

St. STEPHEN'S DAY
December 26, 1971
Redeemer Lutheran Church - Milwaukee

Acts 6:8-7:60 "ADMIRE HIM - BUT FOLLOW HIM"
Matthew 23:34f.

"Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, that upon you may come all the righteous bloodshed on earth, . . ."

Christmas is PEACE and JOY. And yet, during the past week fourteen of your fellow members prepared for this Christmas from a hospital bed. The mood of their preparation was pain for some, fear for others, and some degree of suffering for all of them.

The impact of their Christmas became more crystalized for me after spending part of yesterday with a 23 yr. old nursing student whose prognosis appears somewhat dismal. "Why me?" she asked. "Why have I had to suffer with this for the last nine months?" "Pastor, I've always been independent -- I've never been dependent on others -- now I need them, and I don't know how to accept their concern for me." "Pastor, I know He's present here with me, but I don't trust him completely -- I fight him -- Why me?" "I know it's Christmas - everybody says I should be happy -- but I can't feel that way." "I'm afraid."

Yes, Christmas is PEACE and JOY. But fear, and pain, and suffering are mixed with that peace and Joy.

Christmas is new life -- new love -- rebirth. And yet during the past week Pastor Witt and I have officiated for four funerals.

Yes, Christmas is new life - new love - rebirth. But death and sorrow are mixed with that new love and rebirth.

Christmas is a new union and reunion. It is God's new union with his people in Jesus, and it is our reunion in his love with our families, relatives, and friends. And yet during this same week men and women remain separated by war, by prejudice, by slander, by pride, and by other sin.

Yes, Christmas is a new union and reunion. But separation, loneliness, and barriers of race and clan are mixed into that new union and those reunions.

Christmas is giving and gratefully receiving. It is a response of gifts offered to God and one another for a gift given by God. And yet similarly during this past week some of our members have been victimized by greed ~~and~~ crime.

Christmas is giving and gratefully receiving-- but theft, injustice, and uncharitable acts are mixed with the giving and receiving.

Christmas is an event of ecstasy -- a universal admiration of a begotten babe of Bethlehem. For its beauty and pagentry-- its trees and tinsels -- its vitality and charity -- its new Light as well as its lightheartedness -- for all these we should be filled with joy and grateful to God.

Yet this morning we are reminded that Christmas is so much more. It is more than a mutual admiration society for a child in a crude stable. It is much more than an intoxicated toast. The Chrismons, the glitter, the stars, the children around the Christmas tree warm the heart and make it easy for us to imagine that all is well -- but if Christmas is only this mild and comforting emotion -- this gushy feeling, then we have run away from the Christ whom we commemorate in our Christmas celebrations.

For these examples all seek to illustrate that the totality of life DOES NOT and CANNOT screech to a halt just because Christmas is being celebrated. The PEACE of Christmas is not the same as freedom from strife; the JOY of Christmas is not the same as freedom from sorrow; our meeting with the NEW LIFE in the manger is not the same as freedom from death. NO - for if any of these things were true, THEN God's gift to us at Christmas would be cheap and meaningless. For the gift of Christ does not allow us to escape from life, but rather drives us more deeply into a living commitment to his life -- a life characterized by obedience to God, acceptance of all persons, esp. those whom the world hates the most, by forgiveness when tempted to revenge, and by sacrifice which results in pain.

A question often heard on Christmas Eve around Milwaukee is: "Have you had your Christmas yet?" meaning, Have you opened your gifts yet? I would hope that we do not limit our scope of Christmas as we answer that question. "Yes, we've had our gift-opening Christmas -- so now we must caution ourselves against throwing away Christ with the used wrapping paper.

And so Today by calander coincidence, we celebrate the martyrdom of St. Stephen. Stephen stands as a living witness to the fact that "Christmas" is not a synonym for "being idyll." For similar to Stephen, as you and I live the obedient-- forgiving -- sacrificial life of Christ, we soon realize that we have no protection from pain. For as you and I have offered the hope of forgiveness, we have too often felt the pain of its rejection. As you and I have sought to love the unlovable and accept the unacceptable, we have too often been cast out for this witness of hope.

But how did we receive this rejection and pain? Did we cry about it? Did we give up to never love or forgive again? Did we feel sorry for ourselves? Or like Stepehn, did we realize

that Christ's life of love and forgiveness is often offensive to the vanity of men? And even more, like Stephen were we willing to sacrifice our own pride -- to die to our own arrogance -- to spill our own life so that others might really know and be filled with a tangible example of Christ's life?

Christmas is this total giving. The gifts I gave at Christmas were merely tokens of what Christ has given me the potential to give. The light of Christmas has given each of us a glimpse of a child -- but the significance of that child's life is not realized until we journey with him to a cross and empty tomb. That journey promises pain and rejection -- but not defeat. For the journey is made with an eternal Christ -- and that gives each of our lives eternal significance and worth, regardless of the pain, rejection, yes even the death along the way.

Stephen stands here today to remind us of all this. He makes things uncomfortable for everyone who basks pompously and peacefully in a sort of candied Christmas emotion. He stands here as a challenge and a question we cannot escape. "You are all witnesses to the Christ -- will you follow him or only admire him?"

In Matthew's gospel Jesus laments over the prophets and wise men who are persecuted for His sake. Stephen serves as one tangible fulfillment of the sacrifice Christ foresaw. So this day and every day Stephen challenges us, both young and old, to a similar lifestyle.

As young people and college students, Stephen's life, to say nothing of Christ's, challenges us to expand our perspective of life. The "Now Generation" mentality of our age is a cancer to Christianity. For it is without a foundation. It has no roots to secure it from the shifting sands of constant change.

To live only for the NOW is to live only for oneself. One cannot seek or find God, because that person is too busy trying to find himself. He fails to see that he can discover himself and learn to accept himself as he accepts God. To live for the NOW is to reject tradition and thereby cut oneself off from God's revelation of himself as well as human nature.

So, if you and I are to totally give our lives in service to Christ and each other, then we must be grounded in an eternal past and future -- we believe that we have that eternal foothold as we follow Christ.

As adults and elderly, Stephen's life and death challenges us to move beyond the tabernacle of our faith. Stephen's martyrdom was precipitated by his attack upon the Jews for their failure to witness beyond their temples. In Acts, he calls these pious people "stiff-necked . . . resistors of the Holy Spirit." These were the people who limited their witness to the security of the sanctuary.

The peace and joy of Christmas only find their initiation as we come together here to receive and give thanks for that Word made flesh. We are here empowered with the Holy Spirit so that we might share Christ's peace, love, forgiveness, and Joy after we are scattered from this sanctuary. There is a hungry world of sick people, separated people, grieving people, lonely people, yes even sinful people waiting outside at home, at work, on the street -- waiting for the incarnation of this Christmas.

Will you and I be ready to follow Christ beyond the taberna -- or will we only admire Him in here?

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Hopefully we will be inspired like Stephen to follow Christ everywhere. A poem shared with me by a member recently may serve as an additional source of motivation.

Gonzalo Baez-Camargo, an evangelical Christian from Mexico, in his poem "Cristo," the Christ, seeks to communicate the essence of Christ's life for you, for me, and for all saints and martyrs who seek to FOLLOW HIM.

AMEN.

PRAYER OF THE CHURCH - ST. STEPHEN'S SUNDAY
December 26, 1971

O Lord,

make us instruments of your peace and joy.
Where there is hatred, let us sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon,
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, new light;
Where there is sadness, consolation;
Where there is sickness, healing;
Where there is division, unity;
Where there is ingratitude, gratitude; and
Where there is greed, a charity pattered
after your total love in Christ.

O Lord, eternal God,

grant that we may not so much
Seek to be consoled as to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved as to love;

For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born
to eternal life through your son,
our Lord, Jesus Christ, . . .

CHRISTMAS I
Luth Church of the Master, Troy
Dec. 31, 1978

"365 DAYS OF THE YEAR!"

