



DAVID



THAT COMETH
THE NAME OF THE LORD
THAT FROM EVERLASTING



DANIEL



OUR GOD WHOM
WE SERVE IS A RULER
TO DELIVER



BY GRACE ARE YOU SAVED



IN HIM IS OUR PEACE
FOR GOD SO LOVED HIS WORLD



MATTHEW



FOR WE HAVE SEEN
HIS STAR AND HAVE
WORSHIP



MARK



BEHOLD THE LAMB
OF GOD
THE SIN



BY
GRACE ARE YOU
SAVED

Window Sermon Series

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
100 East Adams Avenue
Kirkwood, Missouri 63122



presented by

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STAINED GLASS SANCTUARY WINDOWS

First Presbyterian Church, Kirkwood, Missouri

The thirteen four by twenty-eight foot windows at the south wall of the apse provide a striking contrast to the otherwise stark interior of the sanctuary. Their size, use of bold colors, clear labeling of subjects represented, and the blue and red ribbon which ties each of the six subordinate windows together ending with the Christ window, draws attention to and highlights the Christ window's central message: *"By grace are you saved."* This message dominates and establishes both the atmosphere for worship and its basic premise.

From top to bottom, each window heralds its subjects with a name and a figure, below which appears an incident central to that person's life or writing; and the final or lower panel offers a scene that is central to that person's message. Both the middle and lower panels, in most instances, include a Bible verse. A description of windows, from left to right, facing the apse follows.

MOSES appears with the rock tablets on a bare rock pedestal, from which lightning streaks from above to the rocks alongside. Hand with nimbus in attitude of giving appears above Moses' head, which has horns, along with the fire representing zeal or dedication.

Middle Panel: Shows two priests with sacrificial animal, behind which the Ark of the Covenant can be seen behind the opened curtains, where parts of the guarding golden cherubim are visible. Verse: *"...He shall lay his hand upon the bullock's head."* (Exodus 29: 10)

Bottom Panel: Refers to Abraham who lived 500 years before Moses. Melchizedek "Prince of Salem" and "Priest of the Most High God" offers bread and wine. The figure of Melchizedek points upward—a foreshadowing of the New Covenant. Verse: *"And Melchizedek King of Salem brought forth bread and wine..."* (Genesis 14: 18)

ISAIAH appears with the flame of zeal above his head where the hand of God holds tongs with a red hot coal, recalling Isaiah's vision and call. (Isaiah 6: 1-9)

Middle Panel: Jesus, identified by golden halo and cross, is stripped and bound to a post. Stone wall and barred window suggest prison, and a Roman soldier stands by with scourge in hand. Verse: *"He was despised and rejected of men. A man of sorrows..."* (Isaiah 53: 3)

Bottom Panel: A woman appears to sit on an open flower, holding a small child identified as Jesus by halo and red cross. Two men nearby kneel in worship. Verse: *"And there shall come forth a root out of the stem of Jesse..."* (Isaiah 11: 1)

JEREMIAH appears with fire of dedication and a circle with hand and extended finger pointing. He stands with hands uplifted in horror. He is surrounded by devastation: the temple, nation and land. His message is one of personal responsibility.

Middle Panel: An Assyrian soldier with sword approaches an Israelite family, who wait helplessly. Verse: *"...and they shall be consumed by the sword and by the famine."* (Jeremiah 16: 4)

Lower Panel: Picture of idolatry—a boy waves a sensor of incense, smoke rings ascend, a green snake (symbol of evil) issues from the mouth of one of his companions. Verse: *"In that they went to burn incense and to serve other gods."* (Jeremiah 44: 3)

AMOS, a rural, laboring prophet, whose ministry occurred before both Jeremiah and Isaiah, stands in hilly, green country where sheep graze, holding tools in his hands, with the zeal of dedication over his head. Dark sky and lightning cast a pall on the scene.

Middle Panel: A couple runs from overwhelming disaster (earthquake). Verse: *"I will send a fire upon Judah..."* (Amos 2: 5)

Bottom Panel: David with harp and crown is hanging on a beam or stone that has fallen. He looks at the second figure identified as Christ by halo and red cross, who seems to be assisting (raising?) him. Verse: *"Seek good and not evil, that you may live..."* (Amos 5: 14)

DAVID, King of Israel, stands in kingly pose, with the flame of zeal above his head, and two anointing or bestowing hands suggesting his special relationship to God.

Middle Panel: Samuel anointing David. Crown and crest are symbols of royalty. Small beam shines from crest and attracts attention to the vague shape of two crosses. Reference to another king? Verse: *"Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the Lord..."* (Psalms 118: 26)

Bottom Panel: David's regal splendor--a kingly crown, scepter in left hand, an orb with cross in right hand. Note the king's bare feet and the rainbow behind. Verse: *"Thy throne is established of old. Thou art from everlasting."* (II Samuel 7: 18)

DANIEL, with flame of zeal and dove flying toward him, stands in thoughtful pose with prayer shawl on his head.

Middle Panel: Recalls the story of the fiery furnace. (Daniel 3: 28) *"The God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego has sent his angel and rescued his servants."* (No verse given on this panel.)

Bottom Panel: Daniel stands among the lions. Verse: *"Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us."* (Daniel 3: 17)

THE CHRIST WINDOW dominates, in position, color and design; the red and blue ribbons joining the other windows which end at the center panel enhance the compelling focus toward this central panel. Behind Christ's head the triangle represents the Trinity, while the circle symbolizes eternity. The white dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit, is released from his breast, and he is standing upon the green shape of the world. This is the Christ in authority at the *"right hand of the Father."* Verse: *"By grace are you saved..."* (Ephesians 2: 8)

"Thou hast crowned him with glory and honor putting everything in subjection under his feet." (Hebrews 2: 8) The body of the dead, green serpent draped over the wooden cross symbolizes Christ's victory over sin and death. *"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."* (John 3: 14-15; Numbers 21: 9)

Three red stars of hope lighten a dark sky in the background, and two human figures plead in the foreground. They sit or kneel beneath the cross with arms uplifted. Perhaps dwellers in Satan's fiery realm, Adam and Eve, or you and I. They hope, and there is reason for their hope; they plead and there is reason for their pleading. (Romans 6: 23) *"The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

A large, circular blue plate below these figures forms the background for the cross. Inside the blue plate, three diagonal light lines cross and may suggest the Trinity. The yellow circle imposed on the cross reminds the onlooker that God is eternal—without beginning or end. The heart aflame signifies intense devotion. Notice the tip of the spear near the heart which is wounded and from which blood flows. This appears to be held upon a chalice, embossed with a cross. (Mark 14: 24) *"This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many."* Verses: *"In him is our Peace..."* (Ephesians 2: 14) and (John 3: 16), *"For God so loved the World..."*

MATTHEW stands in quiet dignity as he contemplates the Hand of God, which is before and above him, beckoning. Matthew's Gospel is a book of beginnings concerned with Old Testament prophecies fulfilled, the lineage of Christ, and details especially significant to Jewish Christians.

Middle Panel: The Holy Spirit descends as a dove upon Mary who is praying as the angel delivers God's message. *"He shall save his people from their sins."* (Matthew 1: 21)

Bottom Panel: Presents the birth of Christ through the three wise men who follow the star. Verse: *"...For we have seen his star and are come to worship."* (Matthew 2: 2)

MARK stands with stern face and folded arms beneath the Hand of God directly overhead, which is open and flat, as if ordering or demanding. Although Mark was not one of the disciples, he seems to have been close to them for some time, and he traveled to Rome with Peter. The quill in his left hand identifies him as a Gospel writer.

Middle Panel: Shows Jesus after his ministry has begun, being baptized by John the Baptist. As he emerges, the Holy Spirit descends as a dove. Verse: *"The Spirit like a dove descending upon him..."* (Mark 1: 10)

Bottom Panel: An extension of the baptism, presenting Jesus as the Lamb of God. The golden halo with red cross makes this clear, and the banner carried over the right shoulder symbolizes the resurrection. This is called "The Banner of Victory," or "The Victory of the Lamb." Verse: *"Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world."* (John 1: 29)

LUKE, probably a Gentile who became a Christian, stands with arms lowered as the Holy Spirit descends. He holds a book, and the sign on the cover represents the first two letters in the Greek word "Christ."

Middle Panel: Represents the healing of the ruler of the synagogue's daughter. This panel depicts the moment Christ tells the girl, presumed to have died, to rise. Verse: *"Took her by the hand and called, saying, 'Maid, arise!'"* (Luke 8: 55)

Bottom Panel: Shows Jesus in benediction over two disciples. Verse: *"...Sent them two by two before his face into every city and place."* (Luke 10: 1)

JOHN stands with his head turned toward Christ, and the dove of the Holy Spirit flies directly over his head toward the congregation; the background is not Palestine. Bright hills and crowded town suggest Ephesus, which tradition considers John's home. He holds a pen in his right hand and a book with the sign of the cross on its cover in his left, representing his Gospel.

Middle Panel: Scene from the Wedding at Cana—Christ's first miracle. Verse: *"Fill the waterpots with water."* (John 2: 7)

Bottom Panel: Raising of Lazarus. Jesus stands facing the opening to the tomb, while the gravecloth-bound Lazarus emerges. Martha and another onlooker look not at her brother but at Jesus. Verse: *"When he had thus spoken, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth.'"* (John 11: 44)

PETER is the subject of centuries of debate concerning his unique standing—Was he given special powers which placed him above the other disciples and made him prominent in the Church Universal? Here he has neither impressive nor regal bearing. The Hand of God is directly above his head, similar to the Old Testament prophets facing his panel. Beside his head the cock of denial appears. Behind his figure, houses are crowded together, jostling one another on a slope; the city wall is castellated. Such battlements are found in European cities. Tradition holds that Peter was martyred in Rome during Nero's reign.

Below: The panels run together presenting the Feast of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit with flame and commotion descends upon the apostles. Directly below Peter's feet, the Hand of God bestows the symbol of the Holy Spirit. From the circle around the dove, smaller doves issue. Verse: *"And they were filled with the Holy Ghost..."* (Acts 2: 4)

PAUL stands with the Hand of God over his head. The scroll in his right hand symbolizes his contribution to the New Testament; more than one-third can be attributed to Paul. His influence is immeasurable. The figure's background is clearly urban, probably a Western city, Rome or Athens.

Middle Panel: Christ stands with an uplifted foot upon a dark, ugly skeleton. Verse: *"Oh, death where is thy sting?"* (I Corinthians 15: 55)

Bottom Panel: This panel is the simplest design in the 13 windows. A man and woman stand facing each other with hands clasped. Between them in the shadow a small table with cross and open book are seen. The colors are restrained, blue and green, suggesting hope and tranquility. Verse: *"For we are his workmanship created in Christ..."* (Ephesians 2: 10)

"A Window on Moses"

(Text: Selected Verses from Exodus, Chapter 3)

PRESENTED BY THE REV. MRS. LESLIE M. PIPER ON JANUARY 8, 1995

Preachers visiting us for worship have often remarked that they wouldn't want to preach in this sanctuary, because the attention of the congregation would be totally absorbed by the enormous and awesome stained glass creations which dominate the worship space. Indeed, there is something a little masochistic about climbing the steps to the pulpit of this church, hoping to draw attention to the Word of God spoken here. This morning, we begin a 13-part series of sermons based upon the most prominent architectural detail of our sanctuary—the windows that absorb our attention week in and week out, as we gather to worship God in this place. So, this morning, and for the mornings following, I am going to give you leave to do something that many of you have jokingly told me you do anyway, the minute one of us gets up to preach on Sunday morning—look at the windows, let yourself become absorbed in them, dissect the panes and panels, as we move through the windows to a greater understanding of the giants of faith there portrayed.

We begin with Moses. His window is so far to your left that, if you are sitting on this side of the sanctuary, you might have to come up for a look at another time, unless you know his window by heart. Moses is one of those Biblical characters we know intimately. His stories are stories we tell the children of our faith, because they begin with the baby Moses, and his miraculous salvation by a quick-thinking sister and mother team, during an Egyptian turn at genocide. His trip down-river in a basket, and his rescue by an Egyptian princess, are the stuff of Hollywood, so it is no surprise that much of our thinking about Moses is overlaid by the Hollywood veneer provided by Cecil B. DeMille. Think of it—we know what he looks like—he's a dead ringer for Charlton Heston! There's not a doubt in our minds. We know how he acts—dramatically, decisively, in actions so large they take up an entire movie screen. We know so much about him we run the risk of knowing too much, and, therefore, too little!

There's no doubt about it. Moses' life was dramatic. Stories of his early life are the kinds of stories the ancients reserved for the "miracle man"—one whose miraculous actions in later life must be preceded by miraculous incidents in childhood. Saved from the fate suffered by most male Hebrew children, he is raised in luxury as a pet of the palace, and could have continued on in this way, had he not felt an ancient stirring for his people as he watched a Hebrew slave bear the brunt of his master's attack. In high drama, Moses kills the Egyptian, earning for himself exile and pain. And all of this happens before he is quite out of young manhood. Drama... Hollywood drama!

The exiled Moses finds himself in Midian, as a tender of sheep, married to the daughter of a priest of Midian. And he could have drifted into a simple, lonely, pastoral existence as a shepherd, had it not been for a bush and a flame and a voice. Hear the words from the third chapter of Exodus:

"Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian; and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush, and he looked and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, 'I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.' When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush: 'Moses! Moses!' and he said, 'Here am I.' Then he said, 'Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' And he said, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God." (Exodus 3: 1-6)

And it was high drama. But an intimate drama. One Hollywood can't reproduce. Because it wasn't the special effects that humbled Moses. A burning bush might have gotten his attention, but it didn't get the shoes off his feet. It didn't strike his heart, and turn around his life. What happened for Moses was a lonely, personal, impossible-to-create moment, that changed his life, and started him on a road that would be much harder than any he might have chosen for himself.

The interior transformation of Moses that happened when he heard his name on God's lips was not unlike the interior transformation we each experience at one time or another. I have yet to run into anyone who admits to having been called by name out of the midst of a burning bush, but I have spoken with countless people who have struggled to describe that moment when, for some reason or another, they heard God speak their name, and they were moved to tears or moved to action or moved to prayer, and always, always moved to slip off their shoes, because the ground on which they were standing was holy ground. There is a moment, captured forever in the mind, when God becomes more than just something out there, an abstract, philosophical ideal, a theological entity entirely, a topic for debate, and becomes something in here, something intimate and full of singular mystery and amazement, and someone who has called your personal name.

And, regardless of how you try to describe it to another person, the moment is entirely your own. It cannot be translated. And so it was for Moses. The holy intersected so powerfully with his ordinary life that what followed was a *fait accompli*. God made a request of Moses. And Moses, with sandals removed, and something like fire still burning in his eyes, said, "Sure, send me." And God gave Moses a mission, and a gift. The mission was to occupy all of Moses' life, and would take him into the depths of despair, such as he could not have dreamed in that moment of zeal and promise. But the gift would be there, as well. The gift would be something no one else could claim. The gift would make their relationship mutual, and would make the impossible mission at least manageable.

For, after God told Moses what was in store for him, at the moment when Moses should have turned tail and run, he asked a favor of God. *"If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?,' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am."* (Exodus 3: 13-14) And Moses was given the name of God. And it was all dramatically changed. For the power of the name was the power of relationship with God. And, that accomplished, Moses could never turn back to the sheep of Midian, and be a tender of sheep who had once had a miraculous thing happen to him. And he could never be an old guy with an interesting story to tell. For, if God had given Moses something of God's self in the giving of the name, God had gotten far more from Moses. There was a relationship. And it was a powerful relationship. One that would have to carry Moses through a harrowing time, with an obstinate Pharaoh, one that would have to sustain him through the whiniest bunch of fleeing Hebrews ever created, one that would have to get him through the sight of the Golden Calf, and one that would carry him through 40 years of wandering by a disobedient people.

Such is the call of God upon a person. Such is the power of grace upon our lives. In a moment, life is changed, never to be returned to normal. In a moment, something precious is planted in a life, something real and lasting and consuming. And it happens when you are tending your sheep, or balancing your books, or cooking dinner, or fighting with your child over homework, or otherwise occupied. And you take your shoes off, because when God calls, it all becomes holy. And you experience the feeling of prickles down your neck, because God has called you by an intimate name. And you know the honor and the responsibility of reciprocal relationship, because God reveals something of God's self to you. And at the moment, what God asks of you is not as important as the fact that it is God who does the asking. And even 40 years of wandering with a bunch of people you wouldn't spend ten minutes with on a good day doesn't seem like too much to ask, because you have the name. And the right to use it. And the responsibility to remember it.

What happens next has been well documented by Sunday School illustrators and Hollywood script writers. Moses goes to Pharaoh with an ultimatum. Pharaoh proves to be a hard sell. Moses has to call down the plagues of God. The people plan a night-time escape, getting out almost before being detected. They have a hairy crossing of the Red Sea, dance on the other side, and set in to grumbling almost as soon as their feet are dry. "Where's the food? We ate better in Egypt! Where are we going? When will we get there?" And there's Moses, turning around like a father in a front seat—"We'll get there when we get there!" And all the while, they were trying like heck to recreate the situations of familiarity in Egypt, which all of a sudden looked very good to them all!

You know that Moses went up to the mountain to talk with God, and 40 days and nights it took to get down the laws for the people, and when he climbed down with the greatest of all gifts, the people were dancing and cavorting before an idol of their own making, which was Number Two on the list of "Thou Shalt Nots"! And the whole time, Moses was wanting to wash his hands of them, but the fact that he knew God's name kept him from being able to do so.

And the thing about Moses is that it was never any easier. The thing about it was that, far from being set apart for great privileges by the gift of the name, he seemed to be set apart for greater burdens. The incident at the burning bush didn't mean that he could "go directly to Go and collect \$200"; rather, it meant that from that point on, he would have to slug it out with the bad guys and the good guys, and wouldn't have a moment's peace until he drew his last breath. And that's a funny thing that Moses teaches us. If we ever get the idea that being in relationship with God means that the way is smoothed for us, that we won't have to endure what other people have to endure, that we're covered by this great insurance policy for our life, then we've got it all wrong. Moses could have had it great, staring at the sheep for years until his retirement. Being in relationship with God doesn't mean being pulled out of the world—rather it means being plunged into the world, in a more dramatic and intensely involved way than we might have managed on our own.

