the world not to condemn it, but that the world might be saved. And that's the gospel truth, and we can depend upon it!

AMEN

LENT III

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

March 10, 1985

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"BEING ABOUT MY FATHER'S BUSINESS"

Jesus said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" John 2:16

Throughout my ministry in my former congregation in Troy, Michigan, one member continually urged that the congregation undertake a carnival each year as a budgetary fund raiser. Each year around this time, he would come to me and say: "Peter, the answer to our financial needs is to sponsor a carnival. We've got five acres of land here -- plenty of traffic -- it would be a colossal success. It would be the ideal profit-maker ... my friend says his church makes \$90,000 to \$100,000 each year on their carnival."

Every time he raised the issue, I would politely listen and then kindly tell him that "the LCA's policy on commercialism forbid us as a congregation from such money-making schemes." He would always walk away grumbling about the LCA not having very good "business sense."

How well we know the concern of that man -- turning God's house into a place of business -- a place of profits, a commercial enterprise. That certainly wasn't Jesus' meaning when he said "he was about his Father's business?" We all know the bottom line for such "church profit" thinkers. Easy membership through carnivals, bazaars and bingo. No personal commitment! No personal sacrifice! No proportionate giving! No real discipleship! Just sponsor a carnival a year -- make some easy profits -- and that's the Father's business (more like the Godfather's business).

Needless to say, Jesus was not quite as kind with the religious businessmen of his day as I had been with my friend in Troy. Unlike the Sunday School image of a gentle, meek, mild Good Shepherd cuddling a woolly lamb, Jesus confronts this kind of "religious business" with harsh words: "Get out of here! You have turned my Father's house into a merchandising mart ... into a trade center." As one person appropriately titled this text: "JESUS GETS TICKED!"

Nothing inflamed Jesus more than debasing worship, prayer, and praise of God into a mere business proposition ... making religion an enterprise of personal advantage or profits ... a matter of buildings and bucks and other bullish realities.

But what real purpose did Jesus' anger serve? Prof. Richard Hoefler says, "There is little doubt that the next

day the temple merchants rounded up the scattered animals, sewed up their money bags, repaired the broken tables and booths ... and it was back to religious business as usual.

But then, isn't that the way it is with most cleansing activities? We scrub floors, vaccum rugs, dust the furniture, and in a few days all the dirt is back again. There is a country ballad about Molly Smith a mother and housewife. She spent all her life fighting dirt. She washed her children's hands and gave them baths every week. She dusted and swept the house every other day. She bent over her washboard weekly. She washed stacks of dishes thousands of times each year. Then one day she died -- and where did her family and friends bury her? UNDER SIX FEET OF DIRT! We just never get totally cleansed, do we!?

Despite our Lord's dramatic demonstration of cleaning up religious corruption in the temple, it really didn't change anything. Within a few days the House of God was again buried beneath the dirt of avarice and greed and graft. The merchants were again making "a killing" - esp. at Passover time. And the profiteering priests were getting their piece of the action. Has anything really changed?? The bingo games are still church business -- the church suppers and bazaars are still underwriting budgets of many congregations. Why did Jesus even bother???

He bothered because he wanted you and me to have a sign. The "cleansing" was a sign -- a sign that Jesus Christ was to become the new temple of God. Our Lord came to the temple not just to clean it -- but to tear it down. He came not to reform the temple, but to rebuild it. Jesus Christ came to REPLACE THE TEMPLE. With Jesus, no longer would religion be a matter of buildings or artifacts or stained glass windows or other forms of idolatry. With Jesus Christ religion would now be a personal reality -- a relationship with God ... and a relationship with other people. A relationship of worship and prayer and service -- a new expression of religious business: NAMELY, HIS FATHER'S BUSINESS.

When Jesus cleansed the temple he was pointing out a radical reorientation of his messianic role. He had come not just to challenge or clean up old ways -- he had come to change them. The old temple of stones would be replaced with a new temple of bones and muscles, flesh and blood -- A BODY OF BELIEVERS CALLED THE BODY OF CHRIST. This new temple -- this new house of God -- this new structure of believers would necessitate new ways of worshipping God.

Worship would no longer be SACRIFICIAL -- no more selling of animals or consecrating actions of sacrifice. Worship would now be SACRAMENTAL. That means God becomes

the giver, and we become the receivers. In the temple, the first-born of the flock was the demanded sacrifice from the faithful. In the new temple, the Lamb of God -- the first-born Son of God (Jesus Christ) was sacrificed for us and we became reborn, born-again, renewed children of God. The sacrificial act has already been done -- once and for all -- our lives now become a response TO HIS LIFE.

That means worship is not what we do for God but what he has done for us. Worship is not a ritual to bribe God with confessions, creeds, prayers and promises. Worship is not a perfected performance to appease God and thereby earn his blessings. Worship is not a commercial counter where we attempt to barter and buy God's love with our prayers, our piety, our preaching or our musical performances. Worship is one thing -- A HYMN OF PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING ... THE BEGINNING OF SERVICE TO OTHERS AS CHRIST HAS FIRST SERVED US.

That's the meaning, the sign, the essence of the cleansing of the temple. Jesus Christ has reoriented THE BUSINESS WITH HIS FATHER. It is not a matter of our sacrifices, but of lifting up his sacrifice THROUGH OUR SERVICE TO OTHERS.

So, how do I feel, how does Jesus feel, when people still view this HOUSE OF GOD as a temple? How do I feel when someone never offers a prayer, a word of praise, a word of thanks to God in this place ... and yet that same person wants to use this HOUSE for a wedding or funeral or baptism or some other worship act? You ask, how do I feel? I feel just as Christ felt -- ANGRY! Because such persons are totally missing the point.

These people have missed the whole point of Jesus Christ. They have made Christ into a temple of stones and bricks and mortar. They have made Christ into a thing -- an idol of plaster and brass instead of a person of forgiving love. They have made the Christian faith into objects of human idolatry -- sanctuaries, and altars, and stained-glass windows, and pipe organs. These are not THE FATHER'S BUSINESS. These are merely tools which can either enhance or detract from the Father's business.

To be ABOUT THE FATHER'S BUSINESS is to be renewed, reoriented, uplifted in this place. This place becomes the place that you and I are freed of guilt and greed and our cheap profit motives. This place becomes our sanctuary for prayer -- a place where we can cry and laugh and talk and even scream with God or at God. And that prayer does not end here -- it only begins here. Because in this place God always communicates back to us -- he always makes clear that prayers never end with words -- they end with our actions

of love toward others. Prayer always finds its fulfillment when it leads us to serving others.

This place is a living, pulsating place of human love and emotion ... a place where hurts are freely shared and where help is regularly offered. A place where new life is celebrated and given eternal affirmation from God in Baptism. A place where the hungry are feed, the naked are clothed, the lonely are visited, and the forgotten are remembered. Above all, a place where old life or diseased life is transmitted into the eternal care of God. This place is not a place where life is sacrificed, but where life is abundantly shared and given -- where life is even nailed to a cross, so that other lives need never again be sacrificed.

This place is BEING ABOUT THE FATHER'S BUSINESS. And that has nothing to do with selling sacrificial merchandise for a profit. It has nothing to do with bingo games or carnivals or church bazaars -- although these sometimes occur in this place. This place is none other than that place where LOVE IS RECEIVED ... in order that it might be given away. WHERE JOY IS EXPERIENCED ... in order that it might be taken away from here. WHERE MERCY IS OFFERED ... in order that it might help the hopeless. WHERE NEW LIFE IS SHARED ... in order that it might never end.

Let us always be ABOUT THE FATHER'S BUSINESS in this place. That business is very personal, very humane, very practical, very down to earth -- IT'S GIVING TO OTHERS AS WE HAVE FIRST RECEIVED FROM CHRIST. It's daily cleansing our temples, our bodies, our lives with the love of Christ. That's the business of discipleship, and that's the business of the Father in this place and every other place.

