

Lent II
March 21, 1973
Lake Park Lutheran Church (supply sermon)

THE DISCIPLINE OF DENIAL

Pastor Peter R. Martyn

"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wills." (Matthew 26:39b)

"If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24)

'Have you filled your Lenten denial box yet?' This was a question that I often heard as a young teenager. I can remember well the different shapes and sizes that these little boxes or tubes for money came in. And I can remember even better putting my 10¢ a day in them when I really wanted to use it for an ice cream bar.

I guess as I look at the whole thing now, it has the ring of being a little gimmicky. It does tend to make a token gesture out of self-denial. But then we at least must be reminded that a token gesture of denial is better than no gesture.

I'm sure we all recognize, however, that Jesus was not talking about self-denial boxes when he said: "Deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me."

Could he possibly have meant that he wanted us to deny all of our WORLDLY desires and needs? To repress our self-interests -- our aspirations for family or vocational life? Obviously, the answer is NO! Jesus did not intend to create a new legalism for his followers. I don't believe Jesus intended to make all of his followers into monastic hermits -- even though I'm sure he would allow this possibility.

Well then, what DOES IT MEAN then "to deny

oneself and take up our crosses and follow him?"

It means in simplest terms that we RECOGNIZE AND ACCEPT a "will," that is, a purpose or intention for life, which is more encompassing than our own.

Or said differently, when I am left to reflect on life without God entering into my ongoing reflections, my purpose statement for life pretty much goes: MORE, MORE, MORE FOR ME, ME, ME! If I'm honest with myself, that purpose statement has a pretty limited scope.

This tends to be the purpose statement for a secularized society. And so it is very easy for all of us to become drawn into this mentality. It is this More, More, More for Me, Me, Me mentality which causes destruction and cancerous divisions to the fabric of human relationships and society.

Just think how often this secularized purpose for life has been the motivation for destructive lifestyles. Family breakdowns, wars, ecological crises, business bankruptcies, church feuds, denominational differences, racial clashes, . . . just to name a few -- all of these have a direct causal connection to the MORE, MORE, MORE for ME, ME, ME MENTALITY.

The question remains: How can we get beyond this mentality?? How is it possible TO RECOGNIZE and ACCEPT God's will -- HIS PURPOSE-- for life, when by nature I would rather accept ONLY MY OWN? How can I become MORE GLOBAL -- MORE PANORAMIC like God -- in my purpose for life?

I maintain that you and I can ONLY have a more global purpose -- that is, we can only DENY OURSELVES -- when we first FEEL and BELIEVE that we are ACCEPTED & AFFIRMED!

Jesus in Gethsemane offers us a perfect illustration of this. He says: Abba, my Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."

Just like you and me, Jesus' first thought was for himself -- for his own narrow purpose. Like any of us, he did not want to die prematurely. But then he RECOGNIZES and AFFIRMS God's greater purpose for him.

I believe that he could not have done this HAD HE NOT BELIEVED AND FELT that he was totally accepted -- totally loved by his Father. He could DENY HIMSELF because he knew that his Father even accepted his doubts -- even forgave him for his statement of unwillingness to accept the cup of sacrifice.

And like Jesus, when we feel accepted, loved, affirmed, and forgiven by God and each other-- then we are able to deny ourselves -- that is, we are then able to live for God's purpose in life, and NOT ONLY OUR OWN!

Let me try to illustrate: A teenage boy in our congregation has for the last month intentionally skipped school every day. He comes from a very well churched and concerned family. And he is not a belligerent or openly hostile kid.

When asked why he has been doing this, he said: "I can't make it anyway -- and nobody really cares anyhow."

Part of his attitude is due to the fact that he has had difficulty passing courses. But this had been dramatically amplified by those closest to him who have continually reminded him that he's A NOTHING.

I believe that much of his skipping school is a cry for love and acceptance. But by the very act of skipping school, he is putting himself on a pedestal -- he is NOT DENYING

himself BECAUSE HE HAS SUCH A GREAT NEED FOR ACCEPTANCE -- FOR BEING AFFIRMED AND FORGIVEN FOR HIS PAST.

And that ACCEPTANCE, and AFFIRMATION, and FORGIVENESS -- all part of God's purpose -- must be spoken NOT FROM ME IN A SERMON. Rather it must be spoken by those closest to him -- his parents and family and friends.

The same is true for all our human relationships. If I am unfaithful to my wife, and she rejects me for it -- then I am just further driven to satisfy my own selfish purpose. But, if she accepts me and forgives me -- WITH THAT RENEWED ACCEPTANCE AND AFFIRMATION, I can deny myself and live out our relationship according to God's purpose for that relationship.

It is for this reason that we as Lutherans affirm the fact that we must first be justified by God's free gift of love, before we can respond with love. He first loves and forgives us -- so that we can respond by denying our own selfish purposes, and love and forgive others.

In other words, God recognizes OUR SELFISH NEED to be first accepted and forgiven before we in turn will accept and forgive. In fact God not only recognizes this selfish need of ours ---- he also recognizes that we will constantly BE FORGETFUL of his greater purpose for our lives.

In other words, he knows that WE WILL often fail to deny ourselves and take up our crosses. And because of this, he offers his grace perpetually. The events of Lent only point to our perpetual need for Good Fridays and Easter Sundays every day of our lives.

We have God's pledge of continued acceptance

and forgiveness as long as we remain in relationship to him. On the vertical dimension of life, that makes it possible for us to DENY THOSE PURPOSES WHICH ONLY SERVE MORE, MORE, MORE FOR ME, ME, ME!

Do we have that pledge from one another on the horizontal plane of life? We have confessed that we WILL TRY to fulfill that pledge. And we won't do it because we feel forced to. We've found that such legalism doesn't work.

No! We'll deny ourselves because God's disciplined example of acceptance and forgiveness has really penetrated into our relationships with one another. And we believe we can deny our selfish purpose for living, because through Christ we've been able to accept -- forgive -- and love each other even when we have failed and forsaken one another.

My friends. You are accepted -- you are forgiven. Through Christ, God has torn up your "I OWE YOU" to him. Now you and I can deny ourselves and do the same for each other.

II WEDNESDAY IN LENT

Redeemer Lutheran - Milwaukee

March 13, 1974

Pastor Quarty

"AN OPEN DOOR POLICY"

"I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." John 10:9-10

William Barclay, in commenting upon the pastoral scene from which these verses come, states: "when the sheep were out on the hills in the warm season, when they did not return at night to the village at all, they were collected into sheep-folds out on the hillside. These hillside sheep-folds were just open spaces enclosed by a wall.

In them there was an opening by which the sheep came in and went out; but there was no door of any kind. What happened was that at night the shepherd himself lay down across the opening and entrance, and no sheep could get out or in except over his body. In the most literal sense the shepherd was the door; there was no access to the sheep-fold except through him."

And so Jesus says: "I am the door." Through him, we find access to God. Quite literally, through him we are shown the love of God. Through him, we are offered and shown salvation--namely, the forgiveness of sins. And through his love and forgiveness, we have life, and have it abundantly - abundantly because we are freed from the stifling burdens and guilts that smother life of its joy and satisfaction.

This is the OPEN DOOR through which we Christians enter life. We are baptized into Christ - to die to sin with him, and to rise to new life with him. Yes, as Christians we put a high priority upon entering life through

Reformation of X

this door - because we believe there can be no better entrance for life's relationships. For with Christ as the INITIAL and ULTIMATE open doorway to life, we enter into interaction with God and man with a CLEAR, EVER-PRESENT visibility of God's gift of love.

That kind of open, clear visibility to God assures us of life -- that is, meaningful, purposeful, vital, energized, ever-growing life, . . . yes, abundant life. ~~████~~ Would anyone turn down that lifestyle? Probably not consciously. But this door is in competition with many others which also claim to offer the abundant life.

The world and its people are rushing madly along life's corridor looking for that door that seems to promise the most abundant life. Unfortunately, many who are looking want a quick-hit abundance - they want a golden opportunity door - a sudden stroke of genius that will open doors to abundance. This often leads to seeking abundance in the strangest places, by the strangest ways, and with the strangest set of values.

on the other hand

God is calling us to show the world and its people ~~THAT~~ ~~ALREADY~~ ~~OPENED~~ ~~DOOR~~ THAT leads to real abundance -- that leads to meaningful, loving relationships. We have to DO more than merely informing people that there is an open door - or that it's possible to find ;an open door. God calls us TO SHOW one another that open door - in our actions, attitudes, and thoughts.

The following example will hopefully clarify how that open door can be shown. A prisoner recently wrote an acquaintance of mine expressing his deep concerns about re-entry into society. The prisoner feared ~~██~~ potential rejection outside the prison walls. He was afraid the abundant, forgiving life that Christians talked about might be absent when put to the acid test.

The Christian layman responded in part as follows: "As members of the great family of God, we have accepted the challenge of helping you along life's way and over the rough spots. We will continue to visit with you as we can, to listen to your problems - to counsel you and help you where we can. Yes, we will counsel you on earning, saving, and spending money. I'll help where I can on improving your skills and experience to improve your job status. I'll listen to your problems as I do my own sons, but just as in their cases, you must make the decision, . . . put forth the effort, . . . build the reputation and develop friends and their trust. We'll encourage you when you need it, but we won't do it for you."

This Christian layman could have responded by saying: "God will take care of you; you need not fear." But that's like telling the prisoner that there's an open door somewhere - if you wish hard enough you might find it. Instead, this layman REVEALED the open door -- Christ became real in the person of this compassionate Christian.

This response not only told the prisoner of an open door to an abundant life - the RESPONSE was Christ's response - it was the open door -- it was the door of the loving forgiveness of God -- it was A REAL PROMISE of a more abundant life waiting for that prisoner beyond the security of those walls. It was AN OPEN DOOR to a man who had experienced locked doors - and was afraid of a future filled with closed and slamming doors.

That prisoner will know that there is salvation from God through Jesus Christ -- and through those who live in the light shining through the open door of Christ. Yes, there is salvation-- there is freedom from past guilt - from the sins of yesterday. And with that guilt burden lifted, there is hope. And whether we're an ex-convict of society or an ex-convict of sin,

we all need to be freed from yesterday's guilts, so that we can live today and tomorrow with new hope - yes, so that we can have life, and have it abundantly.

We live in an age which finds literally masses of people trapped behind walls of guilt. Many find themselves in these positions because of over extended pride on the one hand, or because they have gone AWOL from life on the other - whether its AWOL from their families, or AWOL from honesty, or some other slothful motivation.

And so
The questions facing us as Christians are:
1) Are we behind the walls ourselves, and 2) if not, how can we help those who are behind these walls of guilt? In both cases, the answer is the same: we must approach our God through the open door of Christ, *and* we must **BE** that open door of Christ.

Only when the guilt-ridden knows that he will be forgiven and accepted will he have courage to again face life honestly. God offers each of us that assurance - we need only approach him through the open door that he has provided.

We are not hemmed in. "If anyone enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture." We are free through Christ, the open door, who came to set us free. We are free from the burdens of the past, and thereby free to live the abundant life right now - free to love and free to sacrifice ourselves in loving, . . . even free to lose our lives because there is no life to lose when we are one with Christ and each other.

The door is open. The door is Jesus Christ. He is our exit from the iron cage, and our entrance to the life abundant.

You know, it's really tragic when I walk by his open door in *you and* ~~my~~ search to have life more *our*

abundantly. Yes, and it's equally tragic when ~~we~~ have walked through his open door and accepted his abundant love - and then turned around and failed to show that open door and abundant life to ~~my~~ neighbor in need.

God, help ~~me~~ ^{us} to see your entrance to the open abundant life - and to be a guiding light on that entrance for those still staggering to find abundance at other doorways.

~~Added~~

Amen.

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT
Redeemer Lutheran - Milwaukee
March 10, 1974

"THE TRAGEDY OF REJECTION"

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" *Luke 13:34*

Most of us can recall at least one occasion in our lives where we have really spent ourselves. A time when we have invested our utmost of energy, skill, patience, and determination. A time which was really characterized by personal sacrifice. It may have been a time which lasted only one day -- or maybe several months -- or possibly a decade or more. But it was a time of total giving.