"You are Gods chosen race, his saints; he loves you, and you should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience. ... Over all these clothes, to keep them together and complete them, put on love."

Col. 3:12, 14

As I was typing the bulletin this week, I couldn't help but think that today is the 53rd Sunday of 1978. As I mused upon that thought - I had to chuckle as I gave thought to the notion of a Pastor's Union.

I was having fun thinking about pulling up to church this morning in my blue jeans - and walking up to Ron Eppert with a note which read: Sorry, Ron, my contract only specifies 52 Sundays of preaching each year. You'll have to get someone else to preach today."

Or - since it is the 53rd Sunday of the Year, I'm surprised that somebody in the Christian Church didn't suggest that we take this Sunday off. After all - we're only expected to worship 52 Sundays a year -- we're not going to let God have an extra one from us!!

It all sounds comical -- but living in Detroit, we all know that this is exactly how knit-picking things can get with contracts. For many businesses today - including the service professions -- energies and labors are often dictated PURELY by the calendar or the clock.

Regretably - that's the way a lot of people approach Christmas -- and in fact, their whole outlook on faith. For these people, on or around Dec. 25th - they turn on the Christmas spirit.

How sad it is that for many Christmas - or for that matter, Christian faith -- is merely a calendar thing. These people often crawl out of their caves of selfishness and blink their eyes at this day of cheer and good will. They make it into a make-believe world.

Instead of a living relationship with God -- instead of a sincere thankful attitude for all the gifts of creation - too often we act as if we have a Christmas contract - or a Sunday morning contract with God. We let God's spirit live on Dec. 25th - or possibly for an hour or so on Sunday morning -- but when the clock strikes 12 -- the service better be ended, because now it's back to the real world.

It's no wonder that the Christian church is often attacked by agnostics or the religiously turned-off. It's ~~not~~ the principles of faith that are being dismissed -- it's the hypocritical practices that most thinking people can't tolerate. As most of you are no doubt aware - Madelaine Murray O'Hair has been getting a lot of press in Detroit lately. And as I have read her assaults on religion - she's often clawing at superficial practices rather than the basic principles of faith. Of course, we couldn't expect her to know anything about basic principles anyway. If you heard her local TV show - she admitted that she became an atheist over one weekend. During that weekend she read the Bible from cover to cover - and concluded that it was nonsense.

Well - anyone who thinks they can understand the Bible in one weekend HAS GOT A FEW MARBLES LOOSE ALREADY. And anybody who knows anything about the Bible REALIZES that the worst way to read the Bible is from cover to cover. The Bible is not a novel -- it's a complex compendium of over 1200 years of fragments - put together to be studied in small pieces -- NEVER AS A WHOLE!

But enough of my rebuttal against a biblical imbecile like Madelaine O'Hare. There is one point that she makes that is very valid: many religious people live as if God is dead, so that might as well be atheists.

But God has never wanted it that way. He did not invade the earth for a few brief days in order to spread around some goodies and say hello and "Merry Christmas," and then retreat back to heaven. God is not a Santa Claus who empties his bag of toys and then goes back to the North Pole to get ready for next year. God came to stay - 365 DAYS A YEAR! He wants his birthday party extended around the calendar. He wants the Christmas style TO BE OUR EVERY DAY LIFESTYLE!

And that's why Paul said: "You are God's chosen race, his saints; he loves you (365 days a year) and therefore you should be clothed in sincere compassion - in kindness and humility - in gentleness and patience - and over all these clothes, put on love."

The true test of the Christmas season is whether or not we have a withdrawal from its impact. If we hang up God's love in the closet when we hang up the Christmas stocking -- then we have made clear THAT THE CHRIST CHILD HAS LITTLE SIGNIFICANCE IN OUR WORLD!

I would hope that none of us would let go of the Christ child. In fact, on this last day of 1978 - I would hope that our resolution for 1979 is to reflect ONE CHARACTERISTIC of the Christ child 365 days of the year!

Because - you are God's chosen race -- you are the only ones that can keep the spirit of Christmas alive for more than a few days or an hour on Sunday morning. And so I say again - make a 1979 resolution THAT YOU WILL REFLECT ONE CHARACTERISTIC OF CHRIST ALL 365 days of 1979.

And you all know which one I'm talking about.
Just look at Paul's text again.

Is it **sincere** compassion? No - we must reflect that, but we'll never do it 365 days a year -- because many times our compassion is not sincere, it's motivated by selfish interests. That's why we report our charitable contributions on our tax forms.

Well then - is it kindness and humility? Oh, yes - there are times our kindness and humility is not motivated by self-righteousness -- but we'll never succeed at that 365 days a year!

Well - then how about gentleness and patience? Here again - many of us do pretty well - esp in public. But we all know how we act in private. We'll never be able to reflect the gentleness and patience of Christ for a whole year!!

But -- "The Lord has forgiven you; now you must do the same." Now there is something that each of us can do 365 days of the year -- BECAUSE WE ALL KNOW THAT FORGIVENESS IS SOMETHING THAT EACH ONE OF US NEEDS 365 DAYS OF THE YEAR."

So let us make that our resolution for '79 -- that each day we will offer a word of forgiveness, just as we have received one from God. Because if we can do that - then the whole world will see that the outer garment that we have been clothed with IS THE LOVE OF CHRIST.

And with that garment - we will have PEACE all 365 days of the year!

AMEN

CHRISTMAS I
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 29, 1985
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"F A M I L Y T I E S"

"Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (Did you not know that I had to be about my Father's business?) But they did not understand what he was saying to them. Luke 2:49-50

Today our gospel celebrates the journey of the Holy Family from Nazareth to Jerusalem. It was Passover time ... a time for religious renewal, repentance, and remembrance. Faithful families never neglect opportunities for spiritual renewal. So Mary and Joseph were taking their eldest son, Jesus (who was now considered a man at the age of 12) to Jerusalem. They were doing what good parents always do -- providing a positive and essential model of faithfulness.

Beyond this insight, however, it is very difficult to ascertain why this story is included in Luke's gospel. None of the other evangelists even mention Jesus' childhood. It would seem by their lack of testimony that Jesus' real ministry did not begin until he was an adult. Scholars really go potluck with this Lukan story -- giving no single interpretation of significance. What we are basically left with is the recognition that Luke -- a physician -- felt that some comment should be made upon Jesus' relationship to his family. Luke being a very family oriented evangelist wants us to show that Jesus also enjoyed a regular family life. Moreover, Luke wants all of us to be mindful that our FAMILY TIES are one of God's most primary nurturing expressions.

Certainly as we sit here today, we all realize that we are within a season that dramatically celebrates the nurturing role of family. Like the Holy Family, many families have been on pilgrimages of renewal this past week. Some have come to Toledo to renew FAMILY TIES here; some Toledo families have gone elsewhere to share renewing moments. Christmastide, like Passover for the Jews, is that special pilgrimage of renewal for the American family.

Christmas is that time that God enters into our households as a member of our human family. He reminds us in this season that we were not created for isolation or solitary confinement. We were created to share Turkey and dressing and ham and mashed potatoes and pumpkin pie. We were created to share garage door openers and lingere and new shirts -- and if your Pastor Bob, to at least get new socks, shaving cream, and razors. We were created to play

on the kitchen floor with talking robots and Care Bears and Barbie Dolls. We were created to spend two or three hours trying to figure out the directions for that new space station that looked so easy on the package. We were created to sit around the fireplace and reminisce about all those great Christmases on the farm or at Aunt Tillie's or at Grandma Tyrivers.

Yes, as Americans, we strive to uphold our FAMILY TIES sometimes more than anything else. Even many of our current television shows reflect our desire to celebrate traditional family values. Two of the hottest network shows today are the Cosby Show and Family Ties. These shows reflect positive family values -- values like compassion and justice, values like foreberance and forgiveness, values like harmony and gratitude and good will. Even shows like St. Elsewhere or Hill Street Blues seem to have a secondary family theme. One shows a family of physicians; the other a family of police defenders. The relationships between these people are typical of all families - there are real tensions and problems, but there is also a basic good will and desire for harmony.