AMEN

LENT III
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
March 22, 1987
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"DO YOU REALLY LIKE THE DARK?"

"For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light ... and find out what pleases the Lord." Ephesians 5:8-9

Do you really like the dark? Almost without exception, we all would answer in the negative. But the story of Anna Schilling at least raises the question, why if we like the light so much do we often choose the dark?

The story is set in Germany. A lady tourist had just arrived in a little Saxon town one Sunday evening. She was staying in a local inn right on the town square. After settling in, she opened her tourist book and was reading as she heard a church bell ringing. The guidebook, she noted, had mentioned a 12th century castle church right on the square. Glancing out, she noticed the townspeople hurrying in the direction of the bell -- all of them carrying what resembled antique lamps. Her curiosity aroused, she joined the procession. Upon arriving at the church steps, she asked an elderly woman, "What are you carrying?"

The woman answered: "This is a lamp. We carry these to church to keep alive a tradition that dates back to the Reformation when there was no other way to light the church." The duke of the village had provided in his will that every villager would be given a lamp to bring to church. At the church door, the worshipper would light the lamp from a common Christ candle, and then go in and be seated. The old woman continued: "Of course, nowadays we don't need these lamps, but we still do it because in a small way EACH PERSON MAKES THE SANCTUARY A LITTLE BRIGHTER. Anyone who stays away on Sunday evening, does so knowing that there will be one less light in church for others."

The tourist entered the church and occupied a near-back seat. It was very dark in the area -- but just in front of her was a nameplate. It read: "Anna Schilling." It was Anna Schilling's place -- but where was Anna? Why had she not come with her lamp?? Anna Schilling's light was missing! For some reason, she had chosen to allow her place to remain in the dark. She had forgotten her baptismal promise: THAT SHE WAS FOREVER COMMITTED TO BEING A LIGHT OF CHRIST. She had promised in Baptism to be that "bearer of his light." But where was she?? Was her absence a sign that she preferred the dark??

Obviously, we don't know the answer. But we do know that once we're baptized, WE SEEK CHRIST'S LIGHT. That's the nature of our baptismal promise: WE PROMISE TO FAITHFULLY

COME TO THE SERVICES OF GOD'S HOUSE ... TO LIVE BY THE LORD'S PRAYER, CREED, AND TEN COMMANDMENTS ... TO BE FAITHFULLY INSTRUCTED IN GOD'S WORD ... TO LEAD A GODLY LIFE. In short, we promise to seek a life of Godly enlightenment. Anna Schilling had once made this same promise -- to seek God's way and truth. But now she had chosen to remain in the dark ... namely, to remain spiritually blind ... not to be enlightened by God's goodness and truth.

Well, thankfully none of us suffers from Anna's problem this morning. We have all made our Sabbath pilgrimmage to the sanctuary. We have not come with lamps, but we have come to illuminate this sanctuary as baptized Christians. Our presence here is a real reflection of our desire to seek God's light and truth ... to get out of the dark ... and to shine in this world like Christ.

But we also know that physical presence, just like physical sight, doesn't mean that we are totally "out of the dark." Nothing more graphically illustrates our temptation toward darkness than this morning's gospel text. Certainly our "darkness" is not gross immorality or blasphemy of God; in most cases, ours is not a perverted darkness. On the contrary - we are seen as this world's children of light.

But our temptation is to live the "darkness" of the Pharisees. For just like us, they were the super-pietists in Jesus' day. They were always "in church" - in the holy of holies. Yet, even being in the light of the sanctuary, they were often living in the dark. Because they were spiritually blind. And as we see from this gospel, Jesus concluded that spiritual blindness was a greater handicap than physical blindness. Why would he render such a judgment for the Pharisees? Well, let's look at three ways the Pharisees had turned off God's light... three expressions of spiritual blindness.

First, religion or faith in God had been made into a burden rather than a blessing to the believer. And that's living in the dark. For the Jewish believer, the Sabbath had become an obsession of obligations. As we see in our gospel, they condemned Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. Their whole view of religious life was absolute allegiance to the law. If you got a fractured foot on Sunday - no one could attend to it (imagine what that would do for the NFL). In fact, you were even prohibited from pouring cold water on a fracture -- that was viewed as work. A famous law was that women were prohitod from looking into the mirror on the Sabbath (imagine if you had all done that before coming this morning). Why was this the law?? Because she might find a gray hair, and be tempted to pluck it out -- and that would be work. In their zeal to honor the Sabbath, the Pharisees had forgotten the most important thing: THE SABBATH WAS CREATED FOR HUMAN BENEFIT -- NOT AS A HUMAN BURDEN.

We must ask ourselves -- what have we done with the Sabbath?? Have we made it a blessing or a burden?? Do you come here out of obligation -- or out of desire?? Do you hear good news here, or do you only feel greater burdens after being here? I am serious about these questions. I hope some of you will honestly share your responses next week at the sermon feedback.

Well, I sincerely hope that worship in this sanctuary on every Sabbath serves as a blessing for your life. I hope you're here because you desire the freedom of the gospel -- you desire to be liberated from guilt!! I hope you're here because you are eager to be more like Christ -- that you are really turned on by his lifestyle and ministry to others. I hope you're here because you desire a community of acceptance and affirmation -- for if that's not offered here, then there's not much hope in this world. I hope you're here because you enthusiastically desire to offer yourself and your gifts -- that you have really been touched by God's power of generosity and goodness. I hope you're not here to merely pay the church bills or fulfill some other legal obligation -- because that would be living in the dark.

I hope you're here on this Sabbath for these reasons and many others like them -- because then you are remaining God's light ... a blessing rather than a burden for God and others.

Secondly, the Pharisees had made religion or faith in God a POWER that divides rather than draws people together. Division, destruction, alienation, exclusiveness, separation, status seeking -- these are all powers of the dark!! When people strive to be exclusive and separated from other people -- they are really in the dark!! BECAUSE THAT IS TOTALLY CONTRARY TO GOD'S LIGHT! God's light illuminates all people so that they might see and befriend one another -- not reject and condemn one another.

All parents in this room know how much their young children desired a "light on" just before going to sleep. Having the "light on" made our children feel united with creation -- not all alone. Religion, to be true religion, always serves the same purpose -- it seeks to unite, not divide and separate people. The very Latin root word for "religion" is "to bind together."

So, what has your religion done for you?? Has it made you a more accepting person of those who are different from you? Has it made you more forgiving of others who are not yet perfect? Or like the Pharisees - has your religion made you into a fault-finder ... a people-divider. Does your religion give you pleasure when you can alienate yourself from someone else who is not perfect?? Is your aim to negate

and criticize the failures of those who are less well-off or sophisticated than you? Are these your religious goals?? Is that what you spend your religious time doing?? Well, if so, then you (like the Pharisees) really like the dark!! You have given up your light and turned to darkness!

In the catacombs of Rome, after Christianity had made its impact, one of the greatest evidences of "Christ's light" still shines. The bodies of the highest Roman aristocracy, some even from Caesar's family, were laid side by side with the remains of obscure slaves and laborers. And among the earliest of graves - there were no inscriptions to hint at the status of the deceased. All that sufficed for burial in these catacombs was that the person was a believer in Christ. These early Romans did not perpetrate in death the vain distinctions of the world -- they had mastered the glorious teaching of the Lord: WE ARE ALL OF THE SAME LIGHT!

This leads to the third blunder of Pharisaic darkness. The Pharisees had made religion into a ministry within the womb rather than a ministry to/for the world. We obviously all know that the womb is a safe place ... it is the place of nurture, of feeding, of protection and isolation, and of total darkness. For the Pharisee, the synagogue had become the womb of God. You went to worship the Lord not to be liberated or enlightened, but to be "seen by others." The object of worship was yourself -- showing your piety to others.