And yet

~~we~~ as we imagine this time it was DIFFERENT from all other moments of sacrifice BECAUSE OF ONE FACTOR. After all the investment of time - energy - creative input - and vision, the result was that either you or your plan or your labor was rejected. Your sacrificial effort was overlooked, taken for granted, destructively opposed, or flatly rejected.

Do you remember such an occasion? Do you remember how you felt at that moment of defeat? If you and I are at all honest with our feelings, we know we felt ~~less~~ at that moment.
deeply disappointed

For maybe your effort was a lifetime vocation. A lifetime business or job. You had labored tirelessly to build up that business or that family or that institutional community. And with the stroke of one mistake - a moment of weakness, you find once friendly forces OPPOSED to you. You experience the tragedy of rejection.

Or maybe your sacrifice was of short duration, but equally a total giving brought to conclusion by a form of rejection.

Maybe you gave unselfishly in planning a new project, and then were completely overlooked. Or maybe a term paper masterpiece was graded down because the teacher held a different point of view. Or maybe it's that job that you do day-in-and-day-out -- always and forever without a word of thanks - always and forever taken for granted. Or maybe it was that concern you had shown for your neighbor, or friend, or fellow church member, ONLY to be accused afterward of being nosey or of being motivated by judgmentalism.

causing us to avoid being honest.

These moments and others like them have taught us the fear of opposition - yes, the tragedy of rejection. For NO ONE desires rejection -- and NO ONE foresees or believes he deserves any form of rejection after he has rendered a good-intentioned total giving of himself.

And yet this was exactly the situation faced by the man of Nazereth. Were not his miracles intended for the good of men? Was not his teaching for the upbuilding of individuals and societies? Was not his love for the total health of humanity? Was not his life the very image of God on earth?

Here was life that was totally committed to giving - totally committed to making all things new again -- totally committed to changing that which was dead - which was deceptive -- which was unrighteous. And what was the response for such a God-intentioned spirit: "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you."

Yes, the response to the incarnation of God's love was OPPOSITION. The response to the gift of grace was rejection. To live in the context of that grace - that undeserved love of God - would mean to change -- to live anew -- to live as a servant of God. And that was NOT good news to the principalities and powers of Jesus' day. It was bad news because it meant LIVING OUT

the will of God rather than the will of the world - keenly represented at that time by the rule of Herod.

You see, there can be no doubt that Herod knew the power of love that the man of Nazareth embodied. He knew of the miracles. ~~He had~~ He had seen how people's attitudes and life purposes had been transformed through God's presence in Jesus. And he believed if this presence was allowed to live - then people would soon be living out this forgiveness and mercy and compassion stuff. And this kind of power was not his kind of power.

Herod's kind of power was the might of a ^{Crafty} man. Jesus calls him a "fox," because Herod's power was political trickery and deception -- his power was manifested in destructive acts -- his power was one which followed the motto: Do things my way, or you'll be relieved of your duty by death. We could describe him as the Al Capone of Galilee.

It is because of this obvious power of opposition - this potential reality of rejection, that Jesus commiserates the words of today's Gospel: O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!

Here was the epitome of the lifestyle of love -- ^{he was} ~~and even~~ in the face of opposition, ~~reaching~~ ^{reaching} out ^{Jesus} compassionately seeking to LOVE by reforming Jerusalem of its inflated ego.

But this ^{trans}forming love of God was a threat. It contradicted the will and powers of men - esp. the super-egotism of the administration in power. And so God's power -- God's sacrificial giving of himself in Jesus -- God's offering for the upbuilding of individuals, of societies, -- for the whole creation --

his eternal investment in humanity was now to be condemned and rejected. Rejected BECAUSE God's investment would create a new order -- rejected because God's way was transforming the power of alienation INTO the power of reconciliation and unity.

This WAS a tragedy of rejection - and it remains a LIVE one today. For God's investment in humanity STILL ENCOUNTERS opposition - it is still overlooked - taken for granted AND SO REJECTED.

We all know of people in our society who directly oppose the spirit of Christ. But I believe as Christians we can deal with these people - they let us know where they stand -- which enables us to manifest God's love for them with the hope that it will be a ~~REFORMING~~ TRANSFORMING POWER.

My concern - and I hope yours - is MORE with that "foxy" - that deceptive and subtle opposition to the spirit of God's investment of love.

Pastor Witt and I were recently asked for the use of this facility for a new religious group which proclaims as basic principles - forgiveness, love, and unity. Its aim is to again unify the country under a particular political leader. Because of its use of good Christian terms like forgiveness and love, it sounds very appealing.

But when stripping away the Christian symbols, it clearly spells a neo-nationalistic spirit. It comes close to deifying a political personage. It nearly substitutes the powers of a man for the power of God - which neither rests in any one person or any one political party.

Personally, I believe such movements can lead to a foxy form of opposition to God's will by the glorification of a man's will and purpose. This comes very close to a new kind of Herodism.

And address to my,

to

This is not the only group proclaiming a new egotism. Sadly enough, many leaders today are saying the right reassuring and forgiving words, but too often their *seeking to* fulfill ~~their~~ their own ego-trip. Their claim is salvation for society and all people - but their hidden agenda is personal salvation at the cost of ~~others~~. *society and its people.*

often

~~But~~ even in the church - we can fall prey to a subtle form of opposition and rejection of God's spirit of love. We put great emphasis upon our doctrine of grace. But oft times we make this doctrine sound like its a kind of inoculation - like God injects us with grace -with his loving forgiveness - so that we can then go-on-our-merry-way.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this kind of vision of God's investment - "cheap grace." He states:

"Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth. . . . In such a Church the world finds a cheap covering for its sins; no contrition is required, still less any real desire to be delivered from sin. . .

"Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession. . . Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate . . ." Yes, living and breathing in the lives and relationships of the people ~~of Christ~~ who claim his name.

Bonhoeffer sees God's grace as "costly."
 "Costly because it calls us to follow, and ~~■~~
~~●~~ grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. ~~■ ■~~ Costly because it condemns sins, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all ~~■ ■~~ costly because it cost God the life of his Son -- and what has cost God much CANNOT be cheap for us.

"Costly grace is the incarnation of God" it is making God's investment IN US come alive in our relationships AFTER we have received his gift. It is receiving God's grace - but then not OPPOSING or REJECTING that love in our human relationships.

A recent article in Newsweek which sought to interpret the present condition of love in our

society states: "In our country and our age, perhaps more than at any time in any advanced mass society, there has grown between people a fearful reluctance of any enduring trust - an obsessive dwelling on the failings of the other - an urge to hurt and to tantalize -- and all this buttressed and encouraged by strong social forces (in the same direction)."

My friends, this spirit is IN OPPOSITION to the spirit and investment that God has made in us thru Christ. This spirit is the spirit of CHEAP GRACE.

As fellow Christians, as fellow citizens, as fellow members of one human family, we cannot OPT for this spirit. For this spirit is the SPIRIT OF KILLING THE PROPHETS AND STONING THOSE WHO ARE SENT TO US WITH THE GRACE OF GOD.

Our ^{with love} spirit is TO BE that spirit of our master prophet. And that spirit is TO STAND strong in the face of opposition and rejection -- to stand strong and not be deceived by cheap grace -- to stand strong by living God's love even when it may cost us the DEFLATION of egotism.

And To DO this, not because its easy. Not because it will mean special rewards from God. But to DO this because GOD'S GRACE MEANS SO MUCH TO US -- because God's grace has "turned us on" to love one another as he has loved us -- because we want to follow the costly example of our Lord.

Yes, because God's investment in us has NOT been opposed or rejected. Rather, his investment has enabled EACH OF US to say with our Lord: "Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following sharing God's love even if it may be costly!

Amen.

LENT II

Luth. Church of the Master - Troy
February 23, 1975

"FABLE OF THE FLEAS"

"Jesus said to her, 'Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst;' . . . John 4:13

And it came to pass that two young fleas fell in love - and after a short courtship, they married and settled down. They found a large, good-natured and inactive dog for a home. Theirs was truly an ideal life. Food, shelter, and heat were provided.

There was a large housing unit in every wrinkle. Life was sweet and easy. All they did was eat, sleep, and multiply. Freedom from want and fear had been attained - and they and their offspring enjoyed the easy life.

But the patient, old dog - sore and unappreciate grew weak and weary. Unable to any longer support the hungry and rapidly multiplying non-productive population, he finally staggered off into the woods and died.

Anger reigned among the fleas. They held meetings protesting that the economic system had let them down. ~~Some even threatened to vote for the other party.~~ There was a talk of suing the old dog for lack of support and cooperation.

Many of the panicky parasites perished on the spot. Others, bitter in spirit, trudged off into the cruel world and died by the roadside. Some tried to hitch rides on other dogs. But none thought of where they were placing their trust - their hopes - their ultimate security.

They had placed their total trust and hope in one dog of creation. Ultimate security for them was in a single creature. Their trust & hope was very short-sighted.

The Gospel probes us today -- do we share the fable of the fleas? Like the fleas, do we find security through our parasitic habits? Or is there a greater power and truth behind our actions -- does our trust and hope go beyond what we can get from this moment of life?

Through the woman of Samaria, Jesus was challenging the religious beliefs of his day -- beliefs that were based upon things, upon sensuality, and upon the place of worship. Jesus was telling the woman -- all these things are like a dog to a flea -- they only provide security as long as they last. He concludes - ultimate security for ALL NATIONS can only be found in the power and truth of God.

We all know that there are many wells to choose from in life. But most of these wells cannot quench our ultimate thirst - they may quench our temporary thirst - but eventually, like all facets of creation, they run dry.

Jesus uses the images of water - of the woman's different husbands - and of worship places to illustrate this truth.

"Water" in today's text stands for the many goods of life -- the ~~stuff~~ stuff of creation. The woman, responding to Jesus, asked him to give her water that would quench her thirst forever. His answer - You won't find your thirst forever quenched if you seek the things of life as your ultimate source of security.

Obviously - Jesus is not saying that we should give up food, money, clothing, or such needs of life. But he's saying - if that's our basic goal, we'll be experiencing the fate of the fleas. Life will end offering us anxiety, frustration and anger. Only then will we realize that our security was tied to a dying dog.

We need only look around our society to see the number of people who put their trust in dying dogs. Never in any civilization have

have we known such benefits and security for a day of labor. And what has this over-emphasis in trust for the things of life done for us? It has given us mounting prices - rising costs - and really curtailed our production.

Yes - how true it is - he who drinks of the water of life never stops thirsting -- we demand more, and more, and more -- until we drink the well dry. And then we wonder why we've got a recession.

God help us, my friends, to look for a greater power and truth in life than OUR CREATED THINGS. Ultimate trust in things is like putting your hope in a dying dog.

But he enables the woman to see a second dying dog of her life. She had had five husbands - and was now living with a man but not married to him. Jesus, true to his nature, does not blaspheme or condemn her for her immoral lifestyle -- but he makes it clear that there will never be security if ~~her~~ commitment in life goes no further than sexual pleasure.

Need I even comment how this applies to situations around us today.

I remember too well my own first real romance in college. I really wanted to believe that there was a commitment of love in that situation. But - I'm afraid that in retrospect - it was little more than sexual infatuation.

Jesus is saying that ultimate security in life means more than "being turned on." He's saying that it's O.K. to be turned on, but that can't be the basis alone for a life-fulfilling relationship. He's saying that if sex is the basis of a relationship, then that relationship is ALREADY a dying dog.

There's something very important that is implied here as Jesus talks to this woman. We

know that she has had five husbands. By implication, she has not found any of them worth a total commitment. It is safe to assume that she had expected perfection from her husbands, but had not yet found it in them.

How sad it is when we demand perfection in the same way. And like the woman, when we don't find perfection in our mates, the first thing we do is throw the relationship to the garbage can.

Jesus here is making it clear that such perfection will never be found in any other creature. To expect such perfection will only lead us to confusion like the woman of Samaria - wandering around looking for the perfect man, not willing to make any commitments along the way.

How sadly this describes our "Open Marriage" society. God help us to see the limitations in all human relationships - so that life is more than a dying dog experience -- and so that we put our ultimate trust IN SOMETHING A LOT DEEPER THAN IS SHOWING ON THE SURFACE.