Consider the last days of Moses. Here Buechner tells it:

"And then, of course, there was the hardest blow of all. When he finally had it all but made, and got them as far as the top of Mount Pisgah, where the whole Promised Land stretched out before them, as far as the eye could see, God spoke up and said this was the place, all right, but for reasons which were never made entirely clear, Moses was not to enter it with them. So he died there in his 120th year, and after a month of hanging around and wishing they had treated him better, the Israelites went on in without him.

"Like Abraham before him, and Noah before that, not to mention like a lot of others since, the figure of Moses breathing his last up there in the hills, with his sore feet and aching back, serves as a good example of the fact that when God puts his finger on people, their troubles have just begun. And yet, there's not a doubt in the world that, in the last analysis, Moses, like the rest of those tough old birds, wouldn't have had it any other way. Hunkered down in the cleft of the rock once, with God's hand over him for added protection, he had been allowed to see God's glory itself passing by, and although all God let him see was the back part, it was something to hold onto for the rest of his life!"

Now, to move back to the window. The lower panels give us a good view of how the New Testament writers saw the story of Moses. Moses is viewed by the writers of the New Testament as the example of the old way in which one lived a right relationship with God. As such, Moses is the perfect forerunner of Jesus Christ. As Moses lived a miraculous infancy, so Jesus Christ experienced a childhood of miracles. John the Baptist, coming out of the wilderness to proclaim the coming of Christ, mirrors the deliverance of the people from the wilderness. And the proclamation of the law from the mountain, or the Sermon on the Mount, makes of Christ the penultimate voice of God. Now the words will be God's words, in Christ's lips, not handed down through an intermediary.

The juxtaposition of Jesus Christ and Moses is an important one. For what in Moses was partial, is in Christ complete. The depiction of a sacrifice of a bull, in the center panel, and the reference to a priest of God in the third, only point to the once-and-for-all nature of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In Christ, God reconciled the world to God's self, and thus, has done away with the need for sacrifice on the part of the people. What Moses did was to stand between God and the people, and interpret what it was that God desired, how it was that the people ought to live. What Christ does is to live before us the way that God desires. What Christ has done is to atone once and for all for the sins of God's people.

These words from the writer of Hebrews, sum up what you find depicted in the lower panels of the stained glass of Moses:

"But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption." (Hebrews 9: 11-12)

"The Building Committee declined to deal with the windows, and turned the whole project over to me [as pastor], including the raising of the approximately \$ 56,000 for their production and installation.

"Each window was 28' high and 4' wide, as I recall, and cost \$ 4,000 each. The choice of subject and text was left to me. I chose the text in the windows, some of my favorite verses that I learned by heart along with several hundred others at my grandmother's urging. They still are deeply embedded in my heart and soul. I tried to fit the general scope of Biblical story from Creation, Fall, Judgment, forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Transfiguration, being in hope born of God's promises, of new creation.

"The main purpose was to enable the sensitive worshipper to realize the moment that person stepped inside the narthex door—that a threshold had been crossed."

Today, we look at the window on Isaiah. In the upper panel, we have the stalwart figure of the prophet, who lived in Jerusalem in the eighth century B.C. Isaiah was probably related to the royal family, because he was certainly close to the kings, and took a prominent part in the conduct of foreign affairs. Isaiah lived through the brutal Assyrian invasion of 701 B.C., about which he had repeatedly warned the king.

The book which bears Isaiah's name is the premiere prophetic book of the Old Testament, and after Psalms, is the most valuable Old Testament book for the New Testament writers. Throughout the teaching and preaching of Isaiah, God is fulfilling the Hebrew meaning of the prophet's name, which is "the Lord saves." Isaiah preached between 740 B.C. and 687 B.C. During that time, the people of Jerusalem and the Davidic kings rejected his reforming ideals and acted against his advice.

I think the best way to begin making our acquaintance with Isaiah is by looking carefully at the account which he has left us of his call to be a prophet found in chapter six. This passage focuses on the one overwhelming, defining incident in his life, and is depicted in the upper panel of the Isaiah window.

Verse one opens with the words, *"In the year that King Uzziah died..."* Uzziah had ruled in Jerusalem, over the southern kingdom of Judah, for over 40 years. He had been an able and popular ruler, remaining at peace with King Jeroboam II in the north. Over the years, the two kings managed to push out the borders of their kingdoms to nearly the same extent as King Solomon's realm of 150 years before. Trade routes had expanded, new buildings had gone up, population levels had increased, and there was prosperity past anyone's expectations. But during the last few years of his life, King Uzziah was afflicted with leprosy and had to be isolated. Then, Uzziah died.

The young Isaiah must have felt the same kind of shock and disorientation which older Americans recall having felt when President Franklin Roosevelt died in 1945, or as many more felt when President John Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. *"What will happen now? What will we do without Uzziah?"*

It was with concerns like those that Isaiah headed up to the temple one day, and experienced a life-changing vision of the Lord.

"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple." (Isaiah 6: 1)

Biblical Hebrew lacks any ability to make a distinction between an inner "seeing" and the seeing of outer, photographable objects. The Israelites hardly ever seemed to have asked whether a given instance of seeing was "subjective and internal" or "objective and external." This experience of "seeing God" in the temple was the beginning of Isaiah's career as a prophet.

You may have noted that Isaiah is extraordinarily bold in his description of the vision. Israelite tradition insisted that no one could survive "seeing" God. It was impossible! But Isaiah did not avoid a straight-out statement; he says he saw the Lord himself, not the "glory of the Lord," as Ezekiel said, or "the backside of God," as Moses claimed.

And Isaiah sees in his vision, *"The Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple."* This means, of course, he saw God functioning as a king. In the year that Uzziah, the human king of Judah died, with all the attendant uncertainty of the passing of power from one monarch to another, Isaiah perceives, in a stunning vision, the ultimate authority and power of the divine king, of God himself.

The fact is, if kingship in Judah might gain people's attention, the king of Assyria could bring people to panic. There had been nothing in memory to match the brutal bullying of nations by the kings of Assyria. But if Isaiah's vision was convincing and conclusive, then it follows that the king of Assyria is not really the strongest figure in the universe; God is, sitting upon his throne. God was stronger than Assyria. He was King of kings and Lord of lords. That simple conviction would rule Isaiah's life for 40 years and more.

"Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew." (Isaiah 6: 2)

The seraphs or seraphim are winged beings, mentioned in the Old Testament only here. We really have not much of an idea how Isaiah visualized them.

One calls to the other and says:

"...Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."
(Isaiah 6: 3)

The word "holy" used three times here does not mean primarily ethical and moral purity as it tends to mean for us. Rather, the word refers simply to that which is special to the Divine One. Everything that is separated and set apart from all common, ordinary use, in order to be used for divine purposes, is considered "holy."

Scholars call Isaiah the prophet of God's holiness. And from this experience onward, Isaiah showed a deep realization of the total otherness of God. Isaiah's experience of God's holiness affected his entire prophetic career. Twenty-nine times he refers to the Lord as *"the holy one of Israel."* And it was for being a *"holy nation,"* for living lives of *"holiness,"* that Isaiah boldly claims the Lord had called Israel.

This idea of Biblical holiness is not one well understood by us moderns, I think. Biblical holiness is not something reserved for the saints, who go off to monasteries or desert hermitages, to spend days in penance and nights in prayer.

The Biblical idea of *"holiness"* is perhaps best understood in terms of its opposite, which is sinfulness. When sin enters into our lives, it dehumanizes us, enslaves us, alienates us from ourselves, our brothers and sisters, and our God. The purpose of God's intervention, as Isaiah saw it in human history, was to restore humankind to its original integrity: to its original holiness—a unity with ourselves, others, and our God.

But we don't hear the word "holy" spoken in our society very much, do we? I find it only rarely written in the papers or spoken on radio or television, or in everyday conversation. Among today's continuous waves of advertisements, we don't find the word used. I have never seen a "holy" deodorant, or a "holy" fried chicken advertised!

There are, of course, words such as Holy Bible, Holy Bread, Holy Land, Holy Scripture, Holy Matrimony... but these only appear in special religious contexts. We can manage our everyday life, can't we, without using this word "holy" at all? It has an almost esoteric sound in our "secular" environment.

If the upper panel in the Isaiah window has any meaning for us that will carry into this week, I believe it should be for us to reclaim this idea of holy living.

Traditionally, the two marks or characteristics of a holy person are joy and penitence. Joy, because we know that we are not God, and yet with God, all things are possible. Joy, for the holy person, comes in knowing that perfection rests with God alone and is not within the ability of the believer. A holy person is penitent because he or she knows that while they are not God, they also know how easy we can forget that one simple fact. A holy person knows about the darkness and the shadows which often cloud judgment.

Isaiah knew well this mixture of joy and penitence:

"And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts!' Then one of the seraphs flew at me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'" (Isaiah 6: 5-8)

One of the holy people of our time, Thomas Merton, has said that no one can become holy without being plunged into the mystery of suffering, a mystery that is insoluble by analytical reasoning.

To be on the pathway to holiness does not mean that suffering and pain will have less of an impact upon us. In fact, if Isaiah and Thomas Merton are right, then our sufferings will play a more transformational role in our lives.

This past week, various members within our congregation have been plunged into the mystery of suffering because of depression, alcoholism, major surgery, and, at my count, six families have experienced the death of a loved one.

Another good illustration of this holy plunge into the mystery of suffering comes out of the life of C.S. Lewis. More books authored by C.S. Lewis have been sold than any other Christian writer, short of the New Testament writers, and for 50 years, Lewis has been celebrated as the intellectual defender of a robust, secure Christian faith.

During the first World War, Lewis had experienced considerable suffering as a young officer in the trenches, where he had been wounded. He published a book in 1940 entitled The Problem of Pain, in which he offered some very firm and logical arguments on the subject of pain and suffering.

The book was and continues to be an enormous success, going through many editions, and is still being published.

But a number of readers found the book to be excessively smug, as though Lewis had the subject of pain and suffering well under control. One Oxford philosopher even described it as "a nasty little book" on account of Lewis' claim to secure knowledge.

A dozen years after publishing The Problem of Pain, Lewis' neat, cozy bachelor shell was cracked open by an American woman named Joy Gresham. Their relationship was popularized last year in the movie, "Shadowlands." In 1960, Joy died from cancer, and in his agony during her illness and painful death, Lewis kept a notebook which he subsequently published, entitled A Grief Observed.

That book did not appear originally under his own name, but under a pseudonym, because Lewis did not want to have the extent of grief exposed as his own. The little book is a most honest account of how deep personal loss came to shatter the security of this famous believer. Lewis, who had been full of knock-down, rational arguments to prove the truth of Christianity and its capacity for solving all problems, wrote in A Grief Observed:

"If my house has collapsed at one blow, that is because it was a house of cards... If I had really cared, as I thought I did, about the sorrows of the world, I should not have been overwhelmed when my own sorrow came. It has been an imaginary faith playing with innocuous counters labeled 'illness,' 'pain,' 'death,' 'loneliness.' I thought I trusted the rope until it mattered to me whether it would bear me. Now it matters, and I find it didn't."

Later, speaking of God, Lewis writes:

"God always knew that my temple was a house of cards. His only way of making me realize the fact was to knock it down."

What is also striking about Lewis' account of the grief over the death of his wife, Joy, and I think places him in the stream of the "Isaiah" vision of holiness, is that Lewis goes on to say that even though his superficial faith has been shattered by the loss of his wife, he would not wish in any way to have back his wonderfully happy life with her if it also meant that he had to slip back into that previous kind of faith, which was so full of his own egotism and intellectual conceit.

Such is the attraction of genuine holiness through our plunges into the mystery of suffering.

Isaiah began a tradition of prophets who understood Israel as a servant of God and whose suffering had meaning and purpose. The earliest Christians saw Jesus Christ also as a servant of God, suffering for God's purposes.

And in the middle panel of the Isaiah window, we see Jesus stripped and bound to a post. The stone wall and the barred window in the background suggest a prison or fortified place, and a Roman soldier stands ready to use a scourge. The message of this panel holds closely to Isaiah's conception of the suffering servant. The text under the middle panel is Isaiah 53: 3:

"He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity, and as one from whom others hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him of no account."

The bottom panel reminds us that Isaiah lived to see great disasters. It is quite normal during those times that Isaiah, like us, would look back to the "good old days," to the 500 or so years before, when David and Solomon were kings of Israel. David had come from Bethlehem, and from the family of Jesse. Part of Isaiah's genius was that he could see the future in the past, and the hope which that gave to the present. From the royal house of Jesse would come one upon whom the Spirit of the Lord would fully rest. The text in this panel is Isaiah 11: 1:

"And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse."

Much later, the apostle Paul was to write in Philippians 2 about the one he believed was that one:

"...at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."
(Philippians 2: 10-11)

To the prophet Isaiah, the radical idea of the Creator God coming as a suffering servant was first widely articulated and preached.

None other than our Lord Jesus Christ dignified pain and suffering by volunteering for it. He was no superman, who conveniently changed into a human costume to hide his identity. We say we believe he was fully human, which means the bullets did not bounce off. Willingly, our Lord chose a path of pain, transforming its curse into redemption. That was a pathway of holiness for Christ. My friends, those of us who wear the label of Christian are called to do no less.



"Jeremiah: A Driven Man"

(Text: Jeremiah 1: 4-10; 31: 31-34)

PRESENTED BY THE REV. DR. LEWIS R. THOMAS ON JANUARY 22, 1995

I want to begin our focus on Jeremiah with some historical background. Recall if you will that when the empire built by King David fell apart at the death of his son Solomon (ca. 922 B.C.), there remained in its place the two rival states of Israel and Judah, Israel in the north with its capitol ultimately at Samaria, Judah in the south with its capitol in Jerusalem. Of these, Israel was by far the larger and wealthier, but both were, by modern standards, incredibly tiny. The two together were no larger than one of our smaller states, such as Vermont. These two existed side by side, now at war with one another, now in peaceful alliance, for almost exactly 200 years. At that point, Israel was first to fall. Though they had fought with their neighbors repeatedly, and had on occasion been invaded and humiliated, and though their fortunes had not been unaffected by the currents of larger world affairs, they had, down to the middle of the eighth century, retained their status as independent kingdoms.

But about that time, a sudden and decisive change took place. Tiglath-pileser III (745-727) ascended the Assyrian throne and inaugurated a new phase in that country's history. Assyria's period of empire had begun; from now on she would come to conquer, occupy, and rule. As Tiglath-pileser's forces advanced westward, subduing one by one the little kingdoms there, a coalition was formed to resist him, spearheaded by the kings of Syria and Israel. They tried to get Judah to join them. But Judah, apparently preferring to pursue an independent course, refused; whereupon her confederated neighbors launched a military campaign designed to whip her into line. With that, King Ahaz of Judah panicked and appealed to Tiglath-pileser for aid. As a result, Judah became a dependency of the Assyrian empire, obliged to accede to its wishes in all matters of state, and to render to it a heavy tribute. At the same time, the little kingdom of Israel was essentially wiped off the map.

Except for relatively brief periods of fruitless rebellion against superior powers, Judah was from then on a small pawn, as regional dominance shifted from one great imposing empire to another. It seemed that Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon were continually contesting to enlarge their holdings at others' expense. Chief among the problems with all this, from the perspective of the prophets, was that conquering foreign powers always brought with them their special gods to whom they expected obeisance. And far too many of Judah's people went right along... As enough years went by, even those who intended to be loyal to Yahweh, God, must have gotten confused about what was appropriate and what was not. Morality was at a terribly low ebb.

Jeremiah's ministry apparently began at about the time that a successor to Ahaz named Josiah came to the throne in Judah. The prophet's reaction to this well-intentioned king's valiant efforts at religious reform, was one of genuine disillusionment. For he failed to see the changes of heart and attitude on the part of the people which would be essential if true, lasting reform were to be achieved, with Yahweh, God, once more the only focus of worship.

For the last time, in about 601 B.C., the tiny kingdom of Judah once again attempted to break free during a skirmish between Egypt and Babylon. It was a fatal mistake. Now Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was really aroused! By 597, he secured the total surrender of Jerusalem, and placed one Zedekiah on the throne as his vassal. Once again, many key leaders and artisans were deported—this time to Babylon.

Still agitation continued until Babylon finally had little choice but to destroy Jerusalem, execute much of the population, and ship nearly all the rest off to Babylon. She had lasted over a century longer than her cousin, Israel, to the north, but as of 587 B.C., there was no more a kingdom of Judah.

According to the Webster's Collegiate Dictionary on my shelf, the word "jeremiad" means "a prolonged lamentation or complaint." Do you care to guess from what man's name the word is derived? You guessed it! In response to the word of the Lord which would give him no rest, Jeremiah lodged loud and long complaints against every possible sin and sinner among his people:

- Rebellious kings and rulers.
- Cowardly priests and lying prophets.
- Makers of unholy alliances with pagan neighbors.
- Crafters of dumb idols.
- Worshipers of elements of nature.
- Oppressors of the poor.
- Ignorers of the needy.
- Even the general populace who allowed themselves to be led astray by these false guides.

Obedying God's directives, Jeremiah compared his fellow citizens to an unfaithful spouse, lusting after every attractive idol that they saw their neighbors pursuing. Forgetting all that God had promised and done and commanded, they went about looking for instant gratification and cheap thrills, rather than remaining committed to the One to whom they owed everything.

It seems that no one escaped Jeremiah's scathing attacks. He even lashed out at God for expecting him to be so harsh on his own kinsmen. Here's an example of Jeremiah's contesting with God:

"Oh Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, 'Violence and destruction!' For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I grow weary with holding it in, and I cannot... Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed!... Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?" (Jeremiah 20: 7-9, 14, 18)

God let Jeremiah vent such feelings every now and then, it seems. But it wouldn't be long before he'd send the prophet right back out to bear his warnings of woe again! With God, Jeremiah got away with his complaints. But the Israelites got "fed up to here" with his denouncements. At various points, they beat him and threw him in jail (chapter 37), left him to die at the bottom of a mucky cistern (chapter 38), and finally forcibly dragged him along down into Egypt—perhaps, ironically, as a kind of just-in-case good luck charm—when the last disobedient remnant fled in that direction (chapter 43). Again, they could not summon up the faith and courage to stay put and count on God to deliver them as promised. (Jeremiah had tried in vain to convince them that if they would just hang on and hold out, they would become the remnant around which God would eventually rebuild their nation.)

By the way, we don't really know what ever became of Jeremiah "way down in Egypt-land," but according to one persistent strand of tradition his own people finally got so perturbed by his harangues that they stoned him to death.