The Pharisees were in the light of the sanctuary, but they were living in spiritual darkness. They had lost sight of the whole aim ... the whole purpose ... the whole mission of religion -- TO BE A LIGHT TO THE WORLD.

Isn't that a temptation for all religious folk -- to just stay in the womb. Pastor Mike Scherer says we love to stay in the womb ... it's comfortable ... there's plenty of food. But there's a far more serious problem -- there's no room for growth in the womb. To stay in the sanctuary is to suffer from religious claustrophobia!! The real adventure of religion is not experienced in the sanctuary -- just as the real adventure of life is never experienced in the womb.

The real miracle of sight is only given as we allow God to move us out of the womb into the world. The real mission, the real light of the church is only evidenced when it is offering its healing rays to the suffering and segregated conditions of human struggle. That's when God really "opens our eyes" -- when we get beyond the isolation of the sanctuary and seek to serve the needs of the world. That's living as children of light ... that's doing what pleases the Lord. For the fruit of the light consists of goodness, truth, and righteousness. And we see that fruitfulness when

we take our lamps out of the sanctuary and shine them on the world. God says, "Take away guilt ... remove the walls of separation ... attack those people and powers that seek to destroy and desecrate life ... be a light in the world."

Few of us ever heard of St. Telemachus. He lived in 404 A.D. He was a Christian, but too often he kept his faith hidden from public view. One day he was attending a Spectacle in the Roman Colosseum. As he watched one gladiator after another fight to death in heroic battle, he recalled the commandment "Thou shalt not kill." He rose from his seat, and within earshot of the Emperor, he shouted: "Stop this killing. In the name of Jesus Christ, stop this senseless killing of those for whom Christ has already shed his blood." The Emperor, himself a Christian, stood up and left the Colosseum. The next day, the Emperor proclaimed an edict ... and the games were abolished forever!!

St. Telemachus chose to be a light, rather than remain spiritually blind in silence ... in the dark. We too are called to live as the light! Why would we do it any other way -- none of us likes the dark anyway!!

AMEN.

LENT III
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
February 26, 1989
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"G O D W A I T S -- B U T N O T F O R E V E R!"

"And the owner said to the vinedresser: 'Lo, these three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down, why should it use up ground?' And the vinedresser answered him, 'Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

Luke 13:8-9

To be in business in Toledo during the past decade is to feel intimately close to the vineyard owner in today's parable. The owner had allowed a particular fig tree to grow to its full maturation - three years. Yet after that time, the tree was still barren. So he ordered the vinedresser to "cut it down." NO FRUITFUL YIELDS ALWAYS CALLS FOR CUT BACKS IN BUSINESS!

Many people (some of this room) have experienced the exact outcome in Toledo, Ohio. But unlike the fig tree, most of these had been productive branches of a business. About eight years ago, LOF was showing faulty fruitfulness. In short order, a large number of production workers were cut down. Because of age and other discrimination factors, some of these workers have never found reproductive soil again. Likewise, in the last decade, for various reasons of fruitlessness, Owens-Illinois has experienced two major prunings of its production force in Toledo. A few years ago, a hostile takeover forced OCF to trim down to little more than a skeleton of its previous Toledo size. After years of fruitful growth in Toledo, Sheller Globe has now been cut down in order to be replanted in Detroit. The Blues in Toledo have been purged by a Cleveland cut back. At the present time, TrustCorp is pruning away at its fruitful branches; and Champion Spark Plug may soon become a hybrid of Cooper-Houston, Texas. And of course, good ole Therma-Tru has shown that even fruitful profits aren't good enough in Toledo; the owners have cut down this company for greener growth in Indiana.

Yes, to live in Toledo in the 80's is to know intimately how ownership can hastily cut down its crop when the harvest looks lean. In fact, this whole mecchete management style has seemingly become the mentality of our world. If you're not winning big ... if you're not bearing the best ... then "cut it down!" So if you don't have a winning season -- then fire the coach or move to a different city. If you've had a couple of tough quarters -- don't stick it out here, sell it off before its too late! Even the church has succumbed to this thinking today. Congregations in transitional areas will often shut down rather than minister to their new

neighbors. Somehow or other, the people of God have come to believe that if the fruit isn't bearing white skin, it certainly can't belong to the vineyard of God.

Like no other age, we live in a "cut down" society -- where loyalty, fidelity and even life itself are often sacrificed to expediency and greed. Today, we not only choose to CUT DOWN life by abortion, but now parents are even destroying new life simply because its not the right sex. We have not only become a nation that urges capital punishment for heinous criminals - but today we are delighting in cheerleading parties outside the executionary site. Today many are entering the institution of marriage without real commitment to relational cultivation and hard work; there seems to be a readiness to bail out as soon as partners discover bad breath on the morning after.

And esp. among professional and political leadership -- what a travesty of intolerance, of demand for perfection, of "cut throat" tactics to the core. How many of us in this room would survive a John Tower investigation? Certainly no one wants a tipsy Director of Defense. At the same time I would hardly urge the FBI or anyone to wear blinders when taking a boatripe with Gary Hart. But what kind of crucifixion campaign should be tolerated today from our media, our courts, and other self-righteous legislators??

A little over five months ago a doctor opened my chest and re-routed my arterial heart vessels. What if he had blown it? What if he had not done a perfect surgical job? What if Peter Martyn had died on the table because of surgical error? What if my case was the doctors only error in 20 yrs? Should this doctor -- or any professional -- be taken to the cleaners for one, human mistake? What kind of fruitfulness are we expecting from one another these days? Certainly, if a doctor, or nurse, or teacher, or technician, or pastor consistently screws up or violates our trust -- then maybe punitive action is justified. But hasn't our society become a little too hatchet happy against those who are merely seeking to serve others.

And then there's the Ayatullah - the epitome of Islam ... the pope of the Muslim world -- who orders a 5 million dollar hit job on Salman Rushdie for his "Satanic Verses." What kind of religious reinforcement does the Ayatullah's action reflect to an agnostic world view? It seems to me that the Ayatullah reinforces a vindictive, sniper-in-the-sky image of God. The Ayatullah advocates a position diametrically opposed to today's text - he says, when you sin against God or his people, God sentences you to death. Yet God says just the opposite in today's text -- when you sin against me it may certainly cause trouble ... maybe even threaten your life -- but I do not want you to suffer, I want you to repent ... turn around, change your hurtful behavior.

You see - whether its the Ayatullah in Iran or CEO of General Motors in Detroit -- the socially powerful in our world seem to be advocating the same solution for the problems of fruitful growth in the world: CUT DOWN ANYONE OR ANYTHING THAT SEEMS TO BE UNPRODUCTIVE BY OUR STANDARDS! Thankfully, the parable before us today cautions us against the "cut down crusade" of the powerful of our world. It reminds us that everyone in this world is too quick to render rash judgments ... too quick to destroy the potential given to each of us by God.

Jesus Christ came to show us another way, another truth, another life. He says, "Let the tree alone this year also, till I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it doesn't bear fruit -- well and good, cut it down. BUT ABOVE ALL, GIVE IT ANOTHER CHANCE!

What a contrary message to the Ayatullah! We worship a God of patience and endless long-suffering. In the face of our shortcomings ... our blatant apathy ... our cheap and haughty selfishness ... our indifference and wickedness -- this same God counsels PATIENCE. It would be so justified for God to give the order -- to say: "Jerk those unfaithful, fruitless souls out of this world and let them rot in hell!"