Finally - Jesus says - that if the woman puts her hope and trust in a certain location of worship, she will be committing herself to a dying dog. What a temptation this is for religious people!! *Signification of Israel.*

How often we want to package piety. The woman of Samaria was thinking that the place - the style - the ritual of worship WAS OF ULTIMATE WORTH. Jesus responded - if that's the source of your faith, your committing yourself to a dying dog.

In essence, Jesus answers: the spirit (power) and truth of God is not limited to a certain place of worship - or to a certain liturgy - or to a certain translation of the Bible - or to a certain size of a congregation, etc. How often we want to limit God's spirit and truth TO THE WAY WE ~~APPROACH~~ EXPERIENCE IT.

Jesus says to the woman: You cannot put any single label on God's power and truth. It has no racial or ethnic labels, it has no denominational labels, it is even dangerous to label it "Christian." Because once we have put a label on it, we've limited the power and truth of God BY OUR STANDARDS, AND NOT BY HIS.

The very fact that Jesus was sharing his love with a woman of Samaria SHOULD TELL US SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT. Regardless of another person's label, God's power and truth is for all people. And he expects us TO LIVE as though we understand and believe in this truth.

Jesus concludes to this woman: Your thirst will never be fully quenched if you place your ultimate security in the things you can taste, touch, feel, or construct. Because all these things are dying dogs. There is only ONE living power and truth that will outlive all fleas, dogs, people, and things... that's the loving forgiveness of God.

Jesus says: Hook yourself to this power and truth in life, and you'll be committed to MORE than a dying dog. You'll have a relationship that cannot be taken away from you.

~~We~~ say ~~you're~~ thirsty for something that will last more than a little while - that will last more than a lifetime. Well, ~~you've~~ already got it - ~~you've~~ been given the gift of God's spirit (power) and truth. It had been offered to you and me through Christ.

People are really thirsty for that gift. But afraid to say they are.
It's worth a lot more than a raise - or quick fling - or a beautiful sanctuary. So let's apply that power and truth to our relationships -- so that we will better satisfy what everyone is thirsting for in life.

Amen

2nd Sunday in Lent
Luth Church of the Master - Troy
3-6-77

"THE TRAGEDY OF REJECTION"

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" Luke 13:34

Most of us can recall at least one occasion in our lives where we have really spent ourselves! A time we have really invested our utmost energy, skill, patience, and determination. A time which was really characterized by personal sacrifice. Maybe it was a time that lasted only one day - or maybe months - maybe even a decade or more. But it was a time of total giving.

But that time was DIFFERENT from all other moments of sacrifice BECAUSE OF ONE FACTOR: after all the investment of time, energy, creative input or vision -- the result was either you, or your plan, or your labor was overlooked, taken for granted, destructively opposed, or flat out rejected.

Any of you ever have such a happening?? Do you remember how you felt at that moment?? Did you really get in touch with your feelings?? If you're honest, I'm sure you felt lousy. At least that's the way I've felt under those circumstances

How many times I've known someone like that where it was a lifetime vocation, business, or job. A person who had labored untirelessly -- in that business, family, or vocation. And possibly a simply oversight, or a little mistake-- or maybe no fault at all -- but all of a sudden once friendly forces BECOME THE OPPOSITION. And then comes the TRAGEDY OF REJECTION.

Which one of us has not had the experience or known someone who has??

FOR YOUTH - crushing blow of romantic rejection or verbal putdowns or sarcasm.

FOR YOU MANAGEMENT PEOPLE - how often you've

played the political game according to the rules, then for no reason DOWN COMES THE BOOM because your superior liked somebody else better.

FOR HOUSEWIVES AND MOTHERS - how often the tireless labors and frustrations of family and too busy husbands go UN-REWARDED -- many times the only thanks come in the form of rejections: like, "what you been doing all day??"

How devastating REJECTION can be. Notice today how many television performers "dubb" their acts. Why not alive?? Quite simply, if they goof, they might be rejected by the ratings. So what does television performance do for us?? It just makes us that much more paranoid about perfection.

Why are Lutherans so afraid to witness to their neighbors?? To invite them to church? Youve got it -- the fear of rejection! Fear that somebody might challenge our beliefs. That's why it's necessary to have CONTINUING ADULT EDUCATION LIKE THE 16 wk course -- so people no longer fear to tell somebody that they believe in God.

Why is it that young people today are afraid to get married -- to make it legal?? Let's face it -- they've seen the devastating effect of unhappy marriages and of divorces. Yes -- one of the greatest fears of young people today IS REJECTION. They fear it, because they see it all around them. And they experience it because they see that cultural and material status have a higher priority than they do.

So it is that most of us here know the agonies of REJECTION -- likewise, few of us have OVERCOME the fear of rejection. It still ranks as one of man's greatest spiritual tragedies.

Now with this prologue in mind, just imagine with me the man from Nazareth. Were not his miracles intended for the good of men?? Was not his teaching for the upbuilding of individuals and societies?? Was not his love for the health of humanity?? Was not his life THE VERY IMAGE of God on earth??

Here was a life that was totally given for others - totally committed to making things new -- totally committed to changing that which was dead - deceptive - unrighteous. And what was the response of the leaders in the world around him: "Get out of here, for Herod wants to kill you!"

God's incarnation of love on earth -- his greatest act of mercy for man -- his gift of grace in human form -- good news come in the flesh -- AND THE RESPONSE??? REJECTION!!

No message could be clearer regarding the principalities and powers of this world. They see the love of God in Jesus Christ AS BAD NEWS. Because there is no advantage IN IT FOR THEM. And the powers of this world ONLY DO THOSE THINGS which will be advantageous FOR THEM.

And so it is that Herod said: Kill him!! Don't kid yourselves - Herod knew Jesus Christ maybe even better than you and I do. He was no dummy. And he believed if Jesus lived, then people would soon be living by forgiveness, and mercy, and compassion. And that's never been the kind of power of a Herod.

So it is that Jesus called him "the fox" -- Herod was a mastermind at political trickery and deception. His aim was only for himself -- he only supported movements that were to his own advantage. His motto was quite literally: To hell with the rest of the world - I'm in this thing only for myself.

And some of us has known Herod personally
~~Now tell me my friends that you have never met Herod, and I'll tell you that you're a liar.~~
Because you see, there's a little Herod in all of us. And it's for that reason YET TODAY that Jesus laments: O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!"

Jesus is saying: you've got God's love on a platter, and you still REJECT HIM. Here was Jesus himself - the EXACTNESS OF GOD, and what was his reward: REJECTION.

Amazing isn't it -- the story hasn't changed much from Luke's own version. Just look around at the principalities and powers in your own neighborhood, and Jesus' word is the same:

"O Jerusalem, Troy, Birmingham, Bloomfield, Royal Oak, Clawson -- killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!" Still a tragedy of the 20th century: Jesus Christ is still being rejected! And not only because millions of people don't worship him -- but also because thousands of Christians are afraid to live by his love and witness to it!!!

And what is God's response to all this??? Like yours and mine, does he throw in the towel. **NO WAY!** That's bad news! God's response is the same as it was for those pathetic soldiers at the cross: Forgive them, for they know not what they do."

In the face of our rejection, God keeps on giving himself, loving untiringly. Not because of a darn thing that you and I have done. But because that's his nature: **TO KEEP ON GIVING HIMSELF TO US EVEN WHEN WE REJECT HIM!**

Now tell me: which one of us can call that bad news? Not one of us. Because it's the best news available today, or anytime. But it's only Good News when its received -- and given to somebody else.

I pray that you will not only receive his power of love today -- but I pray all the more that you won't reject it when you leave here -- because it's the best thing we've got going for us!"

AMEN

AND SUNDAY IN LENT
Luth Church of the Master, Troy
February 19, 1978

"AFTER THE WELL RUNS DRY ... THEN WHAT?"

"Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." J'hn 4:13-14

The events of the past few weeks have nicely illustrated a major dimension of today's gospel text. As you might guess, I'm referring to the coal miners' strike. This whole episode portrays one of man's greatest problems over the centuries -- his inability to see beyond the end of his own nose. Humanity's interest so often is his immediate thirst -- so often meaning that we're unable to see beyond our local situation -- unable to distinguish between our wants and our needs, unable to recognize the deeper satisfactions that go beyond the momentary appetite.

Like his first parents, man still wants the whole world to revolve around him -- he seeks to squeeze the whole universe into his little backyard. He demands obedience to his way and to his wants. And if he doesn't get them -- then he turns against both CREATOR AND CREATION. He doesn't care if the whole earth dries up -- either it's his way, or no way.

Yes -- the coal miners' strike typifies the expansive boundaries of man's vision -- very narrow. The present condition illustrated by the miners shows how UNLIKE God we can become.

But I dare not point the finger at coal miners and make them out to be the only bad guys. In our own ways, each of us possesses an equal amount of selfish bacteria. It's in my blood and in yours. For some of us -- selfishness causes us to make the company OUR GOD -- for others the government BECOMES GOD. For many today -- divinity is equalled to having white, Caucasian skin -- any other shade of skin is evil. And literally millions of people today have made a god out of the flesh -- and most of us here are included in that group.

Well things were not much different in Jesus' day. If we had lived then -- we had better been a Jew, or life would have been considered very tainted. Being Jewish ~~meant~~ the man had squeezed God into his own mold at that time.

And so we encounter a woman at a well - a non-Jewish woman.... an outcast woman, because she was a Samaritan as well as a drifter. This woman, and all Samaritans, were viewed by the Jews the way the coal miners view their employers -- or the way management often views the government... hardly a compatible relationship.

But aside from this political reality -- this woman was like a dried up well. And Jesus recognized this about her as soon as he saw her. She evidently had that empty, lost look -- that scowly depressed look (which we see on so many people today). Jesus knew that she had lost a spiritual perspective on life.

Obviously, that was partly due to the constraints that the Jews had placed on Samaritans. It is not a picnic to be looked at as if you were less than human. Any one who saw the Martin Luther King special on TV last week knows what Samaritan life was like. But her loss of perspective WAS NOT ONLY the fault of others -- it was also due to things she had done to herself. She had NOT ONLY been broken by the selfishness of others - her own self-abuse had contributed greatly to her brokenness.

She had left a trail of broken marriages - and was now working on a sixth man. Her disregard for values had left her feeling worthless. She even went down to the well at high noon - the hottest part of the day, because she did not want to face the embarrassment of other people later in the day.

And it's there at high noon that she has her encounter of the 3rd kind with Jesus. But note -- there was no hostility in his relationship to her. In fact the first thing he does is to identify with the human family - he asks for a drink. And that subject of WATER enables him to move a little deeper into this woman's life -- to identify her emptiness caused by greed and guilt.

But notice that Jesus doesn't condemn her for her narrow life -- rather, by using the image of water he shows her that her life has become like a dry well because she has sought only pleasure. And pleasure is like a drink of water - it only lasts for a little while. She had limited life to the pleasures of the flesh -- and since that was the only well that she drew from in life -- her life had now run dry.

Without rejecting her as a person Jesus simply pointed out how shallow her life had become. She had been treating life like a throw away garbage bag. When she had her fill of one man -- she would dump him for the next one. She had lost a guiding principle for life - a principle that transcends the pure appetite.

Much like her Jewish enemies -- she had limited the water well of life. The Jews had equated life with being Jewish - she had equated life with the pleasures of the body.

Isn't it sad that man has not yet learned that his thirst will never be COMPLETELY quenched when he limits his appetite to earthly wells. Humanity looks to its traditions - to money - to sex - to job security - to beauty - and tries to make these earthen vessels into the eternal hope of life. And then he's surprised when these wells dry up.

How long will the coal miners be satisfied with their new settlement when they get it??? Not very long - because soon this settlement will not be enough - this settlement will dry up just like all the ones before it. How stupid that people believe that when they get their way this time that their thirst for mammon (money) will be quenched. We all know that never happens.

Jesus couldn't have said it any clearer: "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again." Earth's wells are never deep enough to satisfy human greed.