I'm hoping that this morning's presentation will stimulate many of you to read, soon, the Book of Jeremiah. As you do, here are just a few of the word pictures and symbolic objects that you will find the prophet employing (some of them will doubtless have a familiar ring):

- An unfaithful marriage partner (chapter 3 and elsewhere).
- A cast-off loin cloth rendered good for nothing by the elements (chapter 13).
- A potter having to start over when his first effort fails (chapter 18).
- A wine jar, or "earthenware jug," smashed and broken (chapter 19).
- Baskets of figs—some good, some spoiled (chapter 24).
- A yoke worn on the shoulders (chapter 27).

A note in this morning's bulletin carries the sobering quotes from Jeremiah 44, which are inscribed on the lower panels of our Jeremiah window. What we need to understand about that forty-fourth chapter is that it has to do with that portion of Jeremiah's ministry which follows the deporting of the bulk of the citizens of Judah into Babylon.

Listen to this example of the difficulty the people of Judah had in sticking with their convictions:

"Some of those permitted [by their conquerors] to remain in Judah, came to Jeremiah asking whether they should become exiles in Egypt: 'May the Lord be a true and faithful witness against us if we do not act according to everything that the Lord your God sends us through you. Whether it is good or bad, we will obey the voice of the Lord our God to whom we are sending you [to receive counsel]...' " (Jeremiah 42: 5-6a)

"But [as was the case throughout Jeremiah's ministry,] they did not really want the truth... [So, when Jeremiah didn't tell them what they wanted to hear,] they accused him of lying, and forced him, [along with] Baruch, his faithful secretary... to accompany them into Egypt [where paganism abounded.]" (This quote from Hagen Staack, Prophetic Voices of the Bible, pages 59-61.)

No doubt some of you have noticed that there is a snake or serpent protruding from the mouth of one of the characters in our Jeremiah window. Failing to find any specific reference to that in the Book of Jeremiah, I can only assume that the serpent here symbolizes the poisoning of the soul which awaits those who succumb to the lure of false gods.*

According to W.S. McCullough's article on the word "serpent," in the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible:

"It is abundantly clear from a wide range of evidence, that the snake was a symbol of deity and of fertility powers in the ancient Near East. In Egypt, where the veneration of serpents in one form or another was common, the ancient serpent goddess of Lower Egypt was the beneficent Buto or Wazit. In the form of a... cobra, she became the symbol of royalty, and she was later attached to the royal crown as protectress of the king." (Note that the Egyptian throne depicted in our window has a carved cobra as its "arms.")

Such background leads me to conclude that these parts of the window are intended to point to the folly, the evil potential, of idol worship, perhaps especially that in which the Jews engaged who fled to Egypt.

I shall conclude now with the second of our readings from Jeremiah this morning—a prophecy which we Christians believe God fully intended to fulfill in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Christ:

"The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." (Jeremiah 31: 31-34)

May it be so. Amen.

*NOTE: The word "serpent" is to be found in Jeremiah 8: 17 and 46: 22, but both seem to refer to Judah's larger, more powerful, threatening neighbors.

THE MORNING PRAYER

O God our Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer, how we marvel at your power and your wisdom, and—most of all—your love! Like a loving parent who may be nearly brokenhearted over the rebellious behavior of a beloved son or daughter, you may chastise your children, but you cannot bring yourself to give up on us whom you have called to be your own.

Help us, we pray, when we read the Scriptural account of the misdeeds and the misplaced loyalties of our forebears in the faith, not to concentrate so much on their faults that we fail to see our own sinfulness, our own unfaithfulness. We thank you for recognizing our need for forgiveness, and for making it available through the sacrificial ministry of your own Son.

Softens our hearts, we pray, so that your covenant of grace may be deeply engraved upon them, deep within us. Let that covenant be the basis on which our values are shaped, and our priorities ordered. And fill us with an insatiable desire to give witness, by word and deed, to the life-lifting impact of your grace.

Walk with us, Lord Jesus, wherever we venture—in home, or school, or shop, or office, or church, or community—that we may utilize our resources and exercise our influence in ways that demonstrate our desire that justice and righteousness prevail, and that persons everywhere may be given the opportunity to achieve their fullest potential. If we, like Jeremiah, must take unpopular positions in order to pursue our convictions, give us the courage to do so. And at the same time, help us to be very patient with those with whom we differ.

Hear now the prayers we bring in silence on behalf of others... Through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.



"Amos: Unwelcome Intruder from Judah"

(Text: Amos 5: 21-24)

PRESENTED BY THE REV. DR. LEWIS R. THOMAS ON JANUARY 29, 1995

May I ask you to open your mind's eye widely for a moment? Good! Now, picture a relatively small, young nation which is enjoying a period of unsurpassed prosperity. A nation which believes that its freedom from domination by other nations is the result of her God's determination to give her preferential treatment. A nation which believes that the very fact that she came into existence against otherwise insurmountable odds, is evidence of her God's willingness to use his power on her behalf. A nation which has lately allowed her top officials to assume increasing powers, a practice which has increasingly divided her citizenry into those with, and those without, power.

Imagine further, that within that nation, those with power and prestige begin to feel that they are in such positions because they deserve to be. The next obvious conclusion they then draw is that the poor are also getting what they deserve—they are obviously inferior in one way or another. Thus, in the nation we're imagining, those who feel destined to be the "haves" pay less and less attention to the plight of those inferior "have nots"; in fact, they often trample on the hapless poor in their greedy schemes.

Enlarge a bit more the picture that is forming in your mind, and include in that vision streams of "haves" approaching proudly their places of worship to perform the perfunctory rituals which they feel are required to keep God reminded that they are still his "fair-haired" sons and daughters.

You now have a picture of a people who have become quite completely convinced of their invincibility—a people who would not take kindly to one who began loudly proclaiming that if that nation's people did not change their ways, they would soon suffer a total collapse! And that collapse would be brought about by the very God from whose disciplines they had begun to consider themselves immune!

Now, permit me to ask you this: "Does the picture that has appeared in your mind's eye have some familiar characteristics to it?" I ask because there are those who sincerely believe that our own nation has fallen into some of these snares. And they can make a pretty good case!

But the description that I've just outlined, I've derived from the Old Testament book which bears the name of the prophet whose message it contains—Amos! His description of the nation Israel, to which he's been called as God's messenger, is far from flattering!

Israel was, in the mid-eighth century B.C., enjoying a brief period of peace and prosperity. The most obvious reason was that at that particular time there was no major dominating empire in that region of the world. But the Israelites were quick to draw untenable conclusions, based on rather selfish theology, that were bound to get them into trouble. Like a lot of nations before and after them, too much prosperity and ease were not good for them.

For the temptation, under such conditions, is for a nation to turn inward and begin to congratulate herself on the goodness she must have displayed to deserve such blessings from God. Religion in such a setting can easily become a thinly-veiled attempt to congratulate God for making such a wise choice in singling them out for special favors. And when folks get convinced that they are God's favorites, no matter what, it is easy to forget God's demands for obedience and justice.

Let me share with you a very pointed summary by Hebrew scholar Abraham Heschel, of Amos' description of conditions in the tiny kingdom of Israel at that time:

"There was pride (6: 13-14), plenty, and splendor in the land, elegance in the cities, and might in the palaces. The rich had their summer and winter palaces, adorned with costly ivory (3: 15), gorgeous couches with plush pillows (3: 12), on which they reclined at their sumptuous feasts. They planted vineyards, anointed themselves with precious oils (6: 4-6, 5: 11); their women, compared by Amos to the fat cows of Bashan, were addicted to wine (4: 1). At the same time, there was no justice in the land (3:10), the poor were afflicted, [and] exploited... (2:6-8; 5:11)"¹

And, again from historian John Bright:

"Israelite society, as Amos let us see it, was marked by flagrant injustices and a shocking contrast between extremes of wealth and poverty. The small farmer, whose economic status was marginal at best, found himself often at the mercy of the money-lender and, at the slightest calamity—a drought, a crop failure (Amos 4: 6-9)—liable to foreclosure and eviction, if not bond service. An already harsh system was made harsher by the greed of the wealthy, who took unmerciful advantage of the plight of the poor in order to enlarge their holdings, often resorting to the sharpest practices, the falsification of weights and measures, and various legal dodges to achieve their ends (Amos 2: 6f; 5: 11; 8: 4-6). In increasing numbers, the poor, who had no redress, were robbed and dispossessed."²

1. The Prophets, Abraham J. Heschel, pages 27-28.

2. A History of Israel, John Bright, pages 256-257

Again I ask: "Does any of this have a sharply disturbing, familiar ring?" (Shades of our growing concern today over the widening gap between the very well-to-do and the impoverished.)

This was the situation in which Amos, a simple shepherd from Judah to the south, was called to speak God's word in the northern kingdom, Israel. The message Amos felt compelled to deliver was that the Israelites were distorting the picture of God which they should have gotten had they remembered more carefully the experiences of their forebears. God is indeed a God of great power. But, more importantly, he is a God of righteousness. And that righteousness led God not only to support the obedient, but to lash out against iniquity and injustice and lack of compassion, wherever he found it persisting. Israel was no exception in this regard.¹

Amos also believed that, while God had chosen this particular people for a special purpose, his call must not be mistaken for divine favoritism or immunity from chastisement. On the contrary, chosenness meant being more seriously exposed to divine judgment and chastisement.²

Amos' concept of God's sovereignty is vividly illustrated by the opening chapters of the book given his name. There he speaks, on behalf of the Lord, of the destruction about to befall each of Israel's neighbors for their misdeeds. You can practically feel the excitement of the Israelites mount, as Amos points the accusing finger at each of their neighbors in turn:

- Tyre had violated a treaty, "...the covenant of brotherhood" ...
- Edom had "...pursued his brother with the sword, and cast off all pity"...
- Syria, ruled from its capitol in Damascus, had tortured and slaughtered the people of Gilead...
- And Amos recalled how Philistia, ruled from Gaza, its capitol, had carried entire communities into exile, presumably selling them into slavery in order to make some money...
- Nor did he fail to hold up the sins of the Ammonites and the Moabites.³

Surely all of these shall be punished severely! The heat of Yahweh's anger shall burst into raging flames!

Israel must have taken considerable delight in the prospects of God's retaliation upon her competitors. But Amos' tirade against the nations had not yet reached a climax! By enumerating the offenses of others first, he had his listeners spellbound. Now Amos turned abruptly to Judah and Israel, and announced God's condemnation of them, too!

Using the same formula as for the others, Amos began: "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment..."

And then he went on to speak of the rich trampling on the poor, of gross sexual abuses, of yielding to the influence of pagan neighbors, and of silencing the prophets who would rebuke them. To paraphrase:

"What kind of gratitude is this," Amos wanted to know, "to the God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and helped you to conquer this land's former inhabitants? Now not even the fleetest among you will be able to outrun the punishment that is sure to befall you. You have been eagerly anticipating the Day of the Lord because you believe that, on that day, God will triumph over all his enemies (and yours), and establish his rule in the world. But, I assure you that the Day of the Lord will be a day of judgment upon disobedience and injustice wherever it is found, including Israel!"

I appreciate Lutheran pastor Frank Barbian's comments on Amos' message at this point:

1. Phillips, Four Prophets, page 3.
 2. The Prophets, Abraham J. Heschel, page 32.
 3. The Prophets, Abraham J. Heschel, pages 29-30.

"...Amos' preaching was not very popular; it did not win majority support from his hearers. In fact, the priest Amaziah, apparently with King Jeroboam's approval, told Amos to [shut up] and go back home!"

But Amos made it clear that God had initiated his mission, and that he had no choice but to continue:

"Then Amos answered Amaziah, 'I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel"'..." (Amos 7: 14-15)

...The judging Word of God cannot be so easily silenced. God's word is not just talk; it is fact and deed. When Israel did not respond and seek good instead of evil, it got the Day of the Lord that it had so piously talked about and hoped for. But it wasn't Israel's Day of the Lord that came, but the Lord's Day of the Lord! It was a day of darkness, and not of light, a day of gloom and woe. Israel tried to avoid it, but there was no way. *"You can run, but you can't hide,"* Amos had said. *"In running away from a lion, you'll run into a bear. You will run into your home, thinking you are finally safe and can rest, but even there, God will send a snake to bite you."* (Amos 5: 2) And when the Assyrians attacked Israel a few years later, all that Amos had said came true. Samaria, the capitol, was destroyed and the inhabitants of Israel were scattered abroad. (Amos 5: 2)

At this point, I'd like to read just a few verses from the fifth chapter of Amos—the portion of this book that's perhaps the best known:

"I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of... your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream..." (Amos 5: 21-24)

What does this mean? Has Amos struck down the Hebrew ritual and cult as appropriate means of worshipping God? Taken in context, I don't believe that is his point. Rather, Amos is contending that, without being accompanied by proper conduct in the course of life, all of Israel's religious clamor and activity were like the noisy gong and clanging cymbal of which Paul later wrote. With unmistakable clarity and outspokenness, Amos showed that ritualistic "religion" can be a smoke screen whereby men and women can obscure God's true expectations and avoid serving him.

One of the foremost scholars concerned with the history of the Israelite religion is Yehezkel Kaufmann. He emphasizes the newness of Amos' insistence that social morality is a factor in national destiny:

"The new stress on morality is accompanied by a new attitude toward the cult. It was the prophets who expressed for the first time the idea that the entire Yahweh cult had no value in and of itself. God is in no way dependent on the cult... on the contrary, the cult is a manifestation of God's grace to humankind. Its purpose is to serve as a symbol and expression of the "knowledge of God." Hence, its value is conditional, not absolute. But, through the sin of humankind, even this conditional value is lost, and it becomes an empty and broken vessel, an abomination of Yahweh God.

*"Morality, on the other hand, is an absolute value, for it is divine in essence. The God who demands righteousness, justice, kindness, and compassion is himself just, gracious, kind, and compassionate. Moral goodness makes human beings share, as it were, in the divine nature. Classical prophecy [beginning with Amos] established a hierarchy of values: both cult [religious observances] and morality [obedient behavior] are God's command and part of his covenant, and both are expressions of the "knowledge of God." But while the cult is sacred only as a symbol, morality is... a reflection of the qualities of God."*¹

What is he saying? He is affirming the fact that no expression of praise for God is acceptable unless it comes from the lips of one who is, or intends to be, obedient to God. Worship is not a means of appeasing God, or of pulling the wool over God's eyes! It is no substitute for fair dealings with fellow human beings. It is no substitute for proclaiming the love and sovereignty of God to those of every nation and every condition.

Now I am not convinced that Amos was visualizing any grandiose, highly organized approach to the problems of poverty and suffering. Today we might say that what Amos looked for and didn't find in Israel was the simple willingness to care about the plight of the next fellow, especially when that person was poor, an underdog, slipping off the bottom rung of the social ladder. How similar to the insistence of Jesus that love for God and love for neighbor must go hand-in-hand...

What Amos had to say is also applicable to us Christians. As a matter of fact, our Lord quoted similar words from Isaiah during one of his denunciations of the scribes and Pharisees. It was Jesus' conviction that they were giving too much attention to detailed, man-made rules for proper religious conduct, and too little attention to the conditions of suffering people:

"...You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said, 'This people honors me with their lips. but their heart is far from me...' (Matthew 15: 8)

As we close, I'd like to ask you to ponder these several questions:

- With what attitude(s) do you approach the practice of worship?

Could your worship behavior be construed as an attempt to "nod to God," and remind him that he's on your side, and that he's made a good choice?

Do you concentrate on God's expectations for you—or do you try to bend God's will to suit your desires?

Is your attitude toward God characterized by gratitude or by greed?

- Does your day-to-day conduct make it apparent that you have given your highest allegiance to the God who insists upon grace, mercy and justice for all people?

What I've tried to do this morning is describe the attitudes of those to whom God spoke these words through Amos:

"...I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream..."

1. Yehezkel Kaufmann, The Religion of Israel, pages 366-367.

It's up to us to decide whether God's message through Amos could be apropos to our situation.

Lest you think I've forgotten all about it, let me comment very briefly now on the Amos window here in the chancel. My first observation is that, historically, it should come before Isaiah and Jeremiah. King Uzziah, during whose reign Amos served, had just died when Isaiah was commissioned.

Now, just this much about the contents of the window:

In the large upper panel, the Hand of God is calling Amos from his work as a shepherd, to the role of prophet.

The center panel portrays the terror of the fulfillment of God's warning, voiced by Amos: *"...I will send a fire upon Judah..."* (Amos 2: 5)

The lower panel emphasizes Christ's fulfillment of God's promise given through Amos, which begins: *"Seek good, and not evil, that you may live..."* (Amos 5: 14)

Jesus heeded that call so completely that he not only teaches us how to live, but offers eternal salvation to all who will, in humble faith, allow his righteousness to be the expiation for our sins.

That, my friend, is the Gospel message toward which, we believe, the entire Old Testament points. I urge you, don't let it pass you by. Amen.

NOTE: F. Buechner's attempt to contemporize Amos' message in *Peculiar Treasures* is also intriguing and instructive. Limitations of time and space prohibit its inclusion here.

THE MORNING PRAYER

Lord God, how we thank you for your persistent call—a call to realize genuine fulfillment and satisfaction in life by living as you intend. For we have become aware, in those moments when we have been at our obedient best, that it truly is more blessed to give than to receive: to give of ourselves to enrich the lives of others—whether family, friends or strangers. Please, Lord, continue to reach out to us so that we do not sink in the quicksand of selfishness and greed. For that can only lead to isolation, fear and despair.

Help us, Holy Lord, never to take for granted our gifts of time, talent or treasure, or to assume that they are something we deserve. Help us, instead, to become grateful stewards, aware that the gifts with which you have entrusted us are to be used in service to others. Surely to kill time, to waste talent, to misuse treasure, is to deny your grace and defy your will.

So, when we see pain, poverty or oppression, keep us from closing our eyes to ignore it, our mouths to protest it, or our hearts from responding to it. The alibis we use for callousness are often so flimsy we cannot even convince ourselves, and our consciences condemn us. Help us, mighty God, to truly repent and reorder our priorities rightly.

Now, as we pray for others, we offer ourselves as instruments whom you may use to help... (silent prayer).

We pray, always, in the name of Jesus who, holding nothing back, gave himself for us. Amen.