That's the kind of impatience and ruthless control God sees from us each and every day. He patiently waits for us to change -- and we demand instant results and immediate gratification from everyone and everything. And if we don't get instant results -- we are tempted to label other people or their performance as UNFRUITFUL, UNPRODUCTIVE!! Just this past week, as I was meeting with the expansion committee -- it was obvious that my impatience was showing. It was almost as if I was saying to the committee -- "I've had it -- let's just cut down the whole project and you can find yourselves a new leader who will be willing to live with the crowded chaos of the present." We all violate God's grace! Yes - God calls us to build up ... to uplift even in the midst of disappointment -- but too often we find ourselves cutting down, and tearing up, and belittling the fruits of others.

God gives us the yellow light -- he cautions us to be patient with one another ... to wait one more year (which as a biblical metaphor might mean many). Because God does not give up easily or quickly on his people ... and he doesn't want us giving up on each other. God's first action is always renewal, always new life, always a sign of hope. Is it any wonder that Holy Baptism is offered to us at the beginning of our faith journey. From the very begining, God wants us to know his intention for our lives -- CONSTANT RENEWAL, CONSTANT CLEANSING, CONSTANT REFRESHMENT!! God knows that repentance can only be possible WHEN HE HAS ASSURED US THAT HE WILL NOT CONDEMN, NOT KILL -- BUT UPLIFT, CULTIVATE NEW GROWTH!!

That's always the first goal, the first action, the first offering of God to his people -- PATIENT RENEWAL, LONG-SUFFERING LOVE, RECONCILING REVITALIZATION. Regardless of the human condition of guilt or poor productivity. God's first offering is ALWAYS ANOTHER CHANCE. First and foremost, GOD WAITS!

However, God will not wait forever ... esp. if he sees us playing games with him. His patience is grace ... undeserved love. But that gracious love always serves a purpose -- namely, it leads us to repentance ... to turning around ... to making us different! GOD WAITS -- BUT NOT FOREVER!!

Repentance is more than simply saying "I'm sorry, God!" Repentance reflects a new action -- a change of heart. Charles Colson in one of his books said too many Americans profess without performing the faith. He said: "95% of Americans claim to believe in God; 50 million of these claim to be 'born again.' Then why, (Colson asks) are so few lives a telling force of Jesus Christ? Colson answers his own question: Too many people think Christianity offers only a flood of blessings, the rights of the kingdom without any responsibilities to the King." Said another way: The Christ of Christianity patiently waits for us to grow in grace -- but once grown, our faith is no longer without a price, without a cost, or without a cross.

H.G. Wells once wrote an essay on a tribe of people called "the goodness sakers." These are the folk who see something that needs doing, or see some social evil or moral shortcoming, and they stand around wringing their hands saying: "For goodness sake, why doesn't someone do something about that!?" God's patient grace empowers us to be more than "goodness sakers."

Because we have been patiently graced -- we are God's most wholesome fruit in the world. WE ARE THE ONES WHO CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE ... BECAUSE WE HAVE BEEN EMPOWERED TO BUILD UP RATHER THAN CUT DOWN. It is not our task to ask why there is hunger in the world -- it is our task to see that the hungry are fed. WE ARE TO BUILD UP, NOT TEAR DOWN! It is not our task to ask why some innocent people suffer tragedy and suffering -- it is our task to see that anyone who suffers tragedy receives material and emotional support. It is not our task to determine who is lost or saved; it is our task to share the unconditional love of God for all. It is not our task to ask God for more special favors -- it is our task to ask God to show us someone less fortunate so that we might offer God's favor.

Because we have been patiently graced -- we can't possibly play the waiting game of putting off fruitfulness -- God needs our fruitfulness now. Just think of the age in which we live ... never before in the history of civilization has humanity been better graced by God!! Think of our daily graces -- food, freedom, knowledge, technology, scientific advancements galore, profound medical achievements, computerization, pleasure, wealth, leisure, educational opportunity, etc. etc.

Is there anyone in this place that can possibly say that he or she has not been PATIENTLY CULTIVATED BY GOD AND HIS CREATION?? We have been cultivated beyond measure! But what have we been willing to give back?? In light of all that God has heaped upon us -- what measure of fruitfulness have we returned to him and to his kingdom?? How much cultivation of His kingdom are we doing??

God's greatest fear is that we will be found CULTIVATING LIFE'S TREASURES FOR ONLY OURSELVES ... AND SHOWING NO FRUITFULNESS FOR HIS KINGDOM! Sadly, sometimes that's exactly what God finds. There is nothing more tragic in my ministry than doing funerals for people who were always too busy to repent ... too busy to return to God ... too busy to renew themselves in his grace and share his goodness. Families of such people always want me to offer the soothing words of the gospel without the faithful word of Christian responsibility that's the fruit of the gospel. The grace of God always yields the fruits of discipleship!

GOD PATIENTLY WAITS FOR THAT FRUITFUL RENEWAL IN EVERYONE! But not forever -- because today (AND EVERYDAY) is the day to repent and be renewed. Thankfully - you have responded today, because as fruitful disciples you realize that tomorrow may never come. And should we not finish all that God would have us do today -- thankfully, we can rely upon his PATIENCE until tomorrow. Isn't it great fun bearing the fruit of God in this world -- he never cuts us down, since he knows that we always have the potential of being more fruitful tomorrow! What a treasure to be graced with God's fruitful love and vitality; what a joy to repent with the assurance that we will always be patiently renewed and refreshed FOR TOMORROW'S FRUITFULNESS!

AMEN.

LENT III
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
March 18, 1990
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"HOW DO YOU SEE IT?"

"I will lead the blind in a way that they know not, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, ... and I will not forsake them." Isaiah 42:16

"As he passed by, he saw a man blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? ... "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." John 9:1-2,39

A baby is born without arms or legs to a disabled couple. A prostitute suffers in a vegetative state after being beaten by her lover. A defiant child hits his mother, then darts out into the street to be struck dead by a passing truck. Four drinking teens are breezing along a county road when, to their total surprise, a freight train rams them dead on! A gay lover contracts the HIV virus and dies the slow, debilitating death of AIDS.

What do we say when such bad things happen? Do we say one thing when it happens to "good people," and another thing when it happens to "bad people." Do we think that God rejoices when suffering happens to anyone? Do we make causal connections between suffering and sin? In the case of the prostitute or gay lover - how many of us would be tempted to say: "What could they expect, given the life they lived." When can we feel justified in saying: "It was God's will?!" When can we honestly say, "It was meant to be?!" Does God ever rejoice over anyone's suffering? HOW DO YOU SEE IT? How do you see suffering and blame in relation to God's will?

Today's gospel tells us that Jesus and his disciples were passing a man blind from birth. Immediately his disciples asked, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? The disciples were apparently seeing sin as a cause for blindness! They were attempting to find someone to blame for this man's lifetime of misfortune. In essence, they were very much hooked by an O.T. notion: that God punishes people for their sins with physical trauma and suffering. How do you see it??"

In today's textual metaphor, not only the disciples, but a lot of well-meaning Christians still suffer from the BLINDNESS OF BLAME when it comes to suffering. Much like the friends of Job - they claim divine insight and offer advice as well as blame when they see human suffering. Just look at the remainder of John's text before us: the Pharisees had a field day with the blind man trying to find fault, to find blame, find imperfection, find sin, and above all, to find themselves totally innocent. Haven't we all known such well-meaning Christians. Instead of just compassionately being there - these people are fueled with all the proper, pious platitudes. Things like :

"You must really like to suffer, you seem to bring so much of this on yourself by the way you live." "I know just how you feel being totally crippled, I suffered from tennis elbow last week." "The reason I have perfect health is that I always do what's right; you never get sick when you do what's right." "God must truly cherish you to give you such a heavy burden of suffering."

Like the disciples, there's often a tendency among well meaning Christians to make God the instigator and perpetrator of human suffering. I'm reminded of the story of the country preacher who was visiting his parishioners after a flood. He called on a farmer whose crop and total head of cattle had been washed out. "Whom the Lord loveth, the Lord truly chasteneth," quoted the preacher, trying to offer some divine comfort. The farmer looked at him and said dryly: "Well, preacher, I believe God overdid it this time!"