There is only one water well that never runs dry - that's God's promise of love and eternal life. And just like Jesus at the well -- that's what God offers continually EVEN while we're grubbing after all we can get on earth. He offers a better thirst quencher than the momentary gods that we make out of his creation.

Jesus message today is a caution hes given before -
if you put your trust in earthen wells - you will
never have your thirst quenched. And more than that -
you'll be shocked sooner or later, because everything
on earth runs dry.

There is only one drink that lasts forever - that's
the one that we will share at Jesus Christ's banquet
feast in heaven. As we trust in that promise -- we
like the woman at the well WILL BECOME LESS GREEDY -
and we may even begin to share some of our water in
life with others. God help us to strenthen the mission
of his church by sharing ALL THE EARTHLY THINGS that
he has given us.

AMEN

2nd Sunday in Lent
HOPE LUTHERAN CHURCH
March 2, 1980

"STAND FIRM"

"Therefore, my people, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm, thus in the Lord."
Phil 4:1

This morning I would like you to imagine yourselves as ~~hostages~~. Please think of yourselves as being imprisoned in a foreign country. I would also like you to imagine that you have several loving children at home. You are very close to them. They mean more to you than any other people on earth. And yet you may never see them again, because you will soon be facing a foreign court which would happily dispose of you just to get you out of their hair.

If you can imagine yourself in this predicament, then you have a glimpse of the situation Paul was facing as he wrote this letter to the Philippians. He was imprisoned, many scholars feel in Rome. He dearly loved the Church at Philippi - and he wanted more than anything to again return to this beloved church. But no such opportunity was on the horizon.

So instead he had to write them a letter. The question was, of course, what should be the content of his letter. Or to put this modern parable back in your lap -- what would you write home to your children - or to your loved ones??

But just to add to the dimensions of your struggle -- let's add the remaining ingredients. As you are about to write -- you learn from a messenger that your children or loved ones are deeply divided among themselves -- they are actually fighting about who is the greatest among them. Moreover, they are quarreling about which one of them you loved the most.

But more than this -- you also learn that

that a couple of your children have gone off the deep end -- they have become fanatical in their faith. They are making the claim among the other children that they are the only faithful ones -- because they have remained morally perfect during your absence. They are further condemning the rest of your children to ~~as~~ ~~damnation from God.~~ *imperfect hypocrites.*

Lastly - you also learn that your children are also being threatened by another religious group that preaches social privilege and ceremonial laws as the way of salvation. This group is seductively undermining the passion and resurrection of Christ. You have made the lordship of Christ very central to your relationship with your family.

So - there you are imprisoned in a foreign land -- facing what seems certain to be your death, yet wanting to communicate a message of hope to your family. And now you realize that there is this incidious division, self-righteousness, and falsehood all competing for the allegiance of your family.

~~Similarly~~ - This was Paul's circumstances with the Philippians. They were like beloved children - and yet Paul saw them on the brink of a fragmenting rivalry - a false righteousness - and a Judiazing influence seeking to turn religion into cultural-ethnic pompousness.

Under these circumstances - Paul must write what might be his last words to this beloved church. Or to make it again more personal to you -- under these circumstances, you must write what might be your last words to those who are you most beloved.

What would you say? Would you try to play upon the pity of your loved ones -- talking about how bad you've got it in prison -- telling them of the harsh treatment that you're getting.

Would you go on endlessly telling them how you've been cheated in your relationship to them -- how unfair life has been to you?

There are probably many who would seek pity under those circumstances -- possibly many Christians who would seek pity. But how would such "pity" serve to keep the spirit of your loved ones vital and alive?? Paul knew that asking for pity would never serve to encourage his loved ones in Philippi. In no way could that be the gist of his message.

So what do you say? Should you write a letter that seeks to chastise your loved ones for their rivalries and for their false sense of righteousness?? We all know what that kind of letter would do! It would only reinforce the rivalries and pump up the righteousness of one camp or the other.

By dwelling on the faults of your loved ones you are not going to create a climate of strength and encouragement. Paul knew this much better than me! In no way could he write a letter making the faults of the Philippians the theme of his letter. He knew that would possibly leave a sour taste in their mouths forever.

So what would you write?? Well, hopefully, like Paul you would not play upon your own pity nor amplify the faults of your loved ones. Rather - you would offer them a foundation of hope that you yourself had found to be your only hope in this moment of imprisonment. Like Paul, you would say: "Stand firm - trust in the Lord" -- and then you would go on saying: "For many, of whom I have often told you before and now tell you again" yes, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame because their minds are only on earthly things. But our commonwealth is in heaven."

PITY NEVER STRENGTHENS!

Thanks be to God for a letter writer like Paul. For from him we come to learn what God's message is all about when we are backed up against the walls of life and death: "Stand firm, trusting the Lord's righteousness."

How contrary our lives often get to this direction. We see families every day who put their trust in pleasure and payroll thinking these are the ultimate salvation. We see societies thinking they have found security in opportunistic politics or private interests. We see a world desiring peace, yet trying to find it with the philosophy of "an eye for an eye." These are the foundations of the world.

Jesus Christ came into that world and said: "Follow me" - not so that you can be like your racist neighbor -- not to be like your pleasure seeking boss - not to be like a self-righteous, reform Christian - not to get any special rewards in heaven.

But rather - "follow me" to my Father's kingdom -- accept my Father's righteousness by forgiving one another as he had first forgiven you. Stand firm and trust in that power. — *and you will be given hope.*

That is the message of hope that Jesus Christ came and lived for ... that is the message that he was crucified for ... that is still the message that we are offered as we gather in his risen name -- and esp. as we gather round his table. "Stand firm - accept my Father's forgiving righteousness. And then live by it!"

That is the message that God continues to write to us -- whether we are hostages in a foreign land -- or just prisoners of sin and self-righteousness in our own land. Thank God, that regardless of our circumstances, he offers a foundation of hope.

AMEN

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
March 6, 1983
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"ONE MORE CHANCE"

And the vinedresser answered: '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

As a way of personalizing today's gospel text -- I'd like to do a brief hand survey with you. First, I'd like all of you who have ever heard the words, "dead wood" to raise your hand.

(Good. It appears that many of you have heard the terms.) Now would everyone please raise your hand who believes that the terms "dead wood" refer to barren fig trees.

(Good. Very few of you raised your hands &- that means we're still cookin' together.) Finally - would all of you raise your hand who believe that "dead wood" refers to people who no longer maintain an active relationship to worshipping God on Sunday mornings.

It's pretty obvious from that survey that we all have a similar understanding of the terms "dead wood." It's rather strange that the church should have adopted over the years such an impersonal metaphor as "dead wood" for people who have turned away from a faithful worship life. But as we read the parable from today's gospel, at least we get hints of why we use such "dead wood" imagery.

The fig tree obviously refers to us - the people of God. The vinedresser obviously refers to Christ -- he pleads on behalf of the tree -- he pleads his case before the owner -- who could represent the world ... or could even represent God himself. The tree has obviously been unproductive -- it has been "dead wood." The view of the world ... and many times the view that the world gives to God IS TO CUT IT DOWN! Make way for a more productive tree!

We all know how tempting and how realistic this view is in this world. In the marketplace of business -- the word is "Be productive" or look for a new job. Especially in these hard economic times -- we are even seeing business casualties among dedicated and productive workers. Productivity has become a deeply cut-throat business these days.

But the same reality cuts through many other relationships of life. There is a capital punishment mentality today which advocates for death and no second chances in life. Amidst the institution of marriage -- there is the same "dead wood" philosophy -- there is a mentality toward divorce ... toward cutting the family tree down rather than working to cultivate renewal and repentance.

Among leadership today -- there is no tolerance for mistakes. Make one mistake in management or healing or teaching or strategy and the news media or courts will take you to the cleaners ... and they'll dredge up all the skeletons of the past while they're doing it.

There is a predisposition in our society today to be hatchet happy -- TO CUT DOWN LIFE AND RELATIONSHIPS! Obviously -- there is some justification for this mentality -- because there is much unproductivity...and apathy ...and unresponsiveness... and self-centeredness in the world and the church. And wherever we see those conditions -- our natural temptation is to CUT DOWN -- TO MAKE ROOM FOR SOMEBODY ELSE RIGHT NOW! We live in a society VERY QUICK TO RENDER ABSOLUTE JUDGMENTS! VERY QUICK TO BE VINDICTIVE!

Through Jesus Christ - we have been shown a better way; he says, "Let the tree alone this year; let me 'till about it and fertilize it -- let me give it ONE MORE CHANCE!

What endless patience our God truly has!! In the face of shortcomings ... of outright wickedness ... of apathy and indifference to his Word ... he still counsels patience. He could so easily give the order; jerk those unfaithful, fruitless souls out of this world and let them rot in the pit of hell!

That's the kind of impatience we churchfolk (and esp church leaders) often demonstrate. Just like the business world many of us work in -- we are tempted to cut down anyone who is unproductive or apathetic. But as Brenda Kunkel, visitation trainer reflected here two weeks ago in a training session -- we so often only look at the outside ... at the visible records. But we don't take the time to find out where people are really hurting -- so that we can nurture them back into a fold that really cares ... really loves. As Mrs. Kunkel pointed out -- many people leave the church's fold because when they have been down THERE WAS NO ONE THERE FROM THE CHURCH TO LIFT THEM UP.

That's why God says -- wait one more year (which in biblical time could mean several). Because God does not give up so easily or quickly on his people. He has a deep, abiding concern for RENEWAL of our fellowship. He wants to see "dead wood" again become living, fruitful life. That kind of repentance (return to a faithful relationship) can only happen through a cultivating nurture -- a sensitive caring for those who have been unproductive.

That's always the first goal of the people of God -- to renew, to revitalize, to refresh one another through the love of Christ. Whether it's a church relationship or a marriage -- the first goal is God's goal: TO GIVE ONE ANOTHER ONE MORE CHANCE ... to forgive rather than to condemn ... to uphold rather than cut down ... to cultivate with care rather than criticize with scorn.

The first word of this text is crystal clear: God is not vindictive toward his sinful people. Jesus tells the story of the tower builders at Siloam to confirm this. The 18 builders were killed - not because of their sinfulness but because such tragedies happen to both the faithful and the faithless.

However - there is an epilog to today's parable. God is not one who wants us people to play games with him. His patience is to serve the purpose of repentance and renewal -- NOT JUST TO PUT OFF THE RELATIONSHIP FOREVER. God will patiently wait -- but not forever!

We all know the story of the Christian Waiting Game. In our 20's we often say - "There's plenty of time for God." In our 30's "we are too busy with our families." In our 40's "we are building our careers, our empires, and our new home." In our 50's "we need to relax and have some fun." In our 60's "we are planning and enjoying our retirement." And in our 70's "it may be too late."

There is nothing more difficult in my pastoral ministry than to do funerals for persons "who have always been too busy" to renew their relationship to God through worship and the sacraments. Families of such people want the soothing word of the gospel without the faithful word of Christian responsibility and fruitfulness. Unfortunately - such families do not know the meaning and application of the cross. Christ calls us **NOT ONLY** to look at the cross or to wear it around our necks -- **BUT TO TAKE UP HIS CROSS AND FOLLOW HIM.**

God has given us so much!! He has given us

the temporal gifts of creation ...
the eternal gift of Jesus Christ ...
the supportive gift of one another ...

these are the gifts of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are gifts to be cherished and renewed. Above all, they are gifts of relationship, which can become like "dead wood" if we take them for granted.

But God would not have it that way. He patiently waits -- each and every day -- giving us **ANOTHER CHANCE** every day, every week, every year **TO RENEW THE GIFTS OF HIS SPIRIT WITHIN US AND AMONG US.**

That renewal begins each and every time we hear his Word and receive his sacraments. Thanks be to God for the living trees that he has gathered to cultivate here today!

AMEN

LENT II
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
February 23, 1986
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"WANTED: A PROPHETIC VOICE!"