Probably one of the greatest expressions of family loyalty in American culture is the church family. The church is the logical extension of the nuclear family. God calls us to expand our vision of family -- to get beyond the confines of flesh and blood. The church is one of the primary expressions of that expansion. Unlike the European scene, Americans have maintained FAMILY TIES to the church. Let us pray that we will never go the way of the state churches in Europe or Asia. Because the church is still God's primary vehicle of his Word ... it continues to nurture his word of love, obedience, compassiona and kindness in the world. Take any nation which has lost its commitment to the church family ... and you know the result: a cold, calculating dependence upon technology and intelligence often without human compassion and sensitivity. Bah humbug to that!!

Thanks be to God that family ties have remained integral to our cultural fabric. But even in celebrating and uplifting these family ties, there is a serious danger in ascribing godliness to the family. God deliver us from bowing down to the Holy Family or any other family. For the gospel story before us today dramatically illustrates that even the Holy Family was not without blemish. Certainly the fact that Mary and Joseph could travel for a whole day and not miss Jesus makes them a very human family. In fact, we find that almost unthinkable today, because we no longer travel in the caravans of ancient Israel (where a son could be assumed to be at the other end of the caravan). The gospel makes it so clear that as

families, we are not perfect, we make mistakes, we do silly things, we are hurtful and sometimes harmful to the ones we love. As parents, we fall short of being the perfect role models that God wants us to be. As children, we fail to live up to the expectations of our elders. As a church family, we fall far short of the glory of God and true discipleship.

The truth of the gospel cannot be avoided: THE FAMILY IS NOT THE ULTIMATE SOURCE OF TRUE HAPPINESS, CONTENTMENT OR CONSOLATION. We need only look at the last week to affirm this truth within our own church family. We have been witnesses to painful deaths during this holiday season. The one time that we put so much emphasis upon the family -- and yet these families have had to bear the horrible burden of family loss and tragedy. Nothing could more dramatically remind us that the family cannot be our God. We need only look in all directions around us to see families who have experienced the pain of divorce, the torment of unemployment, the disappointment of job transfer, the suffering of family illness, the horror of suicide or instant death on the highway. The human family is not immune to life's tragedy, weakness, disease and death. We dare not make our human FAMILY TIES the ultimate hope of our lives. For to do so is to be assured of depression and despair.

And possibly this is where we find the real significance in Luke's story of today. As a boy, Jesus said: "Didn't you know I had to be about my Father's business?" Although a member of the Holy Family, Jesus' first loyalty was to God his Father. And he beckons us to have the same allegiance. It is ultimately the Father who teaches us everything we need to know about family life. It is the father who forgives our weakness, who love us even when we don't seem to love ourselves, who shows us mercy when our family or friends often judge or condemn, who has prepared a place for us SO THAT WE WILL NEVER HAVE AN ETERNAL SOLITARY CONFINEMENT. There is only one parent who will ever be that loving -- God the Father! He is the Father who has given us all our family values.

The Passover pilgrimage was a return to the Father. That's why Jesus says - "why were you searching for me? Where else would you expect to find me at Passover other than in my Father's house? Where else would you expect to find the Christian family at Christmas other than in their Father's house? We return to the Father at Christmas to be renewed through the gift of his son, Jesus Christ.

And as always, each time we return to the Father he has special words to share with us. He seeks to console and support us regardless of our human circumstances or the status of our family ties. To those who have

family tragedy or family loss or family separation or divorce, God the Father has special comforting words: basically, his Word is the same as that of the angel to Mary and Joseph -- Fear Not ... for I am with you.

Possibly that word is better heard through the story once told by Nornan Vincent Peale of a picture hanging in his grade school "showing a lonely beach with the tide out and a boat stranded on the sands. Few things look more depressing than a boat left high and dry by receding water. The inscription, however, under the picture reads: "Remember, the tide always comes back." There is an ebb and flow in all the processes of life. There are times when we think everything is going against us ... when things will never be right again. Those are the times that we must hear that still small voice of God saying: Fear Not, for behold, the tide will soon turn.

For those of us who haven't suffered a recent tragedy - but who are still wondering what 1986 will hold in store for us and our families, there is another word from God. It is God's Word of his greatest Family Tie. That word is possibly best heard from the little boy who was rehearsing for his Christmas play part. He had only one sentence: "Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, for unto you is given a Savior who is Christ the Lord." After the rehearsal he asked his mom what "tidings" meant. She told him "tidings" meant "news."

So the day of the Christmas play came. And as you might expect, the little boy was nervous and forgot his one line. But he remembered his mother's advice. And as his time came, he blurted out: "Hey, I got news for you; Christ is with you!!"

What greater FAMILY TIE could we be given than the assurance of the eternal love and forgiveness of THE ONE who is the Alpha and the Omega ... the beginning and the end. "Hey I got news for you; Christ is with you!!" You can't find a better Family Tie *for 1986!*

AMEN.

CHRISTMAS I
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 31, 1989
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"FOR EVERYTHING . . . A SEASON!"

(Texts from Isaiah and the story of the Holy Family's escape to and return from Egypt.)

The familiar phrase from Ecclesiastes begins: "FOR EVERYTHING THERE IS A SEASON . . . and a time for every matter under heaven; a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to mourn, and a time to dance . . . And for every Christmas season, we could add to Eccless. -- a time for the busyness of shopping and wrapping and partying and addressing and mailing, and a time for resolving never to do it again. The Sunday after Christmas is traditionally known as the SEASON OF POST-CHRISTMAS LETDOWN (even worse letdown = ice storm).

One mother has said she is always sorry when Christmas is over because she knows that after her family has hung the stockings with such care . . . it will be a whole year before any of them hang up anything again. There's no doubt about it - the 1st Sunday after Xmas, esp. December 31st, is the season when we realize that we've overeaten, overspent, overindulged, overextended, and generally overdone it. It is another day of wonder . . . wondering if we'll be able to pay off MasterCard before next Christmas. For some, today is a season of sadness because they're saying "Christmas is all over!" For others, Dec. 31st is a real opportunity - resolving never again to even think about 1989 and saying, "Thank God it's over!"

For the Christian Church - the Sunday after Christmas is yet another day of Xmas celebration. It's a day to look back with praise and to look ahead with promise. The texts today urge us to do these two things: to look back at year end AND MAGNIFY THE LORD FOR HIS CONSTANT PROVIDENTIAL CARE. And to look ahead to 1990 as a promising opportunity TO BETTER PREPARE OURSELVES TO BE CARETAKERS LIKE CHRIST.

Again, the texts urge us to LOOK BACK, not only at 1989 but throughout all time. And anytime Christians look back - their response is the same: they magnify the Lord for his constant & vigilant care. In the Isaiah text today - the people of Israel are just returning from Babylonian exile. They had been a stiff-necked and unfaithful people; now they feared further wrath from God. But it was God who was bringing them back home again just as he had done with the Exodus. It was God's spirit and power that was carrying them back to their homeland . . . forever loving and forgiving the wanderings of his chosen people.

Likewise - the story of Joseph, Mary and the babe escaping to Egypt. God faithfully takes care of his holy family. When endangered by Herod, God warns them to flee to Egypt, then again advises them to return to the safety and security of Nazareth. The details of this caretaking are not given in these texts - but the point is made: GOD'S PLAN IS TO TAKE CARE OF HIS FAITHFUL PEOPLE. His word is a word that can be trusted and will lead to forgiving love and the joy of freedom for his faithful. Is it any wonder that we are seeing that Word come to resurrected life daily in the eastern bloc countries? It can be trusted when it is incarnated within the human soul and spirit. So as we look back at 1989 - WE MAGNIFY THE LORD OF HISTORY WHO CONTINUES TO CARE FOR HIS FAITHFUL PEOPLE.