Thankfully, most of us do not see it like the disciples or the country preacher. But how do we see it? What do we say to our friends when their loved ones are struck down tragically without any warning? Do we leave them with the cold comfort, "It was meant to be!" Does our faith in God go no further than such fatalistic emptiness? Certainly we all suffer from blind spots in our faith and witness, but doesn't God's spirit move us beyond the primitive theology of "It was God's will." Can we get beyond a theology which only offers blame and fault rather than comfort and compassion? HOW DO WE SEE IT when suffering puts us to the test?

I think there are three things that God enables us to see when it comes to human suffering. First, I think God urges us to be cautiously mindful that some suffering is caused by sin. Like it or not -- some human suffering is the result of sin -- the result of human blindness, stupidity, and foolishness! In Deut. 5:9, we learn that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children of the 3rd and 4th generations. Please understand - this biblical truth is NOT asserting that God is punishing several generations of a family. Rather, it is simply saying that there are consequences to everything WE say and do. The consequences of abusive parenting will often be seen into three or four generations. Do we need any more graphic reminders than crack-cocaine today to illustrate the meaning of this text? Are we not critically aware of the engendering effect that alcoholic abusiveness can have upon later generations? Are we not mindful that children raised by television monitors might suffer greater insecurity than those nurtured by real people? Are we not mindful that starvation in the 3rd world might have some relevance to our obsession with abundance? Whether we like it or not - some human suffering is the direct result of our human blindness to the way, the truth, and the life of God. But let us never say that such suffering "is God's will" ... and certainly never say that God rejoices over those who are suffering, regardless of fault! God despises suffering ... and suffers with the suffering -- whether they are at fault or not.

Secondly, we can say as Dr. Stulman more eloquently said on Wednesday night - much human suffering is simply the reality of our natural order ... an order in which God has given us great freedom from his control. Creation, life, relationships, the environment -- all these and many more are expressions of God's goodness and greatness. But because he has given them to us WITH TOTAL GRACE, WITH TOTAL FREEDOM -- there is much imperfection in the way they are experienced. Certainly no one in this room believes that God intentionally sent Hurricane Hugo to devastate the coast of South Carolina last year in order to punish Carolinians for their sins. Likewise, the devastation of the San Francisco earthquake was not God's judgment on Bay area residents. Much like our human order, nature also has her moments when she needs to release her pent-up energies. How much we wish she would direct her destructive energies to the crack-houses or porn shops of our cities rather than the beauty of our coasts. But just as we have been given human freedom, so has God given a measure of such freedom to nature.

But as Dr. Stulman further said, these are not direct and casual acts of God (as our insurance companies claim) - they are acts of nature! They are simply a part of the most beautiful, most majestic, most glorious world that God has given -- but a world which has the divine freedom to include hurricanes and earthquakes, viruses and cholesterol, defective genes and killer cancer cells. None of these are sent by God to punish us. He tells us that the way we have to see it is that "he makes the sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust." Just like the human order, the natural order contains both good and evil. So, evil things happen to good people, and good things happen to evil people (vice versa). Not because God zaps them that way, but because that's the freedom of his creation -- it is still in the process of growing and groaning to perfection, just like you and me.

So, that leaves us with a third and final way TO SEE IT -- in fact, THE ONLY WAY THAT GOD WANTS US TO SEE IT! Since suffering cannot be eliminated from the human or natural order -- the question is not one of blame, BUT RATHER ONE OF OPPORTUNITY! As the O.T. text from Isaiah prophesys today, God's purpose is to turn darkness into light ... to assure his people that they are never forsaken ... never alone. Likewise, Jesus answers his disciples not by identifying the source of the man's blindness, but by urging his disciples to do something to alleviate the blindness. Unlike the Pharisees in this story -- our mission is not to develop a fellowship of fault-finders, a society of sin judges, a body of believers who see themselves as blameless and perfect. Such a fellowship is truly blind to God and his mission -- they may see with their eyes, but their hearts have become blind to the real needs of life. Our mission is to develop a fellowship of healers and holders, of huggers and helpers ... so that those who are blind will be able to see again through us.

Biblical revelation makes clear that there are many sources of suffering in this world. Some we know; others are still a mystery; for many more, we will never know WHY. But the Bible from Genesis to Revelation makes clear there is only ONE SOURCE OF HEALING FOR ALL SUFFERING -- GOD ALMIGHTY! Regardless of where the fault or blame lies -- healing and helping the suffering is "God's only will" for our lives. God does not rejoice at anyone's suffering, but he does rejoice at the healing and helping of suffering. He rejoices when he knows for certain that suffering persons are no longer feeling forsaken by Him or anyone else. Our mission is to make certain that no one ever feels abandoned in his or her suffering.

That is the message from Isaiah; that was the message for Job; that was and still is Christ's message for his disciples then and now: WE ARE NOT CALLED TO FIND FAULT OR LABEL BLAME OR KNOW ALL THE REASONS FOR OUR SUFFERING OR ANYONE ELSE'S. WE ARE CALLED TO HELP, TO HEAL, TO BE PRESENT WITH ONE ANOTHER IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING SO THAT WE MIGHT ENDURE ... SO THAT WE MIGHT KNOW FOR CERTAIN THAT WE HAVE NOT BEEN FORSAKEN. God's message is to offer help and healing to the good and the bad ... to the righteous and the sinner ... to you and to me. Is it any wonder that only God's love can be called AMAZING GRACE?

Now you can see why God commanded that all should be baptized! It is God's graphic reminder that we all need to be cleansed and healed from sin -- not at some arbitrary age, but from the very beginning of life until death do us part. Now you can see why God commanded that we "eat" and "drink" of his body and blood? We are in constant need of the graphic reminder that God is present in our very midst ... always forgiving us ... during our good days and bad. In Holy Communion - God is not up there or out there -- he is dwelling within us ... suffering as we suffer, rejoicing as we rejoice. Now you know why God commanded us to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Because God knows that we suffer from blind spots ... that we quickly lose sight of his healing presence ... that we are tempted to blame him and find fault with him when we suffer rather than seek his grace.

God has but one desire for his human and natural order -- that it will be healed and made whole. That's why he has planted his healing power into every vein of creation. A generation ago there were diseases ravaging this planet that we don't even think about today. As the growth of medical technology and knowledge continues to accelerate, there will even be more progress in generations to come. We don't create cures; we merely discover what God has already ordained as healing agents for life.

That's why a medical team under a 5-year contract with the National Cancer Institute has been working in the Amazon jungle seeking the next generation of anticancer drugs. Michael Balick, an ethnobiologist, says: "The rain forest

is a veritable chemical factory." Did you know that the rosy periwinkle has been found to reduce white blood cell counts, actually bringing about 85% remissions in childhood leukemia cases. We all know that penicillin is derived from mold, but did we all know that cortizone is derived from yams? And did we all know that Atrophine, a drug for stomach ulcers, comes from belladonna plants. The world is filled with God's healing properties. And God's will is the same today as it was 2000 years ago -- seek and ye shall find, knock and the door will be opened unto you.

God's will is not that we find fault or blame or know all the reasons for suffering in the world. That judgment is God's alone. God's will is that we seek to help and heal the suffering regardless of the source or fault. Why else would God have suffered on a cross for our sake? Certainly, he did not do this because he could find no fault or blame with us. He had GREAT REASON NOT TO SUFFER FOR US! But his intention was not to find fault or point the blame. His intention was not to justify himself, but to forgive us. His intention was to heal us from whatever separates us from him or one another. And so he died for us ... to show us that not even death can separate us from his love.

Is it any wonder that we sing: "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see." WAS BLIND, BUT NOW I SEE. HOW DO YOU SEE IT NOW?? Hopefully, more gracefully!