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" Luke 13:34

This past week, when I phoned my sermon title to Norma, she asked, "would you please repeat that once more." So I said, "WANTED: A PROPHETIC VOICE." She replied: "Please spell the word "prophetic." I responded: "P-R-O-P-H-E-T-I-C." And to make sure, I spelled it again. Well, Lutheran friends, it appears that Prophecy is not deeply correlated to our Lutheran tradition. Had I been a Baptist preacher, there would have been no question - PROPHEMIC would have been prophetic. But as a Lutheran, it comes out "Prothetic." Does anyone know what "Prothetic" means?

Believe it or not, it could be Lutheran. "Prothetic" comes from the word "Prothesis," meaning "a preparation of the Eucharistic elements or the table on which this is done (now that's very Lutheran)" ... or "a representation of a dead person lying in state" (now that's not very Lutheran, is it). But obviously, neither of these have a drat to do with today's text.

As a good Lutheran, could we suppose that Norma missed the word "prophetic" simply because it's not a favorite dimension of Lutheran preaching?! Let's face it - most Lutherans do not come to church to hear a prophetic voice. We willingly come to be affirmed, enlightened, sanctified, or comforted -- but not to be challenged! As one cartoon recently summarized in THE LUTHERAN, "excellent sermons" don't offend anyone! Obviously, that cartoon was unaware of the excellence of Jesus Christ.

There are times galore that faithful people recognize the need for challenge -- those are the times we need reminding about the true meaning of discipleship (which is every day). Is it any wonder that the lectionary drafters have uplifted today a duet of prophecy in the voices of Jeremiah and Jesus. Both of them sang the same prophetic songs even as both came from similar sources. They both came from small villages and neither were highly regarded by their home-town folks. Both experienced an intense, personal relationship with God. Both preached messages that were not always positive and affirming. Both were often misunderstood. Both suffered and their earthly lives ended in worldly failure. But both were dedicated to God's goals

for this world. And that's what it means to be prophetic -- being intensely faithful to God's goals for his world!!

Faithful people yearn for prophetic voices, because faithful people recognize their need for direction in fulfilling God's goals. Faithful people desire constant leadership -- they yearn for that challenging voice of the prophet. And that voice always reflects three characteristics of the prophet's faithfulness to God.

First, the prophetic voice proclaims God's goal without being thwarted by worldly threats or intimidation. Second, the prophetic voice strikes down all idolatry ... no other gods in church or government. Thirdly, the prophetic voice weeps deeply for the victims as well as victimizers of sin. The prophet grieves because he so deeply loves everything that God has created.

Let's briefly look at each. In the gospel text, some friendly Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod is about to kill him. Jesus replies, "Tell that fox that I will continue to drive out demons, to heal and to pursue God's goals for this world." The true prophet will not interrupt his mission or ministry because he is being threatened by worldly powers. The true prophet is straightforward, courageous and forward-looking -- he will not take his eyes off the goal established by his Father. The true prophet seeks to finish God's work on earth, even if it means his own death. Even as Jeremiah and Jesus were threatened with death - they persisted in reaching for God's goal.

There are times that pastors and people must "lay it out straight" to each other to show that faithfulness means dedication and commitment to Christ. I suppose that is one reason I sent the "straightforward" letter this past week.

But a far better illustration of "proclaiming God's goal" comes from a good friend of mine, Rev. Glenn Schoonover, pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran, Allentown, Pa. His story was recently told in the LUTHERAN. Nearly 12,000 Hispanics are living near his downtown, German-oriented church. 80% of them were unchurched. After much study, a Spanish-speaking associate pastor was called to help initiate a Lutheran ministry to this Hispanic population.

Many objections arose from the congregation. Pastor Schoonover stated, "We heard many families would leave if we went ahead with this ministry. We went ahead, and they left. But we've replaced them with many more faithful Hispanics. We heard some people would withhold their giving if we went ahead. We did go ahead and some people who weren't giving much are giving even less now. But our overall commitment and stewardship is much improved since we went ahead."

Why are there more people today at St. Paul's than before their Hispanic ministry? Why is their Stewardship so much improved now? Because they have responded faithfully to God's prophetic voice -- to be his inclusive church for all people! They have responded to God's goal -- not just to what was popular or pious in the past.

Possibly, no better story illustrates this truth than that of the famous English Reformation preacher, Hugh Latimer, preaching at Westminster Abbey. On one Sunday, King Henry was in the congregation. Having seen the King from the pulpit, Latimer kept saying to himself: "Latimer, Latimer, Latimer! Be careful what you say. The king of England is here today." But when he finally began his preaching, he said: "Latimer! Latimer! Latimer! Be careful what you say! The King of Kings is here today!" True prophets fear God more than governments, the rich, or votes of popularity.

As God's faithful people, God is telling us today to be straightforward and courageous in our mission to his world. He will not be given a back seat in the business of our ministry. We dare never let powerful interests in this congregation or any other become a threat to the truth of Christ's mission. God will not be stifled by pocketbooks or a consensus of the majority. The criterion is always faithfulness to his Word, which leads to the 2nd dimension.

The second dimension of the prophetic voice is that it strikes down idolatry and demands repentance of all people! That's what repentance is -- faithful interaction with God. There is a great parable that is being enacted every day in NYC. Leading up to the entrance of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in NYC is a huge bank of steps. As a part of their aerobic exercise, hundreds of joggers ascend and descend these steps daily. They repeat this up and down exercise until they are nearly dead from exhaustion. But never do any of these aerobic experts ENTER INTO THE SANCTUARY to partake of the real life -- the forgiving and healing Word of Jesus Christ.

Like so many in this world, these joggers have made physical fitness their aspiration, idol and god. They have no time to interact with the true Father, because they have made their physiques the ultimate expression of fidelity. As I have often said, I am as vain as any of these joggers ... I diet, I exercise, and I care about my body. But nothing is more important than regularly returning to my Father and saying: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" That is the ultimate exercise of true faithfulness in this world. And millions of people fail this stress test every week.

It is our responsibility as God's people to be his prophetic voice -- to call people back to healthy interaction

with the Father. Why is this such a desperate cry? Because the gods of this world have made and continue to make a mess out of the goodness of God's creation.

That's why (thirdly) the prophetic voice weeps when it looks at Jerusalem or any other city of the world. Because the true prophet sees things as they really are -- he sees people who are empty and alone and helpless and exploited ... people who are daily beaten down by the social or corporate or political systems of this world. Far too often these systems have lost their heart and soul. That's why Jeremiah and Jesus wept over Israel and Jerusalem - they were without a loving heart and compassionate soul. Today they weep over New York and Washington and Moscow and Cape Town ... they weep over San Salvador and Managua ... over Ethiopia and Cuba and Iraq and Iran. They weep over refugee camps and nursing homes and over those without any homes. They weep over the billions spent on nuclear weapons in silos east and west. They weep over the millions of aborted fetuses dumped into garbage cans. They weep over a system that will not give adequate bread and shelter and medical care to growing millions of indigents. They weep over broken relationships, and marriages, and empty promises of fidelity. They weep long and hard, because true prophets are the most loving and caring of all God's people.

Contrary to the popular notion of prophets, the prophetic voice only challenges because it desires to see God's goals achieved in the world. It may seem like a harsh voice, but only because it calls for a higher loyalty from God's people. It may seem like a demanding voice, but only because it believes so deeply in justice and peace for all God's people. The prophet is certainly not perfect, but he knows the perfect cure for God's world -- repentance and forgiveness. That is the strength of our faith -- the prophetic voice lovingly speaks for repentance and forgiveness.

As good Lutherans, let us never be afraid of a good Christian word -- prophetic. Prophet is a good word and a good office. It belongs to us ... it is our office -- because we are God's prophets. And we are in good company, because we are in the company of Jeremiah and Jesus. Today, more than ever, prophetic voices are wanted in this world. Because like their heroes - Jeremiah and Jesus -- God's prophets are his most faithful lovers ... "they want to take his people under their wings, as a hen gathers her chicks."

Thank God - his prophetic voice will not be stifled -- by threats, by apathy, by big money, by compromises of any kind. God's goal remains the same - yesterday, today and tomorrow: TO OFFER HIMSELF AS A LIVING SACRIFICE FOR A SINFUL SOCIETY. And prophetically speaking, you and I are a big part of his living sacrifice.

AMEN.

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
February 24, 1991
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"SENT TO BE SPENT!"

But God showed his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. Romans 5:8-9 And Jesus called to him the multitude with his disciples and said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Mark 8:34

JESUS CHRIST WAS "SENT TO BE SPENT." This simple yet profound theological truth is one of the best known realities of our Christian faith. It defines the will of God for Jesus Christ and does the same for every sincere follower. And because of Christ's total faithfulness to this will of his Father, you and I have the assurance of God's promises of love, peace, goodness and everlasting paradise. In a nutshell - that's the essence of our faith in God and his mission for us.

And the three texts today simply tell us THIS SAME OLD STORY. Jacob, just like Abraham before him, received the absolute assurance of God's promise in a dream at Haran - nothing would separate God from his people. And Paul in Romans reiterates that same story for you and me -- through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have received the same absolute assurance of the love of God -- even in our weakness, even in our sinfulness, even while we are yet enemies, God has acted to make us friends - FOREVER ONE WITH HIM!

As we have shared time and time again, this is the story of GRACE - the underserved love and forgiveness of God. From Genesis to Revelation - God keeps us telling us this Good News -- that we are reconciled to him, that we are forgiven, that we need not fear his condemnation, that in Christ - we are made one ... that we have the promise of peace from God. That's what Pastor Michaels proclaimed with power last Sunday: WE ARE MORE THAN CONQUERORS ... WE HAVE BEEN MADE THE VICTORIOUS SAINTS OF GOD ... NOTHING CAN SEPARATE US FROM THE LOVE OF GOD, BECAUSE CHRIST'S LIFE, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION HAS OVERCOME EVERY POWER OF SEPARATION, INCL DEATH!

But the question remains: DO WE REALLY GET THE DRIFT? Do we really believe that we possess a treasure? Has this grace transformed us ... have we been changed from weaklings of the world to soldiers of the cross? Do we really reflect this victorious life of sacrifice of our Lord? Or when Christ says to us like he said to Peter: "WE MUST DIE TO THE OLD WAY OF BITTERNESS, CRUELTY, CONDEMNATION, HAUGHTINESS" - do we, like Peter, rebuke Jesus and say, "No way, Lord! We have not been SENT INTO THIS WORLD TO BE SPENT ... WE ARE HERE FOR OUR OWN POWER AND GLORY, FOR OUR OWN SECURITY AND PLENTY ... WE ARE HERE TO GET ALL WE CAN GET WITH GUSTO ... AND LET IT GO AT THAT!"

So often, like Peter - we take God's treasure of grace -- we take God's blessing of life and love and peace and mercy and kindness and goodness -- WE TAKE THIS TREASURE AS OUR PRIVILEGE & OUR PLEASURE!! And what do we spend of it for others?! Very little! We hoard God's goodness and graciousness, returning anger and insult and slander instead! Oh, we know how to talk a good religious line -- we talk about being a kinder and gentler nation/person, but when God puts us to the test ... we end up giving retribution/retaliation - that which is totally contrary to what we have received from God!

Yes, today's texts first remind us of how abundantly we have been blessed with the grace of God! But then they ask the deeper question of faith: HOW WILL WE SPEND WHAT WE HAVE FIRST RECEIVED? Will we be tempted, like Peter, TO USE GOD'S BLESSINGS FOR ONLY SELF-GAIN ... OR WILL WE, LIKE CHRIST, BE SENT TO LOSE THOSE BLESSINGS THROUGH SELF-GIVING TO OTHERS - for whoever loses his life for my sake will save it!

I am reminded of a pastor friend of mine who was called to a substantially wealthy congregation in another large city. This congregation had been graced for several years with deeply benevolent people who had built up a large endowment fund. The original vision of that fund was to help this church reach out and better serve the critical needs of the world. As long as those benevolent persons were alive - the church grew in its programmatic and outreach mission. BUT WITH TIME, THE POWER OF THIS EARTHLY TREASURE BECAME MORE PROMINENT IN THE MINDS OF THE MEMBERS THAN THE DIVINE WILL WHICH IT WAS TO ACHIEVE. Soon my pastor friend was confronted with the orthodox doctrine of worldly investing: "DO NOT LOSE WHAT YOU HAVE ALREADY GAINED -- JUST GET MORE AND MORE AND MORE! The congregational mission of this fund had radically changed -- it was now SENT TO BE CONSERVED AND PROTECTED AND INVESTED ... BUT NEVER, NEVER "SENT TO BE SPENT" FOR ANYONE OR ANYTHING! The only way my pastor friend could regain his authentic life in Christ was to "get lost" -- to loose himself from that congregation which had adopted a mission of SELF-GAIN rather than SELF-GIVING for Christ's sake! Jesus never said there was anything wrong with being rich, but he always said that much more would be expected of those who had been graced with more!