"David: Chosen of the Lord & Precious"

(Text: II Samuel 7: 1-17)

PRESENTED BY THE REV. DR. LEWIS R. THOMAS ON FEBRUARY 5, 1995

What can we say about David which even comes close to capturing the multi-faceted image of this extremely prominent Biblical character? I pondered that question at length and concluded that the best I could do would be to touch on several widely recognizable qualities he exhibited and events in which he was involved.

It all begins when the great king of Israel, Saul, falls into disfavor with God and God's spokesman, Samuel. It had to do with Saul's troops grasping, rather than utterly destroying, some of the "booty" which resulted from the defeat of the Amalekites.

Soon, Samuel journeyed to Bethlehem, at God's behest, to sanctify a man named Jesse, and to meet Jesse's well-reputed sons. The Lord having failed to nudge Samuel in the direction of any one of those sons, he asked Jesse whether this was the entire roster. The answer was, "No"; the youngest was yet in the fields with the sheep. They sent for him, for the one named David—ruddy, handsome, with striking eyes. Immediately, Samuel anointed him.

A couple of different stories are included in the Scriptures as to how David first came to Saul's attention. One has David summoned as a fine musician who could soothe Saul's troubled spirit. The other has David volunteering to take on the Philistine giant whose threats had held Saul's forces at bay. Perhaps you remember the gist of David's response to Saul, who questioned whether he was a fool to take on such a task:

"Your servant has killed both lions and bears [when they threatened my father's flocks]; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God." David said, 'The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine.' So Saul said to David, 'Go, and may the Lord be with you!'" (I Samuel 17: 36-37)

More victories were to follow the successful battle with Goliath, and the louder the people praised this young warrior, the more nervously jealous Saul became. Perhaps to keep him on his side, King Saul offered the humbled David his daughter, Michal's, hand in marriage. Then he sought a "dowry" of David which was designed to get him killed by the Philistines. But no hurdle seemed too great for David then, and he soon was married.

Saul's fears and anger continued to grow. Had it not been for his son, Jonathan, with whom David had forged a fast friendship, an early plot would have surely ended David's life.

Much of the remainder of the Book of I Samuel traces the mostly separate paths of David and Saul. While avoiding Saul's murderous intent, David amassed a significant following. But he could not bring himself to physically attack his king.

The old expression about "falling on one's own sword" describes exactly the eventual end of Saul, when the Philistines drew too close, became too threatening. Thus he followed his sons to the grave, for they all (including Jonathan) died in battle that same day.

After a period of genuine mourning, it wasn't too long before David was anointed king of Judah, and eventually of Israel as well. Seeing his expanding power and influence, the worried Philistines made a final stab at subduing him, but were thoroughly struck down. Then the previously captured, and critically symbolic, ark of the Lord, was jubilantly, victoriously returned to Jerusalem. (Some of you may remember that this was the occasion on which David got so carried away with his dancing that he earned the ire of his wife, Michal. David's response, by the way, was anything but conciliatory and

humble. At the least, today we would call it "verbally abusive.")

Which leads me to call to your remembrance another famous (or better, infamous) incident in the life of David wherein he was guilty of gross sinfulness. Here is the brief summary of it from the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible:

"David's affair with Bathsheba (II Samuel 11: 1- 12: 25), one of the best known incidents in his life, occurred during the last phase of the Ammonite campaign. For some reason, the king did not accompany the army... but remained at Jerusalem. One evening while he was walking about on the roof of his palace, his passions were aroused when he saw Bathsheba bathing. He immediately sent for her. Presently she found herself with child. Her husband, Uriah the Hittite, one of David's mercenaries, was with [David's chief general,] Joab, at Rabbah. He was summoned home at once in the hope that scandal might be averted. But Uriah was too much a man of conscience to enjoy himself at home while his associates were in the field. When David saw that his plans were thus thwarted, he sent Uriah back to Joab with his own death warrant. Joab carried out the orders of the king, and so Uriah was slain and David was free to marry his widow. If David had hoped thereby to avoid censure, he was mistaken, for his court prophet Nathan... was aware of the situation. He did not hesitate to bring the word of the Lord to the king, and it was not a pleasant one..."

Here is the Biblical description of Nathan's condemnation:

"Nathan came to David, and said to him, 'There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loathe to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, so he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.' Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.'

"Nathan said to David, You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel... '[Think of all that I have done for you, lifting you from simple shepherd to powerful king!]' Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in my sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife..."

Nathan went on to say that the son in Bathsheba's womb would die, and it did. (Their first-born son, some time later, was the famed Solomon.) David's remorse in response to Nathan's chastisement and the Lord's punishment was complete. So, apparently, was the Lord's forgiveness. But as with many famous men, David's relationships among the members of his family, notably his struggles with his sons, persisted for his lifetime.

At this point, I want to pause and point out what strikes me as perhaps the most obvious lesson to be taken from the story of God's dealings with his servant, David. While David was gifted as a poet and musician, as a warrior and general, as a military strategist, as an expansionist, as one who brought unparalleled peace and prosperity to his people, he was still not above the temptation to sin. David's deliverance from ultimate punishment, was due to his willingness to confess, to repent, to change his ways, when God summoned him to an accounting for his failures.

David the King is remembered for many reasons, but especially by us Christians because he was given the promise that the longed-for Messiah would be of David's lineage, would be his descendant.

That is why I have chosen to make the first half of the seventh chapter of II Samuel our primary Scripture passage for this morning:

"Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the King said to the prophet Nathan, 'See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent.' Nathan said to the king, 'Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you.'

"But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: 'Go and tell my servant David: "Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'" Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: 'Thus says the Lord of hosts... "I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. 'When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.' In accordance with all these words and with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David."

It is in the name and at the invitation of that famed descendant of David that we gather around the sacramental table today. Like David, we are a group of blessed people, entrusted by God with a variety of gifts. We have tried our best to employ them to his glory, but we have often failed and done quite the opposite. Our thoughts, our words, our deeds have not always been noble. No Nathan needs to confront us; our consciences are very much alive. What a privilege is ours to come and lay our burdens—our anxieties and sins—at the Master's feet. There we pray that we shall be refreshed and reborn as the result of his broken body and shed blood. Thanks be to God! Amen.

THE MORNING PRAYER

Gracious God, there are so many complex issues, both personal and social, by which we seem constantly confronted each and every day...! So many, that the temptation to cynicism and despair becomes increasingly powerful. There are days when we want to take to our beds, pull the covers tightly around us, and curl up in a fetal position—days when we are tempted to bury our heads in the sand, or build a fortress to keep others out.

But as the prophets of old reminded their peers, such self-centered seeking of isolation or ease is not an option for those who would be faithful. Like King David against the Philistines, help us, O Lord, to gird ourselves for battle with the forces of evil, in order that the poor and the helpless may not be ground into the dust. David had his serious character flaws, but he never lost sight of the fact that credit for any victories he achieved belonged entirely to you, O God. Instill in us a similar trust, that we may be ever more courageous in our quest for justice, righteousness and peace.

Lord, there are many who need our compassionate touch. Help us not to withhold it. May our deepest satisfaction be the result of the unselfish service we render in the name of our Eternal Savior and Powerful Master, even Jesus the Christ. Amen.



"A Window on Daniel"

(Text: II Samuel 7: 1-17)

PRESENTED BY THE REV. MR. ROBERT E. SLATER ON FEBRUARY 12, 1995

I would like for you to imagine that we are living on a small island. Our little island nation has a population of just those of us in this sanctuary. Our island home is a beautiful place with turquoise-blue ocean and white sand beaches. All of us are Christians, and hold membership in one church, which is located in the center of our island's one town.

We wake up one morning to face a difficult situation. During the night, 10,000 soldiers from a nearby nation have occupied our island home. They are well-armed, and located at all strategic points. They have taken over a building in our town square as their headquarters. It is across from our church. Some of the troops occupy our church, and have placed a statue for their own worship in front of our altar.

The atmosphere is electric! We are no longer permitted to possess or read the Bible. We are told that if we baptize our children, we and the child will be killed. We are all forbidden to worship or to take part in any Christian observances.

The ruler of this foreign country insists that all citizens on our island revere him as the incarnation of deity, and he has named himself, "The Inspired One." In our native tongue, which the brutal invaders cannot understand, we say to one another that he is not the "inspired one," but without doubt, "The Insane One"! This savage madman insists and instructs that one of the animals from his country be offered as sacrifice on the new altar now located in our church. He also requires that each one of us eat a portion of that sacrifice, in order to indicate submission to his rule.

How would we meet that situation? We could not immediately rise up in open revolt; because we would be wiped out very quickly. We cannot shout our protests in the town square; a bullet would bring our speech to a swift conclusion.

Most likely, some would go underground, to encourage nationalistic fervor and opposition to the occupying forces. Perhaps an underground newspaper would be produced. And in this newspaper, stories would be published which were meaningful to our side, but unintelligible to those on the other side.

Those writing in the underground newspaper would not even sign their real names to any articles. But they may sign names that would make sense to us because they were revolutionary heroes, such as "Paul Revere," or "Betsy Ross." They would tell stories about our nation's history which, in reality, spoke to our current situation. The punch line of many of those articles would be, "Do not yield! Stand firm! Deliverance will come soon!"

The reason for this imaginary journey is that, for many Biblical scholars, the Book of Daniel is best described as underground literature, written to urge pious Jews to remain loyal to the faith of their fathers and mothers during the persecution of Greek ruler Antiochus Epiphanes.

Antiochus was a brutal man, bent upon destroying Judaism, and persuading all Jews to embrace Hellenism. He actually did place an altar to Olympian Zeus in the outer court of the Jerusalem temple, and sacrificed a pig on it! Antiochus' nauseating tactics spawned the Maccabean Revolt in 166 B.C.

The majority of contemporary scholars believe that the Book of Daniel was finally written during this period of severe Jewish persecution. And stories which reached all the way back to another time of exile, during the years in Babylon, became extremely significant, as the Jews resisted the oppression of the Greeks.

The legacy of Daniel, one of the Jewish heroes during the Babylonian exile, provided helpful mentoring for those in the Maccabean Revolt. Daniel had a long and distinguished career. He seemed to have been blessed with great vitality to an advanced age.

We first read of him as a young man among the captives brought from Jerusalem to Babylon by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar. He was chosen to serve in Nebuchadnezzar's palace. And serve in the king's palace David did, for more than 60 years.

Like Winston Churchill, whose career in the House of Commons spread over six decades... like Golda Meir, and David Ben-Gurion, who had led the struggling nation of Israel while they were in their 70's... like Conrad Adenauer, whose German countrymen called him "the old man," because he was over 80 and still serving as president... like those outstanding persons, whose prominence lasted for scores of years, Daniel enjoyed a long and distinguished career.

It began during the heyday of the Babylonian empire, about 606 B.C. It ended under the Persians, who conquered the Babylonians in about 539 B.C., and created the largest empire the world had ever seen to that point.

But Daniel is known not so much for his age, but for his character and his confidence in God. His extraordinary abilities marked him as one of the great persons of Biblical history. Daniel was a man of prayer and a man of action. And what a wonderful hero he was!

In the upper portion of our Daniel window, we see him in a pensive mood. He may be portrayed as in prayer, because it seems that he has a prayer shawl over his head.

The middle panel recalls the story of the fiery furnace. And the story represented in the lowest panel is surely among the best remembered in the Old Testament. It is recounted for us in Daniel, chapter six. The lion's den experience comes as a result of Daniel's act of civil disobedience.

The particular part of this story which I would like for us to focus on is Daniel's experience of prayer in this incident. We know from the text that prayer was an essential part of Daniel's life. A new law, rigged up by Daniel's enemies, forbade praying to anyone but the King of Persia!

"All the presidents of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counselors and the governors are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an interdict, that whoever prays to anyone, divine or human, for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions."
(Daniel 6: 7)

And Daniel's courageous response of civil disobedience was equally strong and clear:

"Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously." (Daniel 6: 10)

Life without prayer would be life without living. That was Daniel's crucial decision. From Daniel's decision and action, I believe, we can learn lessons which strengthen and steady us.

For most of us, it is hard to pray. It is even more difficult to pray regularly. Most begin with good resolutions, and discover that we get busy, and time for prayer is the first to get cheated, perhaps gradually, perhaps all of a sudden, in the rush of some particularly busy period. And, at bottom, the real problem we have with prayer is that we simply do not pray enough.

Prayer is an act of conversation with God. And it is a mystery at best. We don't see a face; we don't hear an audible voice; we don't feel a physical touch. Yet we are supposed to converse. Answers often come slowly, when they come at all. And it is almost impossible to tell whether we are being heard at the time we pray.

Yet despite all those problems, we have no adequate reasons not to pray. If prayer gives us problems, reluctance in praying, absence of prayer, refusal to pray, have to be the worst problems of all.

Not only in the Book of Daniel, but there is a good deal of other Biblical evidence to indicate that prayer should be a carefully nurtured habit, as well as a wonderfully spontaneous expression.

The world of athletics can provide us a good illustration here. At times we have seen great athletes rise to superior heights. One picture in my mind's eye is of Hall-of-Fame centerfielder, from the San Francisco Giants, Willie Mays, climbing the fence one afternoon in right center field. Leaping and clutching at the fence, he managed to snatch the baseball just before it left the park. Willie then tumbled into a heap with another outfielder, but still managed to hold the ball for the out. It was a superb play at a crucial time.

But that outstanding play was only possible because of the sound habits that Willie had followed throughout the years. He had kept himself trim; his reflexes were maintained to be sharp; his natural instincts had been honed to a fine edge by endless hours of practice. He could make the big play, because he had been faithfully executing the less important plays all along the way. He was in the habit of playing well.

Even if we are not great athletes, our muscles need toning. Just walking, climbing stairs, and bending over to do our chores require good conditioning. If you have ever had to spend a couple of weeks immobilized in bed, you find out very quickly how our muscles atrophy without being used. We must continually discipline our bodies even if we are not athletes.

Likewise, our prayer life requires that kind of discipline and dedication. Then we will be ready for the high emergencies, the strong challenges that call for us to be at our best in prayer.

We know that anything worth doing requires practice and conditioning. And prayer is no exception. Looking at the experience of the prophet-statesman-hero Daniel can be of help to us. In this famous lion's den story of Daniel, I think, two lessons stand out that can encourage and direct us as we better learn to pray. First, we must believe that prayer is essential. And secondly, we must set aside fixed times for prayer.

Daniel had been appointed one of three presidents whom King Darius had set up over his Persian empire. In fact, the king had greater plans for Daniel:

"Soon Daniel distinguished himself above all the other presidents and satraps because an excellent spirit was in him, and the king planned to appoint him over the whole kingdom." (Daniel 6: 3)

These plans for Daniel's promotion set the stage for jealousy on the part of the other officials. Search as they would, they could find no legitimate grounds for complaint against Daniel. They finally settled on a plot that would get Daniel in trouble, because of his religious practice of prayer.

But Daniel believed that prayer was essential:

"Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously. The conspirators came and found Daniel praying and seeking mercy before his God." (Daniel 6: 10-11)

Daniel's agenda in praying shows how essential he believed prayer to be. Thanksgiving, petition, and supplication were part of his regular pattern of prayer. Thanking God for special blessings, and asking for special help and mercy, were basic ingredients of prayer for Daniel.

They were basic ingredients of his praying because they were essential elements in his living. Daniel knew, as we all must know, that many blessings come our way for which we could never be responsible. None of us gets only what we deserve. When we recognize that God regularly blesses us with his grace, and let that truth seep into our hearts, thanksgiving becomes a daily experience.

So do petition and supplication. Daniel knew, as we all must, that problems beyond our capacity to handle are often part of our everyday life. Difficulties are hurled at us regularly. Our human resources do often run thin; our energies do flag; our minds boggle at the size of our problems; emotions can be stretched tight on the rack of anxious relationships. Pray we must, asking God regularly to intervene, begging him either to change the circumstances or give us the courage and strength to put up with them. Prayer is not an option. Life itself demands it.

Daniel's persistence in prayer also showed how essential he believed prayer to be. He was not a wild revolutionary. He was a highly responsible officer of the land, staunchly committed to the laws of the empire. But here was a law he had to break. He did not enjoy civil disobedience, but his conscience insisted on it in this situation. For Daniel, prayer was essential.

It has been quite interesting to watch the 10 o'clock news on Channel 4 this past week. There was a three-part story on prayer and healing. Evidently, our federal government is studying the power of prayer! In 1994, 43 grants were given out by the National Institute of Health to do research on prayer and healing. Some of the most interesting discoveries, so far, have been that there is a link between prayer and recovery.

Now, I don't believe that scientific research will ever prove beyond a shadow of a doubt the effect or the power of prayer. Prayer simply does not march to the drumbeat of the rules of reason. But it is interesting to see many in the scientific community revisiting the power of prayer and how essential it is to health and wholeness. Daniel learned that lesson early, and it served him well when he was thrown in with the lions. None of us have faced, like Daniel did, lions of the animal kingdom, but we all know, too well, the struggle with other lions just as real—the lions of stress and security, the lions of evil and expectation.

A second lesson which Daniel teaches us is that prayer was not something that he did on the run. His example here in chapter six is significant for us. He set aside a regular place for prayer, in the upper chamber, with its windows open toward Jerusalem, the city which symbolized for him God's presence with his people.

Daniel assumed a regular posture in prayer—down on his knees in contrition and concentration.

Daniel followed a regular schedule of prayer—three times a day according to Jewish custom. The Old Testament creed, *"Hear O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord,"* was traditionally repeated morning, noon and night, in obedience to God's command of Deuteronomy 6: 6-7, which goes:

"Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise."

I think from Daniel's example come several practical suggestions for us if we want to practice a rhythm of prayer. Morning prayer, for many, is a time of praise and thanksgiving. Our prayers of thankfulness can be for health and safety, home and friends, strength to work, or grace to suffer. We can then commit our day to God's loving care. We may want to ask God to guide our steps, to guard our words, to strengthen our love, to encourage our hearts. For those who take prayer seriously, like Daniel, no day begins without a conscious expression of tuning in to God's presence and reality through praise and commitment.

Daniel also teaches us that we should let no day end without confession and intercession. Perhaps we need to make it a habit to review each day and to ask God to forgive what we have mishandled or misspoken. Quiet reflection on the course of each day's activities can assist us and prevent the repetition of our miscues. Another suggestion, which I offer and has been helpful to me and others, is to mentally recall the people met or talked to during the day, and mention them specifically in prayer. That kind of habit will keep our prayers from becoming ingrown, and self-centered.