AMEN.

LENT III
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
March 14, 1993
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"COMING OUT OF THE DARK"

Paul writes: "Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light" ... Eph 5:8
And Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." John 9:39

(1:05 of "Coming Out of the Dark" by Gloria Estefan)
About three years ago to almost this day - March 20, 1990 - the word was that she might never walk again - certainly never return to the stage. It all happened on a snowy highway south of Scranton, Pa. Her tour bus was rammed by a semi; and the crash shattered her vertebra, severing her spinal cord. Months of intensive, painful physical therapy, incl. weight training & aerobics, prepared her to return to the tour. But Gloria Estefan says: "the fact that so many people got behind me and gave me a reason to want to come back ... that's what gave me strength! Knowing how caring and how much people gave me - that was the power for "COMING OUT OF THE DARK."

It's obvious from Estefan's lyrics that she did not SAVE HERSELF. She sings, "I know the love that saved me ... and I'll be much stronger holding your hand ... Forever, forever I stand on the rock of your love." Certainly that "rock of love" refers to God, but I think Gloria is obviously referring to her husband, Emilio, and the whole band, the Miami Sound Machine: it was their love and commitment that helped pull her through! But that's always the way God has helped us COME OUT OF THE DARK -- through the presence of his love IN THE FLESH; THAT'S HIS GRACE & TRUTH!

I remember when I was slightly younger than Sarah (about 10). I came home with my parents from our every Friday night shopping experience. It was very dark, but as we entered the driveway it was very apparent that our home had been burglarized: doors and windows had been left open by the thieves. I would not go into the house until my dad had gone in and "checked it out." He came out of the dark house to verify that we were the victims of a theft; it was mom & dad's bedroom that had been turned upside down. Be assured, that was not an easy night of sleep for me -- to be sleeping in a house that had just been turned upside down by an unknown intruder.

Surrounded by the darkness of that Friday night, I just could not see the way that God had truly intended the world to be. What I kept on seeing was the image of that burglar still lurking and rummaging around in the darkness of our home. I was obsessed with that evil notion; I was shuttering in fear that my room would be next; I was not wanting to be alone in my bedroom; I was feeling abandoned by safety, by security, by the way the world was supposed to be in a quiet town like Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

I'm sure that Gloria Estefan had those same fears & traumas after her accident. How would she ever see the light of renewal and recovery ... possibly never again see the lights of the stage! I'm sure that many of you could tell similar stories of darkness ... when you were feeling like the whole world was an army of thieves seeking to disorient & destroy you. That's always what the power of sin does for us. Whether it's an accident, or a burglary, or a tragic grief, or the snowstorm of the century, or a pro-life advocate murdering his medical adversary; or a birthright of blindness, or just someone who is making life hell for us: whatever the condition of hurt or destruction, it causes us the SAME EXPERIENCE: FEELINGS OF FEAR AND ABANDONMENT, ISOLATION & HOPELESSNESS, MAYBE EVEN DEPRESSION & DESPAIR. That was the condition of the blind man in our gospel for today - he had lived a life of isolation, hopelessness, and fear. And as Jesus' makes fully clear in the expanded version of this text -- it was not because of this man's sin or any immorality on the part of his parents (God is not in the business of zapping us with suffering because of our sin). This man's blindness was simply a reflection of a fallen, imperfect world ... just as my heart disease reflects the same fallenness of our human condition. Both physical and spiritual blindness inhabit this imperfect order of creation.

But as we have all known from our own baptisms - God does not want TO LEAVE US IN THE DARK ... he does not want us to live obsessed with fears, guilts, hopelessness and despair. That is never God's intention for anyone in this world - whether we have suffered from blindness, from an accident, from cancer, from murder, or from some other power of alienation and hurtfulness. God's aim is always to heal and to restore. God's intent is always to intervene and see that we will COME OUT OF THE DARK. That's the miracle of being a member of the church. Because once we are grafted to this body in Baptism -- then God gives us everything that we need to COME OUT & STAY OUT OF THE DARK. He gives us this Book - he says this Book will light our pathways for every relationship in life -- not without pain or tragedy or sacrifice -- but it will give us a light for living the Way, the Truth, and the Grace of God (and what more do we need to be complete?). Right here at this altar on every Communion Sunday - God gives us everything we need to see the light of forgiveness: TO COME OUT OF THE DARKNESS OF GUILT & HATRED. From this pulpit (at least once in a while) the truly miraculous light of God's goodness & truth is proclaimed week after week. There is no reason for blindness and darkness, for fear, for guilt and hopelessness to persist among those who regularly gather in this place.

And yet, even though almost all of us have good eyes and ears in this place -- many of us cannot yet really see or hear. Like the Pharisees in this text, we resist the light -- we seemingly prefer being blind ... we figure we can accomplish salvation by our own rituals, our own technologies, our own rules of salvation. As was pointed

at Wednesday night's Lenten study -- not only lawyers suffer from this problem. We all do!! Too often we make our mission one of SELF-PROMOTION & DECEPTION rather than loving the truth; too often we heap LAW SUITS & OTHER GUILT BURDENS on one another rather than uplifting one another in loving service; too often we make the PRECEDENCE OF FORM more important than the substance of love & compassion; too often we become obsessed WITH RELIGIOUS RITUAL rather than sharing a lifestyle of forgiving mercy. Like the Pharisees, we do not suffer from physical blindness; we suffer from a blindness of the heart!

The great 19th cent. evangelist and lawyer, Charles E. Finney, classically illustrates the point. Finney longed to have the assurance of God's presence in his life, but for years he merely wandered around with no real conviction for God's grace to guide him. But on October 10, 1821, the turning point came. That day he left home for his law office, but on impulse, decided to take a detour into the woods surrounding the town. He wanted a quiet spot where he could finally pour out his soul to God.

Praying did not come easy for him that day. Brilliant as he was, he could not make sense of his inner feelings. Nevertheless, something intuitive was telling him it was now or never. At the point of despair, he cried out to God for a "flood of light" -- and a scripture passage from Jeremiah came to him: "You shall seek me and find me when you begin to search for me WITH ALL YOUR HEART!" For the first time in his life he realized that God's goodness and truth was not merely a matter of his eyes or his mind, but a matter of his heart! That was his FLOOD OF LIGHT, much as it was for the one-time Pharisee, Paul, on the road to Damascus.

COMING OUT OF THE DARK is not merely a matter of physical sight or mental intelligence -- it is a matter of A CHANGE OF HEART! To become Christlike is not merely a matter of having good eyes or a high I.Q. or a degree in theology. It is a matter of letting the light of God's truth and goodness penetrate deeply into our inner being so that it can CHANGE our outer being. It's the same reality for the sun in relationship to nature. Without sufficient sun-light penetrating deeply into plant life -- plants soon wither and die. The same is also true for many psychological disorders today; mental difficulties are often transformed with the introduction of intense light! Without ongoing exposure to the light - living things not only remain in the dark -- THEY WHITHER AND DIE!!

Thus - today's message is simple yet profound: WITHOUT CONSTANT EXPOSURE TO THE LIGHT OF CHRIST, CHRISTIANS WILL NEVER COME OUT OF THE DARKNESS OF FEAR, GUILT, HOPELESSNESS AND DESPAIR. We will remain little more than blind Pharisees - religious people who have eyes to see, but remain blind to the real truth of their faith!