We all know the temptation of the mentality of SELF-GAIN! In fact, we all succumb to it regularly. After having fifteen funerals in the last few months, I have been heard to say: "Enough Lord! Send somebody else to be spent!" When a mother or father have been up all night with a crying child ... when we have been taking care of a sick, elderly parent for months or years -- we all have said, "Enough Lord! Send someone else to be spent!" When things aren't going our way ... when life seems to be getting more and more unfair, we all yell: "Enough Lord. Send someone else to be spent!" Even though scripture says, God never gives us more than we can handle -- we know that means in the ultimate sense -- that ultimately we will be victorious over all burdens of life. But at the time the burden is with us, we know it can sometimes feel very overwhelming ... like it's more than WE CAN POSSIBLY TAKE.

God truly understands our limits. He does not have any argument with us when we periodically complain about having more than we can bear. He is understanding and forgiving and accepting of those moments.

But he has great impatience with us when we adopt a life philosophy which says: "THAT WE HAVE BEEN SENT INTO THIS WORLD MERELY TO GET ALL WHEN CAN GET WITH GUSTO, AND THE HECK WITH ANYONE ELSE!" Because that philosophy totally contradicts the gift of grace in Jesus Christ! When he pours his grace into us in Holy Baptism - he has but one purpose for it: THAT IT WILL GROW AND BLOSSOM AND FLOURISH ... SO THAT AS WE GET OLDER, WE WILL LIVE IN HIS IMAGE ... WE TOO WILL BE SENT TO BE SPENT! And when he hears us rebuking him - when he hears us resisting his sacrificial will - then he says: "Get behind me, Satan, for you are not on the side of God, but of men! For if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

And when all is said and done - let's face it -- this is not only a great theological truth, it is also a very practical truth of life. People who really succeed in life ... people who truly reflect a victorious lifestyle ... are people who have learned self-denial and taking up the cross. Please don't get me wrong -- "self-denial" is not self-debasement ... it is not putting oneself down. Rather, it is recognizing the power of grace given AND THEN RUNNING TO GIVE IT AWAY!! Or said another way - it is not living in the comfort zone, not always playing it safe - BUT LIVING EVERY DAY WITH A MISSION OF DISCIPLINE AND DETERMINATION TO GIVE A LITTLE MORE! It may not always happen that way, but there is always a MISSION TO GIVE MORE THAN I'VE GIVEN BEFORE!

Let me illustrate with some very down to earth examples. The University of Chicago did a 5-year study of leading artists, athletes, and scholars. Conducted by Dr. Benjamin Bloom, the research was based upon the top twenty performers in each of various fields. They included pianists, Olympic swimmers, tennis players, sculptors, mathematicians, etc.

In case after case after case - the study concluded that discipline and determination - A WILLINGNESS TO SACRIFICE, NOT GREAT NATURAL TALENT - led to the extraordinary success of these people. (Now that only goes to prove that the Toledo pastors will certainly be victorious tonight -- for we have the discipline and determination even if we don't have the raw talent.) But seriously, Bloom concluded: "We expected to find tales of great natural gifts; instead we found accounts of great discipline and dedication." People who were willing to deny themselves -- not because of great talent -- but simply because they had a VISION OF BEING "SENT TO BE SPENT!"

Another study was done to compare natural Americans from Minneapolis with immigrant Americans from Japan and Vietnam. The responses of both the Japanese mothers and the mothers from

Minneapolis were compared. The mothers were asked to rank the most important things that a child needs to succeed both academically and in life. The answers tell the story of the two different cultures. The mothers in Minneapolis time after time chose "ability." The mothers of the oriental children time after time chose "effort." The vision of the oriental child is "sent to be spent" -- deny yourself by giving all you've got - take up the cross of sacrifice and you will succeed.

That same mystery of discipline and dedication was graphically illustrated in a sociology study comparing Italians and Jews. The once Italian youngster, now adult, said "when I would start off to school in the morning, my mother would push the screen door open and yell, 'Vinnie, do you have your lunch pail?" Like all good Italian mothers, his mother made sure he never went hungry. But there was a Jewish boy down the street. And when he started off for school, his mother would push the door open and yell down the street, "Isaac, do you have your homework?!?" Discipline and dedication, effort and practice were the vision of that Jewish household. That Jewish child was "sent to be spent" - he learned to deny himself by taking up the cross of discipline and dedication!

Obviously, all of these examples are still a little self-serving. As long as we are human, weak, and sinful, we will never be able to totally deny our self-serving nature. But as so graphically shown in our texts today, the focus of our faith is not upon our weakness or sinfulness -- the focus is upon God's grace! CHRIST HAS NOT GRACED US TO FOCUS UPON OUR OWN NATURE, BUT TO FOCUS UPON HIS NATURE WITHIN US. He says, "If anyone would come after ME, let him deny himself and take up his cross and FOLLOW ME!" Christ is calling us to be more than TAKERS of his victorious love -- he is calling us to be GIVERS of his triumphant spirit.

He's not asking us to be real go-getters, he's asking us to be real go-givers like himself. He's not talking about stocks and bonds and portfolios -- he's talking about soup kitchens and bread lines and habitats for humanity and reparations for those devastated by war or other disasters. He's not asking us to be winners of the rat race, he's calling us to be servants of the human race wherever we see it hurting or in need of help. He's demonstrating what it means to be graced in the image of God -- it means that we are daily "sent to be spent" for the good of others.

Grandma Moses achieved worldly success late in life. By the time she died, her name was a household word. And yet when Grandma Moses was asked at ninety-three what she was proudest of, she replied: "I've helped some people." I doubt that I'll ever reach 93, but whenever that question is asked of me, I hope I'll always be able to say more than: "I helped myself to all that I could get and pushed others around who got in my way!" I hope like Grandma Moses, THE MISSION STATEMENT OF MY LIFE WILL BE: "I've helped some people, because that's why I'm here: "I'VE BEEN SENT HERE TO BE SPENT" ... TO TAKE UP THE CROSS AND FOLLOW HIM WHO HAS GRACED ME FOREVER. AMEN.

LENT II
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
March 15, 1992
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

" R O O T S "

(St. Paul writes) "For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; ... Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." Philippians 3:18a, 19; 4:1 And Jesus said: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing." Luke 13:34

Ever since the mid-70's and Alex Haley's novel, Americans have been on a quest for their real ROOTS. Interest in geneological research has mushroomed in the last two decades. Computer programs for tracking family trees have even become a part of the software market. One author has said: "The once fabled rootless Americans are realizing that the people who formed the foundations of their heritage are important." Most of us would have to agree - there is real satisfaction in finding out WHO WE ARE ... FROM WHOM OR WHAT WE HAVE COME. But there is a more telling question: WHERE HAVE WE SET OUR ROOTS FOR LIVING TODAY? More important than "to whom are we from?" - to whom or to what do we give our greatest loyalty now? In short, WHO SETS THE AGENDA FOR OUR DAILY LIVES? In the context of today's gospel, is it the "foxes" of the world, or the loving embrace of a parent-God?

In light of this week's revelations from Washington, it would appear that the "foxes" of this world are still controlling at least the checkbooks of the House of Representatives. But lest we be guilty of playing the fashionable media game of pointing the finger at the overdrafters of Washington or the "rich & famous" of our own community, maybe we'd best ask ourselves: WHO SETS THE AGENDA FOR US? TO WHOM OR TO WHAT ARE WE ROOTED? Some of us would answer: "My home and my family, everything revolves around them." Others would say, "My country - first, last, only, and always!" And for those who make work their all-in all, the answer would be: "Without my job, I would be nothing!" And with the latest California fad being implants for men - to improve their chiseled pectorals, firm derrieres, bulging calves and strong chins - there are hosts of men & women who would answer: "Never-ending youthfulness - that's my god!" And nearly all of us would say: "Health & happiness - when you've got those, you've got it all!"

These are certainly important ROOTS of life, the foliage which enhances daily living. But what happens when these things go? What happens when your home, your family is crushed by the news of a fatal illness or shattered by the death of a loved one? What happens when it's your job

that has been axed or down-sized? Or what if you wake up one day to realize that you're not just getting older - but that you're getting old? Or God forbid, what if you should become captive to an alien force that strips you of everything?

Many of you have read such a story in Dr. Victor Frankl's book, Man's Search for Meaning (new purchase Hope Library). This Jewish psychiatrist tells how he survived three grim years in Nazi concentration camps. His wife, his brother, his mother & father - all were killed in similar camps. He, himself, was stripped of all of his possessions - his clothing, his watch, his rings, even his glasses. Then they shaved his hair so that he would look utterly naked. And the question Frankl asks: Was my life now robbed of all meaning?" Family- gone! All possessions- gone! Community status- gone! Dignity- gone! All he had was his "ridiculously naked self!" Were there no roots left in his life?!?

As Frankl learned through this experience, sometimes we have to be stripped naked before we get to the real question of life: Am I rooted to the cross or to my own belly? Frankl came to realize that all he had left was really the greatest treasure he had ever had in the first place -- the will to offer compassion, courage, and reassurance to the other prisoners. In reality, he was still FIRMLY ROOTED TO THE CROSS because all he had left was the love of Jesus Christ.

Those are the ROOTS to which our texts point us today. What does it mean to say "that there is nothing in all creation that will separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ?" Is that just a nice Bible verse, or is it the very foundation of life itself? What does it mean to say "that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes will not perish?" Is that our real agenda from God, or is it just a pious platitude once memorized in Sunday School? What does it mean to live and breathe and have your roots in God's eternal soil??

Today's texts offer at least three specific answers. First, like Jesus with Herod, rootedness to God's grace means that we DO NOT FEAR THOSE WHO CAN KILL THE BODY BUT CANNOT DESTROY THE SOUL! Jesus was warned by some Pharisees "to get away, for Herod wants to kill you." Jesus' response to those who would intimidate by political power: "Tell that fox what I am really doing by the power of God -- healing, helping and uplifting those who are suffering!"

The Pharisees were confronting Jesus with a dilemma that you and I face every day: TO LIVE IN FEAR OF POWER FIGURES AROUND US RATHER THAN LIVING BY FAITH IN GOD'S MERCY! This agenda by the world's Pharisees is a very successful ploy in our world: TOO OFTEN, THE AVERAGE PERSON IS MORE REponsive TO FEAR - TO HEROD'S NEGATING POWER THAN GOD'S UPLIFTING LOVE! As we all know, fear is one of the most powerful tools that "foxes" can use to control the behavior of others.

The Herods of this world are very adept at getting people to view one another as FEARFUL adversaries and enemies in this world. As one author has said: There's nothing like an enemy to bring people together who once may have been apart." We certainly saw how Saddam Hussein united a somewhat divided America only a year ago. But we don't have to go to Iraq - we see it in our own households. Two brothers/sisters may fight and fume at home ... but let someone else pick on one of those brothers at school ... and sibling rivalry soon becomes inseparable bonding against the enemy. Neighbors in Toledo may go for years never greeting one another - but let it be known that Low Income Housing is coming into the neighborhood; all of a sudden, there's new found solidarity among those neighbors. We all know how typical elections rarely motivate 40% of the voters; but if there's a campaign to defeat a candidate or issue; all of a sudden, the polls are packed. Tragically, that same thing even happens in the life of the church. When things are going well - it's hard to get 15% of the cong. out for cong. meetings; but let their be a fuss about the pastor or some other negative issue ... we see people in church that haven't been there for years! How tragic that people will be faithful to HUMAN SCANDAL and DIVISIVENESS, but unmoved by GOD'S GRACE AND GOODNESS!