But who would feel comfortable treating Jesus that way? Was he human? Yes, most certainly! But far more than that, he is the very Son of God! Far be it from me to treat him as I would a prophet or an apostle!

Therefore, this sermon, more than the others which tended to focus on the characters portrayed in the windows, will be an attempt to delve more deeply into the symbolism of which the window appears to be chock-full. So let us begin. Or to be a bit more accurate, "Let's take it from the top!"

The very first thing to capture our eyes at the very top of this window are symbols of Christ's divinity. If you look carefully, you'll see a triangle and a bright red circle overlapping as a backdrop for the head of the Christ figure. The triangle has long symbolized the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit; the circle, having no beginning or ending, refers to the eternal divinity of this triune God.

I find it inappropriate to comment on the facial features of any of the figures in the windows; they obviously cannot be anything but the product of the artist's imagination. There are not even any faded taintypes found in the back of grandma's dresser drawer to offer anyone a hint!

So, we move on to the beautiful white dove, a clear symbol of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Holy Trinity. While this Spirit may summon others to the service of God, in Christ, the Spirit dwells completely. Perhaps your mind goes back as mine does to the Biblical account of Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan. The Gospel of Matthew has it this way:

"Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.' Then [John] consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'" (Matthew 3: 13-17)

Not only was Jesus guided, empowered, comforted by that Spirit throughout his earthly ministry, but I also cannot help being reminded of his promise to his followers that when he finally was removed from their midst, the same Spirit would come to them and remain in and among them forever. This record of the promise is found in the 14th chapter of John's Gospel:

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe..." (John 14: 25-29)

The most memorable fulfillment of the promise is set forth by Dr. Luke in the second chapter of Acts; it happens on the day we call Pentecost.

When you look closely, perhaps after this service, you will find a symbol in this window which will gladden the hearts of the ecologists among us. For Jesus is standing on what appears to be a green globe. The globe reminds us of passages such as this one from the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

"God put [the immeasurable greatness of his] power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And God has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." (Ephesians 1: 20-23)

Key to this central window is the central text assigned to it by Dr. Donald Stewart, pastor of this church at that time and the theologian behind this phenomenal project. It is a very prominent text within the worldwide family of Christian faith. It is found in the second chapter of Ephesians and reads thus from the New Revised Standard Version:

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2: 8-9)

In terms of church history, the most prominent figure whose life and ministry were most deeply affected, most sharply transformed, by concentration on this passage was the great Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther. A scholarly priest, emotionally plagued by his inability to achieve perfect obedience to God's will, he landed on this text and lived with it until it came alive within him. If only Christ is perfect, and only Christ's grace is sufficient to deliver anyone from the consequences of sin and the power of death, what have we to dread? Not only that, but why should the Church pretend that it had means at its disposal to open the pathway to heaven? What is needed for eternal salvation is faith and trust and a desire to live in grateful response! So, Luther felt compelled to speak out boldly against what he saw as the abuses of the Church by which he had been nurtured all his life. He had no intention of harming or leaving the Church, but of transforming it with proper theology. But to no one's surprise, his protests were not happily received....

Still, this central passage is one which should cause us all to rejoice:

"For by grace you have been saved through faith... It is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast."

But now let us continue our journey downward through the stained glass window.

You will note upon examination that there is a sturdy brown cross below the Christ figure, which merges at its top with that green globe of which we have spoken. On the arms of that cross a green serpent is draped—whether dead or alive does not seem crucial—as a traditional symbol of evil and sometimes even of idolatry. The important thing is that evil has done its worst and the cross is now empty of its intended victim. The victim has become the victor!

In the background of the cross, three small red stars of hope begin to brighten the dark sky, while in the foreground two kneeling representatives of the human race reach upward, as though pleading for deliverance. Though no flames are portrayed, are they reaching from Satan's unholy realm? Remember this verse from Romans, chapter six:

"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6: 23)

If you can force your eyes to move downward from this riveting scene, you will find next what appears to be a large, blue circular "plate." In ecclesiastical circles, blue is often used to symbolize the color of heaven, even of steadfastness and constancy. Overlaying this plate (or might it be the top view of a chalice?) is a heavy Greek cross, where all sides are of equal dimensions. In such a setting, the message seems to be that the cross of Christ is stable as the heavens, rock solid, not subject to change. This beloved verse from the Book of Hebrews leaps to mind at this point:

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." (Hebrews 13: 8)

Now we move to the third and lower panel. Portions of two important passages are displayed there:

"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." (Ephesians 2: 13-14)

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (John 3: 16)

And how fitting these passages are, since the focus of this lower panel is upon Christ's self-sacrifice. From a heart filled with a burning devotion to God the Father's will, blood flows as the spear of violence and rebelliousness pierces it unmercifully. The stream of blood thus produced flows into a font from which four broad streams pour forth. This blood from the eternal heart of God's love holds the power to cleanse and renew, to heal and redeem.

Any time I think of the cleansing quality of Jesus' blood, I am reminded at once of a portion of the very first chapter of the Book of Isaiah as the prophet pleads with his people to repent or perish:

"Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Come now, let us [reason together], says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." (Isaiah 1: 16-20)

The disciples of the Risen Christ found this cleansing agent in the redeeming, saving, life-giving power of what Jesus called the blood by which his new covenant of grace was sealed. This passage from Paul's letter to the Church at Rome refers to that shed blood:

"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life." (Romans 5: 6-10)

It is, of course, fitting that the Christ window be placed at the very center of the apse, at the junction where Old Testament (covenant) gives way to New Testament (covenant). The characters to your left looked forward to the coming of God's Messiah; those pictured to the right looked back upon Jesus' birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection, and found that Messiah in him. They looked back in an attempt to discern the eternal significance of all he said and did, and invited others to join them in placing their whole faith and trust in him. *"Surely,"* they concluded with the Roman guard who presided over the crucifixion, *"Surely, this man was the Son of God!"*

We Western Protestant Christians do not worship symbolic representations of God. But I daresay that the hearts of many worshippers have been lifted as we have quietly gazed upon this window and the message of grace and love which it bears.

So may it be for generations to come. Amen.

Applying this to Matthew's Gospel makes the Sermon on the Mount a part of the extended introduction to the passion narrative rather than the centerpiece of the Book.

Having said that, it remains true that Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount (most of the content of which can also be found in Luke) is greatly revered by many Christians. It has an ethical, moral flavor with served as a great counterbalance to those of Matthew's era (and perhaps many of our own contemporaries, too!) who would claim that accepting Jesus as Savior and Lord is all that is required of them. Matthew makes it very clear that Gospel and ethics, faith and morality, must go hand-in-hand. The concluding warning of the Sermon on the Mount sounds the note that will dominate this Gospel:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." (Matthew 7: 21)

I would briefly invite you to remember that in our focus on Mark's work last week, we spoke of a body of unwritten material upon which Mark drew as he wrote: there were the basic statements of belief which constituted the "core message" of the Christian faith; besides that, we concluded that there would surely have been circulating, also, stories about Jesus and what he did, along with a growing collection of significant words (sayings) which Jesus uttered.

It is generally assumed that Matthew (and Luke, also, for that matter) drew on Mark's writing and upon this growing collection of stories about Jesus—his words and deeds—which many scholars have come to refer to simply as "Q." By the way, this Gospel writer's dependence upon the Gospel of Mark helps solidify the opinion that Matthew the Gospel writer is not likely to have been the tax-collector-become-disciple who was among Jesus' first twelve apostles.

The writer of this Gospel was far more likely to have been a later Christian of Jewish origin who wrote for a church that contained both Gentile converts and Christian Jews. This would further suggest that his writing was done not in Jerusalem, but in one of the many cities to the west to which the Jews had by this time migrated.

We may not know much about the actual author, but it is clear that:

"The 'mixed state of the church' causes him great concern; there are too many in the church whose lives do not conform with their confession. The purpose of his writing is to convince Christians that a genuine faith in Christ must be demonstrated in daily obedience to the way of life he proclaimed. Faith and ethics, Matthew insists, are two sides of the same coin, or the coin is counterfeit." (From Douglas Hare's Commentary on Matthew in the Interpretation Series, page 2)

Last week, I furnished for you a widely accepted outline of Mark's Gospel, breaking it into five significant sections. This morning, though the book is longer, I'm spelling out just three main sections:

1. The Person of Jesus the Messiah (including genealogy, birth story and baptism).
2. The Proclamation, by Word and Deed, of Jesus the Messiah (beginning at chapter 4, verse 17).
3. The Suffering, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus the Messiah (beginning at chapter 16, verse 21).

When you read the Gospel of Matthew, you will notice that the last two sections open with the words, ***"From that time on, Jesus began..."***—perfect words with which to introduce a transition from one major segment to another.

As is the case in Mark's Gospel, the basic turning point or "hinge" in Matthew's writing is Peter's confession and the subsequent passion announcement. Here it is from chapter 16, verses 13-21:

"Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven...'

"Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

There are many passages, some fairly long, some comparatively short, which are unique to Matthew's Gospel—i.e., not included either by Mark or by Luke. One rather widely familiar one is the Parable of the Final Judgment with which the 25th chapter concludes. You will recognize it as soon as I quote these famous words of our Lord:

"...For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

You will remember that when the surprised ones whom he credited with such compassionate ministry asked where and when they saw and aided him, Jesus answered:

"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me."

Thus does Matthew insist that to minister to the hurting is to minister to Christ himself.

It's easy to see how this ties in with Matthew's emphasis upon the inadequacy of faith proclaimed, unless that faith results in obedient action. Nowhere in the Scriptures is it put more succinctly than in the Epistle of James:

"Be doers of the Word and not hearers only." (James 1: 22)

And Matthew pursued that theme.

Permit me now to read another parable which is unique to Matthew's Gospel—one which is probably not so well remembered by so many:

"Then Peter came and said to Jesus, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt."

"But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

"When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

"So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (Matthew 18: 21-35)

Here Peter asks a question which addresses a very human problem from a human perspective. He is answered by a parable which grounds forgiveness in the nature of God:

"A... parable tells of an Oriental sultan who conducts an audit of the operations of his ministers of state and provincial governors ('servant' or 'slave' was used of all administrators, whether 'free' or not). It is discovered that one, perhaps the [designated overseer] of a wealthy province, has embezzled an immense amount of tax revenue... Restitution is impossible. Rather than simply executing the scoundrel, the sultan determines to inflict a more degrading and protracted punishment; the man and his wife and children will be put on the block and sold into slavery... (This detail would indicate to a Jewish audience that the story is about Gentiles; Jewish law did not countenance the sale of a wife for her husband's debts.) The embezzler pleads for time to make restitution—a desperately illusory proposal. In response, the king displays the whimsical eccentricity of a despot: he abruptly reverses his decision and lets the villain off scot free!

"In the second scene, the central figure changes his role. He is not now a debtor but a creditor. A 'fellow slave'—that is, another member of the king's far-flung administration—is delinquent on a small loan...

"The debtor begs an extension, using the same words as his counterpart in the first scene. The difference, of course, is that in this instance the promise to repay is credible. The pardoned embezzler stands on his rights and tolerates no breach of the original contract. He takes legal action to have the delinquent thrown into debtors' prison.

"The third scene is the same as the first. Other administrative officials, appalled by the embezzler's harsh treatment of his debtor, have reported the incident, and the king has summoned the pardoned criminal to stand again at the bar. The cruel creditor is addressed as a 'wicked [or mean-spirited] slave'...

"Although the story focuses on the heartless behavior of the pardoned criminal, the theological center is the astounding magnanimity of the king. So it is with the kingdom of heaven. Those who wish to be part of that kingdom must imitate the incalculable patience and generosity of its sovereign...

"It is a mistake, however, to think of unlimited forgiveness simply as a matter of the imitation of God. Who is capable, by the mere exercise of the will, of becoming 'perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect?' We are driven back to the [very] beginning of [this chapter]. Those who wish to enter the kingdom of unlimited forgiveness are without hope unless they turn and become like children. Only utter dependence on our heavenly Parent will enable us to transcend [typical] human [responses]... in dealing with those who sin against us. [We are] to manifest instead something of God's own way of dealing with sinners.

"We are to hear the parable's conclusion in accordance with its intent: it solemnly warns us that we must fervently pray for strength to resist the temptation of getting even with those who have hurt us and for grace to reflect the majestic generosity of the kingdom of heaven.

"Unlimited forgiveness is not to be confused with sentimental toleration of hurtful behavior... [The parable] cannot be misconstrued as condoning evil. It does, however, serve as a corrective against a too zealous application of [righteous judgment]. Yes, offenses are to be confronted, but only in a spirit of gentleness (Galatians 6: 1). Even when dealing with the stubbornly unrepentant, we must forswear vindictiveness and, by God's grace, give evidence that we are ready to extend forgiveness because we ourselves have been humbled by God's forgiving love."
(From Douglas Hare's Commentary on Matthew in the Interpretation series, pages 216-219.)

Let's take a few moments now to prepare you for your up-close look at the beautiful window which bears Matthew's name. When you compare it to the Mark window, you may notice one glaring difference: While the middle and bottom panels of the Mark window move quickly to the end of Jesus' earthly sojourn, these panels in the Matthew window do just the opposite. They highlight the birth story (which Mark, for whatever reason, chooses not to include). One shows the angel Gabriel with Mary and is captioned with a portion of Gabriel's pronouncement to Joseph: *"He shall save his people from their sins."* (Matthew 1: 21) The bottom panel recalls the visit of those mysterious Wise Men (or Three Kings) from the east. The words included were among those they spoke to persons in Jerusalem of whom they inquired as to the whereabouts of the child born King of the Jews: *"For we have seen his star and have come to worship..."* (Matthew 2: 2)

I close now with this brief excerpt from Sherman Johnson in The Interpreter's Bible:

"Why did laymen and leaders in the house-churches of the Greco-Roman world read Matthew so avidly? Partly because of its completeness. Not only did it contain practically all the narrative material of Mark, [but] to this it added accounts of Jesus' infancy and resurrection appearances, and the fullest collection of his ethical teaching then available."

May God bless and inspire each of you as you take time to re-acquaint yourselves with the Gospel of Matthew. Amen.

THE MORNING PRAYER

Gracious God, once more we pause to thank you for all that you have done for all humanity in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. You are our source of comfort and reassurance when fear and dread would conspire to overwhelm us. You are our source of direction when we feel confused and perplexed. You are our constant source of challenge when we are tempted to care only about ourselves, ignoring the needs of others.

We thank you for faithful followers who have heeded your very special call to prepare and preserve through the generations, the Biblical record of your relationship to humanity. Grant us the courage, we pray, to truly listen to the "still, small voice" of your Spirit as it calls us to serve you according to our abilities. For in responding to your call we shall find purpose, satisfaction, and peace. And the hurting will be lifted up by our caring.

Keep us reminded continually, great God, that the genuineness of our faith is suspect, unless and/or until it leads us to moral, ethical, compassionate daily behavior.

In the spirit of those who genuinely want to help, we lift our prayers in silence now for those whose special needs are especially on our minds and hearts today... Touch them, O Lord, as each has need; touch them—perhaps through us—as we yield ourselves once more to you. In the name and for the sake of Christ Jesus we pray—and live. Amen.



"Mark and The Good News"

(Text: Isaiah 53: 4-7; Mark 1: 1-13; Mark 8: 27-38)

PRESENTED BY THE REV. DR. LEWIS R. THOMAS ON FEBRUARY 19, 1995

While our sermon series is an attempt to focus upon the Biblical characters featured in our stained glass windows, in most cases it is hardly possible to separate the person from the Biblical book which bears his name. So a character study becomes something of a book study. That is certainly the case with Mark, for whom what is generally assumed the first of the New Testament Gospels is named. (By the way, it's because Mark's was likely the first Gospel written, that I've skipped Matthew for today...)

I propose to begin by attempting to define what we mean when we use the term "Gospel" (with a capital "G"), in phrases such as "the four Gospels." Professor A.M. Hunter is helpful here:

"Gospel, a fine old English word which means 'God story,' or 'good story,' translates the Greek word 'evangelion.'

"Originally, 'evangelion' meant the reward given to a person who brought good news. Then it came to mean the good news itself. Then, [with regard to] the New Testament... it came to signify the Good News proclaimed by and centering in Jesus Christ. Later still, it came to be applied to... [those selected] 'memoirs' of Jesus [which were included by the Early Church in the official canon of Holy Scripture.] ...This last usage [is the one we employ] today. By the Gospels, we mean written records of the Good News which came into the world with the coming of Christ.

"But, the Good News was being proclaimed in the world long before there was any written record of it. In the first generation of Christians (roughly A.D. 30-60), there was no written Gospel, but there was a [clear, essential message]. ...And thanks to the labors of modern scholars, we are now able to get a very good handle on its contents.

"A careful comparison of the early speeches in Acts (see particularly Acts 10: 36-43) with certain passages in Paul's letters, where clearly he is handling traditional material (see particularly I Corinthians 15: 3ff.), yields a common outline of the [core] message which formed the earliest version of the Good News. [That basic outline,] of course, [was quite naturally] filled in by the earliest [propagators of the faith] with [additional] stories about Jesus. Of these, there were no lack, for many still lived who had seen and heard Jesus; and in all the centers of early Christianity—Jerusalem, Antioch, Caesarea and Rome—there must have grown up cycles of stories about Jesus which [faithful adherents] passed from one to the other...

(Incidentally, I have used many of the elements which most scholars seem to have concluded were basic to all early Christian proclamation, to form our Affirmation of Faith this morning.)

"[And] what about the teaching of Jesus? Well, it is certain to be true that to the core message of Christianity, there were added not only stories about Jesus, but memorable sayings of this One who 'spoke as no one had ever spoken...' We know that... these sayings [were treasured] for the guidance they supplied for Christian life and practice. St. Paul, for example, could quote 'words of Jesus,' to settle hard questions in his churches (e.g., I Corinthians 7: 10, 11: 23ff., and Acts 20: 35). And eventually, a collection of these sayings was compiled to act as a guide to Christian behavior for those who had become Christians... So [it was that quite a collection of]... materials took shape during the generation that followed the crucifixion and resurrection.

"[But, by the time a generation had passed following Jesus' death and resurrection,] it became increasingly important that the facts about Jesus should be [committed to written form], before the time should come when there would be nobody left who could say, 'I remember Jesus Christ as a man. I heard him say... I saw him do...' Besides, converts were flocking into the young churches: converts who needed instruction in the Christian faith, who wanted to know more about him whom they called Lord and Master... Finally, with the need came the man. That man was Mark.'

So much for a beginning effort to get a grasp of the general need for the book he wrote. It's time now to say some things about who Mark was. I am going to present here what appear to be the most widely-accepted assumptions about his identity.

Mark was his surname (Acts 12: 12, 25; 15: 37); his first name was John, by which alone he is designated in Acts 13: 5, 13. His mother, Mary, [apparently enjoyed] comfortable circumstances, and her house in Jerusalem was one of the meeting places of the Christians of that day (Acts 12: 12-17); Mark was also the cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4: 10). (A variety of accounts related to Paul's many missionary travels testify to the fact that both Barnabas and Mark, at various points along the way, journeyed and labored alongside Paul. One can also get the impression that the three did not always see eye-to-eye, and thus separated from each other from time to time.)

Certain references in the Book of Acts also indicate that Mark and Peter had a close relationship; in fact, some speculate that Mark may have been one of Peter's early converts. To what extent Mark, the Gospel writer, may himself have followed about and listened to Jesus, we do not really know.

The next logical question might be: *Where did Mark write his Gospel? Not only does tradition say that it was written "in the region of Italy," but... there is New Testament evidence that Mark was with both Paul and Peter in Rome. The contents of the Gospel [certainly support] the view that it was written in Rome. A study of Paul's Epistle to the Romans demonstrates that the Church in Rome was predominantly Gentile, and Mark clearly writes with Gentile readers in view. Not only does he use a great many transliterated Latin words like "centurio," "speculator," "legion," "denarius," etc., but he [takes] great pains to explain Jewish customs and ways of life for the benefit of his readers [who knew little about them] (7:3f.; 14:12; and 15:42). Finally, he quotes the actual Aramaic words which Jesus used on certain occasions, as e.g., "talitha cumi," "ephphatha," and "abba," but he always carefully translates them for readers who presumably knew little of Semitic language.*

And when was Mark's Gospel written? *The ancient historian Irenaeus says that it was after the deaths of Peter and Paul that Mark wrote his Gospel. It is generally accepted that Peter and Paul were martyred during the [period of] persecution [carried out by Nero] which followed the great fire in Rome in A.D. 64. On the other hand, the Gospel seems to have been written before the Fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. [We are, then, led to conclude that Mark wrote between 65 and 70 A.D.] The readers whom Mark had primarily in mind were, no doubt, the Christians in Rome who were then going through [that] time of bitter suffering and persecution. They would be heartened to read in Mark's Gospel that their suffering was not unforeseen and unexpected, for Jesus their Lord had not only predicted tribulation for his disciples, but had himself drained the cup of suffering to the dregs for their redemption.²*

In the worship bulletin, I have printed the bare-bones kind of outline* into which the Gospel of Mark is often broken. You may find it useful when you take time at home to read through this shortest of the four Gospels. In the interest of time, I'm going to elaborate briefly on only the last two of the five sections.

The last main section (and note how long it is!) describes the Passion, the Crucifixion, and its shining sequel—the Resurrection!

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1. The Gospel According to Saint Mark: A Commentary, A.M. Hunter, pages 15-17.
 2. The Gospel According to Saint Mark: A Commentary, A.M. Hunter, pp. 19-20.

* The Gospel falls into five parts:

1. Prologue: Before The Ministry (1: 1-13).
2. The Galilean Ministry (1: 14 through 8: 26).
3. The Journey to Jerusalem (8: 27 through 10: 52).
4. Jerusalem: Death and Resurrection (11: 1 through 16: 8).
5. Epilogue (By Another Hand) (16: 9-20).

In it are to be found all the events which we associate with Holy Week: the Triumphal Entry and the Cleansing of the Temple; the teaching in the Temple courts; and the Anointing at Bethany. Finally, [that] Thursday night, Jesus hosts the Last Supper in an upper room in Jerusalem, endures the agony of Gethsemane, is arrested, tried and condemned. On Friday morning, he is lifted up on a cross, and that afternoon he dies a terrible death. Some hours later, Joseph of Arimathea, with the consent of Pilate the Roman Governor, buries Jesus' body in a rock tomb. It is Friday evening, and the story of Jesus seems to be at an end.

But NO; there is an amazing SEQUEL! On the Sunday morning [as we now call it], some women going to anoint Jesus' body find the grave empty, and a mysterious "young man" declares: "*He is not here; he is risen!*" Awe-stricken, the women flee from the tomb...

The Epilogue: What appears to be a great majority of Biblical scholars believe that at 16: 8, the authentic text of Mark's Gospel breaks off abruptly with the words, "*For they were afraid...*" The Epilogue, it is therefore assumed, is by another and later hand. (Did Mark mean to end his Gospel at 16: 8? Or was he interrupted? Or, likeliest of all, was the last sheet of the papyrus-roll accidentally torn off?) In any case, The Epilogue tells how the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples and commanded them to preach the Gospel to all creation.¹

Let us consider for a moment what might be called the thrust of Mark's Gospel:

"Mark writes for people who already believe, instead of the ones who need [to be converted] and therefore, it's who Jesus was rather than what he said, that Mark's book is bursting with—who he was and what he did with what little time he had. He was 'the Son of God,' that's who he was! Mark says it [very plainly] in the first sentence of his Gospel so nobody will miss it [1: 1]. And [later he observes that Jesus] came 'not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' (10: 45) That's what he did; [and that's what brought about his demise]. [One could say that] the whole book is obsessed with the fact of his death. And with good reason."

"Mark is writing for a martyr church, for Christians who themselves may soon be called to enter the arena with its hungry wild beasts, or be coated with tar and strung up and ignited as living torches in Nero's gardens—this is what had recently happened in Rome, when the Christians were made the scapegoat of mob vengeance after the great fire. [Tradition has it that] the blessed apostles, Peter and Paul, [were among those whose martyrdoms were] fresh in their minds. Certainly the example of the Lord himself, the first martyr, and the Firstborn from the dead, [also] steadied and supported them in their [times of] trial."

"One might almost say that Mark's Gospel was written backwards, from the Passion Story to the Baptism; for the Passion Story dominates the narrative almost from the outset. Throughout the book, one question emerges repeatedly: Why did Jesus die? It was a question martyrs might ask, or more likely, the friends of martyrs; it was one every Christian had to face—why must one die, if necessary, for one's faith? If Jesus was the Son of God, why had he needed to die a shameful, agonizing death on the Cross? What led to so dire a tragedy...? Why did God permit it? The Gospel gives the answer, leading up to it, at least from the beginning of chapter two, and showing that Jesus died:

- A. *Because the [traditional] Jewish [establishment came to despise this persistent disturber of the status quo].*
- B. *Because Jesus himself chose to die, and give his life "for many."*
- C. *And, because it was the will of God, and had been so announced long before...*

1. Adapted from *The Gospel According to Saint Mark: A Commentary*, A.M. Hunter, pp. 20-22.
 2. *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who*, Frederick Buechner, page 97.

*"Mark's purpose was, accordingly, not historical or biographical, but intensely practical. He was writing a book for the guidance and support of his fellow Christians in a situation of intense crisis... The last days could not be far off (chapter 13), and every Christian's lamp must be trimmed, every Christian's loins girded for the struggle. Perhaps this is the greatest abiding value of Mark's Gospel: that it challenges the complacency, the neutrality and weak faith, the watered-down values of a generation weary of doing battle with the forces of evil. What is the good of further struggle? Why not yield and make our peace with a world which wants no further heroism or sacrifice, but only sensory satisfactions? But, one who is Christian cannot take that view... [The] Christian [must look at] life from the [perspective of] the cross... [If Jesus, the Very Son of God, died and rose again for our salvation, according to the will of God, then hope, for those who remain faithful, can never be quenched, come what may.] For Mark, Jesus is not Messiah in spite of the cross, but because of it."*¹

You will notice, if you come up later for a closer look, that the lower panel of the Mark window moves us quickly from the beginnings to the climactic conclusion of Jesus' ministry, with reminders of Isaiah's prophecy concerning the "Suffering Servant" of God who would be Yahweh's instrument of salvation for the nations. Do you remember these words from Isaiah 53?

"Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet... like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth." (Isaiah 53: 4-7)

John the Baptist was the first to identify Jesus' role, with these words from John's Gospel: *"...the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* We have come to accept this truth, and to stake our lives upon it! Amen.

THE MORNING PRAYER

How we thank you, God of grace, for the Biblical record of your dealings with your people, which has been preserved for us down through the generations. Especially we thank you for the timeless truths which continue to leap out at us from the pages of that record. And particularly as the Lenten season approaches, we thank you for the Gospel writer Mark's emphasis upon the deep significance of Jesus' sacrificial death and miraculous resurrection.

We pray that we may let that significance penetrate us to the very core of our beings. For since Jesus demonstrated that even death need be no barrier between you and the faithful, we have truly been set free. And if we really believe that nothing can ever separate us from the light and warmth of your love, we ought to be exceedingly bold and courageous in responding to your call. And we know that that call is to love as we have been loved—to love unselfishly, to love even the unlovely, to love without need for reward, to put higher priority on the needs of others, than on our own comfort and desires.

Lord God, fill us with that courage which is peculiar to complete trust, and that love which is generated by overwhelming gratitude. And with such courage and such love, send us forth to address with new determination the needs of those for whom we pray: the wounded of body, mind and spirit; the bereaved; the disillusioned; the guilt-ridden; the homeless; the desperately poor; the imprisoned; the oppressed (and the oppressors); those caught in the crossfire (of hateful words as well as of weapons); the refugees who wander the earth in search of a true home; the unemployed; the unfulfilled; the young who seek direction; the women and men who carry heavy responsibilities.

Touch them, O Lord, as each has need. Touch them, perhaps through us, as we yield ourselves to you in service. For the sake of Jesus who, holding nothing back, gave himself for us—and for everyone. Amen.

1. *The Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, Volume 7, pp. 633-634.



"A Window on Luke"

(Text: Luke 1: 1-4)

PRESENTED BY THE REV. MR. ROBERT E. SLATER ON MARCH 5, 1995

Good morning! Permit me to introduce myself to you. My name is Luke. I know that you are studying some of the heroes of our common faith as you look at them through these beautiful stained glass windows. And today is my window!

Let me begin by making an observation which I hope you don't think of as being too vain. Looking at the Luke window up there, I do think that I'm a bit better-looking in the flesh than I am up there in the glass! Don't you think so?

I also know that, a few years ago, a previous member of this church made travel through time a very popular topic of entertainment. You may want to let yourself think that I have made a "Quantum Leap" through time, from the end of the first century to this, the end of the twentieth century!

I lived and practiced my medicine in the city of Troas. It is on the western coast of the country which you call "Turkey." My life was quite normal and predictable until one day when two men, Silas and Timothy, came seeking a doctor.

They took me to treat a traveling companion of theirs. A man named Paul. Day after day, I returned to his room, treated Paul's ailment, and gradually nursed him back to physical health. As Paul and I conversed over the weeks of his healing, he spoke to me about this one named Jesus of Nazareth. I became a Christian because of Paul's convincing witness about Jesus, and his demonstration to me of the continuing presence of Christ in the Holy Spirit of God. Then I began to travel with Paul, and my life was forever changed.

But I'm getting ahead of myself a bit. Let me slow down, share some about myself with you, and then let you know why I wrote the two books which you have in your New Testament, the Book of Luke and the Book of Acts.

First, I need to tell you that I am a Gentile. In fact, I am the only non-Jew that you have included in your beautiful stained glass windows. I also bear the unique distinction of being the only New Testament writer who was not Jewish. My two books are among the longest in the New Testament, and when you put them together, they make up nearly 25% of the New Testament writings!

In Paul's letter to the Colossians, he lets you know that I was a physician. It has been said that a minister sees people at their best, a lawyer sees people at their worst, and a doctor sees people as they are. That certainly was true for me. During my life, both before and after becoming a follower of Jesus and travel companion with Paul, I saw many kinds of people, and loved the rich diversity which I saw.

I was a well-educated man for my time. I don't mean to boast, but my ability in Greek was better than any of the other New Testament writers. Some have even said that these first four verses of my Gospel account contain the best and the most polished Greek in the New Testament.

I also have been labeled as "the first Christian historian." I want you to know that I did write with the kind of historical accuracy which was appropriate to my time. I honestly felt I was writing the greatest story in the world, and nothing but the best Greek and the best historical research would be good enough for it. Actually though, I was more like a herald, or a messenger who has great, good news, as I told the story of Christ's life, death, resurrection and the beginning of the early Church.

I did have the great privilege to share in Paul's missionary journeys for a few years. I was with Paul in his initial mission work in Greece during the year 57 A.D. I watched and worked with Paul in starting the Church in Philippi and then later in nurturing the Church in Rome. I was with Paul during his last voyage, as a prisoner, to Rome in 60 A.D., and we stayed together until 65 A.D., through the time of his final Roman imprisonment.

A few years earlier, I used the period of Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea to interview individuals and collect data for the two-volume account of the Christian origins which I finally wrote. Because I was a trusted companion to Paul, I had access to the great leaders of the Church, and I interviewed those I could, those who were still alive and had personally known Jesus, including Mark, Peter, and even Mary, the mother of our Lord.

As those who had seen Jesus with their own eyes, and listened to him with their own ears, began dying from old age, I realized how important it would be to record their eyewitness experiences. You see, I was not of the first generation of Christian leaders who were, from the beginning, eyewitnesses to the resurrection and proclaimers of good news about Jesus. I was a second generation Christian, and before I sat down to write the story of Jesus and the beginnings of the Church, I did the most careful research I could.

When I finally did write my account, I wanted those who would read my writing to know very clearly my purposes, and where I was coming from. I actually intended both parts, Luke and Acts, to be introduced by these words:

"In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This,' he said, 'is what you have heard from me...'" (Acts 1: 1-4)

My guess is that, for many of you, my writings in the New Testament are the easiest of all to read. They may even be among your most favorite. The simple reason is because I was writing for people much like you. I show my desire to write for Gentiles by ending my Book of Acts with these last words from Paul:

"After they had set a day to meet with him, they came to him at his lodgings in great numbers. From morning until evening he explained the matter to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets. Some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe. So they disagreed with each other, and as they were leaving, Paul made one further statement: 'The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah, "Go to this people and say, You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them." Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.'" (Acts 28: 23-28)

The worldwide salvation of God, embodied in Jesus and proclaimed in his Gospel, was my dominant concern.

You see, with Jesus Christ, all barriers come down. Jesus Christ is for all people, without distinction between rich or poor, Jewish or Gentile, male or female. From the very beginning, the clear fact was that there were no "successful" churches. There were, instead, communities of sinners, gathered before God week after week, in towns and villages all over the world. The Holy Spirit gathers them and does his work in them.

In my time, the place of women was quite subordinate to men. In our first century society, women were kept very much in their place. But I came to experience a new way, in God's kingdom. I discovered that an important part of God's concern for people was that it was directed towards groups not highly esteemed in my culture, like women and children. Intentionally, I gave a very special place to women in my writing. The birth narrative of Jesus is told from Mary's point of view. And I also wanted to make sure women like Elizabeth, Anna, the widow of Nain, and the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus' feet at the house of Simon the Pharisee, were never forgotten. I am the one Gospel writer who makes vivid the pictures of Martha and Mary, and of Mary Magdalene.

I also came to see that the kingdom of heaven was not closed to the Samaritans or those of lower racial status. I am the only Gospel writer to record the parable of the Good Samaritan. And I make sure that the one grateful leper, who was healed by Jesus, is identified as a Samaritan. I show Jesus speaking, with approval of Gentiles, whom the Orthodox Jews would have considered unclean. I made sure I included in my Gospel the words of Jesus, when he said, *"People will come from east and west, and north and south, and sit at the table in the kingdom of God."*

Another point that I wanted to make sure that nobody missed was that Jesus was always stewing about the terrible needs of poor people. I did this in several ways. I was the Gospel writer who recorded the most details about Jesus' preaching and his rejection in the synagogue of Nazareth.

"When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'" (Luke 4: 16-19)

Those of you who are really Bible students may want to compare, in Matthew's Gospel, the Sermon on the Mount, where he begins, *"Blessed are the poor in spirit..."* And my account of that sermon, which begins:

"Then he looked up at his disciples and said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled...'" (Luke 6: 20-21a)

I knew from the stories about Jesus that his own family was poor. One can tell from the offering made at the birth of the child in the temple in Jerusalem that the family only had meager means. Because Jesus was so concerned for the poor, I wanted to make sure that was communicated in my Gospel about him.

But I went even further than writing about concern for the impoverished. I also emphasized the danger of riches. I recorded several of Jesus' parables, like the one about the rich man and the beggar, which comes right out to say that if "the haves" don't do their share to help "the have-nots," then the "haves" simply and sadly do not understand what life is like within the kingdom of God.

A final emphasis of my writing of which I want to remind you this morning is the importance, I saw, of the Holy Spirit. I was interested to see your stained glass window picked that up, because in the upper panel there is a dove descending, symbolizing the continuing presence of God in the Holy Spirit.

I came to understand that our Creator God never leaves people to serve him, as best they can, out of their own resources. God's love is seen in the Holy Spirit who enters and empowers and guides the followers of Jesus.

I wanted to make sure that the Spirit was prominent in my Gospel from the beginning. So in the early chapters, I include the prophecy that John the Baptist would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. Also, I believed the Holy Spirit was active in connection with the birth and ministry of Jesus. This goes back all the way to Christ's conception, when the angel Gabriel informed Mary that the *"Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most high will overshadow you."*

When Jesus was about to begin his ministry, I include several references to the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist prophesied that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. And then when Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit came upon him, "in bodily form, as a dove." And the same Spirit filled him and led him into the wilderness during the time of temptation.

As important as the teaching of Holy Spirit is in my Gospel account, it really plays a major role in the book that you call "The Acts." In fact, some have titled my second volume, "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." The Spirit was constantly at work within the Church from the Day of Pentecost on. It was indeed because of the presence of the Holy Spirit that the Gospel was able to even survive and then spread as effectively as it did. Actually, the connecting thread which runs through both parts of my work is this theme of the operation of the Spirit of God. Both in the ministry of Jesus and in the life of the early Church, the Holy Spirit was and continues to be an active presence.

God is at work in the world today—this is the heart of what I felt led to write about the Holy Spirit. Our sovereign Creator has not left the completion of his plan to chance. He, with the Son, has sent the Holy Spirit as the guarantee that the entire divine purpose will be carried out.

To do this, God uses the Church—you, me, and millions like us, ordinary human beings with a full measure of human foolishness and frailty. But he does not leave the results to us. God does not risk the success of his program on our power or our obedience. The Lord comes himself, in the person of his Spirit, and lives with us, equipping, encouraging and convicting.

God not only conducts the orchestra of salvation; he plays, alongside us, all the parts, so that the tone, the tempo, the interpretation are what he wants. God not only coaches the team; he himself, alongside us, plays all the positions... in order that the patterns, the timing, the score are what he desires.

Yet he does all this without making us robots. That is what makes the Church so wonderful. It is God's people, with all our human limitations, filled with God himself through the Holy Spirit, so we can live and serve effectively.

Our task is to apply God's truth to our lives; to believe his promises; to obey his orders; to experience his forgiveness and power; and to rejoice in his magnificent gifts to us. Salvation from beginning to end, from creation to eternity, is God's doing—yet his doing includes our response. We are like those who are to dance with the Holy Spirit, taking the lead from our divine guide.

Life like this is true human life. Life in God's spirit is the life for which we were designed, the atmosphere for which we were created. This—life in the Spirit—speaks to our deepest human longings.

I would like to close by calling your attention to the lower panel in the window on Luke. The account it depicts is from the tenth chapter of the Gospel. Jesus was about to move southward, going from Galilee to Jerusalem. This would be the last time he would make that journey before his crucifixion. During the trip southward, he planned for maximum coverage. To the places that he was to visit, he sent 70 disciples in pairs. These teams were to heal, to teach, and to preach the message that *"the kingdom of God is at hand."*

But, before sending the 70 out, Jesus gave them all some clear instructions. Included were these words: *"The harvest is plentiful," Jesus assured them, "but the laborers are few."*

And wouldn't you agree that it is still a great challenge? It is not always easy, by any means, to be a faithful disciple of our Lord. But our great God has not called us to be "successful," but rather to be "faithful."

May it be so with us.



"A Glimpse of the Fourth Gospel: John"

(Text: John 5: 30-47)

PRESENTED BY THE REV. DR. LEWIS R. THOMAS ON MARCH 12, 1995

Since the Gospel with which we are dealing today carries the name of John, let's begin with a brief description of the prominent place Jesus' disciple held among the twelve who were our Lord's closest followers.

John and his older brother, James, were Galilean fishermen—the sons of one Zebedee, when Jesus called them to put down their nets and participate in his newly beginning ministry. One gets the impression that these two brothers, along with Peter, had a particular closeness to their master. When Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus from the dead, when Jesus was transfigured on the mountaintop, when Jesus turned aside to pray (as his death drew near) in Gethsemane—on such significant occasions as these, the Gospel writers specifically mention the presence of Peter, James and John.

Brief references to the words and deeds of James and John indicate that they were impatient with those who turned away their efforts at evangelism, and that they hoped for places of prominence in the promised kingdom. Jesus, by the way, rebuked them for both of these signs of self-centeredness.

In at least three anecdotes in the Book of Acts, John is mentioned as a companion of Peter, both serving as representatives of the Christian Jews in Jerusalem. The apostle Paul mentions John the disciple just once, again as a prominent figure among the converts in Jerusalem.

Having reviewed this much about the apostle John, I hasten now to say that it is by no means universally believed among Biblical scholars that, as was once widely assumed, the fourth Gospel was written by John the Apostle. In fact, the widest agreement seems to be that there is no one good answer as to the authorship of that important work.

Doubtless, most of you are aware that the New Testament contains other pieces of so-called Johannine literature; that is, parts which claim to be authored by someone named John. They are: the three epistles—I John, II John, and III John; and the Book of Revelation. Whether all of the Johannine materials share the same author is also a subject of debate; it is not terribly likely. To get some taste of the arguments, listen to this from the introduction to Dr. Alan Richardson's respected commentary on the Gospel:

"The external evidence concerning the origin and authorship of the fourth Gospel is too scanty and too ambiguous to establish any positive conclusions. We are, therefore, forced to rely upon such internal evidence as the Gospel itself provides. But, here again, we are met with ambiguity and reticence. It [almost appears that] the writer of the Gospel has deliberately tried to hide his identity from us; his aim is like that which he attributes to John the Baptist; namely, to point away from himself toward Christ. Whether intentionally or not, he has covered up his tracks very well." (page 14)

By the way, students of that historical period have discovered that it was quite commonplace for little-known writers to assign authorship to some more prominent figure, in hopes of gaining a wider readership. That could well have been the case here.

Having paid some attention to John the disciple, and having pointed out that he may well not be the author of the Gospel which bears his name, let us now focus on some of the unique features of this wonderful fourth Gospel.

I want to begin by highlighting a term which Bob and I have not yet mentioned in our focus on the first three Gospels and their writers; that term is "synoptic." According to the secular dictionary on my shelf, a key description of synoptic is this: "presenting or taking the same or common view." More literally, it means "see with," or "seen together," or even "viewed from a similar perspective."

You will frequently hear Mark, Matthew, and Luke referred to as the synoptic Gospels. And scholars have developed books which place the contents of these three Gospels in parallel columns to demonstrate how much they have in common and where each differs from the others. They have a great deal of similarity in content. In fact, it is generally accepted that the writers of Matthew and Luke used Mark's writing as a major part of the framework for their slightly later Gospels. Then each added to that, selected portions of the widely-circulated unwritten body of stories about who Jesus was and what he did or said.

While the Gospel of John is called the fourth Gospel, it is seen as quite separate from the synoptics. This distinction suggests that we should expect to see significant differences in content, emphasis, approach. But the book does still clearly fit the definition of a Gospel which we set forth some weeks ago, namely: "A written record of the Good News which came into the world with the coming of Christ."

Listen, if you will, to Wilbert Howard's brief discussion (in the Interpreter's Bible) of the relationship between John and the synoptic Gospels:

"The [unique] character of the Gospel of John becomes more evident as we compare it with the Synoptics. At first sight there is much in common. The ministry opens with the testimony of John the Baptist; disciples are called, twelve in number (6: 67, 70); a successful ministry is carried on in Galilee, marked by many miraculous cures and the feeding of five thousand near the lake, after which Jesus comes to his disciples by night, walking on the sea... [Eventually, even as official opposition to Jesus grows,] Peter, as spokesman of the disciples, declares his faith in Jesus as the Christ. The Gospel closes with an account of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the anointing at Bethany, the warning of the [forthcoming] betrayal by Judas and the denial by Peter, the arrest in the garden, the trials before the high priest and before Pilate, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

"But there are marked differences. Whereas in the earlier Gospels only one journey to Jerusalem is related, in John, a large part of the Gospel consists of visits to the capitol, and of long controversial discourses delivered in the temple court. The cleansing of the temple is placed in the first of these visits to the feasts, instead of in the week of the last Passover. John omits any account of Jesus' baptism, transfiguration, and agony in Gethsemane, though the first and last are suggested to those who know the earlier Gospels. [For John,] the glory of the Son of God is seen throughout life in the flesh, and not merely in [certain special occurrences.] No instance is given of the cure of demoniacs, and the miracles of healing are represented not as acts of compassion, but as occasions for the revelation of divine power. The teaching of Jesus in this Gospel differs widely in subject matter and in form from that reported in the Synoptics. It is doctrinal rather than ethical; there are no parables, but several allegories which generally expand a series of "I am" sayings."

These "I am" sayings, a considerable number of which are to be found in the Gospel of John, have been made familiar to many Christians in our day, in part because they lend themselves to the development of sermon series! (Examples include "I am the bread of life," "I am the light of the world," "I am the good shepherd." I plan to include several others in the next issue of *The Kirkwood Pres.*)

Because I like to look upon the Gospel of John as more "theological" than the Synoptics, I am biased in favor of Alan Richardson's approach to it (in the Torch Bible Commentary series by Collier Books in the early 1960's). He writes:

"We have in the fourth Gospel, a highly original presentation of the truth about Jesus Christ, made by a bold and profound thinker who has long reflected upon the tradition enshrined for us in the Synoptic Gospels... The value of this book resides, not in any new historical information..., but in the way in which the writer decisively and compellingly brings out the true meaning of the... common Gospel tradition." (pages 25-26)

It is important that we take careful note of the fact that the Gospel writer succinctly states, at the close of chapter 20, his purpose for this Gospel:

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." (John 20: 30-31)

Perhaps the next most helpful thing to do would be to offer you a brief outline of the book which you may use as you sit down to re-acquaint yourself with the Gospel of John. By the way, you may well find more familiar passages per page in this Gospel than in any other Biblical book. Dr. Raymond Brown, a highly-regarded Roman Catholic scholar, offers the four very general headings which appear in your worship bulletin this morning:

THE PROLOGUE (John 1: 1-18)

An early Christian hymn... which has been adopted to serve as an overture to the Gospel narrative of the career of Jesus, the Incarnate Word. (This is one of my favorite passages in all of Scripture.)

THE BOOK OF SIGNS (John 1: 19 - 12: 50)

The public ministry of Jesus, where in sign and word he shows himself to his own people as the revelation of his Father, only to be rejected.

THE BOOK OF GLORY (John 13: 1 - 20: 31)

To those who accept him, Jesus shows his glory by [preparing them for his] return to the Father [as] "the hour" of his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension [approach]. Fully glorified, he communicates the Spirit of Life.

THE EPILOGUE (John 21: 1-25)

An added account of post-resurrection appearances in Galilee.

(The Anchor Bible Series, 1966, p. CXXXVIII)

Let's turn our attention now to the stained glass window which bears the name "John." In the upper panel, John stands under the descending dove (representing the Holy Spirit), with the writer's quill in one hand and his writings in the other.

In the center panel, the words *"Fill the waterpots with water..."*, and the picture, refer to Jesus' first miracle, the changing of water into wine at the marriage feast in Cana of Galilee (see chapter 2).

In the lower panel, Jesus is depicted raising Lazarus, brother of Jesus' friends Mary and Martha, from the dead. I doubt whether any other miracle is given more attention than this in John's Gospel (see chapter 11).

Finally, I want to read just one passage from the Gospel of John—one perhaps not as familiar as many that I might have selected. This passage, apparently directed at his fellow Jews, is an example of the writer's persistent emphasis upon the divine nature of the Father's beloved Son, and of his unique qualifications to illustrate the Father's power and love

"I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

"If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true. There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true. You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth. Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent.

"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept glory from human beings. But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God? Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?" (John 5: 30-47)

May we be counted among those who have seen and heard and believed, and whose discipleship is confirmed by the life we live. Amen.

ADDENDUM

"I AM..."

...HE" (The Messiah of whose expected coming the Samaritan "woman at the well" was well aware) (chapter 4)

...THE BREAD OF LIFE" (The true, living bread come down from heaven) (chapter 6)

...THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD" (chapter 8)

...THE GATE FOR THE SHEEP, THE GOOD SHEPHERD" (Shades of Psalm 23!) (chapter 10)

...THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE" (chapter 11)

...YOUR LORD AND TEACHER" (chapter 13)

...THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE" (chapter 14)

...THE TRUE VINE, AND MY FATHER IS THE VINEGROWER; YOU ARE THE BRANCHES" (chapter 15)

...RETURNING NOW TO THE ONE WHO SENT ME" (chapter 16)

Among those who were associates of Jesus, there were three who were especially close. They are sometimes called the "inner three." [You may recall my mentioning this on the Sunday when we focused on John the Apostle.]

For instance, when he came to the home of Jairus, whose little daughter had just died, Jesus dismissed the mourners, took with him three of the disciples, and went up into the room where the little girl's body lay. (Luke 8: 41-56) Those three were Peter, James and John.

When Jesus traveled up the Mount of Transfiguration, he left the group of disciples at the foot of the mountain, except for three—Peter, James and John. (Matthew 17: 1-8)

When, on the last night of his earthly ministry, Jesus entered the Garden of Gethsemane, at the foot of the Mount of Olives, he left the disciples at the gate and went toward the center of the garden to pray. However, he took with him three of his disciples—that's right: Peter, James and John! (Mark 14: 32, 33) That is why this trio is considered the "inner three."

I find myself drawn to Peter—and I think most Christian people do. One reason is that we find it somewhat easy to identify with him.

Now Paul was a great man, and many think that he stands head and shoulders above everybody else (except, of course, for Jesus) in the entire Bible. In fact, you may wonder why we sometimes seem to pay more attention to Peter than we do to Paul, to whom the church owes so much. Perhaps it's because Paul, in many ways, was so different from you and me. Paul at one time was a bitter opponent and enemy of the Christian Gospel. He actually was responsible for the arrest, imprisonment, and murder of many of the early Christian believers. Most of us do not have such a background. Have you ever really hated the Church, or set out to persecute the believers who comprise it? Have you despised it so extremely that you would have done anything—even murder—to try to eradicate it from the face of the earth?

And Paul's dramatic conversion experience on the Damascus road was so radical and extraordinary that it differs greatly from most of ours.

But Peter, in many respects, is much more like us. He had yielded to Jesus; he believed in him; he trusted him; he followed him; he served him. Yet he also yielded to temptation. He acted impulsively, and then regretted his actions. In Peter, we see a strange combination of faith and doubt, strength and weakness, courage and cowardliness. I don't know about you, but in many ways I am like that. And, as a result, I feel a certain kinship to Peter.

Yet this is the man whom Jesus called to be a "rock." Actually, that's what the name means which Jesus gave to the man previously known as Simon: "petros" in the Greek, literally means "rock."

I often wonder what Jesus ever saw in that impulsive, headstrong, wavering, vacillating big fisherman. Then I take a good look at myself—and I wonder what he ever saw in me!

Do you see what I mean about identifying with Peter?

When his life came under the influence of the Man of Galilee, Peter was a reed: waving in the wind... fluctuating... changing... unpredictable... fluttering in the breeze.

But Peter, the reed, became a rock (just as Jesus had foreseen)—sturdy and secure amid shifting circumstances.

In the early morning hours one day, Jesus came walking on the water toward the disciples, who were in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. Peter called out:

"Lord, if that's really you... (he wasn't sure; he may even have thought it was a ghost!) ...if that's really you out there, then tell me to step out on the water, too."

"Certainly, (said Jesus) Come ahead."

And bold, impetuous Peter climbed out of the boat, and began to walk—on the water! Then he took his eyes off Jesus... saw the wind blowing up the waves... realized how boisterous the water was... and began to sink. Just in time, Jesus reached out and held him up. (Matthew 14: 22-33)

Let us not be too hasty to criticize Peter. Would you or I have dared even to leave the boat? Peter was courageous. Yet, once he was walking on the water, he looked away from Jesus, and started to sink. How like a reed he was—fluctuating, wavering.

It was at Caesarea Philippi, that Jesus asked his disciples:

"Who do the people say that I am?"

"Oh, (they replied) some say that you are John the Baptizer... or Elijah... or Jeremiah... or one of the prophets."

"And you? Who do you think I am?"

The first to answer was impulsive Peter:

"Why, you're the Christ, the Messiah, you're the Son of the Living God!"

The Great Confession! And it was Peter who made it. (Matthew 16: 13-17)

Yet, in that same chapter, just a few verses further in the Biblical text, Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Messiah would have to go to Jerusalem... suffer... and die. And Peter blurted out:

"Oh no, Lord! This can't happen to you! Never!"

Do you remember how Jesus responded?

"Get thee behind me, Satan!" (he said). (Matthew 16: 21-23)

Another similar experience takes place in the upper room, when Jesus took a basin of water, knelt, and began to wash the feet of his disciples. When it was his turn, Peter said:

"No, I can't let you do this. I ought to be on my knees washing your feet."

Jesus looked up and answered:

"Peter, if you don't let me wash your feet, you have no part of me; either I wash your feet, or we are through."

"Well, in that case, (said Peter) ...wash my hands and feet, my arms and face—my whole body. Give me a bath." (John 13: 4-10)

That's the volatile, changeable, reed-like Peter.

Later that same night, on the Mount of Olives, Jesus told the disciples that he would soon be arrested... and crucified... and that they would all forsake him.

"No! No!" (exclaimed Peter) "Not me. Though everybody else forsake you, you can count on me."

"Before this night is over, (said Jesus) you're going to deny me, three times."

"Oh no, never, Lord! Even though I may have to die with you, I will not deny you. You can depend on me!" (Matthew 26: 30-35)

The bold determination of Peter to be faithful was demonstrated a short time later in the Garden of Gethsemane: the soldiers came... Peter whipped out his sword... he began to slash... he cut off the ear of the high priest's servant... he seemed ready to die for his Master. (John 18: 10)

Then, just a little later, in the courtyard of Caiaphas, the high priest, a serving girl came up to him and inquired:

"Look, you're one of those Galileans, aren't you?"

Peter denied he even knew who Jesus was! Finally, as others approach him, he resorted to curses to underline his denial. (Matthew 26: 69-75)

Courageous enough to draw his sword and defend Jesus, but cowardly enough that he didn't dare admit to the courtyard crowd that he even knew the Master...

But, let's take another look after the death and resurrection events, and we hardly realize that this is the same man. When we read through the opening twelve chapters of the Book of Acts, we see Peter as he became a rock—firm, strong, secure, steadfast, immovable.

On the Day of Pentecost, following the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the waiting believers, Peter stood up and began to preach to the great multitude that had gathered. Included in that throng were many who had been in the crowd that had shouted to Pilate concerning Jesus:

"Crucify him! Crucify him!"

But Peter boldly proclaimed that Jesus was the Christ... that he had been raised from the dead... that they were responsible for his death... that they needed to repent. That day, 3,000 people were converted, in response to the preaching of Peter! (Acts 2: 41)

A little while later, Peter went to the Beautiful Gate of the Temple. There lay a cripple, a man who had never walked, who had been lame from the day of his birth. There he lay—begging, asking for alms. Peter and John (who was with him) stopped. The hopes of the beggar rose. Peter looked down and said:

"Silver and gold have I none..."

Imagine the man's heart beginning to sink...

"If you don't have any silver or gold, why did you bother to stop?"

Then Peter added:

"Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have, give I unto you."

And stretching forth his right hand, he continued:

"In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise up—and walk!"

And he who had never walked, stood up! ...and walked! ...and ran! ...and went leaping into the Temple to worship! (Acts 3: 1-11)

That's the rock that Peter became.

Because of that and other incidents, Peter and the other apostles were arrested, at the insistence of the religious establishment. (Acts 4: 3; 5: 18) They were released after the first imprisonment, but were forbidden to preach in the name of Jesus. When they continued to witness, they were again brought before the rulers. The leader of the Council charged:

"Didn't we strictly forbid you to preach ever again in the name of Jesus? Didn't we tell you to stop?"

And Peter, standing before the Council, under threat of his life, said:

"We ought to obey God rather than any human authority."

An eternal proclamation was this, as true today as it was then! (Acts 5: 29)

The people of the city of Jerusalem were so impressed with the power of this man that they brought their sick and afflicted... laid them along the streets and alleys... just hoping that as Peter passed by, his shadow might touch the sick and bring healing. (Acts 5: 15; See Isaiah 32: 2)

Many are the incidents which illustrate the rock-like Peter of the early days of the Church, including the story of Dorcas, a beautiful Christian woman who had died. Her friends sent for Peter... he entered her room... dismissed the crowd... knelt... spoke softly to her... took her by the hand... and she was restored to life! (Acts 9: 32-43)

Now this tremendous transfer, from a reed to a rock, did not just happen overnight. It took place over a period of time.

Peter came to Jesus one day, and asked:

"Look, Lord, how many times should we forgive a person? Seven times?"

Generous, big-hearted Peter. The Law said three times: forgive a person for the same offense three times. Peter was being extremely liberal:

"How many times, Lord? Seven?"

I can picture Jesus shaking his head as he answered:

"Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18: 21, 22)

Surely Jesus had no specific number in mind; he simply meant that forgiveness is to be unlimited.

Such is the way that Jesus dealt with Peter: over and over, he would forgive... he would heal... he would restore. Again and again, Peter would waver and falter, but Jesus was always there—to reach out and draw him back. Peter was transformed from a wavering reed to a secure rock—because of the unlimited grace, the infinite patience, and the unending forgiveness of his Lord and Savior.

And that can still happen to us. How like Peter we are: strong at times, but so weak at others.

So it is with us. Jesus does not make us into what he intends us to become in an instant of time. It doesn't happen overnight. Like Peter, we falter and fall back. Again and again, Jesus reaches out to draw us back into his embrace of compassion, back onto the path of grateful obedience. Over and over, he reaches forth to restore us. By his grace we too can be made firm and steadfast. We who are reeds can become rocks.

What do we think of today, when we think of Peter? Many humorous stories that you have heard begin like this: "A certain person died and went to heaven. There, at the Pearly Gates, he met Saint Peter..."

Saint Peter! This man a saint!? And what is he doing at the gates of heaven? He doesn't belong there, does he? Yes! He does! That's what Jesus made of Peter!

How many churches have been named for Peter? The largest church in the world: in the City of Rome—St. Peter's! And multitudes of other churches, of every size and in every corner of the world, including one right here in Kirkwood, are named St. Peter's!

When I realize what Peter was, then recognize what he became—I think there is still hope for you and me.

Before we close, there are two brief things I feel the need to do. The first is to acknowledge the existence of the New Testament epistles known as I and II Peter. I cannot treat them with any depth here. Let me say only that it is highly improbable that the two epistles have a common author. If the apostle Peter was primarily responsible for either of them, it was more likely the first one. Whatever its authorship and date, I Peter is a powerful treatise on Christian hope in the face of duress.

Finally, a few brief comments about the window featuring Peter, along with the usual invitation to come forward later for a closer look. The divine hand over the head of the Peter figure seems to have an instructive or corrective, perhaps even a warning pose. It fits with the crowing rooster nearby. And Peter, with hand on chest, appears to be taking a kind of *"Surely not I!"* stance. Clearly the scene reflects his denials.

The remainder of the window centers upon Pentecost, depicting the release of the Spirit of God upon the assembled, waiting followers of Christ. The words at the bottom are from the report of that incomparable occasion in Acts, chapter 2:

"And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost."

"When I was in college, I was part of a fraternity initiation committee. One night, we placed the new members of our frat in the middle of a long stretch of country road. I was to drive my car as fast as possible straight at the new pledges.

"The challenge was for the new recruits to stand firm until a signal was given to jump out of the way. It was a dark night. I had reached 100 miles an hour, and could see their looks of terror in my headlights.

"The signal was given and everyone jumped clear except one boy. He was killed instantly as I ran over him.

"Not long after that I left college. I later married and now have two children. But the look on that boy's face as I passed over him at 100 miles an hour has haunted me ever since.

"About a year ago, I became hopelessly moody and depressed. Finally I was fired because of my struggles with alcohol.

"My wife went to work in order to bring in the only income we had.

"One morning, I was home, drinking, when someone came to the front door. I opened it to find myself facing a woman who seemed strangely familiar. She sat down in our living room and told me that she was the mother of the boy I had killed.

"For years, she said that she had hated me, and spent agonizing nights rehearsing ways to get revenge. I then listened with amazement as she told me of a freedom of forgiveness which had come to her because she was now a follower of and believer in Jesus Christ. She said to me, 'I have come to let you know that I forgive you, and I would ask that you forgive me!'

Mike continued to his fellow colleague, "Looking deeply into her eyes, I saw the permission to be the kind of man I might have been had I never killed her son, and her act of forgiveness has literally changed my life!"

In many ways, the transformation of Mike's life was similar to the conversion of Paul the apostle. Both were set in motion by an experience of forgiveness.

This morning, as we continue our series on the stained glass windows, we come to a window on Paul. Second only to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the conversion of Paul is the next most important event for the establishment of the Church.

By his early 20's, Saul of Tarsus had become an arch enemy of the young Christian movement in Jerusalem. He was unrelenting in his effort to track down the followers of Jesus, dragging them from their homes and throwing them into prison with the fierce rage of someone who felt his whole identity, his whole world view was being threatened by the beliefs and practices of these Christians.

Saul was a Pharisee. He had dedicated his life to the study and interpretation of the Law of Moses, and he lived his life strictly in accord with that law.

He was offended by these Christians who had found a new and unorthodox way to relate to God. The individuals who made up the first Christian community had discovered a new way which opened them up to accept the forgiveness of their God.

So it was with the full blessing of the Sanhedrin, which was the ruling religious body in Jerusalem, that Saul set out to obliterate the movement which posed such a threat to his way of life and his world view. Some scholars even suggest that Saul may have been a voting member of the Sanhedrin.

After Paul had done what damage he could do in Jerusalem, he went to the high priest with the idea of getting letters of introduction so that he could go to Damascus, and continue his persecution.

This wasn't some mission given to him by the Sanhedrin. Rather, this "crusade of eradication" to Damascus was Saul's own idea. He evidently was a real self-starter, who probably had a very bright future in the religious-political structure in Jerusalem. He was single-minded in his determination to wipe the followers of Christ from the face of the earth!

Listen again to his own angry words, in verse 11:

"By punishing them often in all the synagogues I tried to force them to blaspheme; and since I was so furiously enraged at them, I pursued them even to foreign cities." (Acts 26: 11)

In the wake of a blinding flash and a faceless, authoritative voice on the dusty road to Damascus, Paul experiences forgiveness from God. And it literally turned his life completely around.

About 20 years after that experience, in his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul reflects on what happened to him with these words:

"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation." (2 Corinthians 5: 17-18)

Paul became the first Christian theologian. He had the great genius of being able to reflect upon the teachings of Christ, the resurrection appearances of the Lord, and his own experience of the freedom of forgiveness, and apply those reflections to the questions and situations which were arising in the communities of those who were followers of Christ.

Paul sent letters of counsel to those communities around the Mediterranean. Some of those letters were eventually bound together and became the first part of our New Testament to be considered Holy Scripture. Paul wrote 25% of our New Testament. And nearly two-thirds of the Book of Acts, written by Luke, is the story of Paul's role as the early Church was born.

By most accounts, Paul was not an impressive figure. There is no description of Paul in his letters or in Acts, but there is in one non-Biblical document titled The Acts of Paul, which includes the only known physical description we have of Paul from ancient times. In that document, he is described as "a man small in stature, bald and bow-legged, with eyebrows that meet, and a somewhat prominent nose, yet full of grace."

Before his conversion to Christianity, Paul was a well-trained Pharisee, and at least part of his education in Jerusalem was under Rabbi Gamaliel, who is considered today to be one of the greatest rabbis of all time.

Paul's Hebrew schooling, plus his knowledge of the Greek language and of the Greek way of thinking, prepared him for the kind of life he lived: preaching, teaching, writing and traveling. He clearly was one who felt comfortable in both Greek and Hebrew cultures. And for 25 years, the apostle preached throughout the Roman Empire.

But it all began one day on the road to Damascus, when Paul experienced reconciliation through the deep forgiveness of God.

A former seminary professor of mine, Dr. Lewis Smedes, has written a profound book which focuses on this theme of forgiveness. The book is titled Forgive and Forget.

It has been helpful for me to look through the lens of Dr. Smedes' writing at exactly what happened to Paul that day on the Damascus road.

Putting forgiveness into practice is not an easy thing to do for any of us. In fact, for forgiveness to take place, a miracle must happen between two people, or between us and our God. I think that miracle of forgiveness is exactly what happened between Saul and his Lord.

Let's unpack, a bit, this miracle of forgiveness.

First of all, forgiveness is not forgetting. Forgetting is not hard to do at all. It is not painful. Don't we forget a lot of what doesn't matter to us anyway?

I forget a good number of names, simply because I don't think they are important enough for me to recall. No miracle of grace is needed to get me to forget. All I need is a bad memory! Or, maybe a fear of reality so intense that I stuff the ugly pain of the past into a dark, musty corner of my unconscious.

All by itself, forgetting can be a kind of Russian Roulette. It is the same sort of game a woman plays when she "forgets" that little lump she felt on her breast a month ago. Or the man who "forgets" to tell his physician about symptoms which he experienced a while back that pointed to heart problems.

Forgiving is not forgetting. However, once we have forgiven another, we get a marvelous new freedom to forget. But this time, the forgetting following the forgiving is a sign of health. When we genuinely forgive, only then can we really forget, because we have been healed.

Forgiving is not forgetting; forgiving is remembering and still acquitting. That is what God did for Saul on a dusty afternoon on the way to Damascus. That is what our God wants for each of us every day because of the cross of Calvary.

Secondly, forgiving is not excusing. In fact, excusing is just the opposite of forgiving. We excuse people when we understand that they were not to blame for their actions.

My guess is that all of us know we deserve a lot of excusing for the crazy things we do. Anyone with an ounce of empathy should be willing to suspend judgment on us once they understand our family background, or our genetic makeup, or our unique situations.

But excusing, like forgetting, is not really terribly hard to do. Excusing, like forgetting, is an end run around the hard work of forgiveness. Excusing is a sneaky way of telling a person that they do not need to be forgiven in the first place. Excusing often masquerades as forgiveness.

Thirdly, forgiving another is not the same as smothering conflict. Some of us hinder the hard and good work of forgiveness precisely because we smother confrontation. We can even become barriers to forgiveness, because we never let folk heal conflict through forgiveness. Behind the scenes, we try to stage-manage the conflict so well that folk never get a chance to forgive.

Some of us parents are dedicated to smothering every conflict within our families. We slush and we soothe and then we assure that whatever makes anyone in our family mad is not worth raising a fuss about. We may say to all in our family, "forgive and forget," but what we mean is, "don't make a fuss, because I can't stand the noise!"

Those of us who are professional Christians tend to be compulsive managers of conflict. We know that the last thing any church needs is more controversy. So, if an elder's wife is involved in some hanky-panky with the organist, and someone threatens to blow the lid, we get awfully good at smothering confrontation, keeping it out of sight until we can get the mess swept under the rug of churchy discretion.

Or, if a deacon is put down by the chairman of a commission, and wants to thrash it out at the next meeting, we usually smother the conflict, trying to get the hurt party to see that nobody will like it if a ruckus is raised.

Unfortunately, quieting troubled waters is not the same as rescuing drowning people. Smothering conflict is not the same as helping folk forgive one another.

Saul was on his way to Damascus to initiate some conflict with the Christian believers there. And what happened? God handled the conflict, not by suppressing the confrontation, but by genuinely forgiving Saul.

The apostle Paul discovers that forgiving was not forgetting nor was it excusing, nor was it smothering conflict. But what was it? What actually took place when God forgave Paul, or when one forgiven sinner forgives another, who has caused some hurt?

I am convinced that the miracle of forgiveness is nothing short of the creation of a new beginning. Forgiveness is, at rock bottom, a very simple sort of miracle which each of us have the power to repeatedly perform.

Forgiveness is starting over and trying it again with a person who has caused us pain. The action of forgiving will not take away all the hurt, like an emotional Bayer aspirin. Forgiveness will not deny the past injury. It merely refuses to let the hurt stand in the way of a new start.

When our Lord forgives, he offers us a new start. He holds out his hand and says, *"Come on, I want to help. Take my arm. I want to be your friend again. In spite of everything, I want to be with you. I want to be a loving presence in your life. I am not going to let anything you do get in my way. So let's begin again."*

When God forgives, he breaks down the walls we build, and gets into the backyard of our souls in order to start a new relationship. That is exactly what happened between God and Paul.

The same can happen with us. We put forgiveness into practice much the same way. We need to start where we are, not where we wish we were, not where we would be if we could rearrange life, but wherever we are right now, with any person who has hurt us. And we make a new beginning with them.

We hold out our hand, and we say, *"I want to be your friend again. In spite of all that has happened, I want to be your father, or your mother, again. I want to be your husband, or your wife, again. I want to be your son, or your daughter. I want to be your friend. Let's start over."*

Some of us may have to forgive people beyond reach. We may have to forgive a neurotic mother long since dead, and begin again with only a "forgiven" memory of her.

Forgiveness will never deny the past. It can only create a new future. Sometimes we can only forgive in absentia, simply letting go of our resentment and spite, and starting over with a free spirit inside of us, leaving the other person to God.

The simple miracle of forgiveness is so hard to perform sometimes, that we may wonder why we should even try. Once we have been stung by someone's brutal unfairness, don't we have gale-force motivation for never forgiving? The sheer logic of justice may be stacked on our side.

In fact, it may not even seem fair to forgive. It may not add up to a reasonable deal on our moral calculator of justice. But, I am here to tell you, it will add up to freedom and gentleness and peace in our lives.

The truth of the matter is that the biggest loser in holding on to a grudge or in the "getting even game" is the one who cannot manage the power to forgive. We never know for sure how much we hurt people by not forgiving them. But I can assure you that it will never be as much as we hurt ourselves!

When we make a hard decision against forgiving, we lock ourselves into the straightjacket of our resentment, and then we release within, caustic juices which corrode and canker our souls.

When we forgive another who has hurt us, we dance to the rhythm of the divine heartbeat. When we forgive, we are in tune and moved by the music of the universe.

God is the one who invented the miracle of forgiveness, and perhaps it was the only way to keep his romance with the fallen human family alive.

If our God had not found within the power to forgive, there would be no future for the likes of us. But God did! And that is the tremendous news of our faith.

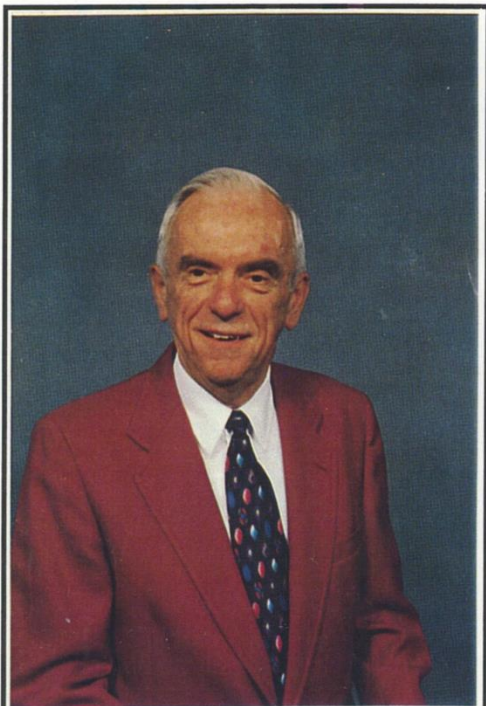
The hope for our tired, old world is in God's readiness to make a new beginning with us, a million new beginnings if need be! And every time ordinary, garden-variety people just like us discover the miraculous power to begin again in a relationship with someone who has caused us pain, we are quite literally walking in stride with the living God.

As a matter of fact, the freedom to forgive another flows out from us, precisely and only, when we learn to lean into the reality of God forgiving us. If we can't forgive, then we will never feel God's forgiveness.

Perhaps more than we can ever know, Western civilization has forever been influenced and shaped by the apostle Paul. He was a man who was captured and transformed by the miracle of forgiveness.

Paul was one man who knew first-hand the love and grace of God through Jesus Christ. His hope and his life's work was that others, like us, might also experience that same love and grace, and then share it with others. May it be so with us. Amen.





Rev. Dr. Lewis R. Thomas
Pastor

There is no doubt that the focal point in our church's sanctuary is that series of pictorial stained glass windows which spans the nave. The vivid colors, the abundance of symbolism, the familiar names attract one's interest at once. The height of the windows tends to draw our thoughts as well as our eyes upward. There's a powerful effect to what I call the majesty of this sanctuary, which irresistibly pulls our thoughts heavenward and prepares our hearts for worship.

Sometimes, in jest (I think!), my colleagues and I are asked whether "those windows" are pretty tough to compete against when we're preaching. My typical answer is that I trust God will provide for the needs of each worshipper, and that the message may come from a variety of sources.

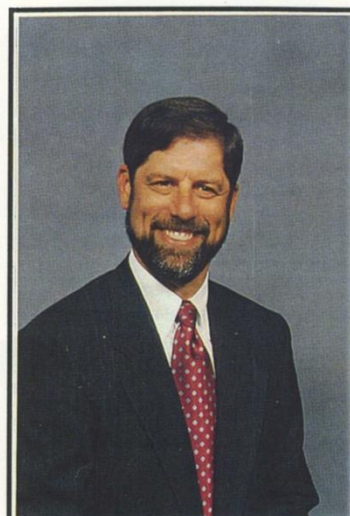
What a humbling privilege it is for Leslie, Bob and me to be called to preach in such a beautiful setting! (By the way, the reason that so few of the sermons in this series are from Leslie is that she spent most of those weeks on maternity leave.)

We trust that you will find this booklet enriching!

Lewis R. Thomas



Rev. Mrs. Leslie M. Piper
Associate Pastor



Rev. Mr. Robert Slater
Associate Pastor