So, the crystal clear message of today's texts is that God will not allow us to remain blind like the Pharisees. Thru St. Paul he has said: "Once you were in darkness, but now in the Lord you are light." Paul is simply saying that ONCE GOD HAS BROUGHT US OUT OF THE DARK (whether in Baptism or thru a partner or in a SCS class or from recovery of an accident) THAT IS GOD'S FLOOD OF LIGHT - GOD'S MOMENT TO GET US TO CONCENTRATE UPON HIS TRUTH & GOODNESS. Again, such was illustrated from Gloria Estefan. She said following her recovery: "I will never allow the dumb things that have little significance to get me in an uproar again." In short, Estefan is saying her life now concentrates on "TRUTH & GOODNESS." Look again at the blind man in today's gospel: once he experienced the miraculous power of Christ's light, he could no longer live by the mediocrity & small-mindedness of the Pharisees. Let's fact it -- I don't have to tell you what is "true and good!" We all know their opposites - those details of darkness which so often become an obsession of our lives: BUSYNESS, BOREDOM, LIES, SLANDER, RACISM, VIOLENCE, INDIFFERENCE, MIOPIC VISION, MATERIALISM, ETC.

Yes, we all know where to find "the light of truth and goodness!" Right here in worship. This is the ultimate place of "truth and goodness" in this world. Because in Xan worship, we do not pretend that evil and darkness do not exist, but we concentrate on God's power to overcome evil with his truth and goodness. Whenever we hear the good news of the gospel, a light beams within us & we're given renewed vision: to live by the truth and goodness of the heart of X.

It's like the story of the sculptor who made a huge model of a great cathedral. His beautiful creation just gathered dust in his workshop. Nobody admired it and nobody wanted to buy it. But one day he got a new idea for his model. He installed a light within it, and that old dusty, dull cathedral became the major attraction of his shop.

COMING OUT OF THE DARK is allowing the light of Christ's goodness & truth to shine through the dust and dullness of our lives. That's exactly what Gloria Estefan experienced from her husband and the Miami Sound Machine -- she came into the light - she received the heart of God's goodness & truth. And look at the miraculous results of God's goodness & truth when they are given from the heart - she not only walks, but she is again a major attraction on stage. When the light of Christ's goodness & truth shines from the heart of our lives, miracles of healing not only happen, but the Christian faith again becomes a major attraction in this world!

AMEN!

LENT III
Divinity Lutheran Church, Oregon
March 19, 1995
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"THANK GOD FOR ANOTHER CHANCE!"

And the owner said to the gardener: 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting soil?' The gardener replied: 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; if not, you can cut it down!' Luke 13:8-9

To live in Toledo in the last fifteen years is certainly to know the meaning of this parable. We're told that the fig tree had been mature, but suffered from fruitlessness for three years; so the owner ... like most good businessmen ... said, "Cut it down!"

To live in Toledo in the 80's and 90's has witnessed many owners saying the same thing: "Cut it down!" These have not been easy years for most businesses in this area; never before in the history of most Toledo companies has there been such a deluge of downsizing and cutbacks. And "cut downs /backs" are not limited to business. In the world of coaching these days - it's "Produce a Winner, or Lose Your Job!" In the fertility world today, hosts of parents demand in advance to know if a child is perfect; if not, they order abortions! Even in the most publicized trial of history, many people are not only turned off by the TV coverage but they have already condemned O.J. before hearing all the evidence. And I certainly don't need to remind us that in the arena of marriage -- never have couples been so quick to "cut down their marriages" as soon as they encounter a little struggle of productivity or dryness in pleasure. And then, of course, the most rampant reality of the "cut down" mentality in our world: **litigation in our courts!** No longer do we work through differences or seek to solve our own problems; today, we sue immediately and seek to blame the other guy for every unproductive problem of life. So we have the world's philosophy: CUT DOWN ANYONE OR ANYTHING THAT IS NOT PRODUCTIVE ACCORDING TO OUR OWN STANDARDS OF PERFECTION!

Thankfully, the parable before us today cautions us against this "cut down crusade" that is so rampant in our world. The gardener - *considered by some scholars to represent Jesus* - reminds us that everyone in this world is too quick to render rash judgments -- too quick to destroy the real potential given to each of us by God!

This gardener confirms that Jesus came into this world to show us another way, another truth, another life. He says: "Let the tree alone for one more year; cultivate it; give it **ANOTHER CHANCE** to become productive!"

Isn't this such a contrary message to what we often hear around us every day?? We worship a God of great patience and endless long-suffering.

In the face of our shortcomings ... our blatant apathy ... our cheap and often haughty selfishness: **this same God counsels patience.** It would be so easy for this God to give the order: "Those jerks on earth have been unfaithful for 2000 years; cut them down today! Let them rot in hell!"

And amazingly, that's exactly the way God sees us treating each other, yet he patiently waits for change ... for renewed productivity! Instead of always demanding **instant gratification, God says: GIVE THEM ANOTHER CHANCE; GIVE THEM TIME TO CULTIVATE RENEWAL!** I don't have to tell this congregation how important that message is! You have been sharing that message with each other ... and that same message has been shared with you through the ELCA! **God has said to Divinity Lutheran: "I will not cut you down; I will continue to cultivate you with my word of grace thru Pastor Julie so that you will become a stronger and more productive tree!**

Yes, you have heard very personally and very directly this message from God: WAIT ... GIVE HER ANOTHER CHANCE! Because that's the nature of our God: a God who does not give up easily on his people; a God who does not "cut down," but instead asks for a sign of new life and new commitment! Is it any wonder that God offers that sign to us as the first sign of our faith? In Holy Baptism, he blesses us to be cultivators like himself! From the very beginning of our faith journey, God wants us to know His intention for our lives: **constant renewal, constant cleansing, constant refreshment, constant cultivation!** Or to use a more ancient religious term: **constant repentance!** Regardless of our human condition of guilt or poor productivity -- God's first word is always the same: **I'll give you Another Chance!** God always seeks to revitalize and renew! God always waits!

But, our text reminds us of another great truth today: **God does not wait forever!** And he especially won't wait if he sees that we are goofing around playing games with his grace ... not taking his patient grace seriously! When he leads us to repentance, **then he expects us to truly make a turnaround ... to begin to make a real difference in the world.** Because he knows and we know that WE CAN'T TAKE FOREVER; death comes in the night, and life and light must be seen before that darkness.

The story of the farmer and the circuit preacher often reminds me of the way too many Christians deal with the seriousness of repentance. The circuit preacher embraced several small, mid-western towns. One day he happened upon this farmer and said: "Brother, have you seen the light?" The farmer responded, **"Guess not, 'taint dark yet!"** "No, no," said the preacher, "Are you lost?" **"No sir,"** said the farmer, **"I've been around these parts for 60 years, both as a boy & man!"** "What I mean is," said the preacher, "are you a Christian?" **"Nope,"** said the farmer, **"I'm a Thompson, but the Christians live down the road."** The preacher drew himself up in the saddle & thundered, "Are you ready for the judgment day?" **"Well, I don't know"** said the farmer,

"when is it?" "Almost any day now," said the circuit rider, "it could be tomorrow or the next day." **"Is that so?"** replied the farmer. **"Well, when you find out, you let me know. The Mrs. will probably want to go both days!"**

We all need a little humor when it comes to repentance and judgement! But we also need "a change of heart" -- our response to grace needs to reveal some real fruitfulness. As Charles Colson said in his book, "95% of Americans claim to believe in God; 50 million of these same people claim to be 'born again.' Then why are so few lives a **telling force** of Jesus Christ?" Colson answers his own question by saying: "Too many people believe Christianity offers the rights to the kingdom without any responsibility to the King!"