In fact, after last week's sermon, someone asked: "What would you preachers do without the devil? How would you preach without the reality of sin?" That person had a good point! A world without sin wouldn't have much need for a preacher! But I certainly hope that the preaching at Hope does not exploit the reality of sin -- WHERE WE PREACH JUDGEMENT AND DAMNATION BECAUSE OF SIN. That's the kind of fear that is being preached today by some of the fastest growing sectarian churches: SCARE THE HELL OUT OF THEM, BUT DON'T GIVE THEM ANY GRACE! My answer to what I would do without the devil is I hope the same as yours: I COULD PREACH EVERY HOUR OF EVERY DAY AND STILL NOT EXHAUST THE ABUNDANCE OF GOD'S LOVE! Why should I concentrate upon the negating power of EVIL when I have not yet finished convincing anyone about the uplifting love of God!?! Like Martin Luther and St. Paul ... I am a Catholic Protestant: I protest against any worldly power that would seek to alter or undermine the life-affirming love of God. There I stand ... firmly rooted against fear - and for grace ... I cannot do otherwise!

But secondly, we are urged today to be firmly ROOTED in that love IN ORDER TO STRIKE DOWN ALL IDOLATRIES OF SELF-INDULGENCE. Like St. Paul, we oppose those who are enemies of the cross. We say this because we believe that the final end of those who serve the belly is destruction. We see this every day. We see countless people intent upon drinking, eating and smoking themselves to death. The god of the belly calls us to live it up, regardless of how it affects ourselves or others. But this kind of self-indulgence not only kills the body, it also destroys the spirit.

Gratifying every desire does not satisfy our appetites; it only increases them. Things that were meant to be used for our good, begin to use us. Happiness and inward health do not depend upon fulfilling every PHYSICAL desire. Rather, spiritual health grows from discipline: the DISCIPLINE of discerning NEEDS FROM WANTS, the WILLINGNESS to shoulder the cross, the DETERMINATION to put the wants of Christ before our wants, the COMMITMENT to put the cross before the belly!

That's one of the fondest memories I have of Lent from my youthful days: THE CROSS CAME BEFORE THE BELLY! The emphasis was not upon "giving something up for Lent" -- that would just be another emphasis upon THE BELLY. Rather, the emphasis was upon DOING MORE THAN BEFORE TO GLORIFY CHRIST IN BOTH OUR BIOLOGICAL AND CHRISTIAN FAMILY.

That's why it meant an extra family WORSHIP EXPERIENCE each week -- not as a drudgery, but as a discipline of praise to glorify Christ and our ROOTEDNESS in him as a family. How much I wish families today expressed that kind of ROOTEDNESS TO CHRIST ... to show that their roots were deeper than their bellies! It also meant hearing the PASSION HISTORY every Lent so that I began to see my part in Christ's passion -- that he died NOT FOR SIN, BUT FOR MY SIN!! It meant a time for extra study and fellowship within the body of Christ -- which is THE ESSENCE OF OUR LENTEN STUDY! Rather than giving up something, Lent was a time for DOING MORE ... for taking up the cross in a more disciplined and dedicated manner! If there was any "giving up" in Lent ... it was a giving up of the idolatry of self-indulgence, of self-satisfaction, of self-righteousness, and of self-sufficiency. And in place of all of these - it was and still is a time TO LIFT HIGH THE CROSS OF CHRIST! Yes, ROOTEDNESS means WAR AGAINST the enemies of the cross - ALL IDOLATRIES of self-satisfaction!

Finally, those who are rooted to the cross of Christ look over the world like Jesus looked over Jerusalem -- and we weep, we show compassion, we shed sweat and tears for those who are victimized by the violence and cruelty of sin. Even though I learned that there was diverse opinion about her preaching style - like Christine Sackett, our rootedness must help us look more compassionately at the suffering in this world. We must become better beggars for the poor ... more visible visitors of the lonely ... more committed caretakers of the abused and broken ... more consecrated as the body of Christ for the least and lost in a world far too obsessed with its own belly. To do less is not to be rooted in the sacrificial lifestyle of the one we call our Lord and Master.

That rootedness to compassion and caretaking was graphically illustrated by a young woman who entered Oxford University in the 1940's. At the time, her life was adrift, without real roots or focus. She came under the influence of her English professor - a certain C.S. Lewis - and soon became a Christian. She left Oxford, and against the advice of almost everyone, she studied nursing and became a certified nurse after five vigorous years of training.

Her assignment was a cancer ward in a London hospital. Gradually, she came to realize that many of the doctors ignored the patients who were terminally ill. These patients too often died very much alone. She strongly felt that these people would be far better served if surrounded by their friends during their last days. As a nurse, her ideas were rejected. So she enrolled in medical school at the age of 33. And soon after graduation at 39, Cicely Saunders founded the HOSPICE MOVEMENT first in England and later in America. And SO BEGAN ANOTHER CHAPTER OF HOLISTIC HEALING. Like so many other movements in healing and hospital care, born because Cicely was deeply ROOTED TO THE CROSS OF JESUS CHRIST: she had compassion and sacrificial love for those who were suffering the cruelty of sickness and isolation in the world.

For her, faith was more than rehashing the Sunday morning creed! Her ROOTS were one with Christ - against fear, against idolatry, and for compassion with the sick ... and she took up her cross and followed him!

AMEN.

Lent II
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
February 23, 1997
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

“SHUTTING DOWN OR OPENING UP?”

He called the crowd with his disciples and said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Mark 8:34

If you grew up in the Martyn household in Oshkosh, Wisconsin -- then you knew there was one hyphenated word graphically associated with Lent: SELF-DENIAL. That was the essence of Lent in our house. And it usually meant “giving up something.” And it very often meant “looking dismal and not smiling in church for six weeks.” Yes, traditionally -- “self-denial” meant wiping away any signs of joy, happiness or pleasure. In short the message was: SHUT DOWN FOR LENT. OR “SHUT OFF” or “SHUT UP” ANYTHING THAT SOUNDED LIKE GOOD NEWS!

How does my Lenten childhood compare with yours?? Did any of you grow up “giving up things for Lent?” How many of you remember these? SELF-DENIAL FOLDERS. When I was a child, this folder was viewed as the true representation of self-denial. Every member of the Martyn household was to put his dime or quarter-a-day in the folder ... and that was really living the Lenten spirit of self-denial. Let’s be honest ... was that true sacrifice & faithfulness?? Gimmicks like these folders really encouraged a SHUT-DOWN spirit of faithfulness in Lent. The whole idea was ... “give a little something here ... make a token gesture there” ... and that’s the true spirit of self-denial. How tragic that “tokenistic self-denial” became promoted as the “real thing of faith.”

But the church has also had other weird practices of self-denial. From the monastic and ascetic period in the early church came the tradition of chastity and celibacy. Be assured - there have been times as a Lutheran pastor that I could see the value in celibacy ... at least celibate priests do not have to worry about family struggles when its a battle between family and congregation. But celibacy also illustrates one of the worst applications of self-denial. According to this practice -- if you shut-down your sexual instincts and desires, then you will more graphically glorify God. Well, like many things, it sounds good in theory, but it hasn’t worked well in practice. Many of my closer priest-friends have openly shared with me their anxiety and sometimes even deep pain because of sexual desires being frustrated. SHUTTING DOWN OR SHUTTING OFF parts of life is not a very satisfactory practice of self-denial.

The reasons should be obvious - when we “shut-down” or offer a token “self-denial” the focus is ON SELF RATHER THAN SAVIOR. That’s why so many Lenten practices ... originally intended to be good, end up becoming bad. The imposition of ashes was intended to remind us of our mortality and our need to focus upon the cross as the source of salvation. But when it’s just a matter of “getting ashes” as I’ve seen it practiced in some traditions -- then it’s not worth the time or trouble. The goal of self-denial is NOT human piety, but DIVINE

GLORY! Too often self-denial has sought to sanctify the self rather than to glorify God. Such a practice ends up causing people to “shutdown” rather than “opening up” to God. I think the little five year old girl understood the **REAL** dangers of self-denial when she was asked what she was giving up for Lent. She said, “*Spinach.*” I only wish I had thought of that when I was ten.

The point of today’s text -- “*when Jesus says those who follow will take up the cross*” -- the meaning of that self-denial is not a matter of “giving up some thing” but rather “becoming the some one” that God intended you and me to be from the beginning. When we **GIVE UP** some thing - then the whole question becomes: “**WHAT-IN-IT-FOR-ME?**” No question could be more contrary to the life of Christ or his commission to “take up the cross.” Jesus never asked, “What’s-in-it-for-me?” And he never commissioned his closest 12 disciples to ask: “What’s-in-it-for-us?” Those questions reflect the demonic cultural conditioning we are always being tempted by each day: **ONLY LOOKING OUT FOR SELF!** That’s why Jesus called Peter, “Satan!” Because Peter was merely looking out for his own skin, not seeking any longer the glory of God through his Savior’s sacrifice. Whenever our life goals go no further than the bathroom mirror -- then we have **SHUT-DOWN ON GOD ...** we have merely closed in on ourselves as the essence of true faithfulness.

“Self-denial” means just the opposite of “**SHUTTING-DOWN!**” “Self-denial” is “**OPENING UP**” -- **SEEKING A GREATER POWER & VISION THAN SELF.** “Self-denial” means going for one’s true potential -- the very image of God within each of us. The question of true faith is not, ‘What’s in it for me?’ but rather ... “What’s in me for it!?” How can I more completely offer my talents, my gifts, my potential to glorify the life that God has given me?? That’s true “self-denial!” **GLORIFYING A GREATER GOODNESS OF THE SELF!!** Again, “Self-denial” is not “giving up some thing,” but “becoming the some one” that God has created each of us to be.

True “self-denial” is like the Sunday bulletin announcement from a Council Bluffs, Iowa Lutheran church which read: “*If God gave you a good singing voice, then come and join our choir. And if He didn’t give you a good singing voice, then come and join our choir and get even!!*” I’m sure Burt would love to have you join the choir so that you can get even with God!!

Contrary to popular usage, every pain & problem that comes along in life is “not bearing the cross.” That’s just the reality of life. “To bear the cross” means those intentional ways that we follow His lead. And he promises that his leadership will always take us to places where we will have to suffer and sacrifice. Obviously, by human nature -- we avoid those places -- all of us seek to eliminate suffering and sacrificing from our lives. Obviously, under most conditions of life -- it’s good to eliminate pain & suffering. But what Jesus is saying today is that **THERE ARE SOME THINGS WORTH SUFFERING FOR!** And the greatest of these is to make certain that the gospel -- the word of

His merciful, forgiving love -- is at the top of our lists!! Christians keep fit by exercising their faith just the way we do when we work out -- and working out for me has always been very sacrificial ... very exhausting & punishing to my own body.

Or to put the whole thing differently -- show me your checkbook or your MasterCard bill and I'll show you what you believe in ... I'll show you if you really "sacrifice for Christ and take up His cross." Because "where and on what" we spend our lives is the true reflection of our faith & convictions. Action always follows belief.

So, when Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" -- we know exactly what to do! First, we step down from any throne we have erected for our own glory! First we realize that God is above everything we have erected to ourselves.

And secondly, once we've again planted our feet firmly on the ground, then we look up ... we look up to the cross ... we look up to see the ultimate example of self-denial. There we see the One that lives in us and through us -- because in baptism we promised "to let His light shine through us in order to glorify God." And as we look at that Christ figure on the cross -- we again realize that he never said, "Now let's see -- what part of myself am I going to give back to God?? Shall I give him a dime or a quarter a day?? What token will I offer Almighty God this week? What little part of myself can I give God?" Obviously - that's a SHUT-DOWN piety of self-denial! And Jesus was not a SHUT-DOWN kind of Savior! Instead, Jesus always OPENED-UP to His Father by saying, "Not my will, but thine be done!!"

Self-denial is no different than it was on the cross. It is not a matter of "giving up" some thing for God -- it is a matter of "Opening Up" to God and like our Lord and Savior saying: "Not my will, but thine be done" through me!!

AMEN.