As I reflect upon God's providential care - I am reminded of my seminary days with another student who was a Southerner. In systematic theology we learned the central teachings of Paul Tillich, who premised that "whatever is your ULTIMATE CONCERN - that is your God." If your ultimate concern is money, then money is your god. If your ultimate concern is security, then security is your god. If your ultimate concern is work, then work is your god.

Well - my Tennessee friend went back to his hill country with all of his Tillich teachings. His best friend there was Corney Kent -- and with a name like Corney, you can imagine that he came from a rather unique background. So my friend began to tell Corney all about Paul Tillich's ultimate concern. There was Corney in his cane-bottomed chair with bib-overalls chewing on a corncob pipe listening very intently to my friend, now the expert theologian.

With the lesson in theology ended, my friend turned to Corney and asked, "Well, Corney, what is your ultimate concern in life?" Corney twisted his pipe a few times, moved his glasses up on his nose, and said directly: "That the Ultimate is concerned about me!"

Is it any wonder that God incarnated himself at Christmas. Even though "his constant concern for humanity" is the whole theme of the Bible, God needed to make it more personal. He needed to show humanity that there wasn't a better caretaker known on earth than Jesus Christ. Is it any wonder that there is so much excitement as we celebrate this season each year?

That wondrous theme of God's caretaking was magnificently illustrated recently in an article by James Hind in Manager's Journal. Obviously, Mr. Hind was urging his business readers to use the management principles of Jesus to improve their marketing strategies. But these are not merely marketing strategies - these are the basic caretaking principles of life! Listen to what Mr. Hind says:

"Christmas is an appropriate time to examine the management style of Jesus of Nazareth. The results he achieved were second to none. In only 3 years, he defined a mission and carried it out. He recruited and motivated 12 ordinary men to become extraordinary. He molded their diverse personalities into a "glorious company." He organized Xantianity, which has grown to 1.5 billion proponents, with branches in all of the world's 223 countries.

His corporate culture was built around concern and care for others - wherein he buried his pride and promoted humility of the heart. Jesus never used the "hard sell" bulldozing people into his ways of thinking; nor did he use the "soft sell" hoping to influence by manipulation. Rather he faithfully promoted and practiced the most important principle of motivation: PEOPLE WANT TO KNOW HOW MUCH YOU CARE BEFORE THEY CARE HOW MUCH YOU KNOW.

He actively associated women with his mission - even though they were considered unworthy by the culture. He was both a positive thinker and doer - his thoughts and words being solution oriented, rather than problem prone.

Above all - Jesus was committed to a caring approach to managing his disciples. He didn't see his disciples as objects to be manipulated for success, but rather as human beings to be inspired and developed. He stressed teamwork, by promoting a spirit of cooperation - never allowing "we/they" barriers. At the same time, he promoted a spirited competition with his disciples, but not the kind where one jockeys for position or undercuts others to get ahead. Competition was always measured against a standard of excellence ^{to achieve the fulness of life}

He did not use his miraculous powers to obtain power, honor, or glory. Yet he won the crown of glory and honor because of his strongest leadership trait: THE SERVANT ATTITUDE. As servant leader, he lowered himself to wash his disciples feet, considered to be the most menial task of that day. In short, he cultivated a supportive role that puts self-serving interests and ego gratification aside."

— search - Comparison, kindness, humility, meekness, Patience - forgiving our anger and very bound by love.

Can there be any doubt about God's desire to be the ultimate caretaker of creation? Has his earth ever seen a better caretaker of humanity than Jesus Christ? Is it any wonder that we are urged to MAGNIFY THE LORD as we come to the close of the Christmas season and another year??

But as we begin the new year tomorrow, there is yet another urgent message somewhat more hidden in the gospel today: Jesus did not become an instant caretaker in God's image right from the crib! Much diligent preparation went into Jesus' caretaking ministry in the world. As we approach the final decade of the 20th century - we are urged to become BETTER PREPARED LIKE CHRIST -- THAT IS TO LIVE IN THE IMAGE OF HIS CARETAKING.

Sometimes scripture gives us the impression that Jesus was born on Christmas and then 12 days later, on Epiphany, he had already become God's perfect human caretaker. This notion reminds me of the story of the guy on Christmas Eve who called asking for the pastor to perform a marriage that evening between services. He said, "After all, the church will already be beautifully set up ... and he had promised this Christmas present to his girlfriend."

Like yours truly - the pastor quickly groped for compassionate words - not the least of which was telling the man that there would be no time for pre-marital counselling sessions.

At which the man responded: "Oh, we don't need any pre-marital counselling. I've already been married four times and my girlfriend's been married three times - so you see, we're already well prepared for marriage ... we don't need any counseling."

Too many people have this notion of preparation in life - "we've tried it once or twice, so therefore we know all there is to know." That's not the biblical image of preparation. Obviously, the Bible gives us the impression that Jesus was not schooled extensively in his role as Savior. The only stories of Jesus' childhood are today's gospel and his bar mitvah in the temple at twelve. And yet the facts are that Jesus spent 30 years preparing for his public ministry.

These 30 years are not recorded, but certainly Jesus knew what it was like to be hungry, to work for a living, to be misunderstood, to be separated from family. From the fragments of scripture, we can imagine that Jesus knew the loss of a beloved father. As the eldest son, it was certainly the Jewish custom for Jesus to become financially responsible for the welfare of his family after his father's death. It's further obvious that Jesus had developed a refined understanding of the Old Testament scriptures. Moreover, he knew intimately the practice of worship and religious education as he attended synagogue regularly on the Sabbath. In short, today's gospel of the holy family calls to our attention the subtle fact that Jesus spent many years in preparing for his caretaking ministry.

So what does that mean for us today? On this 31st day of 1989 - it means that New Year's Resolutions are not worth more than the breath we give them. What we resolve to do today or tonite will never become a reality -- because people don't become faithful to anything through year-end resolutions. Faithfulness to the caretaking of Christ - or anything else of great importance - requires daily, weekly, and yearly renewing of ourselves in that image. That's the reason for this season between Christmas and Epiphany -- to be reminded that renewal does not come with any one season or resolution -- but only through faithfulness to worship, education, and other serious expressions of preparation.

Every new year is a new opportunity to better live in the image of Christ and his caretaking spirit. And let's face it -- if it took Jesus Christ 30 years to prepare himself for his role as God's caretaker -- it will take most of us 60 to 90 years to do the same. Is it any wonder we call our Christian faith a lifetime vocation?

Yes - today is December 31st ... the last day of 1989 ... the first Sunday of Christmas ... the day before a new year ... the final season of the 20th century. For everything there is a season ... a time for every matter under heaven. Today, as we draw the curtain on 1989 - we again MAGNIFY THE LORD FOR HIS NEVER-ENDING CARETAKING OF CREATION. And tomorrow as we look into a new year - we again promise to live more faithfully in the image of Jesus Christ - by seriously preparing as he did to become God's entrusted body of caretaking in this world. And with that kind of spirit -- we will have reason to say HAPPY NEW YEAR!

AMEN.

CHRISTMAS I "WISDOM FOR '92 & BEYOND"
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 28, 1991
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

(My profound gratitude to Dr. Elizabeth Achtemeier, Prof. of Bible & Homiletics at Union Theol. Seminary, Richmond, Virginia, for her inspiration and wisdom in her treatise, "Whence Comes Wisdom." I have liberally lifted her thoughts in the construction of this sermon for today.)

"And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. ... And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor."
Luke 2:40;52

Well, here we are, almost at the beginning of another new year. The old year almost lies totally behind us - with all of its joys and successes, but also its failures & follies, its meanness & mistakes, its depressions & discouragement. One of the great gifts of grace in our Christian faith is that God continually gives us a chance at a new beginning. The past is forgiven; the old is wiped away for 1991! We now have the possibility of living a new and better life, of living the truly abundant life -- the life that the N.T. uplifts where serving others is valued more highly than merely saving for self. As we start out this new year - one of our greatest hopes is that it will be a year filled with WISDOM. Hopefully, next December 28th, we will find ourselves saying: "Now, 1992 was truly a worthwhile and significant year of giving & caring." Like the psalmist, we pray: "Teach us, O Lord, to number our days that we may possess hearts of wisdom."

And yet, in beginning a new year, we are still perplexed as to the place and persons from whence true wisdom comes. Job asks: "Whence comes wisdom? And where is the place of understanding?" Whether we are college students home on Christmas break or retirees ready to break away to Florida for another sunshine escape - we all would like to be filled with greater wisdom in '92 than we may have reflected in '91. So, whence comes this wisdom, and how do we get it?

George Bush has been advocating a "wiser, kinder, and gentler nation" now for three years. Evidently, even after Desert Storm and Recession at home, Mr. Bush and many others still believe that wisdom can be achieved by politicians and political systems. Well, he's right in one regard: there is no greater political system in the world than the one of this learned society. But our system has not yet yielded a "wiser, kinder, and gentle nation." Regretably, politicians must continue to conform to a multitude of private interests and the precedential clout of the past. And so it is - that day after day after day, we continue to see the horrendous violence of handguns and other crimes on our streets and in our homes ... as we again witnessed Christmas week in Perrysburg township. Yet the NRA continues to handcuff America, the Brady Bill, and much other legislation that truly seeks to make us a "wiser, kinder, and gentler nation." I commend

our politicians -- too often they find themselves between a rock and a hard place as far as really trying to do justice and love kindness. But just as Larry said in his Xmas Eve editorial in the Blade, politicians (whether in Rossford or Wash. D.C) are the eternal victims of special interest groups who guard one group's liberties while they violate the spirit of unity for the rest of us; yes Larry, profitability and material success have become the gods with greatest clout at Christmas in this world - we might as well call it Amerimas.

But there are yet others who would say that wisdom comes not from politics, but from technological progress. This myth maintains that since we were able to put a man on the moon, certainly we can do anything. If we just devote the same energy and federal funding to all our problems as we did to space travel - then we will succeed with spectacular solutions. As good as this principle sounds, all of us have seen its short-term wisdom. We have poured billions into the war on poverty, and the welfare rolls are longer today than ever. We have added years to our life span through miracles of modern medicine - and now we are wrestling with caring for aged seniors and accepting the reality of dying without feeding tubes. We have built a great industrial complex and now find it difficult to breathe the air and purify the water of our cities. We have split the atom and now live daily in the shadow of nuclear annihilation. As Achtemeier concludes: "Our technical knowledge does not give us wisdom; it usually gives us more problems to solve.

Still a third group would say that wisdom comes from learning and education. And certainly no one in this room would disagree with such a premise. Our recent affirmation of our own Library Committee celebrates how books can distill the experiences and thoughts of the entire human race -- they can enlarge our world and deepen our sympathies and open up new possibilities of thought and action for each of us. We certainly realize that much of our unemployment in America stems from schools which find it impossible to teach even the basics of reading and writing.

Yet, even the best education can turn us into little more than clever fools. Alexander Pope once wrote of Francis Bacon, the great English philosopher and statesman: he was "the wisest, brightest, and meanest of all mankind. He thirsted for advancement in learning, but never neglected the advancement of Bacon." Which one of us doesn't know such wise fools as Francis Bacon? A man may possess expertise in philosophy, literature and theology -- yet in reality, be little more than a pompous ass. A woman may be a profound genius of history and economics - yet she may be incapable of talking common sense to her teenage daughter. The Greeks, of whom Paul wrote in his epistles, thirsted after knowledge. Their philosophy, poetry, architecture, and sculpture was some of the greatest of the world. Yet in Paul's eyes, they were the greatest fools - for they did not know the true source of wisdom.

So, what is this true source of wisdom? According to Job or Jesus, only God understands the way to it ... and only God has established it and searched it out. Moreover, according to the wisdom writers of Scripture, God not only created the Universe - he also established an infinite pattern of order in this world ... an order not only found in nature, but also formulated for human relationships and within human beings themselves. Therefore, human life to be lived fully and wisely can only be lived according to this order. To live by God's order, is to be wise; to live in opposition to His order, is to be a fool.

The universe all around us is a breath-taking model of this order from God. We need only watch a TV Nova special to see such truth. There are billions of amazing forms of life on earth each perfect in itself, yet each linked with the other forms around it. And all of these are patterned by God to fit together and work as they were meant to work from his original design. An ant in an anthill cooperates in an amazing fashion with its fellow workers. It knows exactly what its duties are -- when to add its particular mud to the anthill, when to transfer its assigned egg to another room in the hill, and when to block up its corridor against some intruder.

But we - who are the highest order of God's handiwork -- we are often not so wise as these ants. Our Creator has given us instructions too - not built upon animal instincts - but revealed to us in his magnificent Word: "Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal or cheat. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. Thou shalt not covet." Yet we persist in thinking that we can go against this God-given order and still have an abundant life. In a recent Level III catechism class - the whole class chastised me for discouraging them from cheating in school. They simply told me: "Well, everyone does it - so we'll be darned if we're going to listen to you, to God, or to anyone else give us contrary directions." And that's the wisdom of the brightest and best of our students in school!!

We persist in believing that we can practice deceit and faithlessness in marriage and business and still have happy homes and productive markets. We continue to gossip about our neighbors and "friends" - and then we wonder why there is no joy and fellowship in our churches and communities. We nurse our grudges and refuse to forgive others' faults -- yet we still believe such hardness of heart can build community and trust. And then we wonder why Scripture calls human wisdom foolishness?!! Because human wisdom time after time fails to abide by the established order that God the Creator intended human life to reflect.

Please do not misinterpret my intention or God's. God's order is not legalism -- not following the law as an end in itself or in order to get some reward in heaven. God's law is simply his orderly direction for living. God, in his

marvelous mercy, has not abandoned us to wander in the dark, to lose our way or to stumble and fall. In his overflowing love for us, he has said: "This is the way - now walk in it and you will have the fulness of life; you will know the full potential for which I created you ... to live in my image." For I deeply love you and want you to have life, and have it abundantly. And so I give you these directions only for your good.

But this Creator of ours - this incredible merciful Father who fashioned you and me and everything that is -- He was not even satisfied with these directions. He was not satisfied in handing down directions in mere speech and writings of human hands; he was not satisfied with tablets of stone and scrolls of parchment and books of paper. No, this loving God took all his wisdom, all his law, all his Word, and incarnated them into a son, Jesus Christ, born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth. And this son, says Paul, this Christ became "the wisdom of God on earth." And later Luke said, this son "grew and became strong, filled with the wisdom of God."

How the wisdom of this world pales beside the grace and truth of this Son! Everyday we find some huckstores trying to tell us the true way of wisdom ... to sell our souls ... to become a Muslim, a mystic, or a Moonie. Let me read your future in the stars. Find everlasting peace in this New Age religion. Send \$25 and I'll make you rich, or help you lose weight, or even heal your cancer. Just listen to the wisdom of this world - for it always claims to have all the real secrets to the good life.

But our foolish, loving God offered a better way, truth, and life: "I came not to be served, but to offer my life as a ransom for many." This God of truth doesn't promise a new Mercedes or BMW as the way of wisdom and truth in this world -- he rears up a cross on earth to ever point to the true way of wisdom - the wisdom of sacrificing for the good of others.

Does anyone here today doubt that the life Christ lived was less than the way of wisdom for this world? Let no one be fooled - He knew what was important in this world! NOT RICHES - he only had a seamless cloak to call his own and no place to lay his head! NOT STATUS - he was a friend of the poor and ostracized and despised by those in charge. NOT POWER - he saved others but would not come down from the cross to save himself. Recently someone asked me: "Peter, why didn't Jesus offer a more comprehensive description of heaven ... more details, so that we could have a greater trust in eternal life?" Today, I have an even better answer than I did that day! Jesus was too wise to offer humanity a specific description of heaven. Because he knew too well THAT IF HE PERFECTLY DESCRIBED HEAVEN ... THEN WE WOULD ASPIRE TO BEING THERE RATHER THAN SEEKING TO DO OUR VERY BEST ON EARTH WHERE GOD HAS NOW BLESSED US TO LIVE. Or as I have said before ... we would be so heavenly oriented, that we would be no earthly good! And that's not wisdom, that's foolishness!

Jesus simply says: "Let God take care of you in heaven! Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to help one another take care of God's earth and each other for whatever time you are given!" That's God's orderly plan of wisdom on earth through his son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus knew what abides in this world and does not pass away; not the might of Rome or America with all its armies, smart bombs, and technological progress, but the helplessness of the cross, that is raised above hundreds of hamlets in every corner of the earth. Not the evil he suffered and the injustice that sentenced him to the cross, but the victory and glory of God his Father, shown victorious in his new life on Easter morning. Not the hatred of human beings, but the love of a living God in the hearts and minds of those human beings. Not the doubt and despair of fools who say in their hearts, "There is no god," but instead the faith in actions that overcomes the obstacles of this world. Not death - but life -- God's abundant life, given for all eternity. Is it any wonder that time itself is now divided by this Christ between B.C. & A.D.? God's ordered plan to bring his kingdom on earth continues to move steadily toward the fulness of its completion through the wisdom of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Whence comes wisdom for '92 and beyond? From none other than a dependence upon the way, the truth and the life of Jesus Christ! Happy New Year!

AMEN.

CHRISTMAS I (ST. JOHN, APOSTLE/EVANGELIST)
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 27, 1992
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"Who Could Ask For Anything More?"

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image; according to our likeness and God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." Gen. 1:26;31

(My special gratitude to Pastor John Jamison for his special research & insights regarding the empire of Caesar Augustus.)

He stood on the steps and waved. He nodded to the cheering crowd below, taking a deep breath and soaking in their praise. He was proud as he looked out over his subjects. He had taken a good thing and made it much better. He had created an empire like no other monarch had ever seen before. He always seemed to know exactly the right thing to do at the right time. Like the time he traded ten (10) old cities up north to King Hiram of Tyre for \$3,600,000 and another fortune in Cedars of Lebanon. Hiram had floated those trees all the way down the coast before he ever visited a single one of those cities to see their real value. The wisdom and savvy of Caesar Augustus had been victorious again.

And those trees -- they had built a palace and grand temple overlaid in fine gold, ivory and precious gems. There was no silver in this palace - that might be fine for the common folk, but not for the home of this emperor. And this same king built fleets of ships that sailed to Arabia, Africa and India -- always returning with millions in gold, tons of ivory & sandalwood, and all kinds of spices, precious gems, and even peacocks (after all, the palace needed color).

One year's income for this ruler approached 20 million; but of course, that did not include the monies from traders and merchants, nor the taxes from governors of the various lands of his empire. This same old-boy had built some 48,000 stalls for his horses (that even makes Washington and the White House seem rather tame). The daily - that's daily - provisions for this ruler's household included 185,000 bushels of fine flour (makes lots of sticky buns), 370 bushels of meal, 10 fat oxen, 20-pasture-feed cattle, 100 sheep, and various harts, gazelles & fatted fowl (MacDonalds please move aside; 20 billion hamburgers are a piece of cake for this empire!). All this was enough for the king, his wives (all 700 of them) as well as his 300 part-time wives, known as concubines.

Stories of this great ruler spread far and wide. One who doubted his greatness was the queen of a land known as Sheeba. To answer her doubts, she visited his empire, bringing with her a small gift of \$3,600,000 in gold, and more in gems & spices than he had ever received before.

As the saying goes among the "rich and famous," she would not be easily "out-glitzed!" After a few days with this emperor, she saw that the stories she had been told were not only true - they had merely broken the surface of the truth. She had never seen such opulence and extravagance. When she prepared to leave, the king's gifts to her amounted to everything she had ever wanted, including, we are told, a son by his highness. Historians say, that as she departed and looked back at this emperor's exploits, "there was no more spirit within her." As the saying goes today, she was "wiped out" by this man!

By now you all know that this is the story of the kingdom of Caesar Augustus. But it is not only his story. It is our story as well. In fact, it is a story that often gets re-written during this season every year. It's a story about gimmicks & greed ... a story of those who are forever seeking that kingdom of fine gold and fancy houses, fast chariots and greater horsepower, and colorful peacocks, gawdy gems & games. There is fame, prestige, promotion and power in this kingdom. It is the kingdom of the Fords & Iaccocas, where you can stand and make decrees forcing millions to travel the way you want them to. As we have heard every Christmas - "in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus for all to be enrolled ..." There was only one reason rulers took this census: to find out how many young men were available for their military machines. Because in this kingdom, you are always building your power base or you are nothing. In this kingdom, there is always more land to conquer, more gold to get, more gadgets to gain, more ladders to ascend, more to acquire that is too attractive to pass by!

Most of us at one time or another dreamed about living in this kingdom. In fact, years ago, we dreamed of having what we now have. And now that we have it, we are still dreaming about more. Somewhere deep, down inside us, we know that if we keep getting more, one of these days we will have enough. We will finally be at that "restful place" - that place of "contentment" -- or as the saying goes ... WE WILL FINALLY HAVE ARRIVED THERE!! But we all know how it goes -- once we get "there," we don't seem to be aware of the fact that we have already arrived. This year we do it for the family, next year we do it for the "good" of the company, and then we finally get "there!" Yet, even after we've arrived, we seem to keep on going the same way we've always done it before ... NEVER QUITE FEELING WE ARE REALLY THERE! Just once in a while when we do get "THERE" we finally say: "Who Could Ask For Anything More!?" But the facts are we know what we do: we keep on asking for more! Then the next day we come to our senses: we realize the whole dream has been little more than a big lie. BECAUSE ALL THIS KINGDOM REALLY OFFERS IS THE WORRY THAT THE MORE WE GET, THE MORE WE MIGHT LOSE! And no one remains secure in a kingdom like that!

There must be another kingdom! Christians have called it the kingdom of God. It is a kingdom of shepherds & wise men, angels and apostles. These are the people who take

care of someone else's sheep, offer messages of hope in times of crisis, or lay down their lives for the sake of others in times of need. There is little time in this kingdom for worrying about prestige, power or promotions. There are many lost sheep to find, hungry sheep to be fed, and wounded sheep to heal. Since there's very little power or prominence needed for these jobs (but "thanks" please!), there's no real need for decrees or pronouncements among shepherds/apostles. People called to duty in this kingdom simply serve and care!

We gather here today on this last Sunday of 1992 to honor and recognize such a person. Instead of hanging around the power centers in Jerusalem, John hung around with eleven other guys that followed Jesus. But unlike so many that are merely ascending to power and promotion - John valued his relationship more than his rank. On one of those rare moments when God spoke openly to Jesus, it was John with two others who became personal witnesses to the Transfiguration. And when a job needed to be done, it was John and Peter who made the preparations for the Passover Meal. And at that Last Supper, it was John who was leaning on his Lord's shoulder already feeling the grief of separation. And on Golgatha, it was John to whom Jesus entrusted the care of His mother. And at the graveyard, it was John who outran Peter to be one of the first witnesses to the resurrection. Oh, we dare not immortalize John -- like you and me, he had his weak moments; he was right there with the rest of the disciples, urging Jesus to ask the crowds to buy their own food rather than trusting in the miracle of multiplication. But even with his shortcomings, he still possessed the greatest gift given to the followers of Jesus: HE WAS JESUS' FRIEND TO THE VERY END! And "Who Could Ask For Anything More?!?!"

Two days ago we celebrated the most precious Gift that God has given to this world: HIS PRESENCE IN THE FLESH! In this Christ Child, we finally see what God had wanted us to see from the beginning of creation: THAT HE HAS GIVEN US MORE THAN A KINGDOM OF THINGS!! His most precious gift is the everlasting FRIENDSHIP OF JESUS CHRIST! That's why God said from the very beginning: "Let US make (notice) US (he was already in conversation with Christ from the beginning) let us make humankind in our own image, according to OUR likeness. And when God saw from the beginning that humanity had the potential to be like himself, he said: IT IS VERY GOOD!!

It is for this GOOD PURPOSE that God sent himself and his apostles into this world: TO MAKE THIS WORLD A KINGDOM WHERE FRIENDSHIP IS CULTIVATED AND COMMUNICATED BETWEEN PEOPLE ... RATHER THAN THE MERE GIVING OF THINGS! That's why we praise and worship Jesus Christ - because like no one in history he has shown us what it means to be a trusted friend -- he has remained loyal and faithful to us, forgiving us even when we take his teachings for granted ... even when we make money more important than the Messiah ... even when we do mindless and and immoral things.

That's why we belong to this church known as the body of Christ: BECAUSE WE WANT TO BE A PART OF A KINGDOM THAT LASTS FOREVER ... THE KINGDOM OF GOD'S FRIENDSHIP THAT BEGINS HERE AND IS BROUGHT TO PERFECTION IN THE LIFE TO COME! That's why John the Apostle & Evangelist is honored today just two days after Christmas! Not only for his great Word become flesh in the 4th gospel, but because he personally stood by the Word of God to the very end: HE REMAINED BY THE SIDE OF HIS FRIEND, JESUS, EMMANUEL, TO THE VERY END. He epitomized the kingdom of friendship! And, "Who Could Ask For Anything More!?!"

AMEN.

ST. STEPHEN, DEACON & MARTYR
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 26, 1993
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"FROM CRADLE TO CROSS"

Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died. Acts 7:60 "Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you kill and crucify." Matt 23:34

One of the great Christmas pageants I recently heard about took place at a maximum security prison. It was a prison of the worst possible offenders, incl. murderers, armed robbers and rapists. Each year the prisoners themselves acted out the Christmas story for the other prisoners. And since they were in a maximum security prison - nothing could be brought in "from the outside" for the play. All the costumes and props had to come from within the walls of the prison.

So a mop-head was used to give Mary her full feminine look. A ski mask with glued-on cotton balls became the sheep's head; socks with glued-on cotton balls became sheep feet. And a discarded cardboard box was used for the cradle (the manger) in the stable. Each year the prisoners really got excited as they used their creative skills to develop this authentic Christmas pageant.

When they were almost ready to begin - the most thorny question arose: what would they use for the baby Jesus? Obviously, a real baby could not be brought in (as we had here at Hope last Sunday). Someone suggested that Mary just hold a rolled-together blanket. But there was a strong objection to a Christmas pageant without something "real" to represent the baby Jesus.

Finally, on the day of the performance, the chaplain offered a solution. He had found something in his office that would be appropriate for the baby, and he had wrapped it into Mary's blanket. The pageant was now ready to go on. It was portrayed with sensitivity that even the prison guards found shocking in this setting. The inmates not only enjoyed the play, but the participants found their involvement even more meaningful. Then came the dramatic scene where Mary revealed her baby - the Christ child. She very carefully unwrapped the blanket. And there was the chaplain's solution for the baby Jesus -- an old rugged cross from the altar in his office. Suddenly, like never before -- the inmates realized that the gospel of Christ's birth was not really the gospel until THE CRADLE WAS TRANSFORMED INTO THE CROSS.

And maybe there's no better way to bring conclusion to our Christmas celebrations on the day after Christmas than to replace the wooden cradle in our crech with a wooden cross.

Because there is no greater reminder for all Christians on the day after Christmas than to remember that Christmas is so much more than a baby in a crude cradle. It is so much more than the intoxicated toasts that have been lifted for Jesus in the last 24 hours. It is so much more than the glitter and the Chrismons and the cheerful gaiety and the flashing lights and the children around the Christmas tree. All these things warm the heart and make it easy for us to feel that all is well and wonderful at Christmas.

But that's not the whole truth of Christmas. While we celebrated the new life and new love of Christ the night before last -- some 165 families in the Toledo area have had to face the grim reality of grief over the loss of their loved ones reported in the Blade since last Monday. While we rejoiced over the reunion of "peace on earth good will to all men" on Christmas Eve--there are still thousands of people this morning suffering from the separation of prejudice, slander, stubbornness, pride and other forms of human sin. While we were gratefully giving and receiving on Christmas day -- we also must remember that the period preceding that day had one of the highest rates of theft for the whole year -- along with the giving of murders, rapes, and other destructive acts that have desimated the holidays for some families. My point here is not to depress us anymore than we already are the day after Christmas. My point is to proclaim that the gospel of Christmas is more than the comforting emotion of Xmas carols or gushy feeling of candlelight!

Stated differently, the PEACE of Christmas is not the same as an escape from strife; the JOY of Christmas is not the same as a sedative from sorrow; the NEW LIFE & GRACE of Christmas in the cradle is not the same as freedom from the reality of death. In short, God has not offered us just another cheap gift in the life of Christ; Christ's birth does not anesthetize us to the real struggles & stresses of life.

Quite to the contrary - Christ's birth instead of sedating us to these hassles of life actually drives us more deeply into these sacrificial & sometimes dangerous territories. Once Christ entered the world we got a whole new picture on the meaning of obedience and service and sacrifice and forgiveness and all the other religious ideas that are so easily talked about but so difficult to live.

And this whole new style of life found its fullness and summation in the life of Stephen, one of the first deacons of the church and the first Christian to suffer martyrdom because of his faith. His life and death clearly witnessed to the fact that believing in Christ "in the flesh" is not synonymous with some heavenly journey to the Magic Kindgom at Chrismtas. Christ's entry into Stephen's life announced the everlasting PRESCRIPTION for all Christians: CAUTION - NO PROTECTION FROM PAIN OR PERSECUTION WHEN TAKING CHRIST INTERNALLY.

Stephen the martyr and deacon makes clear that when Christians take Christ internally ... when we become one in the flesh ... when we really proclaim the truth of Christmas -- then we begin to live like Christ: we love those who are unloveable; we accept those who were previously unacceptable; and we forgive that which was previously unforgiveable. And people who love and accept and forgive like that -- who live the truth of the gospel -- are always at risk in a very judgmental and damning world. Is it any wonder that Stephen became the victim of an early death in his ministry.

But that point was made long before Stephen came on the scene. Lest we think that the Bible is a collection of fairy tales, we need only look at Matthew's narrative of Jesus' birth to see that he was born in the days of Herod the king - a day and a time when life was cheap and madmen ruled nations. We need read no further than Matthew to realize that Christmas is so much more than a glow of sentimentality. Matthew further quells the idea that Christmas is only for children. For after Christmas in Matthew's gospel - Jesus enters the real world where infants are slaughtered and a homeless family must move or die.

The story of the days following Jesus' birth return us to the real world -- a world where there is danger ahead and unknown developments; a world where children die senselessly; a world in which parents like Joseph and Mary must be subject to tyranny and threat and must give birth to a child in borrowed and temporary lodgings; a world where nations occupy others by force, and rulers are terrorized and murdered; a world of harsh and cruel experiences where not every day is Christmas day, but rather the majority of days are after Christmas; a world where a crude cradle in Bethlehem fast becomes Calvary's Cross on Golgatha.

So on this day after Christmas -- the gospel again wants to make clear that it's theme transcends a Christmas cradle. The hope and confidence of the gospel goes beyond the creche to the cross; it is Christ's death on the cross that makes us "one in his flesh" and that saves us from all the precarious fears that still lurk after Christmas. The gospel of Christmas makes clear that the kingdom of God is no longer somewhere up there in the clouds; "thy kingdom has come and thy will is being done on earth, as it was in heaven." But the gospel of Good Friday/Easter has made equally clear that the Herods of this world have been put in their proper place: under the authority of Christ. And even though these Herods can kill with stones and weapons, they can never kill the spirit of Christ in the flesh. For His Word in the flesh of his body has now been resurrected for some 2000 years; and it will continue to manifest his grace, his truth and his forgiveness for eons to come.

That's why the baptism of babies (like Matthew) is still such an important tradition of this body; because in baptism

we become "one in the flesh of Christ" ... and once we possess that oneness, there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God. And then later in confirmation - when we take Christ into our flesh internally -- when we say Christ is the whole truth and nothing but the truth just as Stephen did -- then we know there is but one goal for our lives: TO FOREVER SHOW THAT ONENESS IN CHRIST AS WE MOVE FROM CRADLE TO CROSS ... for when I was hungry, you gave me food ... when I was thirsty, you gave me drink ... when I was sick, you visited me, when I was a stranger, you welcomed me ... and when I was in prison, you came to keep me company. As you have done this to the least of these, you have done it to me ... and you have revealed like Stephen that you are one of God's true children of sacrifice ... not only adoring Christ in His cradle, but taking up his cross and following him all the days after Christmas!

AMEN.

Christmas I
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 28, 1997
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

“PUT ON YOUR CHRIST (mas) CLOTHING!”

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear one with another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. Colossians 3:12-15

The first Sunday after Christmas is always a mixed blessing. On the down side - it's the Sunday that we realize we've overeaten, overspent, overextended and generally overdone it. On the up side, like Christmas Eve -- it's a Sunday of "wonder" -- wondering if we'll be able to pay off the Mastercard. One mother told me she hated the first Sunday after Christmas -- she knew that after the family had hung their stockings with care ... it would be another year before they hung anything up again!

Well, I hope you were greatly blessed by the events and people of this past week. And I hope you were even blessed to receive what you asked for from Santa. I must say - it was a banner Christmas for me. I asked for socks -- and I got six pair. I asked for T-shirts -- and I got two packages. I asked for a couple of new shirts -- and I got two, new long-sleeved shirts! I even asked for new shorts -- and I got two packages of Jockey underwear. Now as church lady would say, "That's really very special!!"

But I never realized how these Christmas requests would illustrate today's texts. The writer of Colossians urges his readers to put on "new clothing!" What he's really offering is "baptismal imagery." Because traditionally, in baptism, the candidates "stripped away the old garments," and put on the new baptismal garment - usually a white gown.

So this imagery is offered to us in the Christmas season when many of us have received new clothing. We know how important it is to "take off the old, soiled and stained garments full of yesterday's toil and sweat." Those garments are not only unpleasant to us -- they are repulsive to others. So in approaching another year of mission -- we are urged "to strip away the old, sweaty, stained stuff that has turned putrid and ugly."

The analogy is a perfect fit to our Christian life -- and not only at Christmas. We are urged to daily strip away that which has become foul and soiled with guilt and greed and anything else that might cause us to become repulsive to God or each other!! Then we are urged to "clothe ourselves in the purity of Christ's baptismal goodness" -- namely -- to put on "compassion, kindness, meekness, humility and patience -- forgiving one another and being bound in perfect harmony with God's love." These are the Christmas clothes of the Christ-child!! Essentially - God is saying ... "please don't come singing how much you 'adore Christ as your Lord' yet still be heaping upon one another

the putrid practices of revenge, jealousy, manipulation and guilt!

In short -- today's texts ask us to assess our growth in our baptismal faith; as we have aged, have we grown in the purity of Christ that we promised in baptism?? Has my baptism and yours changed the way we look at ourselves and the way we look at one another??? A pastor friend of mine served in the Appalachian mountains of Virginia. One of his members had been murdered, allegedly by a cousin. The funeral home was not only packed with the mountain clan that day -- but the atmosphere crackled with a collective desire for revenge.

My friend spoke eloquently -- stating that "hatred begets more hatred ... that vengeance may seem sweet, but it cannot heal. Revenge," he said, "is like burning down the house to get rid of an unwanted cat. Only God's grace & for-giveness among family members will enable this clan to endure the injustice of their loss."

***** During the closing music, the funeral director invited my pastor-friend into a side room. He said, "Pastor, that was the best funeral sermon I have ever heard" -- then taking the pastor by the shoulders, he said -- "now I suggest you leave immediately by the back door."

We all know the difference between the clothing of grace & the undergarments of a grudge! And yet we so often choose to confront one another with the dirty clothes of yesterday's toils and troubles. In my seventeen months at Glenwood -- I don't think I've made it through one week without hearing about someone who had attacked someone else in jealousy or resentment or something. I constantly have heard about little petty games of control & one-upsmanship! And I understand there are still some feuds going on at this moment that were going on when I arrived in August of 1996. Is it any wonder that I say to myself ... and you should be saying to yourselves: "Why sing about AMAZING GRACE if we don't practice it!?" "Why talk about compassion and mercy if we don't show it!?" "Why confess that we seek to be honest and forthright -- when we smile at one another on Sunday only to say evil things behind one another's backs on Monday thru Saturday?" "Why are we so obsessed with finding fault, of holding onto grudges and of serving up guilt on one another!?"

Be assured -- I have no illusions that my honest questions in this sermon will really change anything! Regrettably - people inside and outside the church seem to prefer "to hang out dirty undergarments" rather than "clothing themselves with Christ!" But God has not called me here ... nor has he called you here to keep up this practice!! His Word is clear, concise & direct; and he commands all who believe in Him ... "As God's chosen & holy ones, clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience ... forgiving one another and being bound together in perfect harmony under God's love!"

I cannot do better than God! Yet since this first Sunday after Christmas urges us "to grow in our faith ... even as Jesus had to grow up in his trust of the Father"- I will resort today to a "take-home sheet" written by a business manager titled: The Heart & Soul of Effective Managment. I think Mr. James Hind graphically illustrates what it means to "Put On Our Christmas Clothing."

THE MANAGEMENT STYLE OF JESUS

by James Hind

Christmas is an appropriate time to examine the management style of Jesus of Nazareth. The results he achieved were second to none. In only three years, he defined a mission and carried it out. He recruited and motivated 12 ordinary men to become extraordinary. He molded their diverse personalities into a "glorious company." He organized Christianity, which has grown to nearly 2 billion proponents, with branches in all of the worlds 223 countries.

His corporate culture was built around concern and care for others - wherein he buried his pride and promoted humility of the heart. Jesus never used the "hard sell"-- bulldozing people into his ways of thinking; nor did he use the "soft sell" -- influencing by manipulation. Rather he faithfully promoted and practiced the most important principle of motivation: PEOPLE WANT TO KNOW HOW MUCH YOU CARE BEFORE THEY CARE HOW MUCH YOU KNOW!

He actively associated women with his mission - even though they were considered unworthy in his culture. He was both a positive thinker and doer -- his thoughts and words being solution oriented, rather than problem prone.

Above all -- Jesus was committed to a caring approach to managing his disciples. He didn't see his disciples as objects to be manipulated for success, but rather as human beings to be inspired and developed. He stressed teamwork, by promoting a spirit of cooperation -- never allowing "we/they" barriers. At the same time, he promoted a spirited competition with his disciples, but not the kind where one jockeys for position or undercuts others to get ahead. Competition was always measured by his standard of excellence: "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience -- always forgiving one another and being bound by the perfect harmony of God's love."

He did not use his miraculous powers to obtain power, honor or glory. Yet he won the crown of glory and honor because of his strongest leadership trait: A SERVANT ATTITUDE. As servant leader, he lowered himself to wash his disciples feet, considered an offensively menial task of his day. In short, he cultivated a supportive role that puts self-serving interests and ego gratification aside."

AMEN.