Well, after hearing today's text -- no one can suffer from this mistaken identity. This text clearly reveals that we have been fruitfully graced by the love and patience of God. So he is counting on us to make a difference in this world: **TO BE THE ONES WHO ARE EMPOWERED TO BUILD UP RATHER THAN CUT DOWN!** So it is not our task to ask why there is hunger or suffering in the world; **it is our task to see that the hungry are fed and the suffering are cared for.** It is not our task to be able to explain why some suffer tragedy and others do it; **it is our task to see that all who suffer tragedy receive physical and spiritual support.** It is not our task to determine who is lost and who is saved; **it is our task to share the unconditional forgiveness and love of God with all.** It is not our task to ask God to show us special favors; **it is our task to ask God to show us someone less fortunate than ourselves to whom we can show God's gracious favor!**

How can any of us who live in nearly the 21st century ever claim not to know THE GRACE OF GOD. Never in history has humanity known such grace -- food, freedom, knowledge, technology, computerization, medical sophistication, pleasure, wealth, leisure, educational opportunity, and the list goes on and on. Is there anyone here who can possibly say that he/she has not been **PATIENTLY CULTIVATED BY GOD'S GOODNESS AND GRACE?** We have been cultivated beyond any reasonable measure! But what have we been willing to give back? How much fruitful cultivation in the vineyard can he expect from each of us?

God's greatest fear is that we will be found only cultivating life's treasures for ourselves ... showing no fruitfulness to support and serve others in greater need. Tragically, that's too often what I perceive in my ministry! So often I am asked to do funerals for people who have been too busy to repent ... too busy to return to God ... too busy making big bucks to renew themselves in the forgiving love of Christ! Families of such people always want the patient and forgiving love of God from me ... even when their loved one was unwilling to share the fruits of that gospel ... to be responsible to the King of all creation. How should God respond to such requests? Should he "cut them

down," or give them "another chance."

Unbelievably, he says: "**Give that family tree one more year!**" ... he patiently waits for our fruitful renewal. But not forever -- because today is the day to repent and be renewed! Thankfully - you have all responded today, and God has graced you with his patient love ... and the knowledge that tomorrow may never come. What a blessing it is today to be renewed in his patience and forgiving love?? What greater love could there ever be than from The One "who never cuts anyone down" who humbly returns to the Lord?? And what a joy to know that tomorrow we can even be more fruitful in that gracious love! What a treasure we have: the grace of God's everlasting patience which always "gives us another chance." Never leave home without it!

AMEN

Lent III

Glenwood Lutheran & Sunset House

March 22, 1998

Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor & Chaplain

“LOST AND FOUND!”

Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’ Luke 15:31-32

How many of you could summarize the “Parable of the Prodigal Son?” How many of you have ever heard a sermon on this parable before? How many of you think the parable’s main point is about a “wasteful son?” How many of you think the parable’s main point is about a “generous, loving father?” How many of you think it’s a parable about being “lost & found?” Are any of you are still lost as to the meaning of the parable? Well, when preaching this parable, I have sometimes been “lost” because it is a story with many nuances of meaning. So - even though simple - it can be complex and any preacher can get lost in it ... because preachers sometimes take it in the wrong direction.

The parable reminds me of the story of the motorist who was lost on a back road in Alabama. He wanted to get to Montgomery. So he asked an old farmer sitting on a fence. And the old farmer looked down and scratched his head -- then gave explicit instructions. A half hour later -- after carefully following the farmer’s instructions - the motorist found himself back where he had started. There was the farmer sitting on the fence contemplating the landscape.

The motorist yelled - “Hey, what’s the idea! I did just what you told me and looked where I ended up!” To which the farmer retorted - “Young feller, I didn’t aim to waste my time telling you how to get to Montgomery ‘til I found out that you could follow simple directions to get back here.”

So - today, I’m going to be like the farmer: give simple directions first - then get to the main point of the parable. It’s about two people being lost; and one person being found. The good news of the parable is that God is really pleased when we find our way back to him. Simple enough?

So - first let’s share the directions about the two sons who were lost. Both of them were what we might call seekers today. For instance -- the younger son was a “seeker” by striking out on his own. He wanted to get out from under family traditions & rules: to make a life of his own. One scholar said he went from “sick of home” to “homesick” to “back home.” Now – doesn’t that describe some of our own children?? Most of the time the young son is characterized as “a rebellious kid, who unfairly demands his inheritance.” It may have been wrong for the young son to ask for his share so soon -- but had we been the younger son in this culture ... we might have done the same thing--because most often any inheritance didn’t trickle down to the youngest.

So - does this give you a little different direction on the youngest son?? Well, there's more. How many of you have a picture of the young son as "a loose, immoral, carousing kind of kid?" Well -- there is nothing in the parable to confirm that. It was the older "jealous" brother who accused him of wasteful living with prostitutes. The only thing we know about this younger son was that he had "big dreams;" he hungered to make a great life for himself on his own!! Is there anything immoral with that?? Not at all. But there was one circumstance this young son DID NOT count on in his quest for greatness? He forgot that "in the real world" there are famines -- there are "down times" when it's really tough to make it ... even with an inheritance. The young son's tragic flaw was that he had not counted on running into a famine. And the famine took him to the cleaners.

So - does this give you even more of a different direction on the younger son?? Well, he was lost, but not in loose living. He was "lost" in what many children from every era & generation "get lost in" -- he thought he could "make it without anyone else's help!" His "sin" was he had "cut himself off from a loving family & a supportive community;" he became a "disconnected child of the world." And that's a big disconnection yet today! There are millions of kids who feel totally "disconnected from a loving family or a supportive community." They feel abandoned by God and the world. And unlike the younger son -- many times it's not their fault -- they haven't chosen to be "cut off!" Although sometimes -- they have made this choice.

So - one condition of "lostness" in the parable is "I don't need God or anyone else in my life -- I can seek it all on my own and the heck with the rest of you!" Well, the older brother was also a "seeker." But his kind of "seeking" we might call "a goody boy style" - the one who stayed home & worked his tail off so that the ole man would one day crown him with all the goods. In reality - like his younger brother - he too was only "looking out for himself" -- but, in a much more socially acceptable manner. He also had "cut himself" off from his father and the community -- even though he didn't know it. He also didn't think he needed anyone else "because he could whip the world into shape all by himself." He saw himself as such a dutiful & dedicated worker that his father & the world "better soon glorify him for being a great model of righteous hard work." Even though he was physically at home, he was still "lost"--because he suffered from the worst condition of lostness: self-righteousness.

So - both sons were lost ... even though the younger son normally takes a bigger hit from preachers in sermons. So - are these directions different than you've had before? Are you still with me?? We are now back where we started -- finally looking for the real direction of the parable? Well -- did the father force either of these sons "not to be seekers?" No - the father's nature is to give his children the freedom to choose. He had provided a home of love & acceptance; he had generously shared his resources with his children. But in their attempts "to seek a life for themselves -- both sons were cutting themselves off from the loving, caring, generous example of their father and his household."

So, we're told that the younger son "finally came to his senses." In essence - he realized he couldn't "buy a new life with his inheritance; he realized he already had 'the good life' with his own family." So, the parable's message is NOT: "children - stay home" ... but rather, "children ... when you find real love, compassion & generosity -- don't give it up for a worldly imitation-- don't look for a cheap substitute." And that's repentance -- daily returning to that place where there is real love, compassion & generosity."

That's why the younger son "was found" -- not because he would never be foolish again ... not because he would never again be tempted by secular or immoral values! But because he finally realized what was of greatest value: *"a family, a community, a relationship of love, compassion & generosity."*

And how does the father respond to his sons? To the younger -- he rejoices and gives a party!! Is there any scolding?? Is there any attempt to throw the son's foolish & sinful past in his face?? Is there any condemnation at all for all this son's mistaken direction? None! None! None! The father rejoices -- for what was LOST ... IS FOUND!! A loving relationship has been restored! Nothing is more important to God our Father than restoring loving relationships. And that's exactly what the father tries to say to the older son. But does THIS SON get it?? We don't know! We aren't told! The parable ends -- with only one son BEING FOUND.

Maybe the parable is suggesting that sometimes you and I act like older sons & daughters. And maybe the father is saying to us: *"My dear loved one -- you are always mine ... all that is mine is yours! Come -- rejoice with me when anyone who was lost ... has been found!!"*

AMEN.