*Lent II
Glenwood Lutheran & Sunset House
March 8, 1998
Peter R. Martyn, Presiding Pastor & Chaplain*

“THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED”

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Phil 3:17-18a

Susan Ager recently wrote in the *Eagle/Times*, a transportation publication: “Since 1969, the automobile population has increased six times faster than the human population. Three car garages are now standard in many new homes.” Ager lives in a semi-rural suburb of Ann Arbor and says - “In 1969 - my seventeen mile commute took 15 minutes; today it takes 35 minutes.” She goes on, “Working parents, weary of shuttling the kids, can’t wait ‘til the oldest turns 16 so they can help buy a car for him/her -- that becomes Parents’ Independence Day. Everyone is hitting the road,” she says, “so reformers are telling us to ‘carpool’ ... and everyone shrugs his shoulders and says, ‘You first!’”

In short, Ager’s comments are very challenging to the Christian faith because of a basic world mentality: **NO ONE WANTS TO TAKE THE ROAD OF SACRIFICE -- THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED.** Another apocryphal story also illustrates the reality. Jesus and the disciples are walking along a stony road. He asks each of them to carry a stone for Him. John chooses a large stone -- Peter chooses a small stone. He leads them to the top of the mountain. When they get there they are tired and hungry. So Jesus commands the stones to be turned to bread ... and to eat whatever bread they have in their hands. Obviously - Peter’s share was insufficient, so he begged for more from John.

Soon thereafter they walk down the mountain. Again, Jesus asks them to carry a stone. This time Peter chooses the largest stone he can find. As they reach the river, Jesus tells them to cast their stones into the river. You can imagine Peter’s disgust in having to carry a huge stone all the way down the mountain, only to heave it into the river. Then Jesus asks them: “*For whom did you carry the stone in the first place??*”

The answer is too obvious: they did what they did **FOR THEMSELVES.** Again – they did not choose “The Road Less Traveled” - the road of sacrifice. Or said differently -- “giving isn’t giving if you’re giving for what you hope to get in return.” Obviously - there’s a benefit in every gift ... and there’s nothing evil with some personal gain--but the question remains: **What Road Were You Choosing When You Offered The Gift??** Or as Paul says ... “*Is your end your own belly ... or your own glory? Is your mind merely on earthly things??*” If so, then Paul says “*You have chosen the easy road ... the road often traveled ... the road too often chosen by ‘the enemies of the cross of Christ!’*”

And if we’re really honest with ourselves--most of us are like Peter: we choose the stone that’s too our greatest advantage. We choose too often to be what

Paul says are "enemies of the cross:" we too often choose our own belly ... our own glory. We set our minds merely on earthly things. So -- how can we CHOOSE THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED?!? Or doesn't it matter?!?

Well - certainly it matters -- but I think "The Road of Sacrifice ... the Road Less Traveled" is a never-ending dilemma of the Christian life. *Yergeny Yevtushenko*, a Russian poet, says that "crosslessness" is the real problem. What he means is we flaunt the cross around our necks but we fear living by the cross. That's our human dilemma. He says that we make the purpose of life "to play it safe ... to always have everything go right ... to live life without any risk." And when people live ONLY TO BE SAFE -- they are living as enemies of the cross -- they are not open to vulnerability ... to pain ... to failure ... to bearing the cross.

How can any coherent Christian read the Bible and not realize that God classified faithfulness as a journey to the cross, not a trip to the local playground. Paul says in Romans -- "*Present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him.*" Jesus commissioned his disciples in Matthew as follows: "*Listen, I am sending you out like sheep to a pack of wolves; be cautious as snakes and gentle as doves. Watch out -- for there will be those who will arrest you and take you to court and whip you in public assemblies. ... Everyone will hate you because of me.*" There is no place in the Bible where Jesus says that faithfulness is "playing it safe" or "taking the easy road ... the road most traveled in this world." So, we choose "The Road Less Traveled" not because it's the easiest or safest or most popular -- but because it's the way of Jesus Christ -- and all consecrated to Him.

So, how does Jesus "build us up" to take that "Road Less Traveled?" Well, when threatened -- he says, "Go tell those foxes that we are doing what we are doing by the power of God -- healing, helping & uplifting the suffering of the world." So, if we are going to travel the "road less traveled" we must first make up our minds "that helping suffering people" is the mission of Jesus Christ ... regardless of what the power figures of our world or congregations think. I can't tell you the number of times in my ministry when the powerful people of congregations I have served have tried to tell me that our first concern as a congregation is "to take care of ourselves." Paul calls such people "enemies of the cross" ... because they have made their own institutional security more important than citizenship in heaven ... the way of the cross.

Second, to take the "road less traveled" is to strike down THE IDOL of self-indulgence. Paul says "those who make their belly their god are destined to self destruction." We are called by God to avoid a life of glorification of our bodies or our bellies. Our bodies and our bellies are "but clay pots that will one day return to dust." Gratifying every desire of the belly does not satisfy the belly -- it only increases the craving for more (I can attest to that!). Happiness & health are not a matter of mere physical satisfaction ... but of spiritual discipline:

the discipline of discerning needs from wants ... the willingness to strive for the wants of Christ before the needs of our own belly.

Finally -- Jesus wept over Jerusalem because He saw its sad state of affairs -- we too must be willing to shed sweat & tears over the dismal state of terror and loneliness we still see in our world. To take the "Road Less Traveled" means becoming better beggars for the poor (as Luther once classified all Christians) ... to become more visible visitors of the lonely ... to become more committed caretakers of the broken and abused ... to become a more consecrated body of merciful love for the least and the lost.

"The Road Less Traveled" has been taken by all the great saints of every civilization -- but today I mention a young woman who entered Oxford University in the 40's. Her life at that time was adrift -- without real focus or purpose. She came under the influence of her English professor -- C.S. Lewis by name -- and became a Christian. She left Oxford, and against the advice of almost everyone -- she became a certified nurse. Her assignment was a cancer ward in a London hospital. Gradually, she came to realize that many of the doctors ignored patients who were most terminally ill. These patients often died very alone & abandoned. She felt these people would be far better served if they could be surrounded by their friends before they died. But as a nurse, her ideas were rejected.

So she enrolled in medical school at the age of 33. And when she graduated six years later -- Cicely Saunders founded the HOSPICE MOVEMENT, first in England and later in America. And today -- the Hospice Movement is one of the most respected expressions of holistic healing in the world -- because it affirms the way of the cross ... it offers compassion and sacrificial love to those suffering at the end of their lives.

Is it any wonder that faithful Christians still choose "The Road Less Traveled" - the way which rejects the power of seeking self indulgence and personal glory over the compassion and mercy of the cross of Christ. Thanks be to God ... there is still a remnant in this world who take THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED.

AMEN.

3rd Wednesday in Lent - March 18, 1998

Herod Antipas

Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo

Peter R. Martyn, Presiding Pastor

My name is Herod Antipas. I'm one of the four judges in whose courts your Jesus of Nazareth was tried and sentenced to death by crucifixion. Annas, Caiaphas, and Pontius Pilate were the other three. Actually - they had much more to do with Jesus' trial than me. My role was almost incidental. But judge for yourself.

Sometimes I get the blame for things I didn't do. That's because I come from a family of Herods; several of us got mention in your bible. So many of you get mixed up. It's no wonder - our family history is complex & confusing.

So- let's set the record straight! I was Herod Antipas--Antipas after my grandfather, who was made governor of Judea by the Roman emperor Julius Caesar. That was 40 yrs before the birth of Jesus. After grandfather was murdered, my father, Herod the Great, with the help of Mark Anthony, became king.

I'm certain you all know my father, Herod the Great. He is the king who killed the babes in Bethlehem attempting to destroy the baby Jesus. As you can guess - my father was a hated man. In fact - he was so hated he feared no one would grieve over his death. So he actually told my Aunt Salome to lock up several Jewish leaders in the tower of Jericho and execute them when he died. He figured (that way) at least someone would mourn his death. Well (as you know) my father died a couple of years after Jesus' death. And the prisoners in Jericho were released, and no tears were shed over Herod the Great.

My brother, Archelaus, then became ruler of Judea - until he was deposed & replaced by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Meanwhile - I became ruler of Galilee, where your Jesus grew up in Nazareth. Actually--I knew little about Jesus--but I heard much about another of your prophets - John the Baptist.

In fact - this John was drawing big crowds and making such an impression that my curiosity was aroused. So I sent for him to see what he might say to me. You know--I liked him! I admired his guts & courage. He actually had the nerve to tell me face-to-face that I had grossly sinned; and I needed to repent. Actually

- that wasn't so bad -- but then he got very personal. He pryed into my personal life ... making all kinds of judgments about it.

My sister-in-law, Herodias, and I were having an affair. She left my brother, Philip, and I divorced my wife so that we could get married. John thought that was terrible. But it certainly was no big deal compared to some of the things my father and brothers had done. But John was deeply angered by it. He said "It was unlawful for me to have Herodias." And that made Herodias much more angry than me. She was so furious she wanted John killed. I simply arrested him and put him in jail.

But the matter really came to a head at my birthday party. We were having this wild affair; for the entertainment my step-daughter, Salome, performed a seductive dance. Since I was very drunk and not thinking clearly - I swore that I would give Salome anything she wanted up to half of my kingdom. Well, she & Herodias put their heads together and came up with the bloody idea that they wanted John the Baptist's head on a platter. Drunk as I was - that shook me. But I couldn't go back on my word in front of my guests ... so I gave the order to have John beheaded -- and it was done!! Now you know why your Jesus called me "that fox"--I could be a ruthless murderer!

Well - for the record - my conscience really bothered me with that murder. I had done my share of killing -- but this one haunted me. In fact - I had heard that Jesus was going about preaching & teaching & healing & performing miracles. I was certain "it was" John the Baptist back to haunt me. I began having nightmares & seeing ghosts. For a while - I was a total wreck. Then I realized that "Jesus" really was out there.

His trial was during the Jewish Passover & I was staying at my father's castle. The sanhedrin, the Jewish court, had already found Jesus guilty of blasphemy for calling himself The Christ, the Son of God. But when they brought Jesus to Pilate, the Roman governor, they changed the charge. Now they were arresting him for treason, saying he was a threat to the Roman government since he had claimed to be King of the Jews. Well, when Pilate learned that Jesus was from Galilee, he sent him over to me since I was ruler of that province. That was a kindly, cooperative gesture on Pilate's part; we even became friends after that.

Well - say what you will - but my opinion was that Jesus was being framed by the religious leaders who regarded him as a threat to their positions of power. As you know - power can be ruthless. The head guy often gets the blame-- but the heat often comes from everyone in positions of power. And as you know - power has a way of corrupting even the best of us.

**Well, I was glad to finally meet Jesus. I was really anxious to see one of his miracles - since I had heard so much about them. So I invited many of my friends to a “command performance” of this miracle worker. But what a disappointment!! Not only did he refuse to do any miracles -- he even refused to speak to me. He just stood there like a dummy - not saying a word!! **

Well - I can take many things, but I can't tolerate insolence. So I let my bodyguards give him the business ... ridiculing him and mocking him with a royal robe. Then I sent him back to Pilate without passing any judgment. I'd had enough trouble with my Galilean subjects after executing John the Baptist. I wasn't going to make the same mistake twice!!

So - there you have it. I don't think it's fair that people see me, Herod Antipas, as the epitome of evil in this case ... unless of course - they continue to confuse me with my father or brother, Archelaus. I like wine, women and wild parties!! And the only people I've ever killed are those who try to deprive me of my pleasures!!

Of course--my pleasure-seeking was short-lived!! My father-in-law, King Aretas, declared war on me for having divorced his daughter; my whole army was wiped out! I was soon banished to France ... and my territory taken over by Agrippa.

So--is pleasure-seeking the real answer to life? I wonder if John the Baptist really did have my number. Certainly I will never be remembered for anything constructive or worthwhile. Ask yourselves tonite -- what will your legacy be?? How will those who follow you assess your purpose in life??? Will they see you as one who regularly “returned to the Lord your God ... to be renewed in mercy & loving kindness??” Or will you simply be seen as one like me -- “someone could not forget his foolish ways ... and lived & died as little more than a pleasure-seeker? What a tragic legacy I have